

## Introduction: The Performative Force of Practice-Based Research

Peter Dickinson and Ellen Waterman

As any artist, researcher, teacher, athlete, or home cook knows, one often discovers what is most enriching and affirming in one's practice when it is disrupted or curtailed in some manner. Likewise, adaptations made in response to such circumstances, however pragmatic, temporary, or instrumentalist, can frequently lead to a fundamental rethinking of some of the core concepts and tenets of a practice. For many of us, COVID-19 was just such a reckoning. It forced us to pivot radically in our personal and professional lives; while this has undoubtedly affected our individual approaches to all that we do, as the contributions to this special double issue of *Performance Matters* attest, for many of us, the pandemic has also strengthened and reaffirmed our attachments to our communities of practice.

Indeed, COVID had much to do with the genesis of this volume. More specifically, it builds on a two-day international summit on practice-based research (PBR) organized by Ellen Waterman and Nina Sun Eidsheim and held online in the summer of 2021.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-six artists/scholars held a series of thematic conversations exploring the opportunities, challenges, and exciting uncharted territory of PBR through four broad nodes: knowledge, power, ethics, and affect. As part of a collective writing exercise on Google Docs that concluded the summit, and that explored possible takeaways and next steps for participants, Peter Dickinson volunteered this journal as a venue to build on the energy of the summit through a PBR-themed issue. Ellen and Peter duly drafted a call for papers inviting artists/scholars working in/with PBR to expand on the 2021 summit nodes, or to introduce new ones through a range of artistic media and writing. In doing so, we were especially eager to marry the inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary methods of PBR with the journal's particular focus on the materiality and consequentiality of performance—that is, what PBR does and why it is meaningful. Hence our foundational question for the issue: What is the performative force of practice-based research? For example, what exactly is produced when universal design principles are explored through music, when intergenerational trauma is examined through dance, or when performance art is used to probe the effects of climate change? The darker meaning that “performative” took on during the pandemic also lurks beneath such questions. While we remain committed to the Austinian sense of the citational performative (whether linguistic or artistic) as “doing something” in the world (Austin 1962), several of the papers in this issue critique moments when the performative becomes an empty form of virtue signalling.

Whether it is termed *practice-based* or *practice-led research*, *practice-as-research*, *research-creation*, or simply *artistic research*, the underlying proposition of the various methodologies we here call PBR is that creative practices may be used to seek out knowledge while also challenging the epistemological assumptions that produce the concept “research.” In other words, creative practices such as music,

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dance, theatre, performance and visual art, creative media, and writing are situated through PBR as both artistic processes/products *and* as the ground for (and critique of conventional understandings of) experimentation, analysis, and discovery. Although scholars and artists have worked to define PBR, articulate its pedagogies, design and defend graduate programs, and outline its philosophies, PBR remains poorly understood and unevenly supported in the academy (at least in North America). And yet, as we witnessed during the pandemic, during a moment when so many academic disciplines were forced to reinvent the how—and very often as a consequence defend the why—of what they do, PBR models an approach to knowledge exploration, creation, and diffusion in which the means of a (research and/or teaching) practice are tied directly to the outcomes of that practice. As such, moving a dance technique or devised performance class online will inevitably lead to innovations in screendance and livestreaming methodologies.

Hence the subset of questions posed in our original call for papers: How can PBR methodologies help us to reimagine and reinvigorate scholarly and artistic inquiry? How does PBR productively articulate with other processual and collaborative methodologies? Who has agency within PBR and what constraints does it operate under? The responses to these questions were as varied and wide-ranging as the applications of PBR itself. Nevertheless, several overarching themes and concerns did emerge.

### **PBR and Pedagogy**

Perhaps not surprisingly, given urgent academic preoccupations over the past three years, many of the essays we received from our call for papers were focused on the pedagogical applications of PBR, particularly in response to calls for social justice activism that were amplified during the pandemic.

Natalie Doonan and her students in a 2021 Digital Storytelling course at Université de Montréal practice anticolonial pedagogical strategies through their reading of *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2015), which addresses the shameful 150-year history and ongoing impact of Indian residential schools. By creating a collective experimental story, performed in an online, multimedia environment, they confront their positionalities as non-Indigenous people with responsibilities toward decolonization and reconciliation, asking, “How do we carry stories, particularly when they do not belong to us?” As Doonan notes, the work is somewhat raw, even naïve, a stumbling toward understanding; but she also stresses that PBR processes “help to reframe the notions of (re)presentation, performance, and publication as outcomes, understanding these as manifestations of thought-in-the-making. Importantly, this is a relational process.”

Faculty-student collaboration is also modelled in *The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast* co-hosted by Mario Obando and Daniel Topete, for which Topete’s graduate students from California State University, Los Angeles created a three-episode series in consultation with Obando’s undergraduate students at CSU Fullerton as part of a Chicana and Latina Studies seminar in 2022. For this special issue, Obando and Topete offer a thirty-minute audio reflection accompanied by a written guide to their pedagogical process, exploring the ways that PBR and relational Ethnic Studies can “at once teach students the very skills of our fields while also flourishing new modes of possibility through trial and error in interviewing, conceptualizing, editing, feedback, and dialogue in real time.”

If, as Doonan, Obando, and Topete all argue, PBR has potential to critique institutional structures, Oona Hatton's long-running *SJS-Who?* performance ethnography project takes on the academic institution as its core content. Hatton teaches a research methods course in communication studies, and she espouses a PBR pedagogy based in an ethics of intimacy, accountability, and reciprocity. Student "scholartists" choose a topical theme, interview relevant people, and then perform verbatim excerpts for their interview subjects, an often uncomfortable but revealing exercise. Finally, Hatton creates a play comprising the excerpts (which have been refined through feedback from the interview subjects). She notes that the students' interest in the chosen topic for 2022, hate crimes on campus, "fuelled by a combination of fear, grief, outrage, and curiosity," also points to the "performative paradigm" that PBR shares with more traditional forms of qualitative research—namely the acknowledgement that researcher and subject are inextricably intertwined.

A relational ethos resurfaces in Dasha Chapman's course, *History, Memory, Performance, Place: Activating Davidson's Submerged Histories*, which she taught at Davidson College in North Carolina in 2020 and 2021. Here, she sought to "destabilize conventional colonial forms of understanding and knowledge production" through embodied counter-memorial performances that uncovered and critiqued Davidson's legacy of white supremacy and historical use of slave labour. Her process-based movement pedagogy interrelates "mind-body-spirit, emplacement, and hx/story in conjunction with critical reflection" to confront what one Black student called the university's "plantation energy." In Chapman's application of PBR to her pedagogical and institutional contexts, "experiences of place, hx/story, and self that potentially destabilize conventional colonial forms of understanding and knowledge production" necessarily "work with and through the body."

## **PBR and Place**

The trope of "plantation energy" underscores the deeply rooted energies that vibrate through place and the ways in which these resonances can be embodied and transmitted through PBR performances to highlight sensorial experience and trans-corporeal relationality. Three very different contributions to this special issue take up the theme of PBR and place through performance art, performance-based film, and musical improvisation, respectively.

In her video essay "Letters to a Pine," artist Annette Arlander explores the ecology of "trans-corporeal" exchanges between human and more-than-human subjects. Through repeated visits to an "unremarkable" pine tree, during which she sits quietly and composes a letter to the tree, the Finnish artist meticulously describes physical details of place (rocks, companion trees, weather) and speculates unsentimentally but imaginatively on the tree's lived experience. The video essay is a distillation of a streamed, online performance from 2020, an artifact of the pandemic, that featured international artists performing with trees. (Weren't we all seeking contemplative green spaces then?) Arlander has worked extensively with trees over many years. Her performance-as-research methodology seeks to challenge conventions of both art and research presentation. But while she hopes to draw attention to trees and our relations with them, she wryly notes the limitations: "Well, if you start a relationship with a tree you cannot really expect it 'going anywhere.'" Arlander admits that the project mainly revealed the importance of process: "Something about writing and especially about letter writing, like the importance of the addressee, the imagined reader or receiver—in this case the pine tree—for the text produced."

Indeed, it is the performative processes of PBR interventions in place that produce its most potent and affective works. In their performance-based psychogeographical film *STRATA* (2023), Andrea Pagnes and Verena Stenke (VestAndPage) “seek to develop a holistic understanding of deep time.” They collaborate with other artists and consult with “archaeologists, speleologists, cultural scientists, and time psychologists to seek convergences between art and human sciences.” Plumbing dank and mysterious depths of primeval cave sites in Europe, performers and crew place their bodies in extreme conditions—dark, wet, slippery, and cold—“to try and become one with the rocks.” Their site-specific and site-responsive practice involves building a time-intensive and deep relationship with the places in which they perform. Through fascinating accounts by Pagnes, Stenke, and their collaborators Douglas Quin (sound designer/composer) and daz disley (lighting designer), we discover that the precarious (sometimes dangerous) conditions of filming in these caves requires a heightened attentiveness—a form of listening.

Listening as a metaphor for embodied attention is at the core of Ellen Waterman’s instructional score for improvisation, *Bodily Listening in Place*, commissioned for World Listening Day in 2022. Inspired by the Deaf genre of signed music, which is entirely visual and kinetic, Waterman, a flutist and vocalizer, sought to decentre the place of sound and aurality in her own musical practice. Over several months, she engaged in an iterative dialogue with the artistic team of Paula Bath (hearing) and Tiphaine Girault (Deaf) (SPiLL.PROpagation), in which they exchanged and responded to music, video, drawings, writing, and objects to explore the relations among sonic, visual, kinetic, and haptic sensory phenomena. Like so many of the projects chronicled in this special issue, the pandemic placed its condition of separation on the collaborators. “Home” thus became both constraint and possibility. For Bath, Girault, and Waterman, performing intersensory improvisation as a research-creation methodology involved “working interculturally in a weave that honoured the cultural integrity of each person” and “maintained each collaborator’s individual senses of ‘place’ and ‘home’ in balance.”

## **PBR and Relational Entanglements of Technique**

The medium-specific use of listening to/in place as a technique of PBR (in music, performance, and video) highlights the relationality of bodies, materials, and space. For several authors in this special issue, such relational entanglements are deployed as both content and technique.

In his evocative audio essay, master sound producer Debashis Sinha uses sound editing to explore the “infinite number of stories” inherent in a single sound recording. Three dramatically different mixes of an early morning field recording he made in Kolkata, India, produce different narratives and expose the roles that both recording and listening play in “sculpting the audio to investigate and produce autoethnography.” Here, sound theorizes listening and reveals the “entanglements of the heard.” In the critical reflection accompanying his audio essay, Sinha acknowledges the non-innocence of recording, and wonders what role this insight might take in his research-creation practice. He asks, “Is the repurposing of the information of our lived reality to seek other hidden or personal meanings necessarily always connected to colonial modes of removal, expression, sublimation, erasure, theft . . . ?”

For Jane Dunlop, interwoven patterns in her video art similarly constitute complex analyses of the social and technological through algorithmic processes. Through a discussion of two video installations, (*fw*) *spin measure cut* (2016) and *select important things* (2022), Dunlop unravels the



metaphor of weaving as a PBR methodology. As she explains, “Weaving is a score that lets me operate with intention and precision before I let a work unfold (unravel) into its own disorder. Central to research, and therefore to thinking practice as research, is the fact one does not necessarily know where the exploration will lead.” Dunlop situates her work within feminist epistemologies of science and technology, attending to “interaction, to frictions and syncopations.” The warp threads of artistic outputs, influences, and written analyses are bound through, and entangled with, the dynamic weft of artistic research process (as she beautifully illustrates).

Ben Spatz presents a vivid photo-essay in collaboration with members of his research lab, analyzing two video works, *Postmemory: Fragments* and *Postmemory: Crypt*, comprising performances recorded in 2017 during visits to ruined and partially restored synagogues in rural Poland. Acting as performers and crew by turn, Spatz and his collaborators Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel lay their songs and bodies “against the particularities of each site” amid “multiple layers of past and present,” responding to fragments of memory, evocations of the Holocaust. Spatz positions the work within his ongoing Judaica project, which “attempts to dislocate and disentangle the radical and transformative potentiality of Jewish identification from a dominating whiteness.” Through their ethics of co-creation and reciprocal exchange, Spatz and his collaborators thus interweave performance methodology with their exploration of the relationality of past and present, which includes the relationship between the group’s embodied experimental research practice and its trans-temporal and trans-medial exhibition and documentation.

### **PBR and Embodied Narratives of Identity**

As Spatz notes at one point in his essay, for him “practice-based research asks how an ethics of embodiment . . . can be carried through into various forms of mediation, toward the institutional and the social.” The essays in this section take up this question, using embodied performances of song, theatre-making, and movement to unsettle and reclaim identities as they have been shaped (and shamed) ethnoculturally, institutionally, and intergenerationally.

Julia Ulehla locates her practice-based research in her “familial song heritage” through ethnomusicological fieldwork and contemporary artistic interpretations undertaken in “conditions of colonial rupture.” Through songs and stories, she explores the legacy of her South Moravian ancestors, particularly her great-grandfather Vladimír Ulehla, a noted collector of folk songs from Strážnice. In poetic language, interspersed with powerful performances, she traces intricate pathways through legends and family narratives, social mores, and cultural dissonances in her engagement with these “living songs.” For Ulehla, “PBR affords a chance to linger inside the ruptures caused by colonial histories of domination and feel into the ways that song and spirit move there.”

Theatre artist and scholar Heather May delves into institutional and disciplinary strictures of embodiment in her theorization of *crip time* (a concept of time that prioritizes wellness) in practice-based research. Through a vulnerable account of making theatre in response to a progressive disease causing vision loss, May confronts us with both the constraints and imaginative possibilities that arise from making art out of “these broken languages of our bodies.” Simultaneously, she critiques the rigid conventions and incessant demands of academic institutions that often compel employees to sacrifice their health in the name of productivity (a systemic issue that became widely evident during the pandemic). Through her film *Awaiting Tiresias* (2021), May challenges “ableist narratives about inspiring people who individually ‘overcome’ their disabilities with the crip understanding that

we survive disability by developing and relying on community. While our structures and institutions disable us, we learn how to survive them from those who have already done so.”

Minu Park explores Korean women’s cross-generational identities in her analysis of dancer-choreographer Eun-Me Ahn’s 2011 work *Dancing with Grandmothers*. In this fascinating piece, Ahn combines ethnography (interviewing elderly Korean women and filming their quotidian dance) and choreographed dance performed by professional dancers in front of the films. She then blurs the boundaries of ethnography and professional performance even further by presenting some of the “real” grandmothers on stage with the dancers, and by ultimately inviting the audience on stage for a dance party. This successful and popular work has been analyzed by several other scholars, but Park uses practice-as-research to argue that this “dance performance revives connection with the physical unconscious by decolonizing cognitive and embodied knowledge.” Drawing on Spatz’s (2015) epistemology of embodiment, she suggests that the onstage grandmothers’ portion of the work (which recuperates an often derided form of amateur dancing known as *makchum*) “reciprocates with both intuitive and learned physical memory.” In this way, she argues, “praxis functions to address the nonlinear and process-based quality of decolonial projects, not unlike how practice centres on ambiguity and inconclusiveness.”

### **PBR and Communities of Practice/Process**

Ahn’s collaborations with professional and community dancers gesture toward socially engaged PBR by bringing community members into the professional sphere. The authors of the final four articles of this special issue are deeply committed to work that centres, embraces, respects, and serves communities of practice/process. Although professional artists/scholars participate in and benefit from these projects, they aim to do more than blur the boundaries between professional and amateur. Their work is imbued with the ethics of participatory action research—it exists to support the needs of communities and facilitate social change.

Louise Campbell and Terri Hron are musicians/researchers who are deeply committed to participatory creative music, which is not so much a genre as a process intended—like Ahn’s dancing grandmothers—to break down disciplinary hierarchies and acknowledge the creative potential of all participants. Both are centrally involved in the Canadian New Music Network (CNMN), an arts service organization that supports and promotes contemporary music and musicians. Founded in 2005, CNMN is an ardent advocate for a wide range of professional, contemporary art musics. The pandemic and concurrent rise of social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, however, threw members’ growing uneasiness about the actual lack of diversity and inclusion in the organization into relief. One response was the Participatory Music Hub, a research-creation project that brings together participatory music projects involving varied professional and community musicians; for example, convicts, people with disabilities, or simply people isolating at home. The Hub performs PBR by showcasing “research into diverse participatory creative music” and “raises fundamental questions about the status and value of creative music and sound in Canada.” In turn, it is part of an ongoing critical reflection aimed at revising the organization’s mandate.

As professionals in the field of creative technologies committed to community-based projects, Rebecca Caines and Brandon Watson are often caught between disciplinary expectations of innovation, producing work that is not technical enough to satisfy engineers and not aesthetic

enough to satisfy artists who accuse them of “just doing community consultation.” For these artists/researchers, however, “simultaneously being inside and outside a range of different fields can expose the exclusions that may limit other forms of research.” Caines and Watson take us through this argument by discussing a fascinating range of projects. They ask, “What kinds of performances of innovation might come into view when communities and researchers improvise their own terms for practice-based research, and take up the invitation to explore the creative potential of art and technology together with vulnerability and transparency, always ready to succeed, always ready to fail?”

An ethos of co-research and co-creation also pervades the theatre work of Robyn Ayles, Heather Fitzsimmons Frey, and Jamie Leach, whose PBR “centres on questions regarding the relationships between very young children (aged eighteen months to five years), actors, and materials, with a view toward democratically creating theatre as a collective and immersive event.” Adapting the “Cycle of Co-Inquiry” outlined in a curricular framework for early learning and care developed by the province of Alberta, the authors discuss how their dramaturgical process and child-centered approach to PBR foregrounds play and playfulness, children’s pathways to meaning-making, and their young collaborators as “mighty learners and citizens.” Focusing specifically on a project-in-development called *The Urban Wildlife Project*, Ayles, Fitzsimmons Frey, and Leach take readers through the trial and error steps by which they created the conditions for playfulness (including unleashing basketfuls of pinecones) that allowed their adult actors and child co-imaginers to create “something that was not there before,” and that would not have happened without the active engagement of all participants. Significantly, the project was formative in causing the actors to shift their conceptions of both “creation” and “performance.”

Finally, Julian Henriques and Brian D’Aquino “discuss the theoretical as well as practical and political implications of a PBR methodology having as its subject the popular culture of the Jamaican dancehall sound system scene.” Detailing their participation in, and documentation of, a series of “reasoning sessions” with members of the Jamaican Sound System Federation and sound system industry practitioners, the authors argue that a “subaltern” application of PBR methods to the Global South creates opportunities not just to expose this community’s embodied and situated “ways-of-knowing” to international audiences but also for community members to articulate to each other their understandings of what they are doing. In this way, mapping the “established practice” of sonic street technologies in the Global South becomes, for Henriques and D’Aquino, a “sounding otherwise” that compels a “thinking otherwise.” The “value and force of PBR,” in this context, is its ability “to challenge the privileging of any one idea of knowledge to the disparagement of others.”

Taken together, what do these seventeen articles, written across diverse disciplinary practices and points of view, tell us about the “performative force of PBR”? Clearly, the PBR approaches chronicled here encompass myriad research topics and creative and scholarly outcomes, often (though, of course, not always) resulting in social critique or intervention. But this is seldom a dogmatic approach: most contributors also highlight the importance of messiness, uncertainty, and surprise as the conditions under which PBR projects operate. And, as we allude to above, several authors are also aware of the fine line between the performative as it acts in—and on—the world and that which is read as mere acting. It behooves us not to make inflated claims for PBR methodologies. In this regard, we might also query our use of the word “force,” placing emphasis not on the magnitude of PBR’s social or disciplinary influence, but (as per the laws of physics) on its tending to the energy and motion of change. In many of the contributions to this special issue, PBR operates in nuanced, modest, everyday ways, whether in playful theatre with small children, student

projects, conversations with trees, or performing with the fragmentary materials of a disused synagogue. PBR's exciting potential is to derive epistemological, ontological, and creative discoveries from engagement with all aspects of the physical, social, and cultural environment in relational processes that embrace ambiguity and precarity. As such, it seems that PBR is a fitting methodology for our times, something that is amply demonstrated in our Forum section.

## Forum

For our Forum section, we invited researchers working across a range of disciplines to respond to the following prompt: "For you, what is the most exciting direction in PBR today?" Inevitably, we received a broad spectrum of responses, many of them specific to contributors' current research foci, or reflective of their institutional, pedagogical, and career locations, or grappling with the very meaning of *practice* in its execution, reception, and documentation. That said, certain through lines also emerged.

The pieces by Lynette Hunter, Nina Sun Eidsheim and Juliette Bellocq, and Erin Manning are all concerned in one way or another with the discourse, or language, of practice. For Hunter, this manifests as a choice between "documenting" PBR such that it conveys graphically to an audience the materiality of one's practice versus "articulating" that practice within the communicative conventions of traditional academic research. Coincidentally, Eidsheim and Bellocq offer a way to bridge these two writing practices through a method they call "*speak-to-write*," in which different prompts are designed to get at the "nonlinear process of thinking and writing" and to aid in "the alchemy of communicating [about one's practice] in the presence of another"—in this case an attentive listener and transcriber. Manning would see this as coextensive with making language itself practice, and with letting a work do its work, or what she calls "*faire oeuvre*." In this scenario, the key is not to seek to control the process, or to impose generic categories; rather, it is to move with thought, and with language's "own orienting tendencies," trusting that "the work will find modes of engaging with the ecologies it provokes, and convokes."

The contributions by Michael B. MacDonald, Teresa Connors, and Vanessa Tomlinson present different institutional and transnational perspectives on PBR as a nexus for pedagogical innovation, socially situated and equity-seeking research, and graduate student training and nontraditional peer evaluation. For example, MacDonald discusses how the introduction of livestreaming production techniques into his musicology courses at MacEwan University in Edmonton (engaging students in the production of online graduating recitals during COVID-19) helped to introduce his students to some of the core concepts of research-creation, and to expose them to how he himself works as an artist-researcher within the field of audiovision. Connors situates her own experience completing a practice-based PhD in New Zealand in relation to four research hubs in Canada with which she has subsequently been affiliated. As she notes, all of these units use PBR methods not just to "include diverse thinking-in-the-making processes," but to actively decolonize those processes, while also engaging with broader communities. Addressing the Australian context, where "creative research outputs have been standardized for some time" through internal university and national benchmarking exercises, Tomlinson zeroes in on a question relevant to all university-based researchers employing artistic or creative methods: "What evidence is required for artistic practice to be viewed as artistic research?" Noting that the peer-based means of assessing creative research has begun to influence the thinking behind how that research is done, she nevertheless concludes that

the visibility gained through such reporting structures has contributed immeasurably to artistic outputs being valued *as* research.

Several of the Forum contributors take as their points of departure representative works from their current practice, or representative skills and core discoveries derived from years of practising. In their three-way dialogue, Alyson Campbell, Meta Cohen, and Emma Lockhart-Wilson use the occasion of their recent collaboration on a new theatre creation to reflect on the queerly affective dimensions of both their individual research inquiries—as, respectively, director, sound designer, and lighting designer—and their collective performance outcomes. Focusing on the transition as a site of rupture and possibility in performance-making and performance spectating, the authors note the ways in which their practices are galvanized by the interdisciplinary overlaps of such states. Mark V. Campbell, a practising DJ and a scholar in the field of remix studies, focuses his reflections on the DJ’s “performative act” of listening. As a practised skill that is deployed in ways both “otherwise” and “relational,” and that is accountable to both the music and its audience, Campbell insists that the “sociality of listening” central to the DJ’s display of skills can be extended not just to a reconsideration—and reevaluation—of sampling within hip hop music production, but to a de-siloing of “the rigid disciplinary boundaries” endemic to the “policing of music fields.” Finally, Sherrie Tucker identifies what she calls three “personal turns” in the evolution of her own practice-based research. Writing about the telling sonic and kinesthetic revelations that have underscored her research into the “telling performances” of different communities of practice, Tucker proffers what might be the essential credo of PBR: “No way to write about it without doing it.”

Our Forum section concludes with three contributions that highlight the ethical and political dimensions of PBR. In her article, Pil Hansen suggests a “triadic” approach to navigating the “overlapping ethical spheres” she operates within when crossing PBR with empirical research in the performing arts. Focusing especially on how “Strengths-Based Dramaturgies of Accessibility” can centre the research expertise of disabled artists, Hansen discusses the application of ethics in terms of its situational and relational procedures, its intersection with equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility initiatives, and institutional protocols related to research ethics evaluations and approvals. Using a recent site-based performance piece called VINES as a case study, Melanie Kloetzel returns us to PBR’s investments in questions of place, while simultaneously inciting the field to engage more meaningfully in the impacts of “climate coloniality” on such place-based research. In so doing, she suggests that posthumanist approaches to PBR have much to learn from “Indigenous methodologies that emphasize relationality, reciprocity, and accountability.” Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen articulates a model for the application of this learning in her contribution to our Forum section. Focusing on the experience of creating and presenting *The Seventh Fire* (2023),<sup>2</sup> an immersive audio installation sourcing traditional oral Anishinaabe stories and social roles as an evocation of ceremony in the everyday, Cooke Ravensbergen outlines the “principles of reciprocity” and the “structures of care” and support that are necessary for any practice-based inquiry.

## Materials and Reviews

Our issue concludes with three pieces that take up Cooke Ravensbergen’s injunction to attend more thoughtfully and feelingly to questions of care as they intersect with PBR across different research disciplines and performance sites. In “Reorienting Intimacies: Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s First Canadian Solo Exhibition: An Interview with Rui Mateus Amaral,” Laura Coby surveys the spring 2022 *Summer/Winter* visual art show by queer, contemporary artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, held at the

Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto. She discusses not just how the work of Gonzalez-Torres, through its sensual hapticity, forges new affective states and relations of intimacy between artist and spectator in ways that bridge the losses of two global pandemics; she also notes the care underscoring Amaral's curatorial practice in helping to create the material conditions for such a reorientation to take place.

In his review of Michael B. MacDonald's recent book, *CineWorlding: Scenes of Cinematic Research-Creation*, Matt Horrigan likewise discusses the ways in which MacDonald "treats moviemaking as a type of practice that must emerge from its practitioners' relationships with people." As MacDonald explains in his book, the community nodes that emerge from such work have much to do "with the three Cs of capture, critique, and care. Making nodes is necessary critical and care-based work" (MacDonald 2023, 6). Finally, the issue concludes with Megan V. Nicely's review of Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Love, A State of Grace*, an aerial dance performance that unfolded in San Francisco's Grace Cathedral in 2022. As Nicely notes, the tension between risk and control in Joanna Haigood's choreography, figured in the relationship of connection and collaboration that travels along the rope held between the unseen riggers on the ground and the dancers twirling in mid-air, potentially models a new way of moving through the world for audience members, one in which the "gravitational and social forces" that frequently buffet and unsettle us might be counterbalanced by "finding ways to navigate these forces."

Drawing on the work of bell hooks and Valerie Kaur, Nicely suggests that attuning ourselves to these new ways of kinesthetic knowing and feeling is not unlike what happens when we practice love: "As a practice, love requires cultivation, attention, care, curiosity, and acceptance. Finding ways to enter into, remain, and deepen this practice—which is at times awe-inspiring and at others painful or difficult—is an ongoing act of collaboration and ethical consideration needed more than ever in our current world." And here, perhaps, is where the amateur chef has something to teach the professional researcher, reminding us what it means to practice something for the love of it.

## Notes

1. Funding for the symposium was provided by the Practice-Based Experimental Epistemology Lab (PEER Lab) at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the Research Centre for Music, Sound, and Society (MSSC) at Carleton University, Ottawa.
2. Our thanks to Lisa and her fellow artists at Delinquent Theatre for permission to reproduce an image from *The Seventh Fire* as the cover to this special issue.

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## Making Space: Reading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Report in and Beyond the Classroom through Practice-Based Research

Natalie Doonan, Sara Bouvelle, Gaëlle Issa, and Mariana Villarreal Herrera

### Introduction: Gathering

I (Natalie) teach a graduate-level Digital Storytelling course in the Department of Communication at the Université de Montréal. The first project that I assign in this course is called a “Collective Experimental Story.” This assignment is an experiment for me too; in each of the three iterations of the course, I had no idea what to expect when I proposed it to students (Doonan 2002). The intention of this project is to introduce collaborative storytelling and to explore a platform that enables participatory forms of co-creation and presentation. I enter this experimental process *with* students, and we all explore new methods and subject matter together. In this article, I report on the project created by this class in the fall of 2021.

The approach to storytelling described in this case study modestly engages in the uncertain project of reconciliation between First Nations and settler populations in Canada. This is a monumental task that is by its very nature collective, precarious, and long-term. It is a place not of resolution but of questioning. While Indigenous scholars such as Taiaiake Alfred (2022), Glen Coulthard (2014), and Leanne Simpson (2011) have clearly expressed the problems and even impossibilities of “reconciliation,” I use it in this article in a very circumscribed way in response to the Calls to Action contained in the report of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which impel non-Indigenous Canadians and institutions to engage in reconciliation processes. Alfred criticizes the TRC Report for serving as a means of assuaging settler-colonial guilt and addressing First Nations people as victims, camouflaging the underlying sources of oppression, which are, as he says, “dispossession, destruction, and dependency; it is Colonialism in 3-D” (2022, 77). In this climate, Alfred assesses the TRC Report as an attempt “to bring Indigenous people into a situation in which they can access the benefits of capitalism and industrial society” (77–78). At the risk of naivety then, I will describe a first attempt to bring the TRC Report into the classroom to expose students to colonial-capitalist histories in this country and to the structures undergirding these ongoing processes of dispossession.<sup>1</sup>

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Employing anticolonial strategies in the classroom, as it is discussed below, implicates both content and methodology to work against institutional policies that have been long established in this country, summarized by Duncan Campbell Scott, superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs in 1920, as the assimilation of every “Indian” until there are none left.<sup>2</sup> In terms of content, my aim is to expose students to colonial histories and legacies in Canada, including such institutionalized policies of erasure and dispossession. In terms of methodology, I take direction from the work of Indigenous scholars, notably Shawn Wilson and Kathleen Absolon. Wilson has done extensive work studying the shared aspects of the ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies and research methods employed by diverse Indigenous scholars in Australia and in Canada, noting in particular a shared focus on relationality (2008, 7). Absolon (2011) likewise draws comparisons between Indigenous approaches to research across the country, underlining the centrality of Indigenous worldviews and the positionality of the researcher; process rather than goal-oriented work; recognition of one’s support systems (Elders, ancestors, community, etc.); holism (attention to Spirit, heart, mind, and body); and negotiation between academic and Indigenous theories, methods, and expectations. As a non-Indigenous person, my understanding of these methodologies is limited, since I have not been socialized in these contexts. Practice-based research (PBR), however, has many parallel alignments: horizontal teaching/learning; approaching the topic as a beginner rather than as an expert; attending to affect and the senses; and engaging in acts of making public as openings to conversation instead of treating these as outcomes, statements, or conclusions. This methodological approach resists the colonial-capitalist logic that reduces student value to tuition dollars, treats professors as service providers, and insists on the constant generation of products as evidence of worthiness.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to this consumer-cultural rationale, PBR is conducive to cultivating relations, a concern that is common with Indigenous methodologies (Simpson 2011; Wall Kimmerer [2013] 2016).

In the iteration of the course discussed here, I had proposed to students that we create something in response to the TRC Reading Challenge (<http://trcreadingchallenge.com>), which I had just learned about. This is an initiative launched by Jennifer Manuel, a former schoolteacher and archivist for the Ktunaxa Nation, that aims to recruit as many people as possible to read *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC] 2015). People are invited to sign up online and to share their reading progress with others. From 2008 to 2015, the TRC produced a report documenting the history and ongoing impacts of Canada’s residential school system on First Nations communities, as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Its executive summary report includes ninety-four Calls to Action. Among these are calls for teachers at all levels to address these histories and their effects in the classroom. Students in my course were excited by this proposal to join the TRC Reading Challenge. Over the first seven weeks of the course, we read the TRC Report; we defined the objectives and approach of our project; we conducted research and development to identify a suitable platform for sharing our responses to the TRC Report; and we divided our work.

In reporting on this experience, I do not claim any sort of expertise in anticolonial pedagogy.<sup>4</sup> I do very much wish to be part of decolonizing and reconciliation processes though. In my teaching, I always try to impart to students that making ideas public—through speaking, writing, performing, or any form of (re)presentation—means opening or engaging in conversation. I am following my own advice here and sharing research-creation in its embryonic phase. PBR, with its focus on process, can help to reframe the notions of (re)presentation, performance, and publication as outcomes,



understanding these instead as manifestations of thought-in-the-making. Importantly, this is a relational process.

Developing work for publication, particularly in academia, often entails eliminating any trace of emotion. And yet there are emotions. There is fear. Risky topics are avoided. The third person is adopted. Immediate personal reactions are edited out, or more probably never get articulated. For me, PBR honours a slowing down that allows for acknowledgment of these feelings. In her book *The Minor Gesture*, Erin Manning writes about the relational field that is conventionally obliterated in the act of writing. Here, I am thinking about the classroom as a relational field. Given that this is a Digital Storytelling course, its relational field extends to the Internet, and to the creative platform that we used. This article too belongs to this “co-composition with a world in the making. A worlding,” to borrow Manning’s words (2016, 132). This idea resonates with Michael Taussig’s notion that the field is the site where self and other meet (2011). This site of encounter is destabilizing, unsettling and unsettled. What is the role of the educator within such a field? I propose that it is one of facilitation, which is a “reciprocity in a field of experience” (Manning 2016, 142). According to Manning, the facilitator helps to carry the feeling, to move an event toward its satisfaction. Clearly then, the educator is not the only facilitator. I was not the instigator (or provoker) of the project described below, having responded to invitations circulating online. Evidently, the TRC Report itself is an important facilitator in this story. Likewise, each student participant facilitated the movement of feeling toward certain moments of achievement, and beyond. The tools we used have also helped to co-compose the field.

An important question that emerges in the midst of all this is, How do we carry stories, especially when they do not belong to us? In what follows, there are multiple references to the efforts that we made to design “safe” and “comfortable” spaces for discussion. This should not be misunderstood as an attempt to soften the blow of the stories that we tried to communicate. Our concern with the aesthetics of the virtual meeting spaces we used had to do with our desire to make the event accessible and to make it feel nonthreatening. On the one hand, we were conscious that digital tools are often intimidating. We wanted to use a platform that could be navigated with a minimal degree of digital literacy. On the other hand, we worried about the discussions being triggering for some people. We wanted to preempt, as much as possible, any form of aggression within the space. Creating a warm and inviting interface was one strategy for achieving these goals.

The very design of the project is meant to expose colonial structures in the classroom. I have tried to remain responsive to emergent, unfolding events. This contrasts with planning a project in advance, with a series of lectures or activities leading toward predefined objectives. This PBR methodology is, it seems to me, anticolonial in its denial of mastery. What Manning characterizes as the “neurotypical” assumptions of volition, agency, and (especially) individuality are dismantled in the collective, experimental project. As non-Indigenous scholars, the collaborators in this project cannot take an authoritative role in this work. While recognizing the significant limitations of our impact, I see it as part of much larger processes that will be developed in future iterations of the course, and across the ongoing works of the authors. “With Indigenous resurgence at the centre of anti-colonialism,” writes Elizabeth Carlson, “the roles of white settler academics are at the periphery, making space, and pushing back against colonial institutions, structures, practices, mentalities, and land theft. . . . [E]ven though participation in anti-colonial practice on the part of white settlers [is] a limited possibility, it remains a moral and ethical responsibility” (2016, 5). Doing this work within the short time constraints of a course project is only one of the major restrictions of this endeavour.

Certainly, we have not been able to achieve any form of redress, but we are pushing back. This kind of work in academia does inevitably meet resistance and is thus a provocation.

## Collective Decisions

Together we decided to plan a public event, and to do our best to create a space conducive to discussing the content of the TRC Report with a wider group of participants. One master's student suggested that we use Gather Town—an online meeting platform that boasts an old-school pixelated video game interface and that can host a variety of audiovisual materials. Any number of participants can circulate within the spaces designed by the host(s), under the guise of customizable avatars. Students embraced the process of researching and testing the capacities of Gather Town, and we decided that it offered the functionalities that we were looking for.

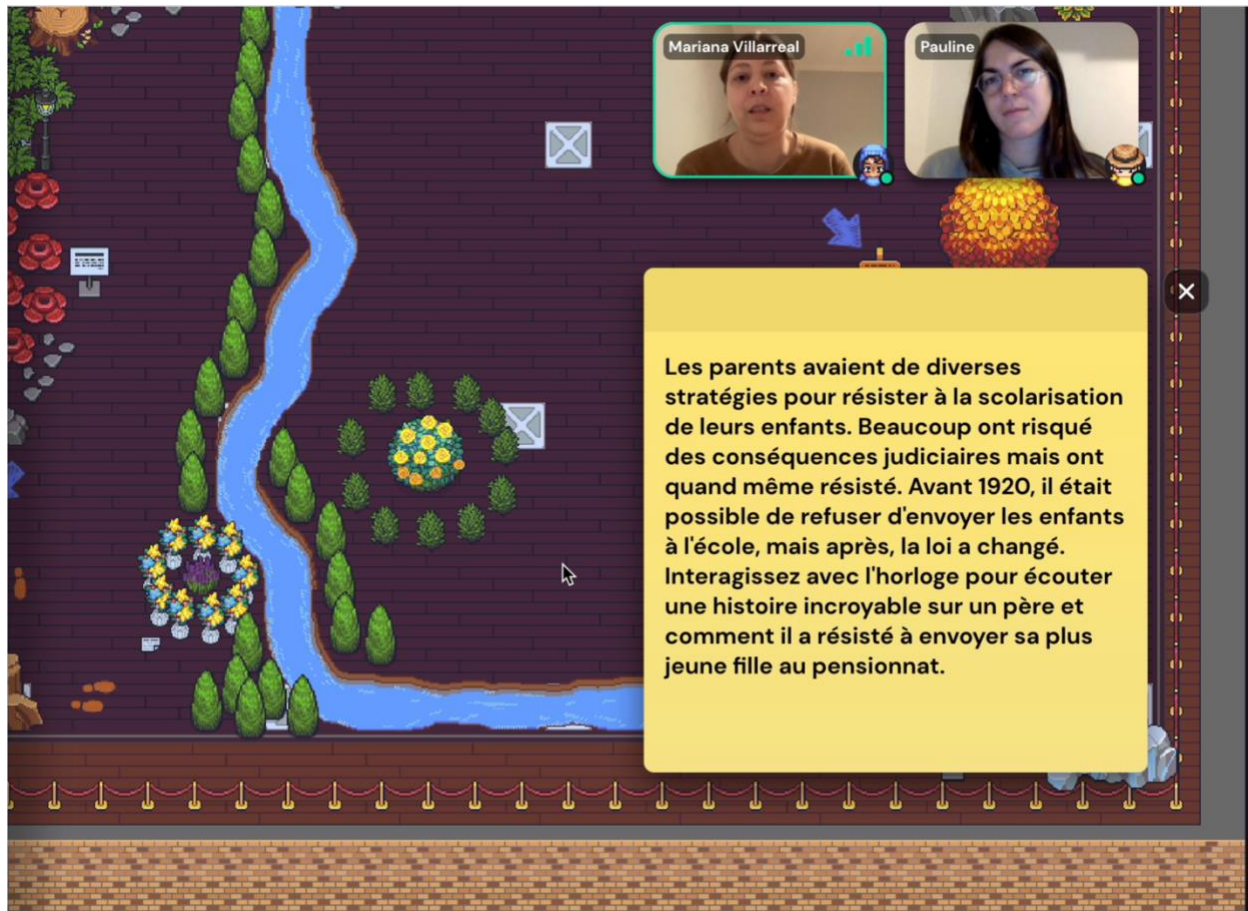
The class of fifteen was divided into groups of two and three, with each taking responsibility for one section of the TRC Report. We fixed October 26, 2021, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. for a public presentation, during which we planned to share what we had learned from our reading, in an open conversational format, and with the support of audiovisual media. Each group designed a room inside our shared space. I was responsible for writing an introductory address, which I presented around a virtual campfire that I had added to the common space for this purpose. I also created a short video that I placed in this common area. The video focuses on some of the visual and audible evidence of Kaniien'kehá:ka dispossession in the neighbourhood where our campus is located. These contributions were to set the tone for the journeys that students created in their separate rooms, which were located adjacent to this common space.

Video example: <https://vimeo.com/636578741>.

In the following sections of this article, four of us will guide readers of *Performance Matters* through our PBR process. Our own positionalities in this project were discussed at length in preparation for the public event in Gather Town. We read the TRC Report from a variety of perspectives: as non-Indigenous citizens, residents, and visitors to Canada, and as scholars in the Francophone Canadian university system. We were careful to avoid presenting ourselves as educators, there to teach others about the violence of colonization processes in this country. Instead, we wanted to invite an open public to listen with us. Our goal was to share our learnings about the histories and ongoing effects of residential schools, and our personal reflections on what it means to hold these stories. We took up the question raised in the Report: on the path toward reconciliation, “where do we go from here?” In preparation for this, we spoke a lot about cultural appropriation and our own varied positions vis-à-vis the TRC Report. One student took the initiative to find and share articles about cultural appropriation with the class.

It was important to us to present stories in multiple formats, including videos and photos. Students assembled documents, testaments, and artwork to help foster dialogue among visitors to the space. The affordances of the platform encourage different kinds of interaction and exchange. For instance, it is possible to place virtual objects, such as rocks, chairs, and screens in the environment. Avatars can interact with these by pressing “x” when they approach them. This can mean, for example, that a video or audio file will start playing, or that an image will open onscreen. When two or more avatars come close together, a live video chat opens. These chats can happen around the audiovisual media, so that people can discuss a video or other file while watching it onscreen.

together. During our live event, students guided visitors through the spaces they had designed, explaining their thematic organization of the rooms and discussing media during and after visitors' engagements with the work. Mariana Villarreal Herrera and Pauline Dubois, for instance, introduced a video that is accessed by approaching a virtual clock and clicking "x." In the yellow pop-up seen in the screen capture, they explain that it is a story told by a father who managed to resist sending his young daughter to a residential school (Radio Canada 2016).



Mariana and Pauline guide visitors through the room they created in the online meeting platform Gather Town for *Honorer, la vérité, réconcilier, pour l'avenir, récit collectif*. Screenshot, 2021.

## Colonial Strata

Taking an anticolonial approach to Digital Storytelling in this course presents a unique set of challenges. In addition to the colonial university system, we must also contend with the colonial architecture of the Internet. By this I am referring to its material infrastructure, which extends far beyond the campus, cutting through Indigenous lands and violating laws governing respectful relations with land, water, air, and other species. Computer networks and core routers provide data routes hosted by commercial, academic, and private network centres that traverse countries, continents, and oceans. Furthermore, our traffic across this network is regulated by international agreements between governments and telecommunications organizations. These forms of regulation conflict with treaty relations, which depend on reciprocity with the land. The Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners report having heard repeatedly that “reconciliation will never occur

unless we are reconciled with the earth” (TRC 2015, 18). They quote Elder Crowshoe, who says that “Mi’kmaw and other Indigenous laws stress that humans must journey through life in conversation and negotiation with all creation” (18). The ideological structure of the Internet has fallen prey to precepts of acquisition, conquest, competition, insatiable consumption, limitless growth, and concentrated wealth. In using the Internet, we acknowledge our complicity in maintaining this structure, while also benefiting from some of its democratic affordances, as intended by its original architects.<sup>5</sup>

Gather Town provided an interface that allowed us to meet with people who would not otherwise have been able to travel to our event. Meeting online does not mean, though, that we have somehow overcome physical divides. Gather Town is headquartered in Silicon Valley, a place that owes its name to the first ingredient used in manufacturing computer chips: sand. This is another reminder of the material foundations of the Internet and of its natural composition. It is composed of land, sand, earth, minerals, blood. The mission of Gather Town is to remove constraints in access to educational opportunities, in choosing places of work, and in being close to family and friends by building the so-called Metaverse, described as “a virtual layer over the physical world” (Gather Presence, Inc., n.d.). This is a symbolic and utopian illusion that fails to acknowledge its trespass, in which we, as settlers, guests, occupants, and recent arrivals, participate.

Our group is located in Tiohtià:ke, a traditional place of meeting and exchange for the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation. This is a founding nation of the Haudenosaunee/People of the Longhouse (Iroquois) Confederacy, which is also comprised of the Seneca, Tuscarora, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Oneida Nations. The Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples have long ties to what is now called the Island of Montreal. Many scholars agree that despite the diverse and divergent understandings of what constitutes “decolonization,” at the centre of these processes are “Indigenous sovereignty over land and sea, as well as over ideas and epistemologies” (Sium, Desai, and Ritskes, 2012, II). We acknowledge that our academic pursuits, even as they strive toward anticolonizing, occupy and extract from these lands. In attempting to make space, we are also taking space.

## **Stumbling Blocks**

The accessibility of the space for students is another question. A common barrier to student engagement with online storytelling platforms is the entry fee. This is an issue that we discussed in class. One of our selection criteria was the relative accessibility of Gather Town. The fee structure allows for the creation of online meeting spaces that are open to anyone, with a limit of twenty-five users. For larger meetings, in 2021, Gather charged US\$3/user/day. For longer projects with more users, the rate was US\$7/user/month, starting at US\$175/month for twenty-five users. This offered us the best compromise we could find for hosting a public event online, considering our goals for sharing multimedia and holding multiple simultaneous live discussions within the same space. It meant investing US\$8 each though. After a thorough discussion, we decided to limit the number of participants to fifty so as to constrain the cost. In the end, we had more than enough space to accommodate everyone, but we worried that some might be left out as a result of limiting participant numbers to keep the event affordable. This issue of financial accessibility is an important consideration in PBR within the classroom. Aside from this event, the only thing I asked my students to pay for during the semester was a Can\$10 downloadable story/game. For many students, even modest fees are significant though and affect their choices to participate or not in activities and events.

This financial hurdle was not the only challenge we faced in using the platform. Two days before our event, one student accidentally wiped out everything that the class had created in the space. All of the carefully curated rooms disappeared, their contents gone. The student contacted everyone in a panic at midnight. Thankfully, after troubleshooting for several hours in liaison with Gather's tech support, most of the space was restored, but needless to say, anxieties were running high in those final hours. This is a pitfall of collaborative work in a platform where everyone in the group is "finding their feet," so to speak. It is a risk that we take in accepting to discover together. In this approach to PBR, the experimental process is valued above the security of the tried and true.<sup>6</sup>

### Case Study: PBR Process in the Collective Experimental Story

A few weeks before our event, we circulated an open invitation to the public through our various personal and professional networks. A poster for the event and a signup form were created by master's student Luana Oliveira. On the morning of October 26, we welcomed about fifteen participants into this space, gathering the group around the virtual campfire for approximately twenty minutes before letting each person follow their own itinerary through the seven rooms. In each room, people were welcomed individually by students. The following is an account of this experience.



*Honorer, la vérité, réconcilier, pour l'avenir, récit collectif* poster. Designed by student Luana Oliveira, 2021.

### Welcoming Address (Natalie Doonan)<sup>7</sup>

I come to this text as a Canadian citizen. I come to this text as a person of mostly French and Irish descent. As such, I am a beneficiary of the colonial-capitalist foundations established by some of my ancestors. These systems have enabled my pursuit of higher education. I am privileged to hold the position of assistant professor at the Université de Montréal, a school that has secured the fourth highest research revenue in Canada according to the latest ranking (Research Infosource 2022). As such, I believe it is my responsibility to address the TRC Calls to Action in the classroom. PBR is essential to this because exposing the learning process and its uncertainties are anticolonial acts.



Approaching (ongoing) colonial histories through PBR has the effect of turning the magnifying glass back on oneself.

In my work, I do a lot of reading. The pace of reading this document is different from what I'm used to. It demands a different rhythm. I had to stop to make way for tears. I had the luxury of choosing the time and the space for these tears—the luxury to keep them private. The survivors of Canada's residential school system, meanwhile, have been called upon, and have had the great courage, to share their suffering onstage, in very public and highly mediatized events. In June 2015 I attended a short segment of the TRC closing event, presented in the nation's capital—Ottawa, Ontario. Survivors spoke their traumatic stories in a bright building of smooth surfaces (Reconciliation Canada, n.d.). At the event, which was open to a public who could come and go freely through the overflow spaces, we were at once enclosed and on display, surrounded by walls of glass. The sense of visibility was magnified by the intense media presence everywhere in the downtown core covering the events. This memory came flooding back to me as I became overwhelmed by what I read on my computer screen. I moved from desk to the comfort of my cozy couch, trading desktop for tablet, my experience safely confined. My point here is that I don't carry the burden of exposing my experience to public scrutiny. But perhaps doing so is part of the reconciliation process?

In relaying this personal encounter with the TRC Report, I am acutely aware of white fragility. I considered not sharing it at all for fear that this may be interpreted as a way of reorienting the attention back to me, a white middle-class Canadian of mixed European descent. I do not share this account because I wish any sympathy. Rather, exposing my affective response to these testimonies is an act of resistance to hiding behind the third person, as so many of us are taught to do in academia. The convention of adopting the royal We remains common practice, even in the humanities and social sciences. It bears underlining that like all writing, mine is situated within a particular embodied experience and orientation toward the topic at hand. Reading is an intersubjective sensory experience. My discomfort in reading this text is not only individual but also social and political. As Michalinos Zembylas points out, my “discomforting feelings” belong to the “wider structures and practices of race, racism and whiteness that trigger such feelings in the first place” (2018, 87). Recognizing this point is part of decolonizing the classroom. Further, acknowledging my lack of objectivity means that I must take responsibility for my reading, and for what I make public, following from that engagement.

The report of the TRC asks Canadians to learn about the histories of the residential school system and its ongoing effects. Further, it asks the difficult question: What happens now that we, as readers, know this history? As non-Indigenous beneficiaries of this system, and of broader colonial-capitalist systems, what responsibilities does each of us in this class hold toward reconciliation? These are questions that must first be answered individually, since each participant in the course relates in distinct ways to these histories. Moreover, within Québec, many Francophones find themselves identified with the ambiguous historical positions of both colonizer and colonized. Because of this, the topic of reconciliation is particularly fraught in this province. The openness of this group to working with the TRC Report may be due in part to the fact that a small minority of the students are Canadian (Québécois[e]), while the rest are international. In other courses, I have met with resistance from a small minority of students who feel that focusing on Indigenous oppression detracts from the histories of injustice faced by Francophones in Québec in relation to the Anglophone elite, of which I am presumably a representative.

What does reconciliation mean to each of us?

While I have not personally committed acts of theft, child abduction, rape, abuse, renaming, and shaming, I do continue to benefit from the effects of these institutionalized policies. In speaking the languages of colonization—English, French, Spanish—and not the languages of my hosts, I do participate in ongoing cultural imperialism. My ways of being and knowing—my ontological and epistemological groundings—are undeniably Western, shaped by the Catholic Church and by Canadian school systems.

I read this text as a mother.

What does it mean to read this text, to be aware of the histories it reveals? What does one do with the stories of more than 150,000 children who were ripped from their families to attend schools that were sometimes thousands of kilometres from their home communities? Some children were taken without notice and never got a chance to say goodbye to their parents, their siblings, their dogs. Some boarded airplanes filled with wailing children even younger than school age, begging parents not to leave them. Some never saw their families again. Many returned home as adults who spoke English or French and no longer had the words to communicate with parents and grandparents.

As a mother, what do I do with these stories?

Stories are repeatedly identified throughout the report as vehicles for reconciliation. “Learning how to live together in a good way happens through sharing stories and practising reconciliation in our everyday lives” (TRC 2015, 18).

I am reading the TRC Report in the context of a Digital Storytelling course. In the course, we have identified common characteristics of digital storytelling. For instance, its emphasis on social interactions, participation, and distributed authorship. We have been interested in its multisensorial, multimodal, and embodied attributes, and in the possibilities that it offers for performative, or action-based approaches. According to Janet Murray, “multisequential” stories are those that allow for navigation through multiple sequences, as opposed to a unisequential storyline, which has a coherent beginning, middle, and end, progressing toward a predefined outcome (1997, 63). Digital storytelling offers opportunities for the social implication of publics and for collective social practice. A multisequential story resists the colonial impulse toward teleological exegesis. We have decided to use this platform as a strategy for sharing multiple stories from a variety of perspectives. People can participate in live exchanges across geographic distances and through multimedia. These forms of storytelling offer alternative modes of literacy, both digital and embodied. Reading and writing being the common modes of address in the university, making work public through multisequential storytelling is a strategy for inviting a greater diversity of participants into the conversation. This PBR approach values the creation of open spaces that may or may not lead to peer-reviewed outcomes (i.e., what is valued by the institution). In an effort to make everyone at ease, we decided not to record the event.

By opening this space, we make ourselves vulnerable. This is not the same thing as opening ourselves to critique, something we do every time that we make something public. Making ourselves vulnerable means exposing our weaknesses and sharing our personal stories. Sharing our feelings and speaking from a place of uncertainty are both strategies that in my mind belong to PBR, because they are gestures of whipping open the curtain. Here I am picturing the meek Wizard of Oz, hidden

backstage of his impressive, God-like talking head projection. PBR rips open that curtain to reveal our trembling selves. It involves taking the risk of approaching making and publishing as opportunities for thinking together. For this to work, it is not possible to maintain our place of unwavering authority and expertise. During the event and in this publication too, we count on the sensitivity and generosity of those who join us. We have done our best to create a welcoming space.

The student reflections that follow are revelatory of the varying engagements that took place. The struggles of students being introduced to these histories for the very first time lay bare on the page. The difficulties of negotiating with deeply bred colonial impulses come through the writing, as they did in the classroom. These are not polished analyses, but reflections of thought in the act. There are evident problems, such as framing residential school survivors as victims, and dismissing their lands and identities as lost. In the three experiences related below, students evoke, as I did above, the privilege to dip into the story, to “witness” and move on. The learning process is fraught, but it is also communal and ongoing. The point here is that in honouring process—the practice, the performance—of ideas being worked out, space opens up for discussion.

### **A Story that Doesn't Belong to Me (Mariana Villarreal)**

The process of building a space in Gather Town brought a strong sense of gamification for me. There are many features to build the space and there is a clear resemblance to games like *The Sims* or *Animal Crossing*. Choosing colours, building scenery, placing objects, choosing actions, and decorating, became the focus of each team, and at one point, since the space is open and everyone can look at what anyone is doing, I felt teams were collaborating yet at the same time competing to create the most visually appealing rooms. I sensed the Instagram logic take over, where achieving an aesthetically pleasing visual is often “the story” and more important than the rest of the content. We didn't discuss this as a group, but my personal conclusion is that we wouldn't have provided that much attention to the decoration/visuals had we used a different platform.

The way Gather Town enables collaboration not only shaped the way our work was presented but also the relationships between the team members since some of them, as with any team dynamic, became the leaders of the group and executed the collective decisions in terms of choices for the virtual space in the early stages. As they became more proficient in using the platform, their place as leaders became more evident and the circle was reinforced.

Focusing on the content of our story, as a student, it was important for me to read and understand this text. This is because I felt I represent—at least in this classroom—what I think is the stereotypical foreigner who reads the news about Canada but does not really go further to understand its history, or the lessons that come from it. Being asked to participate in a collaborative storytelling process about the findings of the TRC was a technical and ethical challenge where many interrogations came into play. The following question helped me to reflect on what I could do: How could I tell a story that doesn't belong to me?

Recognizing that reading the report in its entirety was only a small act in terms of learning the whole context of the findings, I decided first to explicitly recognize my ignorance. I produced a short audio commentary in which I shared my position as a foreign student who recognizes that what she thought was superficial knowledge was instead deep unawareness of history. The platform allowed me to express this very personal aspect of the exercise in an intimate setting, since conversations are



contained within rooms. I presented an audio file set against a black screen. Importantly to me, this didn't detract any of the focus from the stories in the gallery.

**Audio example: Mariana Villarreal's contribution to *Honorer, la vérité, réconcilier, pour l'avenir, récit collectif*. Gather Town, 2021. <https://youtu.be/dKBlkzRyydo>.**

As a second step, I was inspired by the title of Natasha Kanapé Fontaine's book *Do Not Enter My Soul with Your Shoes*. She tells us that this phrase refers to the inability of non-Indigenous people to truly understand the history of First Nations. We can try to learn, we can try to educate ourselves, but we can't really know sincerely what happened. I connected with this thought and decided to include it as the video content that first greeted our visitors in the gallery. Gather Town's spatial layout features allowed me to plan the content of the gallery in a nonlinear way, meaning visitors could design their own path and walk from object to object (a tree, a fountain, a circle of flowers and boulders, among other things), depending on what grabbed their attention. The features did help me, however, to point arrows to floating notes that explained what each object would present and the main historical facts about the video, audio file, website, or photograph that came up after clicking on the object. Prefacing each piece of content was a very important aspect for me, not only to provide additional historical context but to frame the voices of the survivors within a space of respect.

I was able to embark on the discovery of a very complex and sad history that is also rich in learnings and examples of resilience. My own country, Mexico, has a very sad history of colonization and oppression, and this process has helped me to understand it from a distance and in a different light. It is not easy to think about decolonization. It overwhelms me. It is an enormous thought, touching all the aspects of my individual life and the life of my country. My language, my body, the way the society I am part of relates to the environment, the land, the way we eat and value food, the way we process resources, the way we think about health and healing, the way we look at culture and cultural objects. It is a sea of thinking and possibilities that I recognize I can barely see.

While this is not the first project that sparks that internal dialogue and deconstruction in me, it is the first one that allows me to think about it from a unique perspective. Canada and Mexico share a lot of things that I had never considered. Both countries experience the difficulties of trying to heal from the oppression suffered by Indigenous peoples in the past, while the present continues to limit and challenge their lives.

The geopolitical challenges that my country faces in its relationships with the rest of the continent and Canada aren't small or easy, and stem from the same difficulties. The extraction of natural resources and the power dynamics surrounding Mexican temporary workers coming to Canada to develop agricultural land are two issues that came to my mind after reading the TRC Report. Drawing new parallels and digging deep in my ability to question them is part of what I consider the learning process that this project sparked in me.

Working through a PBR approach allowed me, as a student, to discover new strategies of knowledge production and transference. The shifting forms this project had from the beginning (group discussions about which platform to choose, aesthetic considerations, etc.) made evident that I needed to understand clearly the knowledge I was producing and trying to share and my objectives in doing so. This made me unavoidably gain a deeper connection to the material and to the

emotions that it created in me. After all, the most valuable element for me in terms of learning, the thing that I will keep with me, is the ability to ask myself questions about decolonization of all the contexts I inhabit. Whether those spaces are familiar or foreign to me, the process of questioning will be there.

### **Learning Together (Sara Bouvelle)**

Gather Town provided an excellent way to get together despite the pandemic. Its simple and user-friendly design made it easy for the participants who could quickly get used to the game-like interface. In this way, we were able to integrate a playfulness that alleviated the heavy nature of the topics we discussed, thus creating a safer space in which we could all interact.

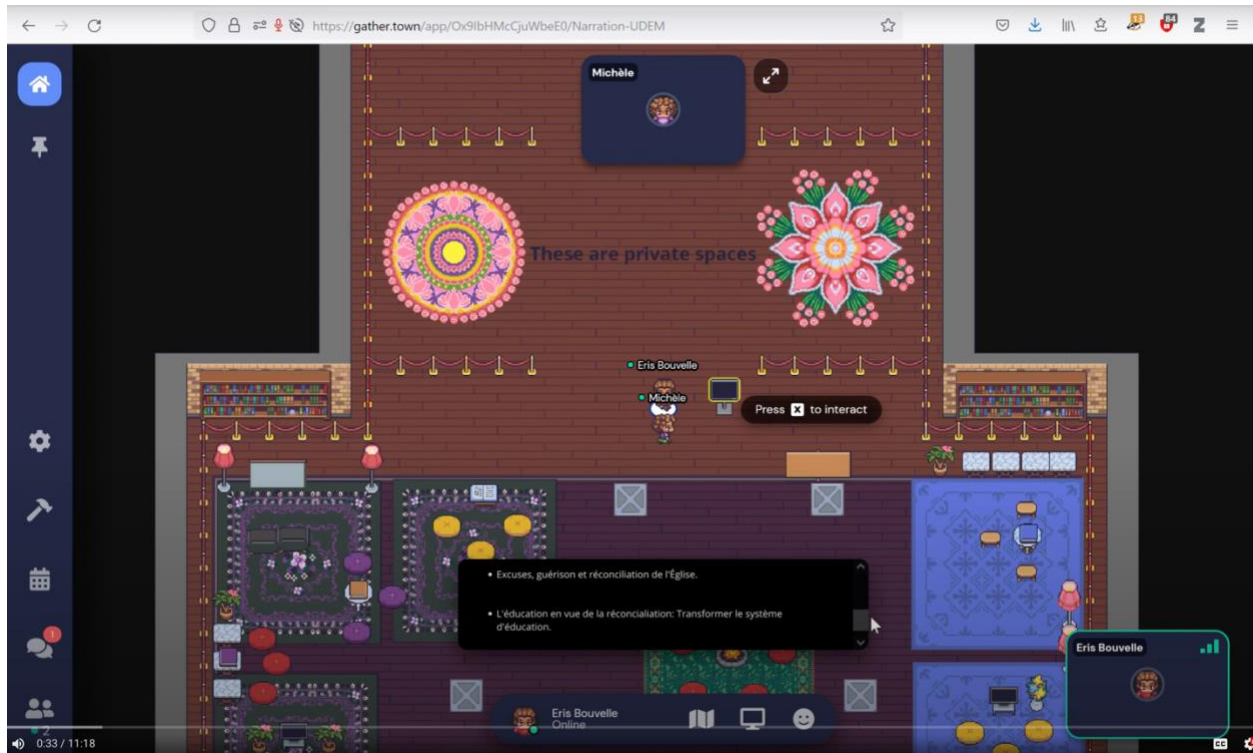
Though creating the rooms was a long process, it was rewarding to put together our own exhibit. Michèle Barcena-Sougavinski and I spent a long time thinking about how to welcome participants during the event, how they would move through our room, what they would see, and how much autonomy we wanted to give them. With these things in mind, we created an exhibit with various media so that visitors could quickly understand the context behind the parts of the TRC Report that we had read. At the centre of the room, we built a space for discussion. It was important for us that, no matter how much they knew about the TRC and the content of the report coming in, we give visitors the tools to make them feel comfortable discussing it with us. Gather Town has a homeliness to it that helped us achieve that goal by personalizing our space with the many options available on the platform.

The collaborative process that led us to the event, however, might have been the most interesting part for me. It helped me get to know my classmates better, and reading the TRC Report all together didn't feel intimidating, even though the text is dense and difficult. We took the time to find the best ways for us to connect with the text and to honour it properly. Various options were discussed, but the one that made everyone enthusiastic was the possibility of holding an event where we would invite people to join us to discuss the report together. Collaboration was the key word for the event as well: none of us being of First Nations descent, we wanted to open a respectful space where we could all learn together without being patronizing.

The event was important to me personally. I don't know much about First Nations histories, and I have sometimes found it difficult to approach the topic without proper guidance, so what we did together was a good opportunity for me to fill this gap in my education. I was appalled to learn the extent of the mistreatment that First Nations have endured in the twentieth century, a period that was glossed over during my school years. Being part of this project allowed me to channel my thoughts and feelings into action. As a new citizen, it confronted me with what it really means to be Canadian, and how privileged I am to have been able to live in this country, ignorant of these issues. It's easy to forget on what grounds Canadian society was built. Reading the TRC Report was eye opening, to say the least. I am grateful we've had the chance to create something meaningful for visitors, but mostly for us, in a truly collective learning experience.

This was a rare opportunity to take part in a collaborative process within a university context. In both undergraduate and graduate studies, learning is often solitary. Never once in my experience has my class come together to create something like this. Natalie made it clear, early on, that she values unorthodox ways of producing academic work, and this event is a perfect example of how those

values reflected on everyone's perception of their engagement with the material. Natalie encouraged us to consider how the shape of conventional academic work reflects on larger issues like elitism, ableism, and racism. This gave me a broader perspective on what academia is, and the many forms it can take, which I think was especially meaningful in the context of Indigenous history, which is so often overlooked for its originality in contrast to dominant Western practices and traditions. Going forward, I will use this lesson as a reminder to challenge what academia should look like, whom it should benefit, and whom it serves.



Gather Town room created by Sara Bouvelle and Michèle Barcena-Sougavinski for *Honorer, la vérité, réconcilier, pour l'avenir, récit collectif*. 2021.

## Opening Our Eyes and Experiences (Gaëlle Issa)

The sections of the TRC Report that my team and I had to address covered The Legacy and the Calls to Action: the impacts of residential schools on the victims and their families; the violence against First Nations children that continues to this day; the differences in government funding to communities; the limited access to education for First Nations people; and the lack of justice regarding the residential school abuses. Our group's main objective was to reflect on these themes in a way that avoided misinterpretation, through three distinct artistic media: literature, music, and visual arts.

Our team was composed of three incredibly dedicated people. We had very diverse backgrounds which made our project more interesting. Two of us were international students who recently moved to Montréal, one from France, and the second from Lebanon; the third one was a Canadian resident of Haitian descent. As non-Indigenous people, we were seeking to depict and carefully convey the messages of these sections of the TRC Report without any cultural appropriation. The intention of our project was therefore necessarily based on personal interpretations. Charlène Auré

shared with us a rather intimate poem that she had thoughtfully written. Gabriel Démosthène then used the poem as lyrics around which he composed and recorded a song. I in turn used his melody as inspiration for a series of illustrations that I created using the iPad drawing application Procreate. My illustrations were based on photos of First Nations women and children, which I found in online publications such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the British Broadcasting Corporation, *The Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. My source photos came from articles covering the events, discriminations, and abuses that happened in residential schools and in non-governmental organizations dedicated to fighting violations of children's rights.

Our collaboration and teamwork were extremely fruitful, and our cooperation was both fascinating and unique. We each performed our parts independently while relying on the TRC Report in creating our content. Toward the end of the process, we gradually unveiled our works, to receive each other's instructive feedback. The results were honestly quite striking. Following the revelation of the song and my three illustrations inspired by my teammate's poem, I edited a video that brought together our three compositions. The result felt like an astonishing music video of the final song: illustrations scrolling along with the lyrics of the poem.

[La vérité pour guérir. Video by Charlène Auré, Gabriel Démosthène, and Gaëlle Issa. 2021.](#)

The final stage of our work took place in Gather Town. Our main concern was to create a warm and welcoming environment—a safe space where people can share their feelings, ideas, and get involved in our extremely personal interpretation. The platform fulfilled this desire for us. We created a simple, peaceful space, divided into a variety of small colourful areas with plants and poufs, in which one could reflect alone or meet with others. Arrows were also used to indicate a path to access all the visuals such as a couple of documentary images, and other visuals illustrated by my teammate.



Video still from *Honneur, la vérité, réconcilier, pour l'avenir, récit collectif*, Gather Town. Original artwork by Gaëlle Issa, lyrics by Charlène Auré. Full video with original music by Gabriel Démosthène.

Visitors circulated through our room to discover and understand our section of the TRC Report. Each person interpreted our video in their own way while capturing the core idea of the project. We took the time to talk with visitors with our video onscreen. It was a truly meaningful and moving experience. It helped me to grow immensely on a personal level. One visitor to the event shared a particularly poignant personal reflection with us: “As an Indigenous person, it helps my healing process to know that there are non-Indigenous people taking the time and showing their vulnerability in talking about this. I feel that education is a huge part of healing. I appreciate your time and work. *Je suis honoré d’être présent aujourd’hui. Nia:wen* (thank you).”

Although I am an international student, and specifically Middle Eastern, this assignment opened my eyes and allowed me to better understand the history of the territory. The feeling of contributing to the process of reconciliation was extremely satisfying and rewarding. As I moved to Québec, part of the integration process was to introduce me to the history of Canada in order to understand the territory I was going to settle in. Reading the TRC Report pulled me into a much more personal experience. Nothing compares to the satisfaction of contributing to a cause. It is an honour to witness the emotions of generations who lost their territory and identity by enduring terribly violent acts. It has been rewarding to share what I have witnessed.

## Challenges

I am grateful for the spirit of generosity with which students embraced this difficult work. To my understanding, PBR values failures, missteps, or shortcomings as cherished openings for evaluating why something worked or didn’t work. Many points of divergence among us are hinted at in the student reflections above. The notion of “giving autonomy” to participants for instance, undercuts the idea of a relational field in which volition, intentionality and agency are distributed (Manning 2016). This is a multi-authored project, as reflected in this article too. Moments of dissensus offer an accurate glimpse into our PBR process. While certain deep-seated colonial impulses are evident, the sense of hope and desire for change is the predominant message conveyed through this writing. The injunction of the TRC Report to read and share its stories is a complex challenge. It risks playing into the fixation in academic research noted by Tuck and Yang on “eliciting pain stories from communities that are not White, not wealthy, and not straight.” They write, “Academe’s demonstrated fascination with telling and retelling narratives of pain is troubling, both for its voyeurism and for its consumptive implacability” (2014, 227). The intention expressed by Sara to create a space that could “alleviate the heavy nature of the topics we discussed” was a strategy to avoid framing our public encounter as sensationalizing. Other students, too, selected media to share that showcased accomplishments, rather than stories of pain. The story of the father who avoided sending his daughter to residential school, presented by Mariana and Pauline, is one example.

The issue of appropriation has been raised a few times throughout the article. From my perspective, it was one of our biggest challenges. One problem that arose was in relation to the graphic elements that are available in Gather Town, which include for example, tipis. These led to stereotyping in some cases, despite the many conversations that we had had as a group about what constitutes cultural appropriation and how to avoid it. In their writing above, some of the students address their own struggles with this issue. While I expected that students would create their own media, it didn’t occur to me to stipulate this in the project requirements. Mariana and Pauline were among the majority though, who pulled excerpts from videos, audio, writing and images that they had found online to create an exhibition in their room. As evidenced in Mariana’s writing, this was part of a



self-reflexive process in which they wrestled with how to communicate their processes of engagement with the report, while avoiding telling stories that do not belong to them. In her careful curation, Mariana was intent on presenting media in which First Nations people present their own stories, in their own words. The danger here lies in inadvertently mining Indigenous content to populate our tour. These are thorny issues that are productively brought to the surface through practice.

On the other hand, Gaëlle's group did decide to produce their own media. In her writing we can observe a glimpse of the challenges the trio faced around how to work with visual representation. The song lyrics express a sense of injustice vis-à-vis barriers to education faced by First Nations, while proclaiming a commitment to allyship. Here it is evident that Call 63.iii, "Building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect" is being addressed. While the group decided to create a series of original drawings to avoid taking work that doesn't belong to them, we can still see issues of appropriation being negotiated. For instance, the image of the white dove in the still from the video Gaëlle's group produced, presumably representing peace, hovers above a landscape depicting residential school buildings. While it seemed logical to include an image of a residential school, since these are a central subject of the TRC Report, we discussed the issue as a group and decided that it would be best to avoid such depictions, since the buildings themselves are triggering for many survivors. Tensions between the desire to create spaces that are conducive to discussion of charged topics in a forthright manner, while avoiding imagery that is triggering, surface in the reflections above. The media shared by each group clearly offered many opportunities for dialogue, which was the main purpose of our event.

### **Publishing as Conversation**

Engaging with these fraught histories in the classroom inevitably opens onto challenging negotiations. Despite this peril though, students committed to the effort. Why did this work? I think in part it is because it was the first project presented and discussed in the course. It gave students an immediate sense of the epistemological orientation of the course. Those who are averse to anticolonial approaches, or to the notion of situated knowledges, may have fled before getting in any deeper. One person did drop out early on, and another one just after we had completed the project. The former cited a different reason, and the latter never informed me of their intention to drop the course, so I don't know what her reasons were.

The way that I present this collaborative, experimental project emphatically underlines that I will not be the decision maker. Although I do try to present some ideas of topic and platform to launch our brainstorming, I strongly encourage students to contribute other ideas too. I suppose that if students were interested in the course and my approach, but not the topic of the project, they would have made other suggestions. The classroom felt quite open and there were ongoing debates, in which conflicting voices seemed free to express themselves. Of course, there are inevitably limits to this as it is impossible to work outside of power dynamics that are present in any classroom, but we did have lively exchanges throughout the semester.

### **Working against Colonial-Capitalism in the Classroom through PBR**

Designing anticolonial pedagogy is not simple or straightforward. As a first step, it might mean recognizing the ways in which we, as scholars, are colonized. Being colonized likely implies that we

benefit from and also perpetuate colonial practices. This is not an easy admission. Blindness toward our own complicity is not usually deliberate. It takes effort to learn and unlearn the privileges that so many of us take for granted. Canadian school systems—Anglophone and Francophone—are founded on colonial order. “The word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary,” writes Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* ([1999] 2021, 1). Instead of trafficking knowledge extracted from Indigenous communities, PBR can help creative researchers to turn attention inward and toward the transformative work required to subvert the systems that have benefited certain people at the expense of others. Turning the gaze inward means both engaging in self-reflexivity and also addressing the systemic and structural sources of oppression.

In this “Collective Experimental Story,” I am attempting to transform the classroom into a space of shared vulnerability, in which we can collectively reckon with the responsibilities that come with access to this space. The work that students created for this project humbled me. The time, effort, and care that they invested in this collaboration were exceptional and deeply moving. PBR in the classroom can be scary because it implies not knowing in advance where it might lead. It requires a certain letting go of control. In my experience so far, this trust has been rewarded tenfold. I am grateful to the students who have also embraced this challenge, joining me on this journey toward assuming our own parts in anticolonial practice.

In her exquisite work *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer invites non-Indigenous people to become naturalized to place. By this she means acting as though our lives, and our children’s futures, depended on the thriving of the place where we live. She urges us (non-Indigenous people) to put both feet on the ground, instead of “acting like immigrants” with one foot still on the boat (2016). This is a metaphor for the colonial habits that persist long after the first immigrants arrived to what we call North America. As I write, more than a year after this event in Gather Town took place, I continue to wonder about the meaning and impact of having invited a class of mostly international students to participate in a collective, experimental storytelling project around the TRC Report. The Report is aimed toward Canadians. However, many of the Calls ask for the respect of treaty relations. If every person were to do this, relations with other-than-human beings would be respected too. Treaties extend beyond humans to other species of animal and plant, as Leanne Simpson explains in her description of relations between fish clans and fish nations (2011, 109). Becoming naturalized to place, and respecting treaty relations where we live, whether temporarily or long-term, entails developing reciprocal relations. According to Wall Kimmerer, reciprocity produces mutual thriving. In these texts, non-Indigenous people are all being called to tread lightly, to be grateful, to act with humility and respect, and to share the gifts that are bestowed on us (2016). All of this is relevant within the classroom, and within this project.

“Respecting and honouring treaty relationships” appears repeatedly in the Calls to Action (10.vii is particularly relevant to the classroom). Call 86 asks “Canadian journalism programs and media schools to require education for all students on the history of Aboriginal peoples.” Knowing these histories and their legacies helps to reduce racism, because many of the assumptions on which racist attitudes are based are dismantled by learning about the realities of colonialism. This is relevant not only to citizens and permanent residents since colonialism has international repercussions. Many of the students in my class hail from France and from former French colonies. All students in Canadian institutions are addressed in the Calls to Action. Further, Call 93 asks “the federal government, in collaboration with the national Aboriginal organizations, to revise the information kit for newcomers to Canada and its citizenship test to reflect a more inclusive history of the diverse

Aboriginal peoples of Canada, including information about the Treaties and the history of residential schools.” Uncovering these histories is not enough in itself, but it is integral to the reconciliation process.

While we each occupy a particular place in these processes, the journey is not solitary. It is a communal endeavour on many fronts. I first learned of the TRC Reading Challenge through the Canadian Association for Theatre Research in the summer of 2021 when I received an invitation to participate through its listserv. Several other members of this association led reading groups of their own in their classrooms. The Toronto-based company Théâtre Passe Muraille joined the Challenge, organizing weekly readings of the TRC Report, followed by monthly meetings to discuss the report’s Calls to Action, with the objective of developing responses to the calls.

The fact that these groups have all coalesced in pandemic conditions has implicated virtual environments within the purview of spaces targeted for decolonization. Théâtre Passe Muraille held its meetings on the online meeting platform Zoom. Recently I have noticed increasing attention toward acknowledging the many lands on which we gather when we make use of such platforms. Collectively, we are seeking ways to transform these spaces, which do not “separate [our] geography from our destiny” (Gather, n.d.) but only try to help us forget that we are rooted somewhere. In PBR we engage in and with those places, embracing the unpredictable transformations that will no doubt unfold from reciprocal relations with place.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ellen Waterman and Peter Dickinson for their superb editorial guidance, as well as the two blind reviewers and Gale Franklin for their thoughtful suggestions. The project discussed in this article would not have been possible without the wholehearted participation of the students in my Digital Storytelling course in the Fall of 2021. A very big thank you to you all! My gratitude as well to Jennifer Manuel for starting the TRC Reading Challenge and to all those who read in solidarity. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak as a guest, even if uninvited.

## Notes

1. See Wolfe (2006) for his widely cited definition of settler colonialism. He explains: “Settler colonialism is an inclusive, land-centered project that coordinates a comprehensive range of agencies, from the metropolitan centre to the frontier encampment, with a view to elimination of Indigenous societies” (393). Lorenzo Veracini (2013) shows that the focus on relationships between settlement and invasion have produced a need for instituting “reconciliation” processes and public apologies.
2. For a definition of anticolonial methodologies and practices, see Carlson (2016). Note that in the absence of First Nations participation in this project and the fact that it falls short of working toward concrete restorative justice, I am calling my approach “anticolonial” instead of “decolonial.” Implicit in this is a critique of neoliberal logic, which Tuck and Guishard call “the most recent iteration of settler-colonialism” (2013, 16).
3. Many scholars have made explicit the alignments between colonialism and capitalism. See, for example, Coulthard (2014), Gómez-Barris (2017), and Sousa Santos (2018).
4. The terminology around what constitutes “anticolonial,” “decolonial,” and “decolonizing” research and pedagogy is contested. Elizabeth Carlson (2016) unpacks many of the distinguishing features. Tuck and Guishard (2013) define “Decolonial Participatory Action Research.” Sium, Desai, and Ritskes (2012) discuss



the theory/action divide that poses potentially fatal problems for doing decolonial work within colonial academic structures in which “decolonizing the mind” threatens to occlude the real, physical effects of colonization on people. Further, Zembylas underscores the danger of attending to emotions as individual responses to the violence of colonization, without a more substantial attention to the underlying social, political sources of “white discomfort” that emerge from “broader affective, material and discursive assemblages of race, racism and whiteness” (2018, 86).

5. For a short story on the discrepancies between the original visions for the Internet and how these have been co-opted, see Brooker (2018).

6. Gather Town launched in May 2020. Although we were unsure of the lasting appeal that meeting and conferencing tools like this would retain beyond pandemic times, our intention was to leave our exhibition up online, making it accessible for as long as possible. I have since decided to password protect the space though. While we had hoped that readers of *Performance Matters* would be able to visit this space during or after consulting this article, in the end I worried about exposing students to critique at a stage when it is important for them to explore freely without repercussions. I did not want some of the critiques that I make in this article to be attributable to specific individuals. This is an example of ethical issues that can arise in PBR projects and publications. Varying degrees of security exist at different career stages, which is an important consideration when working, and especially publishing, with students.

7. This section is a modified version of the Welcoming Address that I delivered during the event. I have adapted it for publication to avoid repeating points that are discussed elsewhere in the article and to provide clarification for readers.

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## Teaching Student-Centered Podcasting: Practice-Based Research and Relational Ethnic Studies in *The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast* “The Seeds, the Soil, and the Cyber Garden” Series<sup>1</sup>

Mario Alberto Obando and Daniel Topete

Featuring Katherine Batanero, Gregory Esparza, Karla Hernandez, Rosa Maldonado, Pedro Martinez, Felicia Mora, Francisco Najera, Nancy Ocana, Diana Ponce, Pedro Reyes, Caroline Romero and Susana Tapia

As we experience year three of the ongoing global pandemic, which some have deemed a “post-COVID” transition period, it is imperative we learn the lessons from the projects and ethics that allowed us to continue to build compassionate and lively learning spaces in the virtual world. While campuses have pushed for more in-person courses, online learning continues to be a critical site of community care, creativity, and generative collaboration. Consequently, we offer this guide to our faculty-student collaboration in the spring of 2022, which produced a three-episode arc of *The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast (AMP)*,<sup>2</sup> as not just a demarcation of a bygone era of teaching practices to survive the pandemic but also a lively archive of performance and practice-based research (PBR) that can be instructive in our pathways currently and into the future. As faculty co-hosts and co-producers of the podcast, we collaborated in these particular episodes with wonderful graduate students from California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA): Nancy Ocana, Rosa Maldonado, Diana Ponce, Karla Hernandez, Gregory Esparza, Pedro Reyes, Susana Tapia, Felicia Mora, Pedro Martinez, Francisco Najera, Katherine Batanero, and Caroline Romero. Our cross-campus pedagogy also integrated Mario Alberto Obando’s undergraduate students’ feedback to support Daniel Topete’s graduate students as they considered questions of audience and approach in a Chicana and Latinx Studies seminar. This guide offers an overview of the series, our goals and pedagogy, and the implications of the series in terms of its demonstration of the importance of teaching performance-based research in relational Ethnic Studies courses.

[Link to audio reflection on the series.](#)

[Link to full three-episode series.](#)

This guide accompanies three episodes of *The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast* that we have called “The Seeds, the Soil, and the Cyber Garden.”<sup>3</sup> We were inspired by an interview with Roderick Ferguson in episode 1, entitled “The Seeds,” in which Ferguson discusses the importance of doing research and creative work that allows for the planting of seeds. In doing so, we cultivate a sort of garden where the blossoming of our efforts takes the life forms of many entities through PBR, intersectionality, and relational Ethnic Studies. Therefore, the procedural naming of the series—from seeds to soil to cyber garden—honours and articulates that PBR and relational Ethnic Studies

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can at once teach students the very skills of our fields while also flourishing new modes of possibility through trial and error in interviewing, conceptualizing, editing, feedback, and dialogue in real time.

In the context of PBR, it was critical to examine work that names the institutional failure of academia in incorporating racialized, sexualized, and gendered bodies, knowledge, and communities into its frameworks. Instead of seeking inclusion, representation, and recognition within the traditional nodes of academic convention, our podcast aims to plant the seeds and cultivate gardens where new life may blossom. One of the main lessons that podcasting offers is a critical virtual space for students to digitally and holistically intervene in the often dehumanizing, overtly competitive, and often transactional experience of academia. We argue that podcasting that centres PBR can produce heartfelt, communal, and compassionate projects that we call “digital holistic Interventions.”<sup>4</sup> Digital holistic interventions are designed for virtual spaces to imagine knowledge production and wisdom sharing beyond the militarized and land-based cartographies of the American university. Teaching digital holistic interventions serves as a spiritual offering; we aim not only to produce assignments for evaluation but also to produce projects that intervene and linger beyond the geographies and temporalities of the campus and academic semester.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the ways we understand educational attainment and teaching, shifting things away from the physical classroom. As teachers at the college and university levels, and as the hosts of *The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast*, we envisioned the possibilities of incorporating the digital humanities into our curriculum. The course that produced these three specific episodes of *AMP* was a graduate-level seminar in Chicanx and Latinx Studies (CLS 5050: Interdisciplinary Seminar in Chicanx and Latinx Studies) offered by Topete at CSULA, in conjunction with Obando’s survey on Ethnic Studies histories (CHIC 190) at CSU Fullerton. CLS 5050 emphasized an interdisciplinary approach to the production of knowledge in Chicanx and Latinx Studies and the nature of interdisciplinarity as a methodology and philosophy. Within the context of the ongoing pandemic, we centred remote learning and teaching with PBR to create a semester-long, cross-campus collaboration. We followed similar curriculum trajectories in our courses and invited the scholars whose work we reviewed in class to speak to the students and to be guests on our podcast. This direct interaction with those whose words students were engaged in reading created new possibilities for learning beyond the standardized formulas of read, memorize, and regurgitate. Students practised podcasting through the units entitled “Critical Testimonio Reflections & Interrelated Genealogies,” “Interrelated & Intersectional Ethnic Studies,” and “Civil Rights Movements, Neoliberalism and the American University.” We read the work of and interviewed Ester E. Hernández and Steven Osuna for their contributions to *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* (Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernández. 2017). We also read and interviewed Roderick A. Ferguson and discussed *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (2012). Finally, we studied and interviewed Anita Tijerina Revilla’s work “Attempted Spirit Murder: Who Are Your Protectors and Your Spirit Restorers?” (Revilla 2021). Our scaffolding of teaching PBR included modelling the practice of podcasting with our students several times before their own performances. This included interviewing Hernandez and Osuna and then holding space for student questions, feedback, and deliberation about the interviews, our methods, and their own upcoming podcast project.

## Goals of the Series

The main goals of the “The Seeds, the Soil and the Cyber Garden” special series are to create a collaborative environment for teaching, learning, and producing performance and PBR. Our first goal was to actively incorporate graduate students of colour in the envisioning, production, interviewing, reflection, testimonio, performance, editing, and distribution of the series. Our second goal was to provide methods, theories, and arguments that underline the importance of performance and PBR and pedagogies in the fields and classrooms of relational Ethnic Studies. The methods and theories of our pedagogy were informed by the critical interventions in Jenifer Gómez Menjívar and Gloria Elizabeth Chacón’s edited collection *Indigenous Interfaces: Spaces, Technology and Social Networks in Mexico and Central America* (2019a). This text allowed us to situate students as critical agents in the development of PBR and Ethnic Studies work. As they argue in the introduction to the volume, digital interfaces for Indigenous and racialized communities allow students to reclaim their denied voices, and their contribution to building an online presence allows them to subvert narratives of their disappearance and erasure (Gómez Menjívar and Chacón 2019b, 6). We also strove to demonstrate the practical ways our series offers productive intersections in Ethnic Studies and PBR. Another goal was to reveal the ways teachers and students can use PBR to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and activate themselves productively beyond the physical space of neoliberal universities and cultivate learning and spiritual communities in virtual spaces that actually allow working-class and first-generation immigrant college students more flexibility for creative and academic endeavours. With this in mind, our series is grounded in the methodological and theoretical contributions of *Indigenous Interfaces*, which argues that “new media” allows for Indigenous and racialized communities to “give continuity to threatened lives and tradition” and also “establish virtual connections and . . . ideas across cybernetic and national spaces” (Gómez Menjívar and Chacón 2019, 15). Having students engage decolonial scholarship and PBR through podcasting allowed us to collaboratively create our own creative intervention. As Paul Joseph López Oro writes in his contribution to *Indigenous Interfaces*, sharing our memories within these virtual spaces, especially for future listeners, is “multi-sited as it can manifest in multiple spaces and forms as dreams, oral traditions, storytelling, visions, spiritual possessions and re-enactments” (López Oro 2019, 170). Finally, the series aims to collaborate with scholars in the fields of critical university studies, Black feminist thought, queer of colour critique, and Chicana/Latina/Indigenous decolonial education in order to situate a multi-generational approach to PBR pedagogies and allow for these collaborations to re-envision new terrains of possibility, critique, and expression.

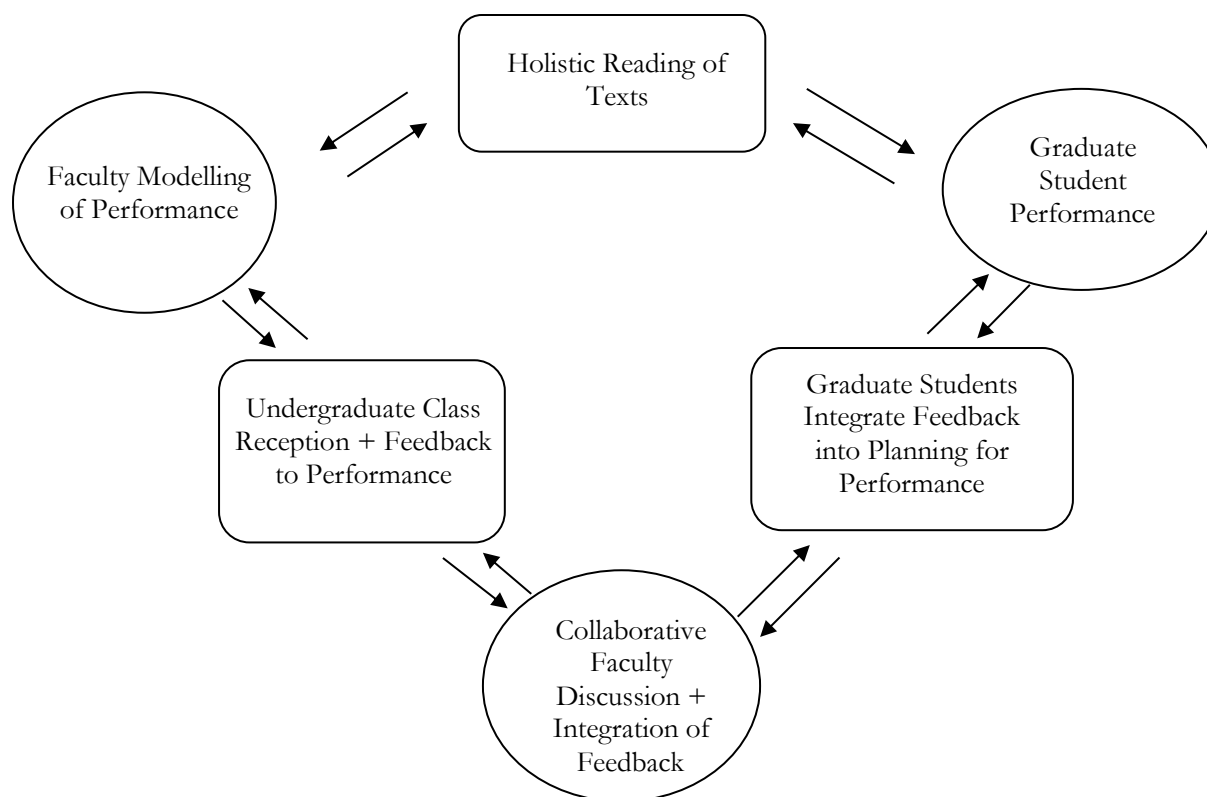
As the three-episode arc thoroughly demonstrates, students engaged in PBR can simultaneously gain invaluable insight into the processes of knowledge production and also critique conventions of knowledge distribution. Consequently, it is our goal for listeners of the series to contemplate the ways students can redefine classroom assignments and research for their own purposes, reorienting these projects as spiritual offerings for themselves and their respective communities. One goal is to listen to the ways that assignments and even lessons do not merely regurgitate annotated bibliographies or gravitate around professorial commendation. Rather, listeners of the series can find it helpful to consider and outline the skills students learned and the ways those skills activated their present circumstances as abundant and capacious positionalities to critique the world around them and engage holistically with course material. It is our goal for listeners to also contemplate and consider the ways that we move with texts, authors, and content in the performative space of podcasting. For listeners, here are questions that may be helpful in contemplating these goals:

1. How does podcasting as a site of performance and PBR reveal the ways virtual classrooms are lively, dynamic, and critical spaces of dialogue and connection?
2. How can collaborative design and shared responsibilities in producing PBR with students produce new theories and approaches to both the fields of critical Ethnic Studies and PBR?
3. How does prioritizing the skills students learn in these projects offer new lines of inquiry and engagement between faculty, students, and guest contributors in the class?

## **Pedagogy**

Our cross-campus pedagogy integrated Obando's undergraduate students' feedback into the central collaboration with Topete's graduate students, especially in co-designing questions and the overall design of the podcast series. Our teaching also relied heavily on faculty modelling and student observation. Students observed three live recordings of our podcast work as workshops for their classes. Our interviews with Hernandez, Osuna, and Ferguson allowed students to observe the rapport we share with our beloved colleagues, the warmth required to receive and welcome them, and most especially that academic and intellectual conversations do not need to be contentious spaces of intellectual one-upping, and can instead be caring and lovely conversations with social justice at the centre. In every one of these interviews, students asked questions of interviewees and then discussed with us the process of our preparation for interviews and how we conceived of follow-up questions. These conversations taught students to consider the real-time ethics and lessons of PBR. How do you thoughtfully and carefully share your questions with the interviewee? How does this practice then inform the ways students engage with scholarship in the future?

For instance, in episode 1, students asked questions of Ferguson, and this turned into an organic blossoming of new ideas about his book. These ideas are now archived in audio podcasts and also in students' thinking about their own projects, be it their preparation for the next podcast episode or their own master's thesis and community research. Students from Obando's course offered perspectives that shared their understanding of course material but also reflected the clarity and effectiveness of the way the podcast episodes were structured and shared with them. The feedback from Obando's undergraduate students allowed Topete to encourage his graduate students to consider clear and precise questions for the preparation, execution, and production of their own podcast interview with Revilla. Therefore, an active engagement with an undergraduate student learner's audience reception and feedback was central to revisions and lesson planning. The dynamic process is visually represented in the figure below. As the figure shows, the modelling, preparation, and production of podcasts as performance and PBR engineers a dynamic, holistic, and comprehensive reading of texts in relational Ethnic Studies.



Dynamic process used in our collaboration to teach student-led podcasting.

Additionally, this process centred orality in connecting our undergraduate and graduate student learners together. For Topete’s graduate students, an intentional creative process of honouring dialogue and collaboration offered the space for creating long-lasting relationships with other people in their fields. As shown in episode 3, students also had the opportunity to reflect on questions of accessibility in translating complex academic jargon into useful and practical dialogue for themselves and for their communities. Students learned the importance of these technologies in dialogue as well as in the power of both their embodied practice to combat erasure and their truths. Gómez Menjívar and Chacón (2019b) write that for Indigenous communities and historically marginalized people, “cyber technology” is a “creative and empowering tool” that combats “language death” and raise(s) political awareness (11). It also produces, as López Oro (2019) writes, “embodied archives” passed on “transgenerationally through the flesh via-a-vis oral traditions” (165). The podcast, being an auditory medium, also challenges the very space and place of written text as the main arbiter of learning and study. In this way, we actively held conversations with students about considering ability as a critical intersection in their own future teaching projects. PBR and relational Ethnic Studies then can be inroads to considering equitable and universal design in the classroom through practice.

Listeners to the series may also be attuned to the value of listening to students actively developing their ideas. For us as teachers, this was beautiful to witness, and students reported in our class that this allowed them to value and honour where they currently are in their intellectual formations. When we listen to these ideas in development, we hear clarity and precision as well as contradiction and complexity and this, for us as teachers, is welcomed and, in fact, should be documented and archived through these kinds of projects. We are interested in documenting the beauty and messiness of process rather than sanitizing these instructional modes into products that often can



intimidate student listeners who desire connection through the space of vulnerability and raw possibility. Our work as teachers in PBR and relational Ethnic Studies does not necessitate producing completely polished academic products for scholarly consumption. Quite differently, we are interested in supporting student healing and collective self-esteem so that students can use these projects as springboards for wherever they go in their journeys. Our main priority was to collectivize our individual wisdoms and create networks of vulnerable, honest, messy, and thoughtful learning communities. This is precisely why we will hear students articulate, on the one hand, not necessarily enjoying writing and the pressures of academia while, on the other, enjoying reading and producing creative projects within the very spaces they critique.

## Implications + Conclusion

*The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast's* series “The Seeds, the Soil and the Cyber Garden” is a testament to the rigorous and rewarding process of collaborative faculty-student virtual performance and PBR produced during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than framing this guide as a detailed assessment of equipment used, we centred the values, ethics, and practices of the series as central to the listening and engagement of kind and curious audiences. Frankly, the equipment used does not matter all that much. Our heart and compassion in this work are insurmountably what matters most. Regardless of whether students used their phones, laptops, or campus equipment to record, we honour the integrity and heart that students of colour place in sharing their compassionate and ardent life stories and interpretations of relational Ethnic Studies in their PBR in podcasting. It takes great energy and love for ourselves and our communities, especially those of us on the margins of society as racialized, gendered, and sexual minorities to offer our spirits into the recorded terrain of these kinds of performances. Our guide here, as well as the accompanying audio reflection, are meant to breathe life into honouring that force and energy, and it is from this point of spirit that we hope audiences receive and hold space for the podcast series. Consequently, we ask: What can we learn by the way the podcast makes us feel? How can we translate that feeling into our classrooms and in our communities? How might that feeling of virtual collaboration that prioritized the mental, spiritual and physical health of students of colour continue to invigorate our work within and beyond the pandemic?

As we elaborate in the [audio reflection](#), listening to this podcast series reminds us of and grounds us in the importance of ensuring that the trauma, healing, and learning of students of colour is always already heard, recognized, and prioritized every time we take up the performance of teaching. Holding the ephemeral nature of these performances within the series for streaming allows for us to return to the life-affirming work that we committed to in the pandemic. However, the PBR we did during the pandemic is not just a relic of a time of survival or time to be escaped, forgotten, or relegated to our repressed memories; in fact, as scholars and teachers in the field of relational Ethnic Studies and the producers of *The Alchemist Manifesto Podcast*, our aim will be to learn from the pandemic within the virtual classroom and in digital humanities projects because this work not only motivated and inspired us, but in more ways than one kept us healthy and alive.

## Notes

1. In addition to this guide, we offer an audio reflection on the series here: [https://soundcloud.com/user-501210202/a-reflection-on-the-seeds-the-soil-and-the-cyber-garden-series/s-13pfsFeqnrk?si=4c738ea8c586417b8b90baacbd8bbaeb&utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/user-501210202/a-reflection-on-the-seeds-the-soil-and-the-cyber-garden-series/s-13pfsFeqnrk?si=4c738ea8c586417b8b90baacbd8bbaeb&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing).



2. The authors are co-hosts, co-writers and co-producers of the *Alchemist Manifesto Podcast*. The podcast, as of 2023, streams three seasons consisting of *testimonio* between the authors, interviews with scholars in the fields of relational Ethnic Studies, and instruction on teaching holistic Ethnic Studies. Conceptually, the podcast is digitally holistic, with cultural and spiritual interventions that are always already an offering toward better worlds, collective healing wisdoms, and generative spiritual practices of engaging comparative and relational Ethnic Studies, specifically that of Chicana and US Central American Studies, and their intersections and entanglements with our daily practices of engaging Mesoamerican Indigenous Cosmologies and Tibetan Buddhism respectively.
3. To stream the series, please click here: <https://soundcloud.com/user-501210202/sets/performance-matters-journal>.
4. The concept *digital holistic intervention* is defined in Obando and Topete (forthcoming).

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### ***SJS-Who?* Performance Ethnography and a Practice-Based Pedagogy**

Oona Hatton

In the call for this special issue, our editors queried, “What is the performative force of practice-based research (PBR)?” This article expands on that important question, asking, What is the performative force of practice-based pedagogy? In other words, are there any common perceptible outcomes of students engaging in PBR in a learning environment? I offer as a case study the culminating project of my research methods course in performance ethnography. After describing the project’s multi-step process and its alignment with both critical performance pedagogy and the performative paradigm (Haseman 2006), I propose three observable features of practice-based pedagogy: intimacy, accountability, and reciprocity. As evidence, I share selected excerpts from students’ writing and my own anecdotal—that is, unpublished—knowledge (Hunter 2019) based on our classroom discussions and my observations. In addition, I offer the archival vestiges of the most recent class project in the form of our playscript. It is my hope that in addition to articulating PBR’s contributions to critical performance pedagogy, this reflection can assist in affirming some of PBR’s broader methodological contributions.

### ***SJS-Who?* Critical Performance Pedagogy and the Performative Paradigm**

For several years, I have taught a course in performance ethnography in the Department of Communication Studies at San José State University, a large state college in California’s Silicon Valley. In addition to being part of our performance studies curriculum, which also includes courses in performance theory, ensemble creation, race and performance, and adaptation, COMM 123I satisfies the requirement for a course in communication research methods, two of which are required for all majors. Although COMM 123I is an upper division course, that designation is misleading; most students arrive on the first day possessing conscious knowledge of neither ethnography nor performance-making. (I say conscious knowledge because, as we discuss in the early days of the class, all of us have engaged in some form of ethnography and/or performance-making, and some of us are continuously engaged in it.) Over the course of fifteen weeks, students are introduced to formalized fieldwork techniques by learning to write field notes, engaging in participant observation, and conducting interviews. They also practise performing, translating their observations and experiences into solo performances, collaborating on group presentations with found text, and envisioning elaborate immersive experiences based on their chosen field sites.

The culminating project is a group performance created using a process I have developed drawing on the work of Anna Deveare Smith (2012) and *Everyday Life Performance* (Stucky 2002; Hopper 1993). In *SJS-Who?* (a pun playing on the university’s acronym SJSU), students share verbatim performances of individual community members based on transcripts of interviews they have conducted using a shared set of questions. Over the years, *SJS-Who* has explored a diverse array of themes, including student loan debt, working for the university, and the experience of student veterans. Most recently, in spring 2022, the class voted overwhelmingly to investigate the impact of

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hate crimes on the campus community. The student scholartists interviewed friends, professors, and administrators about their understanding of what constituted a hate crime, their familiarity with campus resources and/or interventions, and their personal experiences (see Appendix).<sup>1</sup> They then reviewed the audio recording in order to select two to three minutes of material to perform. Some chose a single passage, while others decided to “stitch” several short sections together. After transcribing their selection in minute detail, noting the pacing, emphasis, volume, pronunciation, and verbal stumbles, students memorized the passages, working to replicate the original delivery as closely as possible (Stucky 1993).

Although the vast majority of performances are in monologue form, one or two student scholartists may opt to set their transcript to original music or to choreograph a dance to accompany their prerecorded rendition of the text. After the students perform their pieces for the class, they meet with their interviewees to perform for them, in order to receive feedback on their portrayals. While these meetings are taking place, I enter the process as curator/dramaturg, assembling the roughly twenty-five solo pieces into a single script. The play is structured as a series of acts, each containing four to six monologues on a shared theme. Based on the content of the passages they have selected, some students will have their original monologue divided across two or three acts; many perform in one act only. For the group performance, which is held in our classroom, performers wear a common costume, such as a white top and black bottom, with an emblematic prop or costume piece to represent their interlocutor. Transition music plays between acts, but otherwise there are few production elements beyond a semicircle of chairs. Because the single performance is held on a morning during finals week, we tend to have a small but dedicated audience, including everyone from supportive roommates to peers scrambling to earn last-minute extra credit, to the dean of our College of Social Sciences.

Just as COMM 123I can be classified as both a research methods course and a class in performance studies, my pedagogical approach is transdisciplinary. I teach performance ethnography from a critical pedagogical standpoint, meaning that while I am interested in having students explore systemic imbalances of power, I am also interested in how power inflects the classroom dynamic (Giroux 2021). I also employ a practice-based pedagogy (Hatton 2021) that draws on the tenets of a “justifiable” practice-as-research (PAR) process, as outlined by Robin Nelson (2013, 48). In many ways, performance ethnography serves as a welcome bridge between these two related but distinct approaches. In concert with framing the process by which students collect, interpret, and disseminate their findings through the performance of *SJS-Who?*, this pedagogy also aligns with Brad Haseman’s formulation of the performative paradigm, a methodology that liberates PBR from the constraints of a qualitative approach (2006). In the most recent iteration, it was students’ investment in the topic of hate crimes, rather than the identification of a specific research problem or question, that set the research in motion. Their interest, fuelled by a combination of fear, grief, outrage, and curiosity, also reflected the performative paradigm’s acknowledgement that the researcher and their subject are unavoidably “entangled” (Østern et al. 2021, 7). This entanglement throughout the interview, editing, and performance process, accentuated by the embodiment of interview subjects, ensures that the research is “intrinsically experiential” (Haseman 2006, 99). Moreover, the presentation of findings through live re-presentation reflects the performative paradigm’s insistence that research be shared in the form most suited to its practice (Haseman 2006, 100). As Tone Østern et al. maintain, any attempt to translate what has been learned into another mode risks diminishing its impact, in terms of both knowledge production and the potential for eliciting an emotional response (2021, 2).

Every performance of *SJS-Who?* constitutes the production of new knowledge on (at least) two levels. Student scholarartists learn (and teach others) about the chosen topic; they also learn through practice one approach to conducting PBR. Below I propose three features that characterize the PBR-learning process, one corresponding to each of the three players in Soyini Madison's (2012) explication of performance ethnography: the performers, the subjects, and the audience. I suggest that these features are connected primarily with the practice of research and not the object of study, but the two cannot be wholly differentiated. In other words, the topic of the performance will invariably shape the ways these three features manifest in any given semester.

## Intimacy

The first outcome regards the relationship between the student scholarartist and the material/data/evidence/stories they perform—what we refer to in our class as “knowledge.” This term risks glossing over the troubling power dynamics that have historically accompanied ethnographic research. Ethnographers have long grappled with the reckoning that conducting inquiries about specific cultures is not a neutral practice (Clifford 1983; Fine 1993; González-López 2013). Despite moving beyond the colonizing perception of the ethnographer as the expert who understands the Other better than they understand themselves, ethnography remains an approach dogged by accusations of misrepresentation, extraction, and other abuses. Performance ethnographers, equally susceptible to ethical missteps and exploitation, have sought ways to mitigate these harms, including Dwight Conquergood's conception of the dialogic performance (1985), Tami Spry's “performative-I” (2006), and Soyini Madison's performance of possibilities (2012). As these practice-led scholars emphasize, embodied representation does not imply ownership or even possession of knowledge; rather, it simultaneously invokes without fully re-presencing the interview subject while conveying the performer's own connection to their words. As Conquergood writes, “The stories my Laotian friends tell make claims on me” (1985, 3).

I also use the word *knowledge* to encourage students to reconsider, in the parlance of our department's more typical research methods coursework, what is to be considered evidence. In our understanding of performance as a site for acquiring, interpreting, and sharing knowledge, performance studies scholars are epistemologically expansive. We commit to excavating new sites of knowledge and knowledge production, unearthing “subjugated” information (Foucault 1980, 82) and attempting to understand it by taking it into our bodies (Jones 2002; Smith 2012). Framing the stories of their interviewees as knowledge asks students to consider who is granted the title of “expert,” as well as what form expertise is allowed to take. Similar inquiries arise as we question appropriate methods for the storage and dissemination of research. We discuss why embodiment might be perceived as a “nonserious” means of interpreting and sharing findings (Conquergood 2002, 146), and how that might shape perceptions about the impact and rigour of their own work.

I characterize the student scholarartist's embodied relationship to knowledge as *intimate* to convey a depth of understanding, while also delineating the boundaries of relation. Here intimacy should be thought of as akin to but not analogous to intimate theatre, a form described as intense, immediate, and often one-on-one (Gardner 2009; Wilson 2020). In contrast, I define intimacy as a deep level of (subjective) connection and/or understanding that is also characterized by distance; as student scholarartist R.R. articulates, the researchers “aim to meet with the ideas of the subject” (2017) but do not subsume them. This formulation hearkens back to Madison's description of the dialogic performative as “a mutual creation of something different and something more from the meeting of

bodies in their contexts” (2006, 320). S.D. (2017) likewise writes about finding a balance between the intimacy of embodiment and the independence of both the interviewee and the ideas, beliefs, and experiences they share: “The performer has the ability and responsibility to metaphorically take residence in the world of the individual they’re assigned to perform. . . . If unsuccessful, the performer could become arrogant, thinking that s/he is the sole provider of a culture’s voice rather than showing how that culture has been expressing itself prior to the performance.”

The performative paradigm embraces entanglement at the same time that it distinguishes between the subject and the researcher. The idea that the subject exists before and will continue to exist after the research is presented also connects to intimacy’s relation to time. The process through which student scholarartists engage with the material takes place over several months as they conduct interviews, decide on the portions they wish to share, bring the selected knowledge into their bodies through memorization and rehearsal, and share the knowledge with others through vocalization, movement, and physical copresence. Diverging from Gardner’s association of intimacy (or the suggestion of intimacy) with brief but intense interaction, intimacy may be achieved through the quality of engagement (i.e., embodiment), but also through repetition and duration.

That the researcher transforms the knowledge through their mediation even as they are transformed by it is another tenet of the performative paradigm (Østern et al. 2021). Findings can “help the performers grow in their field of view,” argues A.F. (2022). Although the impacts of performance ethnography are often discussed in terms of the audience or the subject, the outcome of intimacy reminds us that, at least in a learning environment, practitioners of PBR are changed by research and by the research process.

## **Accountability**

The second outcome treats the relationship between the interview subject and the student scholarartist. As with intimacy, *accountability* is not a feature inherent to PBR pedagogy, but it is fundamental to anyone interested in an ethical practice. The students of COMM 123I are introduced to the idea of accountability in performance ethnography through Joni L. Jones’s (2002) description of her immersive installation about Yoruba life. Jones urges ethnographers to think of their performances as collaborations with members of the community they are portraying. While Jones also suggests that there is indirect accountability when members of the source community are present in the audience, the focus of the class is on researchers’ responsibility toward their interview subject.

In the early iterations of COMM 123I, I did not require students to perform for their interviewees because I feared the additional time commitment would dissuade potential participants. I soon realized that the ethical grounding provided by this step was too important to omit. When I added the feedback session to the PBR process in 2016, the powerful—and negative—student response immediately confirmed its significance. Despite reading Conquergood (1995), Madison (2012), and Jones (2002), and participating in multiple class discussions about the ethics of representation, cultural appropriation, and exploitation, students meet this assignment with strenuous resistance. While they concede that the risk of offending or embarrassing their interviewee (or themselves) is outweighed by the importance of asking for feedback, most remain apprehensive until they meet with their subject. In reflecting on the feedback sessions, many express that the experience is both affirming and productive:

Although I was confident with knowing the monologue for proper delivery, I still had an apprehensive feeling locked behind my confidence. I had no idea how she was going to react being that this was a touchy subject. [. . .] [A]s I started I just let go of myself completely and delivered it how I remember her doing it for me. When I was finally done, she said “Wow, I have chills. I completely forgot I said that. Yea you sold it!” After hearing that I felt 100% confident in my delivery because having her validate it made me feel like I was remaining ethical and true to her words. (T.G. 2019)

I will be taking the feedback I have received from them to make adjustments to the final performance so that I can portray them in the most authentic way possible. (A.K. 2022)

We had a long discussion about why I chose the portion of the interview I chose. She had shown a little discomfort . . . and I asked her if there was a way that I could portray the message to make her feel more comfortable . . . she just suggested for me to emphasize the emotion just like how I did in my performance, just to emphasize the vulnerability in sharing a sentiment like that. (J.J. 2022)

Students also acknowledge that performing for their subject changes the quality of the performance: “As soon as I took on the character, I got self-conscious. . . . There was something about knowing you are acting someone out and they are watching you that just makes you start thinking and makes you change the performance a little” (S.G. 2017).

Through a scaffolded accountability exercise, student scholartists become familiar with one of the most important ethical dimensions of PBR. Like intimacy, accountability orients them toward the *process* of performance ethnography, emphasizing the relational experience between the researcher and their subject over the final performance.

## Reciprocity

The third feature can be observed in the interactions between student scholartists and community members who attend our public performance. Scholars in theatre spectatorship have long maintained that audiences are (or can be) “at least as productive as the complex sign system comprising the onstage action (Bennett 2012, 8). In her discussion of the dialogic performative, Madison describes “a generative and embodied reciprocity between the subject and the performer” (2006, 321). Based on my observation of multiple *SJS-Who?* performances, I suggest that an equally productive exchange can take place between the performer and the audience. These acts of *reciprocity* take place in the moments after the performance when audience members share their own stories with the students. In my experience, audience comments tend to fall into three overlapping categories: many are expressions of praise and congratulations; others are inquiries about the research and rehearsal process. Finally, there are those who wish to convey their experience as spectators. In the third case, accounts of watching the show almost invariably lead to the spontaneous narration of how the topic has impacted them personally. For instance, after our play about student loans, student spectators vented about the psychological burden of anticipating paying back sizable loans, as well as the pressure of being forced to choose between going into debt and gratifying their parents’ dreams for them to receive a college education. When we performed interviews with student veterans, an administrator from the Veterans Resource Center opened up

about his own reluctance to disclose his military background when he had returned to school decades earlier. During the post-show discussion for our most recent performance about hate crimes, SJSU's middle-aged, Asian American chief diversity officer was brought to tears as she told the performers about her decision to quit jogging for fear of being attacked while running alone.

Although I would characterize these moments as “emotionally voluminous,” I am not asserting *SJS-Who?* or PBR's potential to achieve the heights of Jill Dolan's utopian performative (2005, 5). Rather, I aspire to Madison's “performance of possibilities,” moments that lead to “creation and change” (2012, 191). Nikki Yeboah (2020) has suggested that the performance of possibilities can be mapped onto the bodies in motion in the wake of a performance; in this case, the performers cluster together on the stage, some in physical contact with each other, all of their eyes trained on the single speaker. They lean in, nod eagerly, sigh. I am interested in how the spontaneous sharing of stories constitutes a remarkable continuation of the performance, in which the student scholarartists become the audience. As the assembled individuals enact a reciprocal exchange of attention, facilitated by body-to-body copresence (Madison 2006, 323), they trade roles, and the inquiry continues. As Haseman proposes, although the planned performance might be the “principal” site of research, “the material outcomes of practice [are] all-important representations of research findings in their own right” (2006, 7). Perhaps more than either of the other two outcomes, reciprocity signals the potential for a PBR pedagogy to destabilize the centres of authority and attention.

## Conclusion

I have proposed that PBR conducted through performance ethnography in a learning environment is characterized by three key features: intimacy, accountability, and reciprocity. These phenomena, which are all relational in nature, do not manifest consistently, even in a case where the instructor and the curriculum remain constant. There are too many variations among individual student scholarartists, across topics, and in the historical moment in which the research is pursued. Nonetheless, there is enough of a pattern that it is useful to make this tacit consonance explicit (Nelson 2013, 48).

In an editorial commentary titled “The Politics of Possibility,” Yvonne S. Lincoln and Norman Denzin gesture toward the impact that educational practice might have on the outside world. Invoking Madison's account of a student performance, they assert: “This form of critical, collaborative, performance pedagogy privileges the primacy of experience, the concept of voice, and the importance of turning evaluation sites into democratic public spheres. Thus does critical performance pedagogy inform ethnographic practice” (2003, 440). If performance pedagogy can inform ethnography, it would be equally productive to consider how a practice-based pedagogy could be helpful to those conducting (or studying) PBR outside of the classroom. Can these three features be identified in the work of professional PBR practitioners? If not, should they be?

## Coda

As an appendix, I include the script of the most recent *SJS-Who?*, in part to demonstrate its inadequacy to capture the experience. As Haseman writes, the text “will not accommodate completely the surplus of emotional and cognitive operations and outputs thrown up by the practitioner” (2006, 7). It cannot convey the anxiety, tenderness, and excitement that radiates from the student scholarartists on the day of the show, nor the care with which they recount their findings.

Nonetheless, it may be helpful in providing a more concrete visualization of the event and its dimensions.

## Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the hundreds of students who have taken COMM 123I and the students, staff, faculty, and alumni whose ideas, opinions, and stories make *SJS-Who?* possible.

## Appendix

### SJS-Who? Hate Crimes Playscript COMM 123I, Spring 2022

#### SCRIPT NOTES

*As a compilation of excerpts from twenty-five unique transcripts, this document includes many instances of nonstandard spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Although all students used a common annotation system (see below), they also indicated emphasis, tone, and pronunciation in unique ways, which accounts for many of the idiosyncrasies.*

.	indicates micropause
(2)	indicates 2 second pause
<	increase in volume
>	decrease in volume
<i>Italics</i>	emphasis
CAPS	volume
hh	exhale
.hh	inhale
=	smile

#### PROLOGUE

SFX: *Intro Music*

*(Enter PAOLA, MEGHAN, AMANDA, JACOB, GIO, ALISON, strike tableau of “denial.”)*

*(TEA, MARISSA, BRIANNA, JAKE, SIERRA, MICHAEL line up behind audience.)*

TEA: This sounds like a fascinating topic. Regretfully, I will not be able to participate.

MARISSA: I don’t know . . . I’m not sure . . . if this would count?

BRIANNA: I’m not a lawyer. I’m not a police officer

JAKE: I have never been a victim of a hate crime so I don’t know how my perspective would be relevant.

SIERRA: You know this is just me this is my own opinion but



MICHAEL: I don't know if it would be my place to discuss it. I just don't want anyone to think I am overstepping any boundaries or anything.

SFX: *Music*

*(Exit all except BRIANNA, MARISSA, JACOB, and GIO)*

*(ENTER RANDY, TONI, XANDRO, BRIANNA, MARISSA)*

## SCENE ONE

JACOB: How would you define a hate crime?

BRIANNA: [the] definition of a hate crime is you're targeting someone because of their identity, right (?) Right.

RANDY: Sooooo . . . the way I would describe it is . . . an action (*bites her lip*), an action done to a group of people, a certain group of people or individual that belongs to a certain group, like some sort and it is done. with bad intentions. It's targeted and it is (*looks around*) the base of it, is (*speeds up*) prejudice towards those people and that is, the base of it, it is not like, it's just not a random thing, like the person is targeted for, it could be for their sexuality, their race, their ethnicity, the way that they look (*pauses*), that is a hate crime.

MARISSA: I would explain hate crime ass (3) a crime that. someone (2) who has whooo has racial intentions like bad racial intentions. specifically targets someone because of their race.

BRIANNA: Now once it's within the same group, (2) now, (3) it does get tricky. (=) That's, that's GRAY. (h) That's the gray. But I wanna make it very clear we all have biases, (2) we all have privilege, (2) and so it is very easy. it's easy for. We've seen people within the same groups TARGET each other or MISTREAT each other or have favoritism because someone is a little lighter than or a little darker than. (h)

TONI: You could also argue that, you know, any kind of gender-based violence has a hate crime component. Right. Think about sexual violence and things like that. So I would say a lot of people, you know, people who identify as women experience hate crimes and it's called sexual assault. It's often not called a hate crime because our society isn't really awake yet to how much patriarchy impacts so many young people in that way. We talk about feminism, people immediately turn towards equal pay and they forget about the just rampant amount of sexual violence that happens. You know, we don't want to talk about that.

XANDRO: It's something you're being persecuted for, something you can't control.

GIO: I think a lot of people think that a hate crime can just fall into the category of things like, like gender or, or maybe even, you know, religions or, or things that you can physically see about someone. I think also hate crimes can fall into the category of

hating an idea right. Of, of, of a thing or a person or of an entity of what they believe in or who they are. Right. And so, you know hate crimes, come in various forms. But, you know, I think like kind of the, the basic foundation of a hate crime, right. Is, is having this hatred and doing something to a person because of something they believe in or something that, you know, is who a part of who they are.

SFX: *Music*

*(Exit all but MARISSA, who moves to stool. Enter GABRIEL with guitar)*

## SCENE TWO

GABRIEL: *(sings)* I'd say a hate crime is illegal malicious intent  
Based off of someone's character and unchangeable character

The first thing I think of when I think about it,  
If I consider myself. as part. as part of a group. subjected to. hate crimes  
I consider myself a Christian, that means I follow Jesus  
The example that he set, per the New Testament  
And something that he said is that the world is gonna hate us  
Because we follow Jesus

And in terms of San José State I feel like  
Since we're very diverse that kind of  
There's two student outcomes of that  
I think there's people who embrace the diversity  
And I think there's some people who inbred deeper segregation  
And maybe, implicitly, to some sort of degree

Further hate crimes illegal malicious intent  
Based off of someone's character and unchangeable character

I think the really great thing about using the word hate crime (is it)  
Validates the victim, helps identify a problem  
It's not just this concept or weird thing that happened to you or  
Someone you know or love that you're just confused about  
It helps you identify the problem so you can identify the solution

But I don't think it's a problem of politics  
Oh I think it's a problem of the heart

*(Exit GABRIEL. Enter JACOB, MAHASTI, MEGHAN, JAKE)*

## SCENE THREE

MARISSA: Have you or someone you know experienced a hate crime?

JACOB: Wheeen I weent to <Missouri and New Jersey> because I'm in the army <specifically Missouri Fort Leonard Wood> (h) I remember there was definitely <outward racism towards me and preferential treatment with my peers> who had a lighter complexion = you know what I mean= same thing with New Jersey (2) it's the same deal over there. When comparing those places to SJSU and San José in general it's. <it's pretty much, it's much much safer when comparing> thankfully in San José uh it's more diverse = feel like people are more inclusive especially SJSU they do a good job with that.

MAHASTI: One of our professors who came to me who is an African American professor (2) and they assumed that he is a Muslim. (h) He came to me and he told me that (hhh) in the bathroom (2) somebody wrote a message for him (2) very large print (2) in the men's bathroom. He was threatened with that message. And I called the police station and they came and they cleaned that area (2) And a day later, it was the same message in the women's bathroom. Sooo I was afraid (2) andddd I thought ok, whoever wrote this message. . . knew Muslim peop- Muslim women are in charge (2) in the office because it was writing about Muslim women in this department (h) we are not gonna be safe either. . . Sooo at the time, I was the only Muslim woman in administration (hhh) So we called again they came they cleared. Of course nothing happened, but it was scary.

JAKE: Like growing up before, like I never really gave it much thought, like, especially like, um, Asian-American hate crimes, like, I mean, I've known about police brutality, especially with like. African Americans and stuff, but like with just because people that don't really talk about it, like. for Asians until like recently, I never really knew, but I found out, I think it was like three semesters ago? Like I took an Asian American history class. and I learned about the case of. Vincent Chin. Like, like it's not a happy subject, but if you're ever looked looked into it. it's a pretty good documentary. Like it taught me a lot of like. how like Asian hate's been going on for a long time.

MEGHAN: So my brother was in this car with this group of friends and ended up getting pulled over under the assumption that theyyyy like stole the car that they were driving? And so they were immediately like drawn at gunpoint and asked to like get on the ground on the street and put their hands up and yeah (2) Soooo I don't know if that would technically be like a hate crime but like (2) it was just really strange to think thaaaat. . . Yeah so. . . (2) Yeah I mean that ended up happening and then when they found out the car was legally registered under that person's name they were very like oh well, (h) like sorry (2). But I think it really taught my brother (2) about those optics and how things can come across to other people.

*(TEA turns overhead lights off, JEREMI turns on blue light, MEGHAN turns on lamp behind couch. AUSTIN begins walking from SR around behind the audience.)*

AUSTIN: We were walking towards Santa Clara street and he was walking towards um further into campus. Um (1) my friend and I were just having a conversation when I noticed the guy looked at us from that distance (1) faced us (1) and then he starts walking across the grass towards us = So on high alert (1) I (1) you know (1) I kind of let my

friend know like, “Hey, I think that person is heading straight towards us.” He had to cross like two sets of grass. Um (1) and um (1) within that span of like two seconds . I had told her = I think he was coming . he was and (**BOOM!**), right at our side. And theeeeen we immediately turned around and walked. started walking back towards campus. You know (2) it’s well lit where the dorms are and everything. And during that time he was like, “Hey, what’s going on? Like, what’s up with you ladies. What’s going on? What’s happening?” And um. I don’t encounter this situation a lot at all. but my friend Jada does. So, um, it seems like her initial style was just ignore him. Like *be silent, keep walking, don’t look at him.* (h) We were passing like the art building. It felt like the longest walk ever. Uh . and he just said, “what’s going on? Like, Hey mamacita,” and he started speaking Spanish (2) very poor Spanish. Like it wasn’t even good. So the reason why I bring this hate crime, or I think of this in regards to hate crime is because it seemed very ethnically targeted. He started speaking Spanish, calling my friend “mamacita” because she was uh yeah she is um. a Latin American. Latinx. And I remember at some point we just stopped and we. we said like, “Hey you,” or I said, “can you give us space? Like stop? Why are you following us?” And anyways. um yeah = he would say really gross things like, “oh, you want me to like slap you on the butt or slap,” you know. like all these really gross things. And then we had finally reached towards campus. I don’t really think I need to include this detail. buuuuut other than me saying like, “HEY, GIVE US SPACE. WE DON’T WANT TO TALK TO YOU.” She also said, “DO YOU WANT TO GET SPRAYED?” (2) Like she also looked at him and he just unfazed. It was crazy that we’d say these things, but he’d still keep following us. Um but yeah, once we got back to campus, I think he knew that we were gonna be safe. So he threw like his most um, like disturbing things. (2). He was like, (h) “I’m gonna come back and find you and I’m gonna rape you.” (3). That’s what he said. Yeaaaaaaah. And then he turned off and started walking away.

*SFX: Music*

*(JEREMI turns off blue light. ALL exit but MEGHAN and AUSTIN, MEGHAN cross to AUSTIN, lay hand on shoulder, then cross SR to stool. AUSTIN exit SL.)*

*(Enter JEREMI, STEVEN, MICHAEL w newspaper, BRANDON, JANINE roll in table from SL to CS, sit on top in front of MICHAEL. MICHAEL keeps newspaper up for whole scene.)*

#### SCENE FOUR

*(TEA turns lights on.)*

MEGHAN: What do you think are the impacts of experiencing a hate crime?

BRANDON: I mean, it probably varies. quite a bit like (2) depending on the severity of the crime and like, you know. what crime it was, it could just be like a general fear of going out and like encountering people. You knooooow, when whatever comes with that, like (2), the physical, emotional psychological damage that’s done. Uhh also. DEATH you know, in the worst case. And then you know, there’s really hospitalized, sometimes they DIE. And then other times they have to rely on like GoFundMe is

because the healthcare system of America totally ASS. So ugh they have to, yeah, the financial damages that they have to pay for because of like, medical bills or replacing their shit or whatnot. because they can't exactly really take this to court a lot of times, because a lot of times like, like the guys left, like it's hard to find them.

STEVEN: You have to question why? Right? And it's hard to deal with just the simple fact, like why do people not accept me for who I am? Right. Why is it that I look a certain way where people think it's okay to enact violence on me or a certain racial group that causes like a whole ton of stress? You know and I can't even imagine really what one would go through just juggling the idea the entire time. Right. There's something that happens that just probably causes one to go to some certain breaking point, right?

JANINE: Yeah, I mean, you know. . . I touched on this earlier but. . . it's that feeling where you want to be safe but you don't? Not that you don't want to (*laughs*) don't get me wrong I want to feel safe and I felt safe in SJ when I was there, but (2) with things arising now, I don't and (2) you know (2) um (2) there's a lot of people that feel the same waaay where (*speeds up*) you just wanna go outside and you wanna feel comfortable being who you are, but (2) you don't. So, what are you supposed to feel? You feel (2) I wish I wasn't who I am because who I am is being targeted right now. Um. I never felt that way in SJ but I know that if I still went there I would. Because you just don't know. Um. (*takes off glasses to wipe tears and collect herself*) For me, I always feel like oh. (2) I wish I wasn't Asian so I could just go outside but (3) I am Asian, and I wanted to feel proud of that but now something that I want to be a part of I feel like I don't want to be anymore. (*voice breaking and shakily*) It's because I don't want to experience what other people have experienced (2) and that can really mess someone up emotionally and mentally in a really negative manner.

(TEA: Lights off)

JEREMI: San José State in a lot of ways is SO much safer than a place like Arizona State (hh). And in fact, (h) one of the reasons why. you know, towards the end, I was so hell bent on leaving. And you know, (*voice slightly quivers*) excuse me if I get a little emotional (2) that spring 2016, the first two weeks, four students died (*Voice breaks*). (2) Three were suicides, and one was a murder. > And the student that was murdered. she was, it was an off campus murder? But she was an international student. (h) She was not my direct student, but she fit the profile of someone who would take my class . And all I kept thinking about was. this young woman's parents get a call in the middle of the night (*chokes up*) with the news that their daughter is murdered (*crying*) (3) that was really what drove me to leave Arizona State. I remember the night that Trump won (2) And you could hear the cheering you could hear like, YEAH, you know, like, and I think that was the first time when I thought, OOOh (2) my God, like, I think I knew. that. there was going to be, you know, like violence was going to be haaad > for anyone who wasn't whiTe (2) we were walking to my caaar, and there's a truck that's slowly following us. And like (2) the. you know, like, FEarr comes over me. And we're both scarrred to death. But like, we move over so that the truck can like pass us, and the truck does, and then it stops in front of us. And. innn that split second, the first thing I thought was. my husband's gonna get a call tonight. And he's gonna get a call that announces my DEath,

because this is, this is it. Right? The truck stops. And it's a bunch of like young white men that > get out of the car. (hh) And they get out of the car, just to yell and scream. in joyyy that Trump won. I thought, this is just the beginning (h) of. the. type of. FEar that she, my friend, and I, you know, I'm Filipino. She's Korean. I was like, this is the very beginning. of what we're going to have to experience for the next four years (hhh). And so it was (2) just very scary. *AA*nd if you are someone who doesn't have to think about > safety, I want you to reflect on > thhhat.

*SFX: Music*

*(MEGHAN strike chairs 1 and 2, STEVEN strike chairs 3 and 4, exit JANINE, BRANDON and JEREMI strike couch and lamp)*

*SFX: Michael's music*

MICHAEL: *(Dance performed to transcript/music.)*  
Hate crime is umm. . . ugh. . . is that, they kind of attack based on who this person is—nothing to do with what this person do. Uh, solely based on identity. Solely based on. . . you know, whatever the color of the sk-, uh, or you know, in my case and I- the reason surging of the Asian American uh hate crime is Asian American. Just solely because who we are. This face uh makes us the target. [Do I know anyone that has been affected by hate crimes?] You know, I actually don't personally know anybody but because uh ah I- you know, it's just, it's hard not to care. Umm. . . it's umm. . . it's not possible not to read the news and uh. . . and you see faces like mine, and you know, faces like my uncle, and faces of my aunt, you know. All these people are bloodily attacked, even killed and umm. . . They are my people. I- I feel like I know them. I feel like. . . I feel like they are just closest as you can get. And I have my sister living in New York City. Um... I worry about her every single day. I don't know how too. . . I mean if I ask her I feel like I put too much pressure on her being making her even more scared, but if I don't ask her, I am scared. I didn't- I don't know asking her doesn't make me feel better, but in not asking her I don't know what can I- what I can do so it's like, "how are you doing?". "OK another news, please be careful." I don't know what else to say. [What would I say to the perpetrators of hate crimes?] There must be something you learned that umm. . . that bias you. Uh, there must be something you learned that you feel so strongly about that you want to do that to us. Um. . . And I wish there is a way to make you understand that we are both human and. . . and I wish there is a way. . . um. . . you know, as a country, as a people, we can share our stories to. . . so that you hear more. Not only that story you hear, not only what you believe. And I don't know how many of you are out there. And I. . . I just want to invite you to. . . to. . . to see us eye-to-eyes. We're human too.

*SFX: Music*

## SCENE FIVE

*(Exit MICHAEL, with table. JAKE restore Chair 1, ALISON and ADRIANA restore Chairs 2, 3, 4. ARIANNA and AMANDA restore couch. TEA turn lights on. PAOLA and TEA enter.)*

- JAKE: Does the university do enough to prevent and respond to hate crimes?
- ADRIANA: I. don't know if things have changed. But I can speak from, when I attended the university and there WAS a hate crime, that occurred in the dorms, and a student was locked up in his. suite, and hadd, Confederate flags hanging everywhere and posted outside win, on their windows for other students to see as they would walk by, the dorm buildings. Aaand, it was, completely kept hush hush, forrr months and months and months, that this was going on and the fact that it was kept under wraps pissed A LOT of people off because of course the victim was African American, in a dorm with 5 to 6 white (2) people, who, used their white supremacy to make this student feel HORRIBLE. Not a way anybody should ever feel. But the school'sss way of handling the situation is to keep it under wraps. And I think if it was *different*, if it was a *white student* who was kept that way (*speeds up*) all hell would have been broken loose.
- ARIANNA: I was, actually talking to my boss um. the program coordinator the other day. I was kinda talking to her about uhm (h) this interview and she was telling me about how Centro it was actual:yyyy - the reason that it finally was uh (2) founded was because of a hate crime directed towards Latinos (2) So I feel like that hate crime was a wake up call to the school. uhm (2) that it was uhm (h) eye opening to me that it took a hate crime for the school to realize. to do something about it (hhh)
- AMANDA: Definitely there's just like policies we have to like, uh, like make those like stronger cause like they have policies where a lot of people don't really follow them or care for them. So definitely like (3) strengthen their policies, especially around students and faculty. And I noticed that like, like the president or like higher up people of our school don't really care for many inzzidents that happen here. Like they'll just like, ohhhh, like > *we'll give you money later*. Like. especially like when you see like the sexual assault that happened here. How they really threw it like under and they didn't care for it. Yeah. And so we definitely like need to focus on like the higher ups to make them know how like our troubles and our issues that are happening and then needing to do something more about it.
- ALISON: We're in a weird place this year because there's been a lot of administrative changes like the former president leaving, people in different roles moving around, having a new title IX coordinator, the whole investigation in athletics and being sued, umm. It just, further. it further reveals the issues that SJSU's hiding. Theyyy are definitely in a place of power? So they should be responding to like hate crimes, like they shouldn't sweep it underneath the rug, that it happened, and also they have to find ways to support the person that experienced that, in terms of like resources and what's available to 'em, because. it's just like. it's like if a person goes through something like that, they should have support, like, it's not a question, it's like a justice issue.
- TEA: I actually did read the story about [Gregory Johnson's] family- oof! That's, yeah. very, very difficult situation for the family. Cause I would be in the same. shoes, same boat: what happened. What- the report that you guys have given? It doesn't add up, it *doesn't* add up. So yeah, that was that was disturbing. For- and I don't want to say the school brushed it? under the rug? But. I don't feel like *they* took. The



appropriate steps. I don't think they did a full full investigation. I don't know if they're trying to hide something, cover it up, whatever, but they could have done more. They could have done more [. . .] And they're not getting the support from the school that they need. They don't realize just that one little piece of information will help them, you know? And they probably like got rid of some, you know certain *evidence*, information that they just don't want out there. I mean, they messed up all the way, it like the whole thing was done was all the wasn't done they didn't take the proper steps to do the investigation correctly, so I yeah yeah. It's unfortunate, but they're probably not going to find out. ever. They're just going to wonder and wonder and wonder and wonder and that's going to eat at them. But I don't know. whatever happened, I kind of like pull myself back cuz I can't let myself get too emotionally attached to these type of stories.

PAOLA: We talk about racial viiooioolence. It's an important way of thinking about this. Right. And this is what I'm saying, is that . . . the reeaason that. The (2) police have engaged in. intergenerational racial violence against people of color is because they've understood it as their right to do that. Right? And sometimes their responsibility to do that. That's the way they've understood it. And white folks, um we talk about the Ahmaud Arbery murder right. White folks feel like they've been deputized. to engage in racial violence. as a means of. protecting their understanding of. what theeeiir responsibility is to other white people, and to white supremacy in this country (2) and it's a really complicated idea? but that's what's happening. Right. Sooo, we're engaged in these different forms of racial violence against communities of color on a daily basis. I mentioned earlier that this is educational as well. Right. And so. The way in which our schools engage black and brown students is a form of racial violence, I was just talking about the community cultural wealth model as this like. assets based, strengths based. approach. to working with Latino students. But we always use the opposite model, which is a deficit approach. Right. Which is racially violent. Against communities of color. The way in which Latino students are treated in schooooools. Is focusing on their deficits. Right. One example is language, Linguistically, we think about the need to help them learn English as quickly as possible. Right. Because we understand that their Spanish language is a deficit. and it's a problem. And until they. move past that (2) they're not going to be successful (2) That's a viiiioolent (2) educational approach to Latinx students, rather than seeing them as. students that have a whole other system of knowledge. of understanding of the world, of possibility. It hasn't been recognized or centered. The people-they- they just accept as the norm. And that's the problem. because when we talk about the- the racial violence of the- the murderers of ahm- Ahmaud Arbery. or of um. George Floyd or Brianna Taylor or of Orlando Castillo or of an- any of these um. you know many of these-Freddie Gray- you know, there's like d- d- dozens and dozens and dozens of names That is reinforced by all the work we do educationally in this country. Right. We educate. the. perpetrators of those crimes. to understand that racial violence is their right or responsibility. um to uphold their understandings, of white supremacy in this country.

*SFX: Music*

*(Exit JAKE, AMANDA, ALISON, TEA, PAOLA)*

(Enter AUSTIN, SIERRA, GIO, JENNY with stepstool, XANDRO with plant.)

## SCENE SIX

- AUSTIN: As members of the SJSU community, what can we do about hate crimes?
- ARIANNA: Honestly I feel like their bare minimum is just being aware, you know? Because I know that it happens all around us (hhh) but sometimes we are just not aware of the things that are happening, happening around us = just because it is not directly happening towards us *doesn't mean we shouldn't be educated about it.*
- SIERRA: Ummm, addressing it is easy. Well it is easier than preventing it. Addressing it is about finding out who's responsible, investigating to their best abilities if a crime has been committed, and then prosecuting to the full extent of the law. (*Confidently.*) I think that once the faculty and the police department do that, a few times you know because the penalties for for for hate crimes. it's a felony and its huge. and people do time for hate crimes, especially in California! I think a few of those if, if they prosecute to the fullest extent of The Law and then make it public you know put it out on the (2) campus website or make it known or post it on the Instagram, their blog, or whatever and allow people actually to HEAR about it I think that'll scare people into being more careful and thoughtful about doing it again.
- ADRIANA: Hiring more professors. of people of color. to start. Because I know, especially in the criminal justice. department, almost all my professors probably except for one were white.
- JENNY: We have to do as students, we have to do the like training for like sexual assaults and like (*gestures*) you know, all these trainings. (*sucks teeth*) But I don't think that by doing that once, you know, it creates an environment that's like 100% safe. It's something that you have to continue to do because it's not. it's not a conversation that we always have. If it's a conversation that we always have, like I think, for example, it doesn't. [it's] not really related, but you know, there's an increased conversation around pronouns. So sometimes you don't have to say like, you don't have to, umm, teach someone about pronouns, so you just have to create a space where we are using pronouns, right?
- XANDRO: We need more story-based knowledge, like people who are actually sharing their stories and people who are from those minority groups telling their stories. I think that's the most important thing is just because I mean, right I mean, you're gonna learn fast. I feel like if you're interacting with someone's stories and you're able to put yourself in their shoes, and I think that's for me how I learned best and I feel like a lot of people could agree with that.
- GIO: You know, the hardest thing is to listen these days, I feel like a lot of people don't have a listener, people, someone to listen to them. And so sometimes that can be the basic support as a, or they feel like they could actually be heard. Yeah. Um, because sometimes the people who are being hated on, like I said, they go into their mind. I mean, they think like, oh, I shouldn't say anything. Cause I don't wanna be retaliated

against, I don't wanna deal with this. I don't want to look like a fool. Right? And so they keep it bottled up. And so sometimes what it, all it takes is someone to just feel like they're heard and that makes them feel like they do have a say. For those people, just having that person to talk to, these resources, makes them feel like I am important! Someone does care about my feelings and what I have to say and how I feel is valid. And so I think that's what people want if anything, they want to keep their dignity for them getting that support is them keeping their dignity. It's keeping their sanity. It's keeping them valued as a member of society as a member of a college, as a member of a friend group, et cetera.

*SFX: Music*

## SCENE SEVEN

ISEPH: *(sings)*  
I think  
definitely college campuses  
I know,  
since San José State, is so  
adjacent to our downtown, area,  
and San José of course is going through a period  
right now where we have lots of folks who unfortunately have to live on the streets.  
  
sometimes that gives a certain,  
image that the campus  
is somehow unsafe  
or something like that  
But the fact of the matter is that our campus – like many all over the country are the  
safest  
“bubbles”, if you will  
  
that you're gonna experience  
and that's for any number of reasons, not all because police or something like that,  
but that is in fact  
the case,

*(ALL begin to enter and fill in spaces on stage.)*

But I think that you have what I think is a really good point, of the conversation  
one of the things that we know battles this division and this kind of terror – is to  
actually build community, that's why it's not always about policing

I don't know, the—the university responses to these sorts of  
things; it's about what's being done in that community  
to build solidarity there among people across difference

*(As song goes, people move on to stage)*

- JACOB: We are students.
- JEREMI: We are faculty.
- ADRIANA: We are alumni.
- BRIANNA: We are administrators.
- TEA: We are staff.
- JENNY: We are the San José State community.
- ISEPH: Thank you for listening to our stories.

## END OF PLAY

### Note

1. The term *scholartist*, while uncommon, has been in circulation in the fields of education, theatre studies, performance studies, and the social sciences for some time, often in discussions of qualitative inquiry (Hatton 2021; Nielsen 2008; Prendergast and Leggo 2007). William W. Lewis and Niki Tulk (2016) attribute it to Dr. Joseph Shahadi, Mila Aponte-Gonzalez, Dr. Amma Gartey Tagoe-Kootin, and others in the NYU Performance Studies program in the mid-2000s; I speculate it is a term that emerged organically across multiple disciplines as arts-based inquiry gained traction; the “art” of the scholartist ranges from writing, both poetry and prose, to visual art to performance. I use the term here in the spirit of Prendergast and Leggo (2007), whose poetic explication includes the passage:

researcher/artists  
bring their artistic sensibilities  
and experiences  
into the research process:  
a form of symbolic constructivism  
a qualitative research approach  
that uses nonroutine  
artlike portrayal  
to elicit (challengeandshift)  
existing sense-making  
frameworks. (1470)

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## **Practice-Based Pedagogies for Counter-Memorial Performance: Teaching to Address and Shift “Plantation Energy”**

Dasha A. Chapman

### **Introduction**

Gathered in a circle on the grass at Davidson College, I discuss with a small group of white and Black students what we do and don't know about the histories of the college. We occupy the ancestral homeland of the Catawba Indian Nation, surrounded by buildings constructed in the 1830s by “volunteer’ laborers” with bricks made by enslaved peoples,<sup>1</sup> shaded by towering trees imported to populate the grounds as an arboreal display of worldly specimens. To my surprise, those who showed up to my Moving Campus Histories workshop at the end of Spring semester 2021 were familiar with the Davidson Disorientation alternative campus tour that highlights the white supremacy, colonialism, and racism embedded in the college’s past and present. The last student to speak was a Black senior Africana studies major, active in campus equity and antiracism initiatives, who had taken my Dancing Diasporas course the previous fall. Since arriving to Davidson, she explained, even though not immediately knowing specific histories, she had felt “plantation energy” in buildings and locations on campus.<sup>2</sup> It was from this different-yet-shared sense of historical haunting that I developed History, Memory, Performance, Place: Activating Davidson’s Submerged Histories, a class I taught in the spring semesters of 2020 and 2021 at the college, for which this outdoor, site-specific workshop was a public-facing extension. In this article, I discuss the ways I utilized practice-based pedagogy in the course to address as well as shift what this student identified as “plantation energy” on campus.

Located nineteen miles north of Charlotte, North Carolina, Davidson College was established as a Presbyterian vocational school for males by white slave owners in 1837. Many original bricks crafted and laid by enslaved peoples still vibrate unacknowledged, calling for “a something to be done” (Gordon 1997, 139, 205). It was not until the 1960s that first a Congolese male student and then African American males were admitted, and not until the 1970s that first white women and then African American women were admitted. African American student-led campus activism in the 1980s forwarded a platform for racial equity and institutional transformation called Project ’87, which made demands the college is still trying to meet (Padalecki and Norman 2021). Since the mid-2010s, Davidson has invested in multiple campus-wide initiatives aimed toward reckoning with its racial past and the ongoing continuities of erasure, oppression, and inequity in the present. I devised History, Memory, Performance, Place (HMPP) in response to these initiatives launched before and during my three years as visiting assistant professor (2019–2022).<sup>3</sup>

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Davidson's highly praised institutional identity focuses on ideas of truth, trust, "humane instincts," "disciplined and creative minds," and "leadership and service" (Davidson College n.d.d). BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and/or non-Christian students, faculty, and staff, however, often experience a campus environment that lays bare the ways such purported ideals effectively perpetuate exclusion, discrimination, and white supremacist values coded as universals ("discipline," "integrity," and "truth"). In the "Goals and Scope" section of the website *Disorienting & Reorienting: Recovering and Analyzing Legacies of Colonialism, Slavery, and White Supremacy at Davidson College*, Sarah HD Mellin and Tian Yi (2019) write about "the disconnect felt by underrepresented students of color who are 'sold' one particular version of the institution and find themselves experiencing a very different reality after arrival." Such a reality sparked the research and development of their alternative campus tour, *Davidson Disorientation*, which powerfully unearthed the colonial dispossession, enslavement, and racism that underpinned the college's history and growth.<sup>4</sup> Mellin and Yi also share their hopes for the project's futures: "This knowledge should not and cannot remain unused, but must inform deliberate community-led action." My teaching of HMPP responded to their call. As an interdisciplinary performance studies scholar, dance artist, and educator invested in undoing racism through body-based methods, I was curious how a multimodal pedagogy intent on "activating Davidson's submerged histories" could contribute to campus reckoning efforts. How might practice-based research support this work of addressing violent histories and their pervasive continuities as "plantation energy" felt by members of the Davidson community in the present?

This article offers considerations on the relationships between practice-based research, body-based methods, and antiracist pedagogies as they came together in HMPP. In broad scope, my work as an educator draws from multiple realms of experience and interdisciplinary practice. I am a white American child of Jewish South Africans who has for over seventeen years moved in African diasporic dance communities and with Haitian artist-activists as a dancer, ethnographer, collaborative performance maker, and educator. My collaborative performance projects, coauthored articles, and multidisciplinary initiatives insist on the generative capacities of thinking and doing together, and I am invested in the ways artistry and embodied practice can make place, transmit hx/stories, and potentialize change.<sup>5</sup> As a white educator who works to implement queer feminist antiracist pedagogies, I regularly convene with both white and multiracial collectives to practice identifying and addressing white supremacy within our personal embodiments, interpersonal and institutional contexts, and pedagogies.<sup>6</sup> At Davidson, I was contingent faculty on the relative margins of the institution, called to activate my positionality to bolster students' capacities for confronting (and healing from) race, racism, and white supremacy on campus and in their everyday lives. To do so, my pedagogy integrated body-based learning with interdisciplinary methodologies, critical theory, and ongoing self-reflection. Reflecting on and detailing my teaching here, I discuss some ways practice-based research can undergird antiracist critical performance pedagogy.

HMPP introduced students to foundational dance, performance studies, and Black studies theory and methods. With a dance course number, HMPP was cross-listed with Africana studies, anthropology, and Davidson's newly implemented Justice, Equality, Community (JEC) curriculum. As a new transdisciplinary course with an unfamiliar faculty member, my classes were small, and students arrived from varied locations. Across difference, I facilitated student excavations of Davidson's past and continued legacies of white supremacy through archival, historiographic, place-based, theoretical, and embodied creative modalities. Coursework was divided between reading, discussions, embodied practices, creative workshops, performance viewings, reflective and analytical writing, guest artist visits, and practice-based research. Here I share some of the strategies I

employed in the course, integrate student reflections as well as excerpts from their final projects, and dwell in the “counter-memorial” potential of approaches I incorporated in HMPP as well as in my on-campus teaching the following fall. I discuss the possibilities my intersectional performance studies pedagogies offered for “activating Davidson’s submerged histories” and potentially shifting the “plantation energy” minoritized students experienced on campus, and ultimately consider such methods vis-à-vis more spectacular performances of public apologies, staged theatrical production, and commemorative art. This writing integrates practical discussions with philosophical considerations, my own voice alongside that of my students, and concrete as well as theoretical potentials, demonstrating my multimodal interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to both pedagogy and scholarship.

### **“Plantation Energy” and Racial Performance at Davidson College**

Davidson’s efforts to address and rectify its embeddedness in structural oppression and dispossession is part of a larger trend of universities reckoning with their debts to enslavement and the expropriated labour of African Americans.<sup>7</sup> For well over a decade, Davidson faculty, students, staff, and alumni have been excavating formerly suppressed college histories. A main goal for HMPP was to connect to these prior efforts. Early assignments introduced students to these projects, and we met with campus librarians Jessica Cottle, DebbieLee Landi, and Cara Evanson, as well as Dr. Hilary Green, a leading scholar of African American history who was in residence on campus 2020–2021. Green’s Hallowed Grounds Project (n.d.) richly charts the University of Alabama’s relationship to slavery and the African American lives and labour that sustained the University; Green was at Davidson to conduct similar research in alignment with the College’s Commission on Race and Slavery.<sup>8</sup>

Mellin, cocreator of *Disorienting & Reorienting* (Mellin and Yi 2019) and author of the senior thesis “Beneath the Bricks: Reckoning with Legacies of Colonialism, Slavery, and White Supremacy at Davidson College” (2020), also served as a crucial interlocutor. Students read portions of Mellin’s thesis, did the alternative campus tour,<sup>9</sup> and met with Mellin. In conversation, Mellin highlighted known instances of racialized performance on campus—including nineteenth- and twentieth-century performances of blackface, confederate nostalgia, and racial violence—examining how they “remain” in the present through racist stereotypes and value systems, structural inequities, interpersonal microaggressions, and historical erasure (Schneider 2001; Mellin 2020, 85–114). Mellin carried forward an ethos of collaboration and recognition, honouring the many who have long pursued racial justice on campus, and emphasizing the role white folks can and must play in furthering such work.

A prominent theme that emerged in early conversations and research was the “mental [and emotional] strain” Black staff, faculty, and students experienced, trackable in archival documents to as early as the 1870s (Davidson College Archives and Special Collections 2015; see also Davidson College Archives and Special Collections 2011). Labouring at the college also meant enduring the psychosomatic wear of existing in a southern PWI (predominately white institution). Like Black people’s labour, Blackness as aesthetic or costume has been expropriated as well—another American tradition (Dixon-Gottschild 1996). College archives document that in the school’s early years, young male students causing trouble donned blackface to mediate white Presbyterian ethics and rigidity; as Mellin assesses, these acts provided a “fetishistic escape,” disguising the self to commit transgressive acts and avoid accountability (Mellin 2020, 89). Blackness—associated with deviance and criminal

behaviour—becomes objectified, abstracted, and made into a costume. The 1920 college yearbook holds a photograph of a mock lynching on the lawn in front of a main campus building in which an African American staff person wears a noose while two dozen white students point rifles at him (Mellin 2020, 153–54). Additionally, the “Wildcat Minstrels” are documented performing blackface from 1920 to 1925. Football halftime shows in the 1930s staged racist stereotypes locally and nationally, and the 1937 Centennial Celebration for the college promoted settler nostalgia through redface costumes and scenes of Native American encounter (Mellin 2020, 85–114). Civil War reenactments fuelled nostalgia for the Confederacy through the 1970s.

This glimpse of Davidson’s past makes clear how performance has historically been a site of racial power and domination at the college. Encountering this history impacts everyday experience of campus space. A white American student reflected:

As a community that functions in these spaces, we should know and be aware of the land’s history. It changes how you feel walking through a space and how you might want to use it. Chambers Lawn is a notorious spot on campus to hang out with friends and just enjoy its openness and beauty. Knowing now that a mock lynching took place on the land does not make me want to go bask in the sun the next warm day we have. I think if these spaces on campus were recognized for their histories it would certainly change the way they are used. I also gather a sense that there is a large part of the student body that would be interested in this project and would want to disorient themselves from the “Davidson narrative” to understand more of the institution’s past.

These impacts land in and on bodies differently, depending on people’s situated experiences. In conversations with students, a clear disconnect emerged between the ways white cisgender students encountered Davidson’s histories, like the student quoted above, and the ways Black and Indigenous students, other students of colour, and queer students, who might not have known the details of such events, could feel in their bodies the stickiness of history’s residues carried on in everyday enactments of power, privilege, and un/belonging on campus. In group conversations, white students were disturbed and upset at not previously being taught about their beloved school’s histories. The one Black student in HMPP would often relate experiences that confirmed the ongoingness of racist histories—citing instances of exclusion, microaggressions, and compiling violences registered psychosomatically, resulting in a form of exhaustion that critical race theorist William A. Smith (2008) termed “racial battle fatigue.”

Steeped in thinking with these pasts, I also often brought up Davidson’s submerged histories in other courses I taught when relevant. Discussing the histories of blackface on campus with my *Dancing Diaspora* class, the Black student cited at the opening of this essay who referred to Davidson’s “plantation energy” explained that even though she hadn’t been aware of specific performances of blackface at the college, she was “absolutely unsurprised.” We discussed the ways an incident during Halloween 2019, when a group of white students dressed up as “‘thugged’ out inmates” (Thompson 2019), in fact reinstated blackface performances in the present. Several students considered how other campus events might additionally feed into the perpetuation of racist stereotypes. This conversation also made space for a white student involved in the Halloween incident to stay after class, interested in clarifying further how such an act was not just culturally insensitive or appropriative—how the group’s post-event mediated discussions were framed—but was indeed a performance following the lineage of blackface.

## Body-Based Intersectional Performance Studies Pedagogies for Counter-Memorial Practices

We in performance studies value how “performance” functions capaciously. In HMPP we examined performances on, but primarily “off,” the stage, and delved into the ways performance studies examines social phenomena “as” performance. The class took the “repertoire” (Taylor 2003) as it converges with “embodied knowledge” (Daniel 2005), and more generally coalesced African and Indigenous understandings of embodied transmission to demonstrate the continuity of ancestral legacy and community hx/stories as living relations. The class considered how historical silences in the archive are undergirded by racial ideologies (Trouillot 1995) and are then reiterated in contemporary performances and enslavement’s “afterlives” (Hartman 2008). Teaching students these multiple convergent perspectives on performance as not “that which disappears” but “that which persists” (Taylor 2003, xvii) makes space to recognize the ongoingness of both colonial arrangements of power and knowledge, as well as resistances to them. So, how does the past move through our bodies and how might our bodies put these hx/stories into motion in new ways? How does the frame of performance help us learn about and grapple with silenced legacies of the past through attuning to the ways they continue to function in the present? And why might bringing together dance, performance studies, and Black studies support attention to these concerns?

This set of inquiries, in conjunction with a process-oriented conception of performance in HMPP, was inspired by Ralph Lemon’s “counter-memorial” practice, implemented in his practice-based research for the 2004 project *Come Home Charley Patton* (Birns 2005; Profeta 2005). Through a set of iterative, situational, and nonspectacular practices, Lemon traced iconic as well as noniconic sites of racial violence in the US South—bus stations important to the Freedom Rides, the Edmond Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, “unmarked” sites of lynching. Creating ephemeral-yet-ritualized enactments through improvised movement, object-altars, and place-based encounters, Lemon marked the hauntings of particular space-times with intention, curiosity, mourning, and a sense of incompleteness. Katherine Profeta characterizes Lemon’s “desire to present history as open-ended, incomplete, unresolved—instead of known, finished and thus not worth consideration” (Profeta 2005, 26). Lemon’s reckoning with a “traumatic and incomplete” (26) past required that he bring his body into an encounter with such emplaced, ongoing legacies, marking places with his presence and leaving ambiguous, ephemeral traces. Lemon’s ritualized practice instantiated the felt effects of historical erasure as it resonated ghostly emergence; the body served to imperfectly register unresolved absent-presences of such southern locales. This is a *counter*-memorial practice because, as Nicholas Birns (2005) puts it, “the ultra-historicism of official memorials makes us think the past is finished, when we still have the power to construct it” (22). Through noncodified, antidocumentary, solo-collective practice, Lemon inverted conventional—monumental—renderings of history, memory, performance, and place toward an intentional *doing* that commemorated not the past but its unfinished ongoingness in the present.

A counter-memorial approach to performance and/as pedagogy charges practice-based research with intentions to unfurl personal habits and make space for experiences of place, hx/story, and self that potentially destabilize conventional colonial forms of understanding and knowledge production. Such approaches must work with and through the body. My conviction that addressing white supremacy and dismantling oppression must centre embodiment is informed by a broad range of antiracist activists, theorists, and body-based practitioners.<sup>10</sup> As a scholar trained in performance studies and a student-practitioner of African diasporic performance forms, I bring attention to the

embodied aspects of racism and activism into relationship with practice-based research and critical theory. Inspired by performance studies' capacities for attending to the body in/as performance, as well as the field's commitment to transgressing disciplinary silos and conventions, I also recognize that our field does not always meet its potential for tilting work toward intersectional antiracist praxis. Thus, my HMPP pedagogy brought together methods and theories from performance studies, dance studies, and Black studies through body-based research, reflection, and analysis as foundation for transformative learning experiences.

Reckoning with white supremacy and dismantling oppression must centre embodiment, because these phenomena are realities perpetuated, contested, and lived through the body. Indeed, performance and embodiment might be the most resonant route to get at the stuff of transformation. Tuning into one's own felt sense of embodiment in relation to History (and hx/stories) in the present can serve as necessary starting point for antiracist work, practice, and change. But such work also requires critical reflection and analysis to connect the psychosomatic to the structural and social. Thus, movement in my classrooms functioned as process-based pedagogy rather than performance-oriented activity. Guiding students in movement activities and learning from and through their bodies, "the body" becomes not an abstracted vessel but rather a multiply valanced sociohistorical entity marked by—and experienced vis-à-vis—difference. For example, when instructing students in Haitian dance techniques as a lesson to accompany study of Yvonne Daniel's notion of "embodied knowledge," physical practice served as body-based learning, rather than consumption or emptied-out movement to repeat. What do we learn, from our own situated selves, in the physical embodiment of this integrated embodied philosophy?

Emphasizing the constructive nature of difference speaks back to the ways diversity had been regarded at Davidson. Mellin notes how the 2018 Davidson College Tour Guide Manual couches diversity as a *problem* to be addressed, including "diversity" in the last section of the manual titled "Difficult Questions" (Mellin 2020, 27). Learning this, one student reflected: "Including diversity in the 'Difficult Questions' is something that takes me aback, it should be celebrated and promoted, not relegated to topics not discussed often." Such discussions heighten student awareness of the disjunct between prominent representations of people of colour in Davidson's outward-facing image, like the college website, and the actual reality of their minoritized status on campus. Countering habits of tokenization, we read essays by Audre Lorde ([1984] 2007) and Joy James (2013). These Black feminists instruct in a practice of embracing difference, a perspective they have long advocated: intentional recognition of each person's fullness-in-difference is foundational to the cultivation of change-making community (Lorde [1984] 2007; Crenshaw 1989; hooks 1996).

### **Body, Place, Map, Land**

The intimate teaching environment my small classes afforded, in combination with the newness of my approach, challenged students to move, think, and create outside of their comfort zones, yet in close, but sometimes cautious, community. The pandemic punctuated my first semester teaching HMPP. As we reorganized ourselves in lockdown, I provided students prompts to take stock of where we were and reflect on the semester so far. Responding to my question about what they were understanding of performance studies as a field, a method, and a theoretical frame, a white student from West Virginia interested in activism and education began her post with considerations of our classroom environment. She described it as one that was radically accepting, inclusive, and open to "messy"-ness:

I want to reflect a bit on the process that this class has gone through, and more so how this process has challenged and changed me forever. . . . As a lifelong dancer, I've always been nervous to walk into new studios, knowing my training hasn't been as rigorous as most of my peers. But as I walked into our class, I felt a sense of calm. I felt challenged, but not in the typical Davidson way that I had to hide who I was and always be intellectually on, but rather I could be myself, still intellectual, but also simultaneously messy and unsure.

Inviting students into improvisational practices with open scores for them to explore provided opportunities for embodiment and movement investigation they were not used to in conventional dance or theatre settings, and certainly not in their academic seminars. Constant open dialogues and reflective practices accompanied these embodied activities, creating a feedback loop for critical engagement with body-based learning.

This student also grappled with the open-endedness and multifaceted potential of performance studies—a field that privileges multiple questions rather than a singular answer and, as she wrote, “[accepts] that tension.” The unknowing that performance studies might offer, and the recognition that it's okay to not know but you must be willing to show up, felt prescient in those first weeks of lockdown. That performance can hone our attention to power differentials, historical legacies, and potent transformation, also became resource in uncertain times.

Relatedly, after reading Rebecca Schneider's “Performance Remains” (2001), a different student recognized the ways performance studies is “ground[ed] in the body.” He continued, “The body, its rituals, idiosyncrasies, traumas, imitations are both the instrument and the canvas for the field.” Performance studies encourages movement from the body in dis/comfort: a potent site of knowledge and un/knowing. This echoes Dwight Conquergood's formative assessment of the field's capacity to contest hegemonic formations of power and knowledge, which requires multimodal approaches. Conquergood asserts: “This epistemological connection between creativity, critique, and civic engagement is mutually replenishing, and pedagogically powerful. . . . The ongoing challenge of performance studies is to refuse and supercede [*sic*] this deeply entrenched division of labor, apartheid of knowledges, that plays out inside the academy as the difference between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualizing and creating” (Conquergood 2002, 153).

To distinguish between abstracted colonial epistemes “from above” and the living transmission of embodied knowledge “from below,” Conquergood cites Michel de Certeau: “what the map cuts up, the story cuts across” (2002, 145). Problematizing top-down conceptualizations of space, place, and history, I asked the students: What does a map communicate about a place, and how does this compare to the ways you—or others—might “know” this place? In 2020, while still on campus, I devised an activity for the students to explore this in the studio. Each student had a handful of Post-It notes to “map” a place they call home. They were invited to write on or manipulate the paper, placing it anywhere they want. Once placed, I asked students to move through their “map” while storytelling verbally and/or through movement. A white queer student from Tennessee stuck the Post-Its to his leg, chest, foot and back, narrating intimate stories of love, loss, injury, desire, and land as carried in and on specific locations of his body. The white student from West Virginia cited above, awakening into her activist self, ripped up the Post-Its and clumped them together representing institutions of socialization: family, church, high school, college; she then danced through each location with strong affect, level changes, and memories in relation to the ways each corporeally instilled in her particular hegemonies of discipline and value.

The practice of mapping place through our bodies also influenced the first exercise I offered once students left campus and were Zooming into class from their family homes. As an asynchronous activity, the simple practice invited them to orient, reorient, and then disorient themselves to their surroundings, recognizing where they were at that new and uncertain moment.

You're now in a home space that is both familiar and unfamiliar—you are changed and/or maybe the space has changed.

Start with 10 minutes sitting in the space, breathing and feeling/noting your breath, body, emotions, states. No need to judge or change or label anything. Just notice.

Spend 2 minutes facing in 5 different directions, or sitting/standing in different spots of the room, house, or surrounding outdoor space.

Now, find some new ways to move in and with your space. Reorient your body, your gaze, your senses, your attention. Free yourself to act in unconventional or 'silly' ways. Tune into your intuition. Do what feels good. Or maybe stay with what feels awkward. Spend at least 10 minutes exploring.

What was revealed in this practice? Reflect. 5–10 minute free write.

Many memories and connections between past, present, future emerged in their movements through and with old-new spaces. Discussions in class also offered students an opportunity to share whatever they were comfortable sharing about themselves, their emotional-physical states, and their home-places. Providing students connections not only to their own bodies—for each the first time they had done so since quarantine began—but to their spaces and living/dormant memories, the activity also allowed us to reconnect as a group navigating new and uncertain circumstances. The exercise revealed the power inherent in a simple practice of focus and reorientation—which I hoped would stick with them in the coming months.

I shifted the mapping/story/place activity when teaching online in 2021. Discussing mapping and stories at a point in the semester when we had also been thinking with Indigenous perspectives, we looked at Native studies scholar Ashley Elizabeth Smith's generative online resource about Indigenous approaches to place that assert *the land is history*. Her work disorients the colonizing gaze, shifting away from dominating projects of fixing, containment, and erasure (Smith 2021). Smith's work launched class discussion of our own experiences at Davidson and the ways the college "maps" its stories through architecture, landscaping, narrative, visuals, and campus tours. In later sessions, this line of thinking re/disoriented us toward the land and relation that became layered through interactions with three guest artists, the first of which was DeLesslin "Roo" George-Warren, member of the Catawba Indian Nation—the peoples whose land Davidson College occupies.<sup>11</sup>

Across George-Warren's work as a queer artist, cultural organizer, and advocate for language revitalization and food sovereignty, George-Warren brings together relational creativity, experimentation, and Catawba perspectives. In meetings with HMPP students, George-Warren prompted new forms of thought and world-making through provocations such as: What in your house moves? What is your water? What do you think of when you hear the world "wild"? What is prompted when you consider the word "family"? George-Warren instructed us in the animacy of all living beings and elements, colonial imperatives to separate "Man" from "environment," Indigenous perspectives on kin-relation, and the ways our home waterways might teach us something about inter-connectivity and change. The queerly playful manner in which George-Warren introduced Catawba lifeworlds threw into relief the Eurocentric and colonially entrenched perspectives students



had taken for granted as false universals. These encounters instigated student questioning of language and frame, as they began attending to their own relationships to land and Indigenous peoples in the contemporary.

## Positions to the Past

At the end of two-and-a-half years living in Durham, North Carolina, I codeveloped with artist-activator Aya Shabu “Hayti | Haiti | History,” a research-based community-oriented performance project about real and imagined connections between the nation of Haiti and Hayti, a historic Black neighborhood in Durham. The multimodal approaches we devised in collaboration influenced my methods in HMPP, as did Shabu’s vibrant repertoire of performance-based walking tours of African American neighborhoods. Shabu visited HMPP in both iterations, sharing her approaches to enlivening the past, activating place, and channelling memory through the body. In 2021, Shabu prompted: “How do we reenter the past? How does the past see us?” Her walking tour experiences are “opportunities to create new memories about this place, where Black histories and residents are visible. This counters their invisibilization due to ‘urban renewal’ in the past and gentrification in the present.” Conceiving of herself as a “conductor,” Shabu extends the metaphor related to her company’s name, Whistle Stop Tours, as well as to the electricity of performance to evoke the role of guides along the underground railroad, and the metaphysical possibilities of the performing body.

This perspective on the capacity of Black embodiment practices to conjure ancestral, metaphysical, historical connection was also emphasized by Charlotte-based dancer, educator, and researcher Tamara Williams. Sharing her performance research that “reimagines” the history and practice of the African American dance tradition Ring Shout (Williams 2018), Williams’s workshops offered deeply contextualized ways of encountering this practice that had profound effects. In 2020, Williams facilitated a workshop on campus just two days before campus closed for pandemic lockdown. Afterward, the student from Tennessee spent time reflecting on what it meant for him as a white person to participate in learning Ring Shout. His reflections at two different points in the semester illuminate the impact this learning experience had on his embodied understandings of his own positionality and his access to knowledge of the past. I cite his writing at length here because it evidences the import of coupling embodied practice, academic study, self-reflection, and dialogic engagement. Following the workshop, he wrote:

I felt initially apprehensive to dancing the Ring Shout. I feared that performing the Ring Shout as a white person would diminish its political potency and tarnish its cultural significance. Derived from resistance and spirituality, how could I respectfully perform these movements that weren’t and will never be mine to perform? That were derived from experiences I will never know?

. . . As I struggled to pick up the advanced movements of Ring Shout, my whiteness physically confronted me. I became aware of my positionality in a literal, spatial way. Tamara [Williams] claimed that every form of Africana dance traces its roots to Ring Shout. My ear picked up the beats’ similarities to hip hop and reggaeton music, and my eyes picked up on echoes of movements I’ve seen before. However, as we continued to dance, my body felt more and more distanced from the pathos of the practice. . . .

This experience reminded me of Trouillot’s writings about the position of the past in his book *Silencing the Past*. He writes: “The past does not exist independently from the present. . . . The past—or more accurately pastness—is a position. Thus in no way can we identify the past as *past*” (Trouillot 15).

I felt that my position as a white person dancing the Ring Shout was turned away from the position of the past that the dance itself is connected to. I think that the setting of the dance in a classroom space gave me the ability to step back and ethically understand how the position of the past manifests in embodied experiences and practices (that are not my own).

Such experiences of bodily-psychic discomfort—produced first by one’s own awareness of whiteness in relation to rhythm, then by whiteness in relation to history—register the feeling of a learning-growing edge. In the context of the classroom and through course assignments, this student had space to move with and carefully consider this discomfort, which facilitated insights into larger social issues. Having to ask himself, What is my relationship to this movement practice I am doing, and what do I learn by physically doing it?, provided a channel for significant reflection on appropriation, complicity, and historical knowledge production.

In early May 2020, this same student’s post-course reflection, written in the wake of the continued murder of Black civilians, extended his pedagogical reverberations:

I’ve been thinking a lot about white allyship since Ahmaud Arbery’s murder. I went on a run the same day I learned about his death. It felt weird. I felt my whiteness in my strides. This experience reminded me of Tamara [Williams]’ visit to our class. . . . Again, I became aware of my positionality in a literal, spatial way. Reflecting on both of these experiences, I realize the privilege of making a movement that feels disconnected and distant from the past and inconsequential to the future.

Considering the “Run for Ahmaud” social media campaign in relationship to our class discussions about the continued influence and appropriation of Black aesthetics in popular culture, he continued:

I think it’s good to make white people confront their privilege to do normal things without the threat of racial violence. However, I don’t think we should confront our privilege and complicity in white supremacy only concerning black deaths and blatant racism. Tamara’s lesson on the Ring Shout was productive for me as a white person to acknowledge the roots of American pop culture and movement. It helped me interrogate my complicity in white supremacy. I benefit from cultural productions of black folx. I must cite where American culture comes from. I have to recognize and celebrate black folx when they’re alive, not just when they’re killed by cops or racists.

This student’s continued processing, emergent from his corporeal experience, indicates the potency of practice-based research when integrated into coursework, coupled with critical reflection, and implemented in antiracist efforts. Additionally, his understanding of the individual/body’s role in understanding the past also produced a counter-memorial sense of justice, attentive to ongoing legacies and our individual positions to the past.

Conceptions of the counter-memorial resist the white supremacist framing of history as monumental or “past.” In my teaching, I hoped to steep students in ways of approaching history, ancestors, land, and body as entwined entities all inherent to ongoing processes of remembering and/or forgetting. Through movement practices that interrelated mind-body-spirit, emplacement, and hx/story in conjunction with critical reflection, I aimed to kindle possibilities for place-based memory-making that would recognize—and even reckon with—the force of unresolved pasts in and on each of us in the present. Ultimately, the students’ final practice-based research projects attended to remembrance in anti-institutional modes that centred healing and community-building for minoritized communities, and the challenge of disorientation and education for white students.

### **Student Projects for Remembering, Disorienting, Healing**

How does performance transmit knowledge about the past in ways that allow us to understand and use it?

—Diana Taylor (2006, 68)

#### **Queer Archive of Feelings**

In 2020, the white queer student from Tennessee cited above created “An Archive of Feelings: Davidson Queer Letters,” which, as he described it, staged “a response to the frustration I feel sitting in the Davidson College archive sifting through the thin ‘Homosexuality at Davidson’ folder.” Through imaginative epistolary exchange that put fragments of the archive into conversation with his lived experiences as a queer student at Davidson, the student wrote back against the insufficient ways “homosexuality” is registered in Davidson’s archive yet vibrantly lived among people on campus. This project activated the memory and hx/stories of queer ancestor Zac Lacy, an influential LGBTQ student leader at Davidson in the 1990s who, upon returning after graduation in the capacity of an alumni fellow, died by suicide on campus. Initially, this student planned to establish a commemorative annual party in Lacy’s name, held in the campus queer space the Lavender Lounge, which he hoped to have renamed for Lacy. Decorating the space “with annotated clippings from the archive,” Davidson’s queer community would “have a space to come together and look at the archive as inspiration and [as prompt to] consider how we can imagine our past beyond the archive.” Pivoting due to the pandemic, this student crafted an exchange of letters that riffed on Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), desiring to spark a more active relationship to the community’s own past, present, and futures.

I started thinking about how I sustain community with my queer friends in the time of COVID-19. I realized how much I’m in constant communication with my queer friends throughout the days. . . . I thought about what staying connected looked like historically for queer people (or anyone) to resist bouts of isolation. I thought about letters’ hallowed place in archives. For queer history, letter correspondences provide a glimpse into the private stories and relationships not displayed in public. They give insight to more intimate queer feelings lost in institutionalized forms of memory. . . .

I decided to shift my project to an archive of letters written to my queer friends about Davidson College’s queer history. I started this version of the project by going through the archive again and noting pieces of queer history that remind me of my relationships with my queer friends. Thus, this project not only intervenes in the

archive but also contributes to it. The shared experiences I talk about in these letters mirror my ruminations on queer documentation in the archive.

This project is my small attempt at creating queer history. It's dedicated to the queer folk who made history at Davidson before me, my friends making history right now, and the queer community that will exist at Davidson after I graduate.

### **Cultivating Spaces for Black Women's Wellness at a PWI**

At the end of her senior year, a Black anthropology major/dance minor from Texas focused her project on attending to the experiences of Black women students at Davidson through a combined attention to tracing legacies, surfacing difficult experiences, and creating healing spaces. This project arose through the student's preoccupation with the fact that almost all her Black women peers had taken a leave of absence from campus, combined with her encounter with related stories emerging from the archive—including the “mental strain” of workers in the 1870s, and the exhaustion of Black campus leaders in the 1980s. She wrote:

In an interview with two Davidson Alums, Janet Stovall '85 and her daughter, Maia Harrell '20, Stovall describes how she came up with the idea for Project '87, a plan to get more black students and faculty on campus equal to that of the United States racial demographics. She explains that it was born because she was exhausted from “fighting the fight for fairness,” and she “withdrew from a term and considered transferring” (Stovall, “Project '87 to Project 2027”). Stovall also explained how she supported her daughter Maia Harrell's pie business by allowing her to bake and sell out of her kitchen. This testimony about needing to leave Davidson and about supporting black women businesses, prompted me to think about safe, supportive spaces for black women. Spaces for black women are so important because it can help black women navigate and find refuge in a world that is so against us.

Connecting this historic pattern to the experiences of her peers, this student interviewed fellow Black women about their time at Davidson. Testifying to the psychosomatic and very real experiences of trauma experienced by Black women at the college, her project was committed to reparative healing. Echoing Audre Lorde's call for Black women's “rest” ([1984] 2007), this student devised a wellness session called “Trap Stretching: an Experience and Class for the Health and Soul of my Sistas.” Structured as part conversation/testimonies and part movement/stretching, the class served as a space “to come together and talk about a wide range of issues surrounding being a black woman on Davidson's campus and in the world, as well as solutions and positive topics to give hope to the women.” Integrating dialogue and movement aimed “to connect the mind and body, two entities that are often separated from each other.” Her session “gave black women the space to speak about experiences on Davidson's campus as well as served as another testimony to how black women's experience and feeling of isolation and exhaustion on Davidson's campus is recurring and ongoing and it obviously needs to be addressed.” These conversations surfaced the isolation and culture shock Black students face, explored tensions within different factions of the Black student population, and evidenced experiences of colourism and sexism experienced by darker-skinned Black women.

Observing continuities between Janet Stovall's support of her daughter Maia Harrell's dreams and the networks that kept Black women going, as they contrasted to the stark absence of spaces and

resources for Black women on campus, this student also compiled a resource guide for local Black-owned spaces focused on Black women's wellness in Charlotte, as well as in Houston, her current place of residence. She concluded:

All in all, I enjoyed conducting this project because I feel like I have added to an archive of black women speaking on their experiences in all white spaces. I also feel like the project does not just offer negative experiences, but serves as and offers solutions to black women to engage with and build upon. I learned that Davidson needs to offer more supportive spaces for black women on campus to prevent the cycle of black women taking semesters off from campus. I also learned that I should have more faith in myself and my ability to create my own wellness spaces for myself and other black women. I hope this project stays in my repertoire of work and can be used as a source of history in the future.

This work clarifies the need for members of the ubiquitously articulated but ill-defined “Davidson College community” to learn more about the strain Black women experience on campus in order to transform an often-hostile climate. We could all take inspiration from this student's methodology for cultivating spaces not only focused on wellness but also that facilitate grounding and connection across somatic, social, and historical levels. While one goal of sharing her project might be for other Black women students to take on such an approach as a model to craft their own spaces for healing connections to themselves and each other, the burden of change should be placed upon non-Black community members who must recognize the impacts the status quo imparts on those who have historically experienced exclusion and harm (Lorde [1984] 2007). It is up to those in positions of privilege to build a more supportive and nurturing environment for all.

### **Cultivating Presence through Acknowledgement**

A white sophomore art history major/dance minor from the Northeast developed a self-guided embodied tour that moves the participant alongside sites on the college's original campus grounds, places excavated for history and documented in the *Disorienting Davidson* tour. This student crafted experiences for the participant to witness, process, and dis/orient these campus histories through intentional embodied practices. In order to “explore the dichotomy between the natural and the imposed, what is told and what is neglected,” the tour moves participants through Davidson's “luscious greenery and tree landscape”—colonially cultivated as an arboretum with tree specimens from all over the world—which “brings to question what or who was displaced to enable the college's landscaping as well as a curiosity in how the ecosystem was influenced by planted imports.” As she explains, “I am drawn to the land, to the peaceful tranquility that is felt underneath the shaded greenery. However, the colonial undertone of crafting a landscape with imported trees infringes upon the ability to appreciate the land as land. This confliction rests at the foundation of my tour; I offer a mix of practices, walking, and histories to get at the unsettling, distracting feeling.” Embodied prompts guided participants through campus. “The tour is designed to be an individual process, so the option of dialogue is removed, and the single body is what has been made ready to digest the histories.” The tour was made to “alter the experience of a given location, so that the next time the viewer passes through the specific landmark, they don't simply walk by. They are rather reminded of the history it holds. I want to shift the way people view the landmarks of our campus, to bring meaning to the historic spaces we pass through every day, and to remind the community how embedded we are in the lasting effects of displacement, colonization, and enslavement.”

Each “stop” engaged the tourer in a different embodied practice. Informed by Emily Johnson’s (2018) multimodal communally engaged approach to performance and Faye Driscoll’s recent audio choreographies, she “crafted an audio choreography to reground the viewer in the landscape after learning a history,” a choice devised to “[engage] with the sanctuary the landscape offers and to provide the viewer with a meditative moment to feel where the new knowledge is landing in their body.” Considering how she might create a “memorable” embodied encounter with the past—something Aya Shabu emphasized in her visit with us—the student pondered:

How can I bring forward new memory, while engaging with the viewer’s body memory and previous knowledge? How does this help get at the unfinished nature of history? An emphasis on the complexity of history is needed; the single narrative that has been consolidated through time simplifies the past and pushes all else to the periphery. There is presence in what is absent; what is missing can be acknowledged but not reversed. My tour engages with knowledge and histories in a variety of forms, in hopes that at least one form will serve as memorable. My tour provides historical context for Davidson’s ties to slavery, racial injustices, and to indigenous displacement to complicate the Eurocentric white narrative that [the College] has streamlined.

Thinking with our conceptual framework for the semester, the student considers how her tour activates HMPP approaches:

Performance serves as an activation in its own manner and places the body in the narrative, not just the mind. Diana Taylor’s notion of performance and/as history allows for my tour to serve as a documentation and an activation of various histories present on campus. The duality allows for history to become alive, the past being existent in the present: “The bearers of performance, those who engage in it, are also the bearers of history who link the layers past-present-future through practice” (Taylor 2006, 83). I wanted my performance to serve and/as history, bringing forward an activation of the past to the present both in the physical body and the physical land. I wanted to emphasize the ‘unfinished’ nature of history. Furthermore, Ralph Lemon’s counter-memorial practices explore the power of the body in sharing history: “The body serves as a distilled history, a vehicle to communicate historical information” (Birns 2005, 19). Each body holds its own histories, which then brings forward the individual into the collective. In offering performance and a guided movement practice, I hope to enable the viewer to recognize the histories their bodies hold and to ponder how their own body might express those stories.

Finally, this student noted how her research, embodied exploration, and creative development uncovered the “unfinished” nature of this work:

In the making of this project, and throughout the semester, I have realized there is much of Davidson’s history that I have yet to uncover. Furthermore, there is much of the school’s history that the community has yet to uncover and reckon with. Much of what I have learned of campus history has never been discussed in either an academic or social setting, and I feel as though that needs to change. I hope that my tour offers an entrance into Davidson’s history that leaves the viewer wanting to uncover more.

## Counter-Memorial Performativity: Emergence and Ongoingness

The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us.

—Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference”

The three student projects shared above exhibit how “performance” took on a broad decentralized frame in HMPP. Their work elucidates how practice-based research was utilized to tilt embodied, archival, and place-based investigations toward the ongoing excavation of historical legacies and embedded white supremacy, while also catalyzing change. Conducting class online during the pandemic primarily kept our course work amongst ourselves and our immediate circles, though students did often report the impact of their learnings and related discussions with friends and associates on campus. Their projects evidence a desire to share their research and connect to their peers in practice-based ways. I, too, worked to expand these efforts in my teaching the year following, and was spurred to write this essay to disseminate their meaningful work.

In my small ongoing labours of shifting oppressive campus choreographies toward more historically informed inclusive, holistic, and body-based practices that could support students’ awareness of the histories in which they are steeped, I continued to implement strategies and knowledge gained from HMPP into other Davidson courses: instructing students in key elements of Davidson’s racialized performance histories, bringing students outside to the old part of campus for different types of attunement activities, encouraging research about Indigenous presence and Africana legacies. How can we develop more connected relationships to this place, that can hold and acknowledge the complexity of its history, the beauty and the horror; relationships that motivate us to build a different relationship to the past, to the present, to each other, and to a future we have yet to build?

On campus at the end of spring 2021 semester, after teaching remotely all year, I led two outdoor dance workshops in the original quad. As described at the start of this essay, these Moving Campus Histories workshops took place amongst buildings and trees that materialized the colonial histories we’d been reading about, discussing, and imagining against all semester. The first workshop was during class time with HMPP students, the second was open to all. Some of my former students as well as dancers involved in the student-run dance company joined. We began with conversation about events documented on the Davidson Disorientation tour as well as some findings we had been digesting over the semester. Familiar with the tour, students shared their experiences learning—and not learning—about Davidson’s past. With bare feet in the grass, I then led a grounding practice for homing in on the palimpsest of the land where we stood, and aligning with the four elements of nature. We practised a “slow walk” to attune to each other and soften our frequency, recalibrating amidst the grass, buildings, trees, manicured walkways and quizzical passersby. I then had students choose a location to “study” details, textures, shapes, architecture and circulation through somatic forms of attention, then devise gestures and a movement sequence responding to a specific place and their renewed attention of it. They then developed this into a movement “tour” of this spot, that ultimately each student performed and we witnessed, then discussed.<sup>12</sup> We learned both about these specific chosen places and people’s newly devised relationships them, registering how one’s movement can serve as a form of imaginative research, revealing and reaching toward hx/story, while also resonating new possibilities through intentional practice. After a closing circle, the students reflected on their renewed perspective of their campus, and themselves as doers, makers, and learners in its land/scape.

This work on and about campus served as a beginning to more sustained in-person practices I was able to facilitate with students the following academic year. Knowing there was much more to be done, in fall 2021 I assigned the above-described student's embodied tour to the thirty-two students in my Introduction to Dance Studies course. In conjunction with their development of embodied land acknowledgements (which I must note, as Indigenous peoples teach us, are no solution to the dispossession of the Catawba peoples from the land [Cole and Poll 2021]), the embodied tour sparked a different *felt* relationship to place, informed continuous reflection, and planted seeds for several final projects.

That fall, I also often held my Haitian Dance Technique and Theory course—which integrates physical practice with in-depth study of Haitian culture and history—on the grass surrounded by the original campus buildings. Practising outside among the bricks created by the hands of enslaved peoples, imposing architectural columns, and street markers commemorating white segregationists, while discussing the history and continuity of dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the exploitation of Black peoples and their labour, pertinent to our study of Haiti, brought trans-temporal and trans-spatial intentions to those grounds each time we gathered. Singing, dancing, and playing Afro-Haitian rhythms—performance practices wholly about connection to land, nature, lifecycles, and ancestry—brought not only healing and much needed collectivity to the multiracial group of students navigating grief, isolation, and mental health struggles, but in my estimation offered a kind of ephemeral yet iterative energetic effort toward repair.

This work brought our efforts out from the dance studios on the far side of campus to a highly visible area. Elevating the vibration of that space through practices that connected us to nature, history, ancestors, freedom struggles, and communality, I sensed our practice providing a form of reparative labour not only for my students in such a difficult time of isolation and loss, but for the space itself, the land, its ancestors and inheritors. Celebrating the vibrancy of Black creativity and freedom, which we study via Haiti and recognize as labours from which we all benefit and which can inspire us in myriad ways, perhaps contributes to an effort in renewed relation.

After our end-of-semester public performance showing in that space, as I placed my drum and dance skirts in the trunk of my parked car, I realized a remarkable resonance. On the sidewalk alongside the lawn where we regularly practised stands a marker that commemorates Woodrow Wilson's attendance at the college between 1873 and 1874. I had parked and walked by this marker countless times before the gravity of Wilson's naming struck me this day. Wilson, who while president emphatically advanced segregationist policies in the US, also oversaw the completely destructive nineteen-year occupation of Haiti (1915–1934). I like to think the energy we collectively generated in that space throughout fall 2021 and which I continued in classes during spring 2022, vibrations that praise African diasporic epistemologies and honour Haitian creative survivals, cultivated ephemeral yet impactful counter-memorials to the occupation's devastating neocolonial effects on Haitian political and cultural sovereignty, which absolutely continue today. As “minimal acts of commemoration” that functioned more like ritual than spectacle (Profeta 2005, 24), perhaps our efforts addressed those who haunt Davidson's campus, ancestors calling for proper acknowledgement and recognition, as well as living descendants of these histories and those who sustain the ongoing trauma they inflict.

Such iterative performance practices, co-constitutive of practice-based research, like the projects my HMPP students developed, occurred adjacent to—but not fully of—both performing arts and



history/memory work as conventionally conceived at the college. Our iterative efforts surfaced silenced pasts, created alternatives for a fuller-bodied present, and in minor though important ways offered restorative-yet-critical practices. The ethos of counter-memorial pedagogies positioned HMPP and my other on-campus teachings differently than critical efforts within Theater, focused on devised staged production, or history and Africana studies, contributing to filling silences of the formal archive. A counter-memorial approach also set into relief the public apology that Davidson College president Carol McQuillen made in August 2020, before the academic semester began, of which none of my HMPP students were aware. When discussing the apology in spring 2021, students wondered at the efficacy of such an action considering it had not been widely publicized across campus constituents—particularly pertinent in the post-2020 era of so-called “performative activism.”<sup>13</sup> Davidson maintains committees for Acknowledgement and Naming and Commemoration (Davidson College, n.d.a, n.d.b) and has commissioned a multimillion-dollar commemorative art project on campus (Davidson College 2021a, n.d.e) while advocating that “Honoring and Remembering Begins with Stories rather than Stone” (Davidson College 2021b). In this process of uncovering hard truths through storytelling and listening sessions, it would behoove constituents to develop companion practices that can support community members in processing and metabolizing these efforts, as well as instilling a necessary humility and courage in the ongoing efforts needed to dismantle white supremacy and rectify ongoing harms. Practice-based research integrated into classes and large-scale initiatives can shift focus away from an encapsulating product and toward the solo-collective process of grappling with the enduring effects of occluded hx/stories. It will also be critical to find joy, creativity, and connection in this work—something my students taught me is urgent for our moment and will fuel our collective counter-imaginaries toward other futures.

## Notes

1. As the report authored by Davidson College, Commission on Race and Slavery (2020) states, in 1835–36, “Historical documents report ‘volunteer’ laborers constructed the first seven buildings using 250,000 bricks made by enslaved people on a nearby plantation. These historical documents commonly obscure information we would like to know, such as whether these ‘volunteer’ laborers were in fact enslaved. These laborers could have included skilled masons and carpenters” (2).
2. Considering a PWI in the South as a “plantation” is not uncommon, and quite apt. This was something I often heard about Duke University when I was there as a postdoc in African and African American studies.
3. These initiatives include, but are not limited to Davidson’s Commission on Race and Slavery (Davidson College, n.d.c; Davidson College, Commission on Race and Slavery 2020); Sarah HD Mellin and Tian Yi’s Davidson Disorientation tour, resources related to that tour (Mellin and Yi 2019), and Mellin’s senior thesis (2020); the Justice, Equality, Community curriculum requirement; antiracist public history work carried forward by students in collaboration with faculty and staff; and the Mellon-funded Stories (Yet) to Be Told: Race, Racism, and Accountability on Campus (Davidson College, n.d.f.).
4. Mellin and Yi’s approach to “Disorienting” was inspired by Sara Ahmed’s theorization of the concept (2006).
5. Throughout this article, when I use hx/story and hx/stories instead of “history,” “histories,” or even “History,” I aim to textually communicate the importance of pasts informed by storied memory, imagination, and queer feminist experiences.
6. This practice began with attendance at Urban Bush Women’s Summer Leadership Institute and integrated undoing racism training by the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond in 2016. Since 2019, I have co-convened Un/Communing Pedagogies Collective, a multiracial group of educators who centre movement in

our social justice education work. In 2020–2021 I also participated in and co-facilitated white working group sessions with Practice Progress, Sarah Ashkin and kai hazelwood’s organization that uses body-based learning to address white supremacy.

7. For example, Wilder (2013), reparation initiatives by Georgetown University, and the University of Virginia’s consortium of Universities Studying Slavery.

8. In fall 2022, Green returned to Davidson in a tenured position as the James B. Duke Professor of Africana Studies.

9. You can view the tour at PocketSights, “Davidson Disorientation Tour Parts 1, 2, 3,” <https://pocketsights.com/tours/location/United-States/North-Carolina/Davidson>.

10. These practitioner-scholar-activists include Audre Lorde, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar/Urban Bush Women and the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, Resmaa Menakhem, adrienne maree brown, Jean-Sebastien Duvalaire, Nyama McCarthy Brown, Crystal Davis, Jesse Phillips-Fein, Sarah Ashkin and Kai Hazelwood, Michelle Johnson, and Bo Forbes.

11. Artist-scholar visits were supported by a Center for Civic Engagement Course Development Grant in 2020 and a Stories (Yet) to be Told grant in 2021.

12. My opening grounding and elements practice is inspired by studies with Peniel Guerrier and Rosangela Silvestre, as well as work with the Un/Commoning Pedagogies Collective. “Slow Walks” in my teaching are informed by Japanese Butoh, Euro-American postmodern practices, and Jeannine Murray-Roman. The “movement tours” activity draws from approaches shared by AB Brown and Nikki Yeboah, J Dellecave and Lailye Weidman.

13. As Michelle Liu Carriger notes in her introduction to the 2021 special issue of the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* concerned with the concept of performativity, “The transformation of performative into an anti-theatrical slur indexes a very reasonable exhaustion and a very correct recognition that representations and statements are unstably attached to action; but to suggest that the verdict of performative is the end of an inquiry, instead of its beginning, would be to cede a vast territory wherein although we can’t understand clearly what is happening, things are clearly happening” (Carriger 2021, 10).

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## **Letters to a Pine: A Video Essay**

Annette Arlander

*Letters to a Pine*: [link to video essay](#).



Video still, *With a Pine I* (2020). Filmed by Annette Arlander.

### **Transcription of the Voice-Over**

October 31, 2020

Dearest pine,

I hope you don't mind that I address you in English this time. The reason is that I am participating in an international Live Art event<sup>1</sup> with other people performing with trees in other parts of the globe, or on the earth. And that takes place via Zoom, with the help of my phone, right behind me. As you might remember, or then not, last time we met I thought I would say goodbye for a while, and that I felt that our contact or communication was not really going anywhere. . . Well, if you start a relationship with a tree you cannot really expect it "going anywhere," at least not literally. Trees are sessile beings par excellence, reliable to stay where they are "till death do us part," as they say. But I meant that I did not really feel you were interested in communication, or perhaps simply, brutally, that I was no longer inspired by you. I did not like myself in your company; I did not like the thoughts that came to me while in your company—whether they were induced or inspired by you or not. That said, when this opportunity to join in

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an event with other tree lovers occurred, I immediately thought of you! One reason for that was quite practical; the ferryboat to the island where I have most of my tree friends does not run any longer—it stopped for the winter. And although I have a rowing boat, and today the weather is very calm, perfect for rowing across, I could not know that beforehand. You live here right next door to me, in the centre of the south of Helsinki, and in a funny place right up on the rocky hill, alone, so it is relatively easy to perform together with you, without other trees, bigger and more spectacular ones, catching all the attention. The rocks are frequented by people, of course; this is a public park, and in summertime there are plenty of parties here. Now only one family is playing around nearby, and they will probably not stay for long. The chilly weather has made your little birch companion to let go of their leaves, but some trees, like the alders, are still green. More people coming—funny, I did not expect that, but, if they don't disturb you, then I will not be disturbed either. Complaining kids! That is the last thing you would imagine a small pine tree would be surrounded by. It is a strange place to live that you have chosen (or perhaps you did not have much choice, actually, simply landing here)—not because it is a public park, but because there is so little soil in the small crevice where you are rooted with the birch. Probably your root is working hard to press forward downwards towards the centre of the earth. This is at least what philosopher Emanuele Coccia (2018) claims. Plants grow actively in two directions, up towards the sun, and down towards the centre of the earth. So, you are a cosmic being, like the famous world tree! Some strange noise from the shore behind me is getting louder; is it a boat or a truck or what? It seems hardly to move... I wonder if you sense the vibrations—probably. Such low frequencies are making “bigger waves,” so to speak, if I remember correctly. . . I am going to write three separate letters to you, in order to be able to turn off and on again my video camera. Although the Zoom event is recorded somehow, I also wanted to make an “ordinary” video of this longer meeting. And because my video camera can record only twenty-one minutes at a time, this hour will be divided in three twenty-minute slots. So, I will leave you for a moment, and then come back again, soon. I will be lucky to be able to check if my phone is still working, too. . .

\*

This video essay, “Letters to a Pine,” based on material written during a collective online performance on October 31, 2020, relates to all four topics mentioned in the call to this issue—knowledge, power, ethics, and affect—by demonstrating and discussing how to perform with trees as an intervention into dominant notions of who and what can perform. In this essay, I am suggesting that beyond our ongoing performance of trans-corporeal exchanges with vegetation in the world, deliberate artistic performances can be developed to intervene in the continuous disregard of plants.

The practice of writing letters to trees was first undertaken as part of the project *Performing with Plants* (Arlander 2016), hosted by Stockholm University of the Arts in 2018 and 2019, and funded by the Committee for artistic research at the Swedish Research Council. Published examples of letters include “Writing with Trees” (Arlander 2022c), “Dear Olive Tree” (Arlander 2021), and “Dearest Pine” (Arlander 2020a). This particular instance of performing with trees by writing letters to a small pine tree in Kaivopuisto Park in Helsinki took place within the context of another project, which was developed based on experiences of the previous one, namely *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* (Arlander 2020b). Within this project, I have explored further modes of addressing trees in writing. The letters written to a tree in front of the video camera in Finnish, Swedish, or English were often later transcribed, read and recorded, and edited as a voice-over to the video, sometimes translated and added as English subtitles as

well. In this case of writing to a small pine tree during the collective online performance organized by the Becoming Tree project, only the action of writing was visible; the resulting text was not shared with the audience.

These letters serve as an example of how PAR (performance as research) methodologies can, on the one hand, “challenge the epistemological assumptions concerning the concept of research,” and how they can, on the other hand, “reinvigorate academic conventions” of presenting research results in conferences and publications.<sup>2</sup> To what extent can imaginative approaches—like addressing trees in writing—function as useful research methods? Do we learn something about pine trees by writing letters to them? Or, rather, do we learn something about writing, and especially about letter writing, by writing letters to trees? Perhaps the most relevant question is whether art practices, such as writing letters to trees next to the trees, can serve as an aid to focus attention on trees, and by extension other beings that form our “environment” or our shared habitable world.

This specific video is compiled for the publication at hand and has not been presented at an academic conference, nor shown as an installation or in a screening in an art exhibition. Other similar letters, however, have served as research results in both contexts. One example is “Hanging in a Pine – with text,” a video made for a performance lecture at a philosophy conference in Amsterdam (Arlander 2019a), which has also been shown as a three-channel installation called “Swinging – With a Pine – Hanging” at an exhibition in Helsinki (Arlander 2019b). Here I propose that this video essay, too, can exemplify how in the context of artistic research, the same material can be made to serve as an artwork and as a research presentation, often with very small adjustments.<sup>3</sup>

The three-part letter written in English was the last in a series of letters written to the same small pine tree in Helsinki in Swedish during 2020,<sup>4</sup> continuing a practice of writing letters to a small pine tree in Stockholm,<sup>5</sup> which I could not visit due to the prevailing pandemic. I wrote the letters to this “substitute” pine in Swedish, and had already finished the practice, feeling there was nothing more to be explored with that particular pine. When I saw the call to the Be-coming Tree event, however, I immediately thought of the pine. “Be-coming Tree,” a collective live art event on Zoom, organized by an artist-led initiative facilitated by Jatun Risba, Danielle Imara, and O Pen Be, defined itself as “a grassroots showcase platform, an open-source art project in the making and a community of artists who create, document and share kin close entanglement with trees” (Be-coming Tree, n.d.b). I had had the opportunity to participate in an earlier event organized by the same project in August 2020. For this new event on October 31, 2020, I decided to experiment with writing a letter to a pine in Kaivopuisto Park. In the program, the performance was described as follows: “Annette Arlander will perform *With a Pine* in Brunnsparcken or Kaivopuisto Park in Helsinki, together with a small pine tree, which she has visited a few times last summer and written letters to as part of her project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*.”<sup>6</sup>



Video still, *With a Pine II* (2020). Filmed by Annette Arlander.

Dearest Pine,

I will try to reach you another time, or if not reach then contact, or at least address you in some manner. Writing letters to trees is, of course, a slightly absurd activity, but on the other hand, it is a traditional, even conventional, strategy used by poets, in the Romantic era especially. I am not a poet, and I am not addressing you in some sort of sudden cosmic euphoria, or imagined dissolution into existence, or immersion in nature or whatever. I only try to find a way of performing with you, together with you, in a reasonably ethical manner. And traditionally tree lovers are speaking “for” trees rather than with trees. Erazim Kohak, an old philosopher I encountered because he was referenced in a recent text by Matthew Hall (2019, 317), has written a text called “Speaking to Trees” (Kohak 1992), and there he is writing in favour of trying to find manners of speaking that are respectful and supporting of peaceful coexistence. Many, many years ago I made some attempts at performing “as” trees, on behalf of trees, in a playful manner, in a series of audio plays or small monologues written and compiled for specific trees. One of the trees in the series *Trees Talk*<sup>7</sup> was a pine, and it was growing in a park in Kuopio, in the north of Finland. That work was made for ANTI-festival there, but the first talking trees were talking the whole summer [2003] on Harakka Island. I would not do that again, not with you, that is, to try to put words in your mouth and make you into a puppet in a puppet theatre show, as it were. Of course, I could do that, and then hang an MP3 player and earphones on your branches for passers-by to notice. The first attempts were actually made with CD players hidden in plastic boxes at the roots of the trees. Today, the easiest way would be to make a QR code and attach it to your bark and let passers-by use their phones to find your speech on the Internet. But that is appropriation, really. Well, no, it would be OK, and I don’t think you would mind. I am sure you have a broadminded view of such things. But what would be the point? To teach the children playing around here to see you as a living being? That would not necessarily help, because they could just as easily see a teddy bear as a living being. And you are living in a different way, a manner much closer to our way of being alive. So, that was a long explanation for an easy decision, to try to speak *to* you instead of *for* you,



or *as* you. But I am not really speaking to you; I am addressing you in writing, and that makes a difference, I guess. Once, when sitting on a tree trunk up in the north and writing to the dead trunk, I formulated it in something like these words: “I am not writing to you imagining that you could somehow understand English, and I am not leaving this text, on paper, at your roots for you to digest—no, rather, I think that by writing my thoughts or my ‘words to you’ on paper like this, I am forced to articulate them more clearly, and therefore they might be easier for you to discern as well—if not as words directly, then as intentions, or affects, or some form of trans-corporeal vibrations.” The notion trans-corporeality, coined by Stacy Alaimo (2010), does not refer to “vibrations,” but to all the chemical, magnetic, radioactive, or other exchanges that take place between us and that pass between and across all kinds of bodies. We are exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide, of course, but all kinds of other chemicals or waves pass through our bodies without our being able to control but a small part of that. And if we are thus physically connected, perhaps there are other forms of more intangible connections, too?

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The experience of writing to the pine as part of an online event can be compared with my first attempt at performing online within the same project. In the collective live art event “Be-coming Tree,” held on August 1, 2020, on Zoom, I was practising a yoga pose next to a pine. I performed together with a small pine tree on Harakka Island in a performance that I called “With a Pine on Harakka Shore,” the same little pine I had visited daily during all of July.<sup>8</sup> That first event was an important challenge, because I had to consider how I could extend my practice of the two-legged tree pose to last for the duration of an hour. I decided on a rhythm of ten breaths of the pose (reaching up with my arms and balancing on my toes) alternating with ten breaths standing relaxed with arms down. I attached my phone to a root on the cliff for the Zoom connection and asked a colleague to stay next to the phone in order to tell me when the performance was over. My main concern was the Internet connection rather than the performance, and I even made the mistake of recording a vertical video image.<sup>9</sup>

Performing the action as part of a collective event was nevertheless empowering in some sense; I have never considered myself a performer and would not expect to hold the attention of a live audience with my minimalist actions. The possibility of “sharing the stage” with other performers with more spectacular performances provided the opportunity to serve as a “bass player” of sorts, maintaining my action as a complement to other actions.<sup>10</sup> The heightened awareness induced by the “live” moment online, and the exhilarating feeling of being in contact with other artists working with trees in different parts of the world, was combined with a focus on accomplishment, something undertaken for others.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the performance was less of a sensitizing and meditative practice done for oneself, producing material for future artworks as a side effect, nor did it really serve as an exercise in attending to the pine, in creating some kind of relationship to the tree.

After that first experience, the second event felt like a much more relaxed endeavour, and I chose to work alone, exiting the image between the letters to check the connection and the video camera. The act of writing a letter to the pine was not physically demanding and maintaining my focus on the pine was relatively easy. The undisclosed content of the letters gave a private dimension to the performance, separate from the act of writing that the online audience could see. This experience of addressing the pine during an online performance can also be compared with my previous experience of writing letters to the same pine in front of the camera as a private exercise to generate material. The main difference was the duration, which varied

depending on the letters and the weather. Because of the fixed duration of the one-hour Zoom performance, the three letters vary in character, and it seems like the awareness of an audience and the heightened “now” of the live event spurred me to concentrate and try to formulate something of interest, although the audience could not see or hear it.

Writing a letter by hand is slower than reading the transcribed text. This asynchrony of the speed of recorded writing and recorded reading led me later to experiment with recorded talking.<sup>12</sup> Although the three letters included in this video essay are unaltered as texts—I have transcribed them as they were written, soon after the performance—reading and recording them as a voice-over to the video essay necessarily transforms them. In this case, they were read almost one and a half years later. The reflective or explanatory commentaries in these sections interpolating the transcribed letters in the present essay were added as extensions and were written much later.

The video essay is based on a compilation of three videos,<sup>13</sup> with my entering and exiting of the framed image excluded. The first version of the compilation, creating the appearance of one continuous performance, was rather long (54 minutes) and is here abbreviated to include only the beginning of all three letters on video. The recorded letters, however, are included in full, with each letter beginning synchronously with the image, and then assuming a rhythm of its own. The commentaries were added after each letter while the image still depicts the writing of that letter.



Video still, *With a Pine III* (2020). Filmed by Annette Arlander.

Dearest Pine,

How do you feel about the coming winter? Are you “afraid,” whatever that would be in your terms? Are you anticipating it with dread or apprehension? Or is it a welcome time of rest when you can stop working or at least slow your photosynthesis production and hibernate, or at least take it easy. Probably winter means a little different thing to you than to deciduous trees that really drop their leaves and store their chlorophyll in their roots, like the small birch next to you is doing. You keep your needles, so the change is not that dramatic. But you will feel the cold in some manner, that is for sure, and the

increase of moisture in these chilly autumn days. Now, because of climate change, there will probably not be so much snow here in the south by the sea, and the sea will probably not freeze, which will make your winter experience different, too. In the north, where there is lots of snow, it is hard work for pines and spruces to carry the weight of all that snow. And if the snow is wet and heavy, it is even harder. They say that some trees break because of the snow, while others fall or topple over, if the ground is not freezing, keeping their roots tight. Well, you have none of those problems here—I guess heavy storm winds are the most dangerous thing you can anticipate. And there is no protection here on the hill. I wonder how deep you have managed to get with your roots. You are not that high, so probably the wind will not hurt you. . . Or is it the diminishing light that makes the difference? Well, that is what makes the difference for all of us, but for you that really means less energy, less food, less life material. That is the magic with all of you, plants, you can make your own nourishment from water and minerals simply with the power of sunlight. With our solar panels we try to learn from you, but we still have a long way to go. And a world without trees, with food grown synthetically in laboratories, would be a sad world. I am getting cold here, sitting next to you, even though it is only for an hour. So, I really respect your capacity to find a way of living that makes this cold somehow bearable, or perhaps even pleasant for you. But, then again, you have been around for many millions of years longer than humans, so you have had time to learn quite a selection of tricks: how to survive and thrive. I am going to leave you now; I am simply too cold! And I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for being allowed to spend time with you again. I wish you all the best for the coming winter—take care!

Yours, AA

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In what manner do these letters exemplify PBR or more specifically PAR (performance as research) methodologies (Arlander et al. 2018), and to what extent do they actually “challenge the epistemological assumptions concerning the concept of research?” To use artistic methods to gather data or produce research material is common and fairly easy (Arlander 2017). Whether artistic methods can be used to analyze such data is another question, and in my experience not so easy. Artistic tools like performance can surely “reinvigorate academic conventions” of presenting research results, as this essay hopefully demonstrates. And as I proposed at the beginning, this video essay can also exemplify how the same material can be formed into an artwork or performance, and into a research presentation, with only minor adjustments. More generally, we can ask to what extent imaginative approaches—like addressing trees in writing—can serve as useful research methods. Did I learn something new about pine trees by writing letters to them? Maybe not in this case. Perhaps I rather understood something about writing and especially about letter writing, like the importance of the addressee, the imagined reader or receiver—in this case the pine tree—for the text produced. In this particular project, the most relevant question is nevertheless whether performance practices, such as writing letters to trees next to the trees, can serve as an aid for the public, and for an academic as well as an art audience, to focus their attention on trees, and by extension other beings with whom we share this world.

### Afterthoughts

After compiling this video essay, I have written about differences between the experience of a collective online event and a daily performance practice (Arlander 2022a, 237–40), and reflected on ethical problems related to addressing trees in writing (Arlander 2023). I have also made many

new experiments with various pine trees within a new project called *Pondering with Pines* (2022b).<sup>14</sup> I have not, however, come anywhere closer to solving the problem of reciprocity. How could the specific temporality and materiality of the pine tree be foregrounded? Will all attempts at creating an I-You relationship with a pine tree inevitably turn into anthropocentric fantasies? When returning to these letters written during a one-hour performance with the pine, shared with an online audience only as a visual action, I realized the difficulty of estimating the effect of it. Although the chosen pine tree is small, resembling a human scale, and thus fits with me into the same image frame more easily, and although the human is relatively immobile together with the sessile tree, the pine nevertheless easily becomes a backdrop rather than a co-performer in the video. The duration of the performance inevitably follows human rather than vegetal conceptions of time, and the needs of online spectators and performers in various time zones, rather than the time of the pine, regardless of how we understand that.

Considering temporality prompted me to look at the letters preceding this online event. In my previous nine letters to the pine (between March 30 and August 6, 2020), with the camera as the only witness, the duration of writing was “internally” decided. I stopped writing when I was too cold, or whenever the action had run its course. In the live online performance, the exact time and the duration of one hour formed the frame of the event for all other performers and spectators; the letter writing and my relationship with the pine were adjusted to that “outer” decision. Before this event, I had established a kind of friendship with the pine tree, visiting them repeatedly and addressing them in Swedish, anthropomorphizing the tree to some extent. The letters are, for example, describing the broken branch with its pale wound that later was covered with resin, marvelling at the buds and wondering about the relationship between the pine and the small birch growing from the same crevice on the rock. My understanding of the lifeworld of the pine and our relationship developed over time.

In previous letters, I nevertheless repeatedly return to the absurdity of the attempt at addressing the pine: “Am I wrong in writing to you like this? I mean, it does not hurt you, but is it a delusion, an illusion, a silly game that makes me believe that an I-You relationship à la Buber or Levinas could be possible between us”<sup>15</sup> (April 24, 2020; translated by the author). And at times I try to consider the pine’s point of view:

It’s been a while since I was here, and you might not remember me even if you would have noticed me for some reason. If we think rationally, you have no reason to notice me if I don’t try to hurt you or if I’m not a threat, or then the opposite, if I would not somehow favour you or provide something that you would appreciate. That would be the carbon dioxide I secrete in my breathing, and that is in modest amounts, especially since I am not coming near you. However, we don’t have to think rationally, we can play a little, fantasize. I don’t know whether pine trees can fantasize, but if they can remember, they can plan, too. . . . (May 2, 2020; translated by the author)<sup>16</sup>

And further:

I realize it is on the verge of lunacy to play together with a pine tree—I could as well have a conversation with a chair or a table—but that is not true! You are a living being, and even if it is possible that the chair and the table are alive as well, you are living in a manner which I can recognize, which is closer to my way of living, after all. (May 2, 2020; translated by the author)<sup>17</sup>

What these early letters to the pine and the letters written during the online performance have in common is their character of *ex tempore* performance. They were written on the spot, as an

automatic writing of sorts, and transcribed without censorship. In the online performance, the act of writing as an action was foregrounded because the text, the content of the letters, was never shared. Whether that helped the spectators to focus on the pine tree, as I hoped it would, is questionable. Perhaps adding the letters to the video<sup>18</sup> serves to focus the viewers' attention better. The problem nevertheless remains unresolved: How can communication between a pine tree and a human take place without diminishing the pine to fantasy projections, or then biochemical processes? Can we even imagine a reciprocal conversation or friendship between a pine tree and a human?

## Notes

1. See the Be-coming Tree Facebook page (n.d.a), where I first encountered the event: <https://www.facebook.com/becomingtree/>.
2. These quotes come from the original call for papers to this special issue of *Performance Matters*.
3. For comparison, I made a version of this video essay with only the letters included, which could easily be shown as an artwork. See *Letters to a Pine*: <https://vimeo.com/807081797>.
4. The previous letters were written on March 30, April 6, April 17, April 24, May 2, May 23, June 10, June 23, and August 6, 2020. See *The Pine in Brunnsparcken*: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/831544>.
5. See “The Pine on Hundudden”: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/771644>.
6. The following links were included: Pine Research, <https://meetingswithtrees.com/>, and <https://annetearlander.com/>.
7. See “Talking Trees”: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/62946/159786>.
8. See “July with a Pine”: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=960090>.
9. The vertical video image was somehow turned sideways in the zoom recording, and the documentation of the collective event had to use still images of my video recording; see the compilation at <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/944410/924/1543>.
10. A brief documentation of the online event that shows the Zoom view of all participants is available on the Research Catalogue page: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/831544/1524/81>.
11. This was more of an inspiring fantasy than a real connection while performing because I could not see or hear the others, nor even know if the connection was working. This imagined connection to human performers and spectators elsewhere nevertheless took some part of my focus away from the connection to the pine tree next to me.
12. See, for example, the videos in “Talking with the Reclining Pine (in Kaivopuisto Park)” in the same park: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1323410/1529168>.
13. See videos on the Research Catalogue page: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/831544/1125/0>.
14. See *Pondering with Pines* blog, <https://ponderingwithpines.com>, and the project archive: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1323410/1589526>.
15. The extract in the original Swedish: “Gör jag fel att skriva till dig på det här sättet? Jag menar, det skadar ju inte dig, men är det en villfarelse, en illusion, en löjlig lek som får mig att inbilla mig att ett jag-du -förhållande à la Buber eller Levinas skulle vara möjligt mellan oss.”
16. The extract in the original Swedish: “Det är ett bra tag sedan jag var här sist, så du skulle kanske inte komma ihåg mig, även om du lagt märke till mig av någon anledning. Om vi tänker rationellt så har du ingen orsak att lägga märke till mig ifall jag inte försöker skada dig eller utgör ett hot, eller då det motsatta, att jag på något sätt kunde gynna dig eller bjuda på något som du skulle uppskatta. Det är i så fall den koldioxid jag utsöndrar i min andning, och det är ju blygsamma mängder, i synnerhet som jag inte

kommer nära in på dig. Men vi behöver ju inte tänka rationellt, vi kan leka lite, fantisera. Jag vet ju inte om tallar kan fantisera, eller leka, men om de kan minnas så kan de också planera för framtiden...”

17. The extract in the original Swedish: “Jag inser att det är på gränsen till galenskap att leka tillsammans med en tall—lika gärna kunde jag föra ett samtal med en stol eller ett bord—men det är inte sant! Du är en levande varelse, och även om det är möjligt att stolen och bordet också lever, är du levande på ett sätt som jag kan känna igen, som är närmare mitt sätt att leva, trots allt.”

18. See *Letters to a Pine*: <https://vimeo.com/807081797>.

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## **STRATA: The Research Process in the Making of a Performance-Based Film**

Andrea Pagnes, Verena Stenke, Douglas Quin, and daz disley

### **I. Introduction**

On the threshold of beauty, science and art collaborate.

—Edgar Varèse (1967, 196)

*STRATA* is our fifth performance-based film project and deals with the concept of deep time, the formation of layers in human history, memory, and the geological.<sup>1</sup> After three years of preparations, sudden delays, and waiting due to the pandemic, we started filming in spring 2021 in the caves of the Swabian Jura in Germany. Lockdown and the regulations for COVID-19 were still in force, making the production more complex than expected, but it could not have been otherwise.

Deep time is a profoundly different time scale in geological and evolutionary processes than that with which we deal in our daily lives. John McPhee introduced the term “deep time” (1981, 20) to the modern philosophical concept of geological time developed in the eighteenth century by Scottish geologist James Hutton (1726-1797),<sup>2</sup> regarded as the father of modern geology. Observing sequences of formations from rocks cut across and intruding on each other, Hutton recognized an ancient Earth with “no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end” in these unconformities (Baxter 2004, 231). Earth’s landscapes are shaped through long-lasting processes of cyclical counterforces: erosion, deposition, consolidation, and uplift. For Hutton, over longer time scales, nothing is constant: “We are as lost in time as in Copernicus’s space” (Baxter 2004, 231).

Our idea to make a performance-based film on deep time stemmed from the results of research funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, conducted by the network Rock/Body: Performative Interfaces (University of Exeter, UK), and consisting of a series of seminars organized by human geographer and anthropologist Nigel Clark and art historian João Florêncio. We were invited to participate along with a number of other scholars, including Timothy Morton. The core idea of the seminars was that the Anthropocene prompts us to see human beings as geological agents. The focus was on the human body and its relationship to the ecological, the effects and consequences of human dependency, and the use of geologic framing. The aim was to shed light on how we understand social life as shaped and perturbed by physical forces, and whether geological *strata* (natural formations) and layers resulting from human endeavour are similar to structures of memory—the process of storing and retrieving information.

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Venetian-born artist and performer **Andrea Pagnes** and German artist **Verena Stenke** have been working together as VestAndPage since 2006, exploring performance art and filmmaking as phenomena of thin places through their collaborative practice, artistic research, and curatorial projects. They are founders and curators of the Venice International Performance Art Week and currently serve as lecturers at ArtEZ University of the Arts (NL) and Unidee Academy (IT). **Douglas Quin** is a music composer, sound artist, and film sound designer whose works have been performed internationally. The recipient of numerous commissions and awards, Quin is professor emeritus at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. **daz disley** is a UK-based artist with a background in sound, music, light, and technology. His current research interests are in the domain of audio software and platforms. disley is module leader in the Home of Performance Practices Department at ArtEZ University of the Arts (NL).

Considering how the exploitation of natural resources is legitimized on a global scale, at the expense of life on the planet, the seminars provided a forum for reflection to consider the socio-political and ontological concerns about humankind's presence and indeed survival on Earth. Deep time emerged as a main topic. The idea that deep time transcends hegemonic modes of perceiving and marking time gave us the impetus to think of a performance-based film—to glimpse, at least ideally, its contours and the possible convergence of artistic and scientific comprehension. From the outset, it meant approaching this daunting prospect through a work of imagination—an abstract entity, never-ending, continually growing, perhaps a thing (not an object) of any form. Thus, we were venturing into a conceptual terrain full of pitfalls to arrive at a performative outcome.

To imagine travelling back through the eons of time is to feel a vertiginous beauty that one cannot hold. “Beauty is nonconceptual. Nothing in the object directly explains it” (Morton 2013b, 208). Beauty, as Kant (2000) expressed, precedes cognition. Hence, reproducing perceptual beauty through performance-based filmmaking, imagining going back through time, is very subjective. One has to access one's critical memory. One has to outsource and compare different kinds of representations of beauty one's memory has stored over time and reshape them for the purpose. It is an action of “transcendental reflection” (Kant 1998, 367) to inspire the artistic practice. It involves critically examining the assumptions that inform knowledge and understanding their limits, thus learning from one's experiences in order to perform. At the same time, it is an opportunity to explore the complex relationship between performance art and reality and how performance art can challenge dominant discourses and expose the constructedness of reality (Diamond 1997).

My partner in art and life is German artist Verena Stenke, and we have been working together under the acronym VestAndPage since 2006. Whether we perform live or create films, we question how we can make our perception of time tangible by reflecting on the artistic processes we undertake to produce a work. Our creative practice is contextual and situation-responsive, conceived psychogeographically in response to social contexts, natural surroundings, historic sites, urban ruins, and architectures. In a “Poetic of Relations” (Stenke and Pagnes 2020), we examine notions of temporalities, memory *strata* (formation) and communication, as well as the fragility of the individual and the collective within social and environmental spheres. When we perform site-specific work, we are aware that our actions, even though minimal, impact the environment. Therefore, we must consider the consequences of our artistic choices and strive toward wise and responsible relationships with all living beings and natural systems. It means caring for the opaque, the invisible, the unknown, the complex, the unexpected, and the variable. Most problems find their origins within relationships, but relationships are where conflicts can be solved; hence, we must always make connections. In that, we consider performance a tool to search for ways to inspire a sense of connectivity with oneself, one another, and the reality outside, disorienting as it may be. “To join the dots and see that everything is interconnected. This is the ecological thought. And the more we consider it, the more our world opens up” (Morton 2010, 1).

We previously partnered with scientists, philosophers, and sociologists for our film trilogy *sin<sup>∞</sup>fin The Movie* (2010-2012). We learned that art and science follow their respective trajectories but can open unexpected scenarios once they entangle and engage. As artists and performers, we deem it essential to attempt to give artistic and/or narrative forms to our lived experiences and the philosophical theories we explore. We aim to raise meanings that take shape in living and moving images. We try to transpose them to the limits of artistic representation, respecting the epistemic potential of such experiences and ideas under certain aesthetic conditions. We do not seek to solve a formal identity between lived experiences, theoretical concepts, and representational forms but rather to find an aesthetic-epistemic logic of those same ideas through the use of art



processes. It is like perceiving the beauty of something elusive to define and difficult to explain rationally yet clearly felt with affective resonance.

## 2. A Film Project

By Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage)

The film *STRATA* is the result of an interdisciplinary project that Verena Stenke and I have conceived to investigate the human body as a site that exists in continuity with the formation of geological layers. To do so, we invited performing artists, vocal performers, musicians, and sound and light designers to meet with archaeologists, speleologists, cultural scientists, and time psychologists to seek convergences between art and the human sciences.

The film production sites are the Swabian Jura caves in Baden-Württemberg, located in southwest Germany. Our Ice Age ancestors used them as shelters about forty-three to thirty-three thousand years ago. Some of the first handcrafted flutes, small ivory figurines representing a waterbird, a horse and a mammoth, the Venus of Hole Fels, and the therianthrope figurine of the Löwenmensch (Lionhuman) of Hohlenstein-Stadel have been found in these sites.

Therianthropy refers to the mythological ability to shapeshift from the human form into an animal. In the film, together with the Lionhuman, we animate a series of therianthropes, interpreting them as fantastical creatures that inhabit liminal spaces, thin places, chiasmic intersections where the invisible intertwines with the visible and “every relation with being is simultaneously a taking and a being taken” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 266).

We performed them as proto-mythological, imaginary characters constantly transitioning between two worlds, as if belonging to an elusive cosmic time. Some were developed from the figurines found in the Swabian Jura caves, like the Lionhuman and the Waterbird. The enigmatic painting of the Cave of the Trois-Frères in France inspired the character of the Sorcerer. The White Crow and the Cosmo Rabbit are from our imagination.



*Seven Rock Bladelet Cuts/The Lionhuman*. Performance by Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage). Filmed by Verena Stenke (VestAndPage). Location: Hohlenstein-Stadel Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



*Dive-in/The Woman Waterbird (White)*. Performance by Marianna Andriago. Location: Blautopf spring. Film still, 2021.



*Marking Time/The Sorcerer*. Verena Stenke (VestAndPage) is preparing Nicola Fornoni to perform as the Sorcerer. Location: Hohlenstein-Stadel Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



*Marking Time/The White Crow and the Sorcerer.* Performance by Verena Stenke (VestAndPage) and Nicola Fornoni. Location: Hohlenstein-Stadel Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



*Time to Come/The Cosmo Rabbit.* Performance by Francesca Fini. Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Film still, 2021.

The findings in the caves of the Swabian Jura have led to the hypothesis that the caves are not places of illusions, inhabited by shadows of forms of the things that make up the world, as Plato (2007) imagined. Instead, they are the places where the first anatomically modern humans developed the concepts of image and reality, operating as artists that sculpt and paint what they perceived as energy and vibration of what animates the visual matrix of reality (Demuth 2022). In Plato's allegory of the cave, "the prisoner-philosopher is guided by sight, breaks free and discovers true reality in the light of the sun. But what he fails to realise is that this great projector in heaven is the prototype (and the archetype) of the cave's fire which also projects light and forms a reality on earth. The pure forms are still forms, and the realm of ideas is another screen" (Vudka, forthcoming).



These ideas have been highlighted by several prehistory archaeologists we interviewed, including Nicholas Conard, whose team found the figurine of the Venus of Hohle Fels, considered to be the most ancient undisputed sculptural example of artistic depiction of a human being, in 2008; Kurt Wehrberger, former codirector of the Museum Ulm and curator of its Archaeological Collection, which hosts the zoomorphic Lionhuman figurine; and Stefanie Kölbl, director of the Prehistoric Museum of Blaubeuren, where the Venus of Hohle Fels and the waterbird are displayed.



Kurt Wehrberger with the Lionhuman ivory figurine. *On Scars and Myths: A Conversation*. Museum Ulm (DE). The STRATA Knowledge Archive. Interview still. © VestAndPage, 2021.



Stefanie Kölbl with prehistoric Venus ivory figurines. *On Death and Rebirth: A Conversation*. Prehistoric Museum of Blaubeuren (DE). Interview still. The STRATA Knowledge Archive. © VestAndPage, 2021.

During the preliminary stage of our research and the preparatory phase of the film, we interviewed them and other archaeologists, including Guido Bataille, Johannes Wiedmann, Rudolf Walter, cultural scientist Barbara Spreer, and art historian and philosopher Bernhard Stumpfhaus, to shed light on the questions we had. Can the divide between nature and culture be overcome by viewing the human body as an expression of geological matter and as a site of exposure and response to changes in the dynamics of Earth's systems? Can art make visible the sediments in the depths of humankind, the history of our planet, society, and the human psyche? Could the encounter between art and science shift the anthropocentric thinking driven by capitalist imperatives into a post-anthropocentric view: to soothe the wounds of our bleeding, haemorrhaging reality?

Housed in the STRATA Knowledge Archive<sup>3</sup> (a section of the film STRATA website), these conversations raise awareness of our geological past. They discuss progress through the lens of cultural exchange and cooperation. They analyze the growing complexity of social systems and

their evolutionary consequence, sharing the necessity of a more holistic approach to life, in order to recover a harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

Eventually, they inspired Stenke and me to imagine a film under a new poetic gaze: one wherein performing within nature, as part of nature rather than apart from nature, is a way to experience the world anew, with heightened, empathetic sensitivity to beauty and emotion. A method of looking at human existence to capture its deeper meanings and cultivate a greater sense of connection: the essence of things, rather than simply their surface appearance.

Deep time is a highly complex thing. In archaeology, the geological time scale is not considered to be strictly linear but rather a sequence of different periods characterized by various geological and biological events. While there is a general progression of time, with older periods occurring before more recent ones, the actual timeline made visible is often more complex. It can be affected by a range of factors, such as the formation, sedimentation and erosion of rock layers, uplift, volcanic activity, and changes in climate and sea level.

Archaeologists use the geological time scale as a framework for understanding the chronology of human history and prehistory. They also rely on other methods, such as radiocarbon dating, dendrochronology, and stratigraphy, to refine and confirm the dates of specific archaeological sites and artifacts. Ultimately, the goal is to create a more accurate picture of the past, considering geological and cultural factors.

In explaining deep time, archaeologists echo theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli's position that time itself is not so much a fundamental structure of the world but something that is born stratified, to be understood little by little considering gravity, heat, and entropy. Its direction is unstable: "It is neither absolute nor uniform, nor is it fixed: it flexes, stretches, and jostles" (2018, 50). Deep time is part of a complexity from which we emerge as human beings—animals who live in time, pieces of the world. It is also a way of thinking about our planet. For Rovelli, we live inside time in some way as we are inside nature; the more we understand nature, the more we understand how much we are inside it (2023).

However, translating these concepts into performative actions conducted in exceptional natural environments presents significant problems. There is always the risk of inevitably putting one's presence before nature, using the environment, even involuntarily, as a scenographic background. Indeed, when we perform site-specifically for our films in extraordinary natural locations, we feel that our sense of mystery and wonder is renewed and our imagination enlivened. However, it is not enough to project concepts we confront into an artistic medium like performance-based filmmaking, nor to restore universal or abstract ideas of beauty and specks of beauty we perceive subjectively through constructed moving images.

In other words, to attempt to engage with the geological and the notion of deep time through performance-making is not only to venture inside remote caves and perform site-responsive actions that require significant physical and psychological training and logistical preparation. It is also to acquaint oneself with the literature of geology and time theory in order to understand which trajectory to take and the range of formal outcomes that are possible.

Stenke and I practised mindfulness to stay present in challenging environmental situations, relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation to help calm the mind and heat the body at low temperatures. Over a period of five years, we repeatedly visited the caves we had chosen as locations to shoot the film, mapping their rocky formations and rough structures in as much detail as possible to access them more efficiently.

In addition, still being in the preliminary stages of our research, we sought authors who examined how the formation of layers in human history present similarities with the formation of geological strata, including Lewis Morgan. In his book *Ancient Society*, he theorizes that human societies have developed from the earliest communal groups in ancient times to more advanced forms of social organization through a process of cultural evolution. They have built upon each other over time, similar to the formation of geological strata, resulting in distinct periods of history (ages, eras, or epochs) reflecting different levels of technological, economic, social, and political development (1985).

Questioning if the formation of geological stratifications may be compared to how the human brain stores memories in its complex network of interconnected neurons functioning to encode, consolidate, and retrieve information, we found the theory by Nicholas Steno, whose *Prodromus* (1669) is considered a foundational study in the geological literature, to be very informative. Steno posited that formations of rock layers are superimposed and arranged in a time sequence: “Different solids contained within a solid” (Winter 1916, 209).

Thus, we imagined our solid human bodies contained within the solid earth—our flesh, bones, and skin as geological layers themselves, and the fragmented beauty of the violated landscapes residing in our memories as insects of time. We performed within the subterranean, winding conduits of the Gustav-Jakob Cave, crawling as if dancing through narrow passages not even half a meter wide, formed of superimposed rock stratifications from oldest to youngest: our bodies fractal expressions of deep time.



*Rock/Body*. Performance by Fenia Kotsopoulou, Marcel Sparmann, and Sara Simeoni. Location: Gustav-Jakob Cave. Photo: daz disley, 2021.

We descended to the bottom of the slippery, dark funnel of Schiller Cave, a sight to behold, with its unique geological features, its cold mud enveloping us up to our knees, giving us the sensation of making us sink into its core.<sup>4</sup>



*Spiralling Time/Ammonite*. Performance by Giorgia de Santi. Location: Schiller Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.

We repeatedly went upriver for Falkensteiner Cave's clear, gelid waters, which gush out from siphons narrow as gulleys, wading where the walls of the gorge force you to pass from one bank or shoal to another, striving to maintain our balance on their slippery surfaces.



*The Walk*. Performance by Sara Simeoni. Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: daz disley, 2021.

We undertook performative actions in an attempt to integrate our bodies or parts of them with the particular geological conformations that we gradually discovered going deeper into the caves, at times embracing each other to try and become one with the rocks which supported our precarious equilibrium.





*Rocks/Venuses*. Performance by Fenia Kotsopoulou and Verena Stenke (VestAndPage). Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.

Whether Steno's law of superimposition of geological strata could apply to human memory formation is difficult to ascertain. It is speculative but evolved as an operative metaphor for exploring performative possibilities. What also hindered our thinking was how to combine it with Hutton's breath-stopping view of deep time. Could our finite, fragile bodies dwell inside the enduring vastness of the geological? How could we perform deep time as a concept, a category, or a measure of duration without a beginning or end?<sup>5</sup>

Performance is ephemeral in nature, therefore contradicting Hutton's idea that deep time is like an entity *ad infinitum*. We had the feeling of embarking on a nonviable journey—erratic motes striving to illustrate with our bodies a dynamic living tension with a dimension of time we cannot grasp, micro-organic vessels adrift in the infinite sea of a time scale whose traces dwell in the geological strata of deep dark caves, cosmic accidents of an intricate evolutionary process.



*Rock/Body Entanglement*. Performance by Marcel Sparmann. Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou, 2021.



### 3. The Ecological Thinking in *STRATA*

Can the human body become an expression of geological matter and a site of exposure in response to changes in the dynamics of time and Earth systems? Can performance-based filmmaking attempt to move beyond the nature/culture divide?

*STRATA*'s opening moves are that art-making processes can function as harbingers of possible changes, that ecological thinking is essential to understanding human existence, and that plurality, the nonbinary, and inclusiveness of diversity are fundamental prerequisites for social development. Ecology, mobilized in the making of the film as a research tool for understanding interactions between concrete entities, grounds the embodied performances in underground landscapes shaped by cold, muddy waters and wet, slippery rocks; the bodily self is thus a part of the *oikos*, or "house," at the root of the term *ecology*.

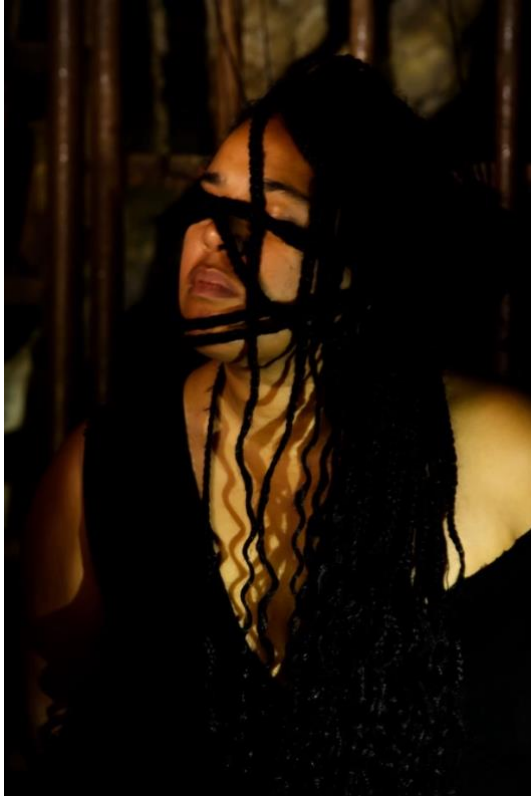
From these perspectives, the film also attempts to emphasize the need to recognize the interconnectedness of all beings in the world, the impact that our human actions have on the environment, and the agency and value of nonhuman beings for a more holistic, integrated approach and a more ethical, sustainable relationship with the environment. In the conversations housed in the *STRATA* Knowledge Archive, we emphasized the need to consider social, cultural, and political dimensions of ecological challenges. We, humans, are not separate from nature but deeply embedded in the web of life (Capra 1997).

To explore the intersection of processes of embodied cognition, performance practice, environmental philosophy, and ecological thinking, we also drew inspiration from Lorraine Code. Her works have contributed to feminist epistemology and the development of environmental philosophy. Considering the ethical and political dimensions of environmental issues, Code argues that ecological thinking requires a shift away from dualistic thinking that separates humans from nature. She stresses the importance of acknowledging not a monolithic truth but rather diverse ways of knowing and being and of engaging in collaborative and democratic processes to address environmental challenges: "Ecological thinking is not simply thinking about ecology or the environment. It is about imagining, crafting, articulating, and endeavouring to enact principles of ideal cohabitation" (2006, 24).

Additionally, we looked at anthropologist and critical theorist Elizabeth Povinelli, whose work engages with questions of power, inequality, and social justice concerning environmental issues. Her concept of ecological thinking highlights the complexity of social, economic, and political forces that intersect with the natural world. In her essay "Do Rocks Listen?" (1995), Povinelli argues that ecological thinking requires us to acknowledge how colonialism and capitalism have shaped our relationships with the environment. Calling for strategies to address power structures, she foregrounds the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups often disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation and climate change (2016).

Feminist and postcolonial perspectives on understanding the relationship between mimesis, power, and identity can offer essential insights into how art and literature can challenge dominant discourses. They can also provide alternative modes of representation (Diamond, 1997).

Anguezomo Mba Bikoro, the French-Gabonese performer who participated in *STRATA*, considers performing to be a means to take back or re-member distant moments in time. This helps to heal the present, which may in turn help subvert dominant patriarchal discourses. Indeed, honouring or criticizing what preceded us through performance serves to not forget about ourselves and what has existed and will exist without us.<sup>6</sup>



*Disentanglement*. Ritual performance by Anguezomo Mba Bikoro. Location: Bärenhöhle Cave (The Bears Cave). Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



*The River of the Ancestors*. Ritual performance and floating installation by Anguezomo Mba Bikoro. Location: Wimsener Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



*How to Survive the Apocalypse?* Ritual performance by Saúl García-López. Film still, 2021.

In *Ecology without Nature* (2007), Timothy Morton criticizes authoritarian politics and calls for a new way of thinking about our relationship to the environment, advocating for a philosophy of symbiosis rather than dominance. Morton (2016) suggests we must embrace nature's dark and unpredictable aspects rather than control or tame them. This radical rethinking of ecology encourages us to think in new and more nuanced ways about our relationship with the natural world. Reflecting on the importance of interconnectedness, inherence, and relationality in ecological thinking paves the way to move beyond a dualistic view of humans and nature as separate entities, for we are deeply intertwined with the environment and dependent on its health and well-being.

Morton analyzes how poets and philosophers of the Romantic period, particularly Schelling and Hegel in Germany, and Coleridge and Wordsworth in England, had insights into ecology long before it became a scientific discipline wishing “for reconciliation of subject and object” (2007, 22). However, in learning about the history of the caves of the Swabian Jura, we could not help but encounter once more how German Romantic writers and artists often depicted nature as a pristine wilderness, disconnected from human society and untouched by civilization's negative impacts, disregarding nature's practical and material aspects. With an emphasis on individualism, inwardness, the sublime and an idealized view of nature, they were celebrating the grandeur of the natural world while at the same time perpetuating an unrealistic understanding of the relationship between humans and nature: an alienation leading to significant cultural and environmental consequences and social implications (Stone 2014).

Thus, *STRATA*, in both method and outcomes, also embodies a critical stance with respect to German Romanticism's distorted images, nationalist dogmatic beliefs, codified narratives, and aesthetics presupposing the superiority of the Aryan race and man over nature.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. Approaching (Deep) Time to Perform**

Do we exist in time, or does time exist in us? The nature of time is perhaps the greatest remaining mystery. Ultimately, perhaps, more about ourselves than about the cosmos.

—Carlo Rovelli (2018)

By combining performance art and filmmaking, Stenke and I question our perceptive processing of reality, the experiences we make, and how we organize and store information in our memory

and bodies. It is a process that presents gaps, paradoxes, and ambiguities but leaves room for the imagination.

To perform the idea of deep time, we are faced with the difficulty of our human brain grasping a concept of time based on the entire geologic history of our planet, spanning over billions of years, or, as in Hutton, a time without beginning or end. We wondered if we could imagine the impossible scale of deep time as a poetic, imaginary time—time of the imagination, “not the kind of time we normally experience. But in a sense, just as real as what we call real time” (Hawking 1996).<sup>8</sup>

Yet how could we, through performance, hope to retrace the vestiges of a very distant past that we cannot hold? We attempted to imagine a nonlinear time that might contain fragments of real time. We thought of a mythic dimension of time, where to perform inside it involved embodying imaginary characters inspired by the therianthrope figurines found in the Swabian Jura caves.

Imagination can help to build new myths, although mythic time lacks historical perspective and is not concerned with a linear development of time. By imagining, however, our minds can wander outside the box to create without constraints. “Imagination embraces the entire world” (Einstein 2009, 97) and holds its image to generate new ones. Imagination is esemplastic: a unifying, intuitive “living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, to re-create and unify” (Coleridge 2014, 205-206), moulding everything into one. It lets us tap into the collective unconscious (Jung 1981) and connect with more profound aspects of ourselves to push boundaries and challenge the *status quo*. By imagining, we have the opportunity to form new meanings and metaphors. “Where reason analyses and reduces into parts, imagination takes us to the hidden metaphysical unity behind multiplicity” (Kahn 2015, 1).

For *STRATA*, we look at myth-making as a possibility to make the unknown and the invisible elusively visible by filmmaking and as a way to unlock inherent truths to comprehend the world around us while thinking of new ones (Mosley 2020). Performing and shooting scenes inside the caves every day for more than three months was like performing a rite of passage in repetition.<sup>9</sup> Crossing the threshold of a cave and entering its dark womb, we were separating from the real world with its ordinary time. Performing inside the caves, our bodies were as if sucked into its million-year-old rocky formation, risk-taking and struggling to aggregate with it.

The structure underlying our constant going in and out of the caves was similar to that of the monomyth (the literary “journey of the hero/heroine”) and its three main stages: departure, initiation, and return (Campbell 2004). In our case, they consisted of departure/separation from the ordinary outside, descent into the cave’s darkness to perform, and return to the earth’s surface. Of course, we did not perform “heroic” deeds inside the caves. We went there to understand if the transient immediacy of performance-making allows us to become part of those underground landscapes for a fleeting moment in the chasm of deep time. In so doing, did we anthropomorphize their natural structures? Honestly, this question still lingers: performing in places where contemporary humans cannot live and have no reason to dwell can only accentuate our doubts. Although seeking to develop a holistic understanding of the concept of deep time through our performance practice-based research, I personally found it challenging to overcome assumptions derived from my Catholic cultural background and education.<sup>10</sup> For Catholics, time is a straight line that traces the path of humanity from the initial fall, a brief life of labour and suffering, to final redemption. Yet time is also an extension of the soul in a succession of psychic states through memory and anticipation: “For a fraction of time, the soul may grasp the splendour of a constant eternity” (Augustine 2008, 228).



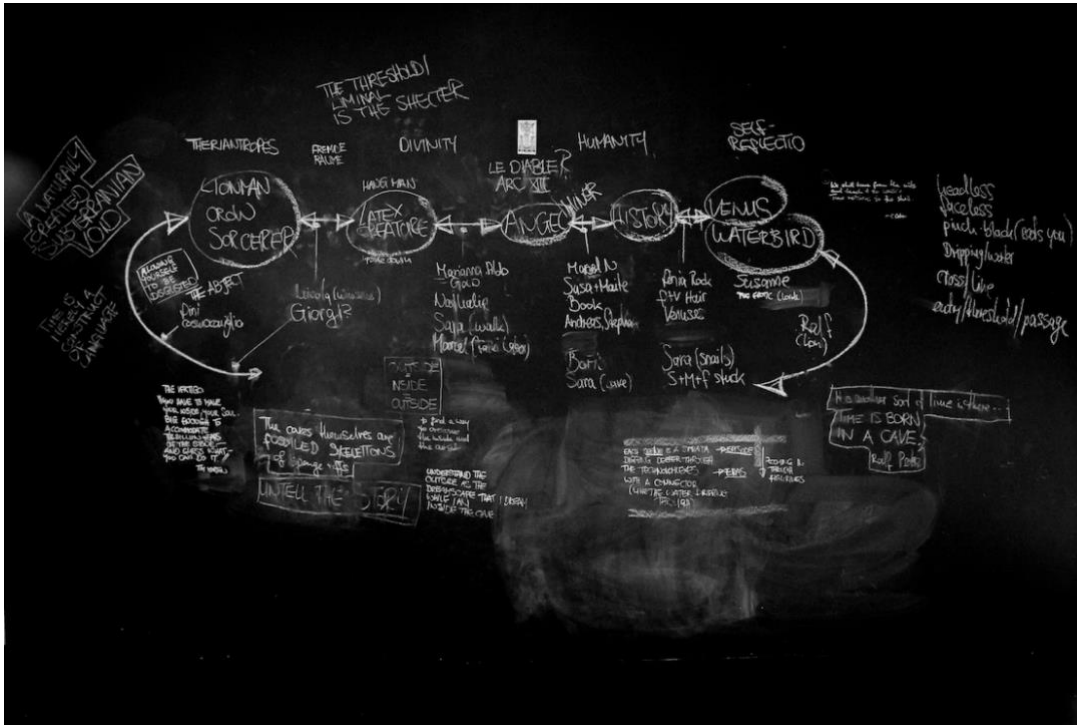
*Seeking Time/The Miner*. Performance by Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage). Location: Schiller Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



*Seeking Time/The Miner*. Performance by Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage). Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Film still, 2021.

The spoken words in the film never mention the word “cave.” The characters we embodied in the performances teeter between the visionary and geological formations. The caves are the tiered cosmos, and a world where they try to imagine alternative realities while mapping impossible ones through performances for the camera. Through our mapping, “we realize that nonhuman entities exist that are incomparably more vast and powerful than we are, and that our reality is caught in them. What things are and how they seem, and how we know them, is full of gaps, yet vividly real. Real entities contain time and space, exhibiting nonlocal effects and other interobjective phenomena, writing us into their histories” (Morton 2013a, 130).

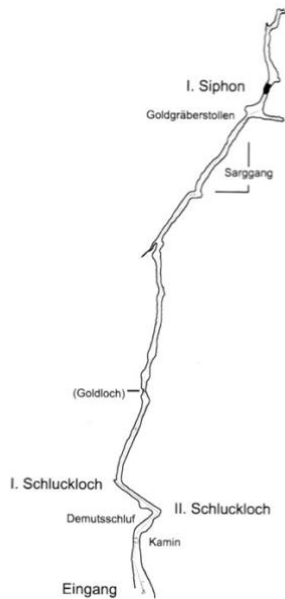




Verena Stenke (VestAndPage). Sketch for the film editing. VestAndPage's studio wall. Image courtesy of the artist, 2021.



Verena Stenke (VestAndPage). Sketch of the Falkensteiner Cave map. Image courtesy of the artist, 2022.



Map. The section Falkensteiner Cave where we filmed. Image courtesy of Arge Grabenstetten, 2021.



Enok Ripley. *Skin-tracing the Cave*. Hand poke tattoo of the Falkensteiner Cave map on Andrea Pagnes's (VestAndPage) back. Film still, 2021.

Morton writes that the more we discover about evolution, the more we realize that our entire being is caught in this vast interconnectedness of relationships of all things in the world, including humans, animals, plants, and non-living entities like rocks and geological formations. The idea extends to the ineffable, like global warming. In this regard, Morton “invented a word to describe all kinds of things that you can study and think about and compute, but that are not so easy to see directly: *hyperobjects*” (2015).<sup>11</sup> This pervasive “meshwork” of hyperobjects is a force “vivid and often painful, yet they carry with them a trace of unreality” (2013a, 28).

This trace of unreality reminds me of McTaggart’s (1908) idea that time is an illusion and that the common-sense perception of time as a sequence of past, present, and future is fundamentally flawed: a subjective experience that arises from our limited perspective. Does it mean that our memory is also limited, containing just illusion?

According to Morton, if our memories are caught in the mesh as is our being, shaped by our relationships to all living and nonhuman entities that dwell in the universe, they are not just individual phenomena. They are influenced by and connected to the broader context in which we live and the hyperobjects that contain us. For Morton, “the time of hyperobjects is a time of

sincerity: a time in which it is impossible to achieve a final distance toward the world. . . . Coexistence is in our face: it is our face” (2013a, 130).

Indeed, Timothy Morton has been highly inspirational to the film project. In an email exchange, I asked if comparing geological strata to an ideal Earth’s sedimented memory, which is how Earth itself reveals its history to us humans, can be considered a sort of hyperobject. And, if so, whether our memory is a hyperobject formed by the relation and coalescence of memories (personal/experiential memories, genetic memories, and collective memories) that settle and merge upon specific stimulation, be they rational or sensory or both—a process of sedimentation forming an archive of information about the evolution of humankind, but still hard to decipher. Morton answered affirmatively to both questions, citing the memory theory of Karl Pribram (1991), who uses David Bohm’s idea (1980) of the holographic universe:<sup>12</sup>

Memory is holographic and not located in the brain directly; we can access it somehow, the same way light can recreate a hologram. Although empirically hard to prove it, memory could also include non-human or pre-human memories. The good old Freudian unconscious is a great example of a nonlocal being too. It records everything and cannot negate it, becoming more substantial than the local manifestations it produces. Freud’s essay “A Note upon the Mystic Writing Pad,” written in 1925, a metaphor for the human mind, would make an excellent link between geology and memory (Morton 2017).

Questioning if geological strata can be compared to the formation of memory structures and if these layers entwine, we inquired about the permeability of time boundaries in our perception: to what extent can we accurately perceive and distinguish between different periods of time?

Our perception of time is largely influenced by external factors such as clocks and calendars. Over time, ancient civilizations relied on the observation of celestial bodies to organize their lives, adopting different forms of calendar. But our perception of time is also shaped by internal factors such as memory, attention, and emotion (James 2007). Each human being may experience time differently because of their particular perceptual capacities (Mach 1914). In experiments where cavers are left without clocks in the darkness and told to emerge after a pre-agreed amount of time, they can never emerge on the right day, or at the right hour because their clocks-internal drift from the external clocks.

Indeed, the boundaries between different periods of time can be porous, particularly when we experience strong emotions or engage in certain activities that require us to focus intensely, like performing in challenging, wet environments at cold temperatures. Depending on our psychophysical condition, enthusiasm, concentration, and stamina, by acting in extreme conditions, we may lose track of how much time has passed because we are fully immersed in the present moment. Conversely, we may become hyper-aware of every passing minute by performing durational static actions.

Suppose our memories can also influence our perception of time. In that case, we may be more likely to remember events that were particularly salient or emotionally significant but also blur essential details and transform the memory of a happening, placing it differently over time from how we used to remember it years ago.<sup>13</sup>

Edmund Husserl (2019) defines our experience of time not as a mere flow of moments but as structured by our intentional acts of consciousness. Much like space, time is a fundamental aspect of the fabric of reality that shapes and structures our experience. However, unlike space, which we can experience directly through our senses, time is a more abstract concept that we perceive



through the passage of events and changes in the world around us. According to Morton, time shares many of the characteristics that define hyperobjects, including their complexity, pervasiveness, and difficulty in comprehending fully as equally long-term memory.<sup>14</sup>

A key to our site-specific and site-responsive performative practice is to enter into deep ties with the places where we perform. It is a process that can take a long time, depending on the specificities and challenges that each site presents, both in terms of physical conformation (if in nature or abandoned architectural sites) and socio-political features and dynamics (if in urban environments). We learn the place where we are to perform. We spend time listening to it. In our “Poetics of Relations,” it is the place that owns us, not vice versa. Therefore, before performing in a specific location, we must get to know it and understand our limits in relation to the difficulties it presents. In extreme environments, adequate safety measures and collaboration are necessary to perform at our best. Although site-specific performances can be criticized as invasive, we attempt to connect to a place and become one with it while reducing our impact to a minimum. Do we succeed in that? With our art, we can only try. Does a place welcome and host us? And yet, do we know a place? And if we do, how and when do we know it?

Before producing the film in the spring and summer of 2021, Verena Stenke and I had visited the caves of the Swabian Jura several times since 2016. In a psychogeographic process, we discreetly spent many hours inside each of them to get to know them and understand where to perform and film. We did so to get a “permanent memory-trace” (Freud 1961, 227) of them—their particular geological characteristics, conformation and subterranean conduits etched in our memory to recognize them as familiar once shooting the film. The process and inspiration were informed as much by geopositioning as geomancy and the liminal spaces and time in between.

Memory aids and devices, even a simple image, an object, a word, a smell, or a sound, help us to remember something—not just on a rational level but on a sensory one. Mnemonic processes and techniques can be highly performative: visualization, association, location, imagination, and repetition (all principles of memory) can help us remember and retrieve information more effectively. For example, the ancient mnemonic technique of the method of loci (also known as the “memory palace” or “mental walk” technique) was used by the Greeks and the Romans. It involves visualizing a familiar place and associating pieces of information with specific locations within that place, mentally travelling back through its environment to recall the information (Yates 1984).

We exercised the method of loci to recall and assemble fragments of memory we had of the caves and caverns we repeatedly visited. In doing so, we recomposed them in our minds so that they inspired us and stimulated our imagination to glimpse the performative images that, once we went back to filming in the cave, we could create. In addition, we often practised dynamic breathing techniques, which were helpful in reawakening sensations, sense memory, and vision in helping us locate ourselves.

Dealing with our memory archive in this way helped to bring forth durational aesthetics and the unfolding of actions over time, which give access to other temporalities. We consider performance and filmmaking as cognitive tools to recall places and situations from whence to create new ones—for instance, through visual metaphors or associated sounds.

While undertaking this complex thought process, we still needed help understanding how to translate deep time performatively. If everything in the universe is interconnected, is it possible to think that deep time is somehow connected to our genetic memory? Are pieces of it inscribed in it? If so, what do we remember about it?

Fascinating as it may be, the idea that deep time is connected to our genetic memory presents no empirical evidence. Going back billions of years to the origins of the universe, deep time precedes human existence. We can conceptualize and intellectualize it philosophically, but our understanding is based mainly on a range of scientific evidence, geological data, astronomical observations, and biological research. For instance, the *STRATA* approach to time is a way of conceptualizing time in geology, dividing it into discrete intervals or strata based on the layers of sedimentary rock that accumulate over time. It is an essential tool for studying life and Earth's evolution and an organizational conceit for the work at hand.

Even though we were going to perform in particular environments where time is not the metronomic tick of the clock, how could we perform temporary associations and dissociations without hierarchy, to bring Earth time and body time closer in synchrony? How could we engage our bodies to find poetic connections and corporeal affiliations between the temporalities of the geologic, human labour and life spans? “The more we analyse, the more ambiguous things become” (Morton 2010, 40).

During our collaborative performances and filming of *STRATA*, one of the artists Stenke and I invited to participate in the film, Nicola Formoni, a young Italian performer with severe scleroderma, compared his body to the geologic: “So many layers, eroded, corroded by water and the natural transformations through the years and the eras that pass. My body has changed over the years—years that scratch harder or less harshly. I can imagine a connection between these rocks and my body, which is rigid and thin as their stratification, sharing some minerals with them, such as calcium and phosphorus.”<sup>15</sup>

In order to embark on a performance-based film about an imaginary journey that questions the structure of time and the essence of the human being interconnected to the realm of hyperobjects, *prima materia*, and the geological, we considered the importance of a transcendental time perspective. Many scholars have used this notion to describe different aspects of Husserl's phenomenological philosophy and the concept of transcendental imagination, already present in different ways in Kant and subsequently in the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

The transcendental time perspective refers to the individual capacity to cross the limits of the earthly life, from mental travelling to eternity—thus, an idea of time implying the spiritual dimension. Paul Ricoeur discusses transcendental imagination to describe ways in which the creative and interpretive faculties of the mind shape our experiences of time and narrative. In his essay, “Imagination in Discourse and Action,” he writes, “By mapping out actions in this way, the storyteller produces the same reference as the poet who, in Aristotle's terms, imitates reality in his mythical reinvention. The story is a heuristic process of redescription in which the heuristic function stems from the narrative structure and redescription has the action itself for referent” (1994, 125).

Precisely those words gave us the decisive impulse on how to tackle time's complexity in the film. We did not choose the linear approach of the Judeo-Christian eschatological tradition, nor the circularity present in ancient cultures, where time cyclically devours everything. Rather, we sought an alternative to the philosophical concepts of Newton and Einstein, which contextualize the being in an absolute or relative dimension of time contained in a multidimensional space, and of Heidegger, who imagined that the being exists and moves in space contained in a multi-temporal dimension. Even the idea of the infinite present could not correspond to the experience of entry, transit, and exit that occurs when continually entering a cave, performing in it, and then coming back out, constantly shifting from the outside to the inside.

During the film production, we soon realized that our performative actions were somehow wedging into one another, clustering on top of each other but opening in opposite yet connected trajectories and directions, forming a spiral-like pattern. They were like growing strata of space-time and movement, captured by the video camera, and that could still be layered and edited in different orders depending on our artistic choice.

The concept of spiral time implies that the action patterns tend to repeat themselves, but not precisely in the same way as the cycles of life, death, and rebirth in some spiritual and mystical traditions. Action patterns evolve and change as they repeat, creating a spiral or a process of growth and transformation, moving outward and upward, expanding and evolving, like Bohm's idea of a dynamic interplay of order and chaos to which Timothy Morton also refers concerning larger societal and cultural patterns, nature and time.

Discussing the notion of the spiral, philosopher and psychologist Jean Gebser sees the poet "participating in the timeless memory of the world" (1985, 327). Morton assumes a new level of human awareness transcending the limitations of the modern, rational mind for a more intuitive understanding of consciousness, time, and space.



Enok Ripley. *Ammonite's Time*. Spiral branding. Film still, 2021.

From our artistic perspective, the caves that sheltered our ancestors are not simulacra of origin. We see them as places of sharing, shells of the inner world, metaphors for our insides, spaces where a transcendent reality exists, and thoughts enter a process of becoming form. We ventured inside them audaciously but respectfully, always in silence. We tried to understand the geological by artistic generative encounters. Do we have the right to go inside them so far and perform? Have we learned to embody time cadence and rhythm?

In *The Order of Time*, Carlo Rovelli weaves together quantum physics with poetry. The Big Bang happens. Hydrogen becomes helium. The stars fall in an infinite play of combinations, drawing the direction of time. We are exploded particles of space-time, "we are all burnt by ultraviolet rays. We all contain water in about the same ratio as Earth does, and salt water in the same ratio as oceans do. We are poems about the hyperobject Earth" (Morton 2013a, 51).

We are the effect of the boiling of a sun—its wind creating strange structures that are us, allowing our existence. We are memory and nostalgia, and we are time, and "the emotion of time is precisely what time is for us" (Rovelli 2018).

Inside the conduits of the Falkensteiner Cave, looking for the best places to perform, I observe drops of water falling from the cave walls onto a flowstone.<sup>16</sup> They splash on my face intermittently as thought flashes and lap; my face wrinkles as with rock cracks and caesuras. Faced with the experience of opening to the nonhuman to tune into deep time and weave semantic relationships within it, we thought we should try to become allies, perhaps finding inspiration from characters who have already dealt with time in some way, like Walter Benjamin's "angel of history" (1999, 249). Besides the therianthropes, Stenke and I embodied imaginary creatures trapped since birth inside the geological formations of caves and blind like olms.<sup>17</sup>

In the film, these anthropomorphic salamanders move blindly among the caves' structures as if to find some peace, their every thought and gesture captured in dark chambers and wet ochre corridors impossible to avoid, just as impossible as it is to hide in memory.



*One/Many (Blind Latex Creature)*. Performance by Verena Stenke (VestAndPage). Location: Schiller Cave. Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou, 2021.



*Birth (Blind Latex Creature)*. Performance by Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage). Location: Sirgenstein Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.

They are imaginary creatures that appear and disappear, recasting their memory hanging upside down from the cave ceilings like bats. They pass through places during, before, or after other scenes have happened. They move backward in time—time themselves—where an opera duo play a Bach sonata and four Schubert Lieder in the Hohle Fels, a breathless limestone cathedral shaped by nature over millions of years. In the Sirgenstein Cave, they rest invisibly behind the three Fates, nearby the shadow of a bow musician, or at the side of a man repeatedly yelling the words of the Lord: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand” (Bibles 2011, Job 38:4). They follow Roy Hart vocal performers lending their voices to time in the darkness. They meet inside the rock eye of the Kleine Grotte (Small Cavern) for a moment of love to die and be reborn in their grace. Then, the Woman Waterbird recovers gently their old skin resurfacing from the Blautopf (Blue Pot), the spring that forms the drain for the Blau cave system extending for tens of kilometres underneath.



*Schubert’s Wanderer*. Music performance by Stephan Knies (violin and viola) and Andreas Bauer Kanabas (basso profundo). Location: Hohle Fels (Hollow Rock Cave). Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



*Solo for Shadow*. Music performance by Aldo Aliprandi (handmade string bow). Location: Sirgenstein Cave. Film still, 2021.





*Pietas*. Performance by Verena Stenke and Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage). Location: the eye of the Kleine Grotte (Small Grotto). Film still, 2021.



*Transit/The Woman Waterbird (Black)*. Performance by Marianna Andriago. Location: Blautopf spring. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.

In the more difficult caves to access, and due to the low temperatures of the water and the mud, we were able to complete only a small number of performances, often performing only one at a time. After two hours inside the cave, the body begins to show clear signs of fatigue and possible hypothermia, especially when performing half-naked. That was how it was in Schiller Cave when I performed the *Angel of History* in its mud funnel, and I immersed myself in the icy waters of the Wimsener Cave; and when I tested my physical limits of resistance to the cold going upriver through the Falkensteiner Cave subterranean creek to perform half-naked the wanderer angel.



*Anticlockwise/Angel of History/Wanderer Angel*. Performance by Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage). Location: Schiller Cave. Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou, 2021.

Caves that are dominated by water are mutable, unstable places: coursing water prevents the rocks from forming closures, causing voids and sudden dislocations. The day I performed the wanderer angel inside the Falkensteiner Cave, I decided not to wear my neoprene suit to move more quickly. The entrance to the Falkensteiner Cave is a sizeable funnel-shaped corridor studded with rocks and stones. From below its huge arched portal, a creek flows out, extending for all 4,259 metres of the cave's floors, carving its depths. In 1776, a miner killed himself inside this cave. He was searching for gold, and there was none to be found. He was buried right *in situ*.

Before entering to perform the wanderer angel, I pause and concentrate for a few minutes, staring at a sizeable, cubical rock ahead. Then, I slip through the initial compressed vault of rocks and water of the Demutschluf (Humility Water Passage), as this is the obligatory passage and threshold from which to proceed. The rocky roof of the Demutschluf is massive, smoothed, long, and very low. I pass through it, walk further, and kneel in a small cove. I wait for Douglas to position the mics, daz to turn on the lights, and Verena to start filming.

The damp walls of the cave cling to my skin. Cold water drips from my limbs. I try to think of nothing but faith to embrace, but I begin to feel my body becoming numb. I am dressed only in a pair of large wings that prevent me from moving nimbly and a mask made of gauze and bells that blind my gaze. I stretch my body, I feel the limits; I have to become cold like this water to make this performance make sense, but I cannot play with my bodily limits. When I finally enter the freezing water again to perform, the heat loss from my body begins to create a cloud of steam around me. I feel the adrenaline rising. My stomach tightens.

daz gives me more lights. I catch a glimpse of the flashes and follow them. It is as if I were inside a surreal, timeless spectacle. The glaring lights form bars that come together and fray like stars, but here we are underground. Under my mask, I glimpse the silhouettes of stalactites and stalagmites that lash the space, spears on display in the armoury of nature, letters from lost alphabets that seal the rocks on which they stand or hang from, as if composing the tale of deep time, split from the idea of the human-divine. I feel like I am lucid dreaming or experiencing some sort of hallucination. It is probably just my defence mechanism to imagine I am in an

altered state of consciousness, certainly to forget about the cold. Actually, I am perfectly aware the slightest mistake would compromise everything. It is the last day we have to film inside the Falkensteiner Cave. After working hard for two weeks nonstop, we are all tired and yesterday my scenes did not turn out particularly well. I must use up all my remaining energies. Trapped here, the wanderer angel can only be among their memories—the memories of their torn wings. What does it mean to say that time passes? Moving backward is like performing the expiration of time or performing while time expires. If I stop and do nothing, nothing happens. If I stay longer than necessary, I risk hypothermia. Therefore, the chances of performing or repeating the same action more than once are very remote. The pressure builds; I cannot take it anymore. I must get out of this cave's time. It's only hers. I must go back while looking forward, for the wanderer angel is the opposite of Benjamin's Angel of History: mortal and nothing else. I am almost at the exit. One last effort. One final thought: if I could go liquid, I could slip into the cave crevices and synchronize with its time. But I am a fragile solid, and I can only immerse myself in my finite time, cherishing every fleeting moment of my brief existence.



*Castaway through Time/Wanderer Angel (1)*. Performance by Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage) Location: Humility Passage (Falkensteiner Cave). Photo: daz disley, 2021.



*Castaway through Time/Wanderer Angel (2)*. Performance by Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage) Location: Humility Passage (Falkensteiner Cave). Photo: daz disley, 2021.



## 5. The Performance-Based Filmmaking Approach

By Verena Stenke (VestAndPage)

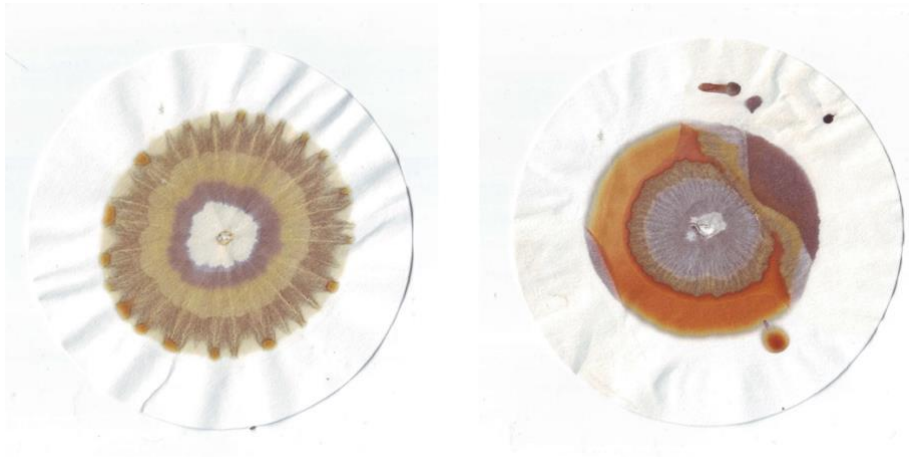
Time reversal might be unlikely to occur in nature, but reverse motion in filmmaking is possible. Although illusory, it can give the sensation of a character going backward through time. In that, a film can function as a kind of wormhole where space-time is illusory, revealing the connections between apparently disconnected things and situations, thus offering a key to search for meaning and purpose.

In exploring philosophical themes through performance-based filmmaking practice, the formal aspects of filmmaking are reduced to a minimum. We often use long takes, a static or handheld camera, and a minimalist approach to performing—approaching a *tableau vivant*. For us, “film as a medium is a mnemonic of the potential, a catalyst of the manifest, and a shrine to the residual. Performance art can challenge it by not adhering to pre-ordered linearity. Each performance and each film are an answer to the question: How do we read reality?” (Stenke and Pagnes 2020, 5). Through performance-based filmmaking, we examine how the original documentation of performative acts develops into complex, nonlinear narratives. Our films are the outcomes of creative experiences and research processes.

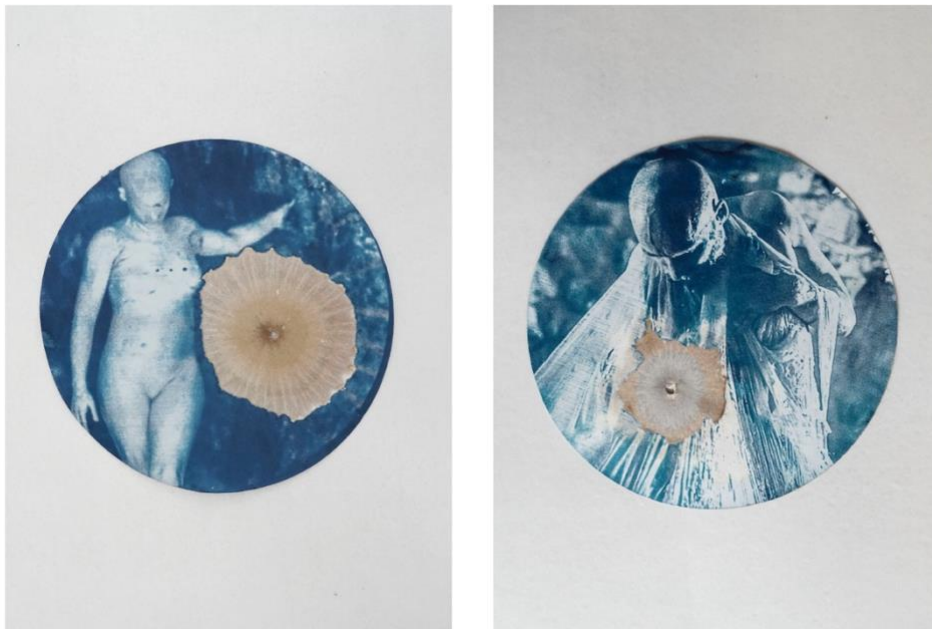
We look to the reflexive mode in our approach to documentaries. As such, they are not “a transparent window on the world; instead they draw attention to their own constructedness, and the fact that they are representations” (Burton 2007). We do not travel to a place to tell a story—we journey to a place to find its story, seeking new images that depict inner landscapes. We create subject matter by responding to a chosen site with its given setting and circumstance and by performing the actions it evokes in us.

The film is not side-tracked by adhering to a script or a storyboard. It remains open, entrusted to the thoughtfulness of the performers and the camera operators. Everything is subject to change until the end of the editing process. The story builds through performance: action by action, overlapping, and stratifying over one another. Only later, the recorded material reveals the film’s inherent dramaturgical structure.

The video camera serves as a sketchbook: it captures happenings and sketches the film as it unfolds. Instead of pre-drafting scenes and planning the production according to them, we follow our intuition—the camera documents the performances and turns their ephemerality into an archived, digitized memory for a story yet-to-be-born. In reviewing the raw footage of the scenes, the video camera functions as a geophysical, psychogeographic magnifying glass to glimpse specks of stunning subterranean natural locations. Many of these sites could one day vanish as a result of human activity.



Fenia Kotsopoulou. Cave soil and *STRATA* performers' hair chromatographies. Images courtesy of the artist, 2021.



Fenia Kotsopoulou. Cave soil and *STRATA* performers' hair chromatographies on film still cyanotypes. Images courtesy of the artist, 2021.

In our past films, just the two of us (Andrea and Verena) worked on all aspects of creation and post-production. Because of *STRATA*'s artistic and logistic complexity, we invited a selected team of long-term collaborators familiar with our poetics and methodology. Reciprocal trust and collaborative qualities are essential, as the dark, deep cave systems are critical environments: misunderstandings and lack of attention can have severe consequences for everyone.

We use non-invasive equipment, as agility, readiness and efficiency are vital for performing and filming in extreme environments. There is little time to set up lights and cameras. Inside the caves of the Swabian Jura, temperatures range from seven to nine degrees Celsius at 80 percent humidity, and the water is cold, between four and six degrees Celsius. Performers' stamina is drained standing or waiting in a cave: only maximum efficiency can guarantee their best performance. Likewise, strike-downs and exits must be structured and executed quickly so everyone can return safely. Managing and maintaining one's energy levels both outside and inside the cave is of prime importance in a production that sees us working in such harsh conditions every day for months at a time.

Before entering a cave to shoot a scene, we draft a plan of action based on the particulars of each site: some caves are tortuous mazes of narrow passages, barely half a metre in height or width, while others are filled with pools of water and strong currents with only a few centimetres between surface and ceiling. Careful attention is paid to the order of entrance of each crew member to get into the cave, the setup time for the tech system, the basic outline of the performance action, the time of strike down, and the order of exit from the cave. Within these margins, everyone knows their responsibilities and possibilities. We check in with each other many times, and by holding the space together, we ensure mutual safety for installation and performance.

Inside the caves, our crew usually consisted of two video camera operators, the sound engineer, the lighting designer, the performers, one photographer, and one assistant (often one of the two directors, operating likewise as a location supervisor and safety officer to make sure that the crew members have everything they need). At the cave entrance, two other performers wait with refreshments for the cave crew to return. They help them change clothes and recover, ensuring first aid or immediate help in emergencies. In addition to the hazards of falls, scrapes, and bruises—or worse—the main concern is hypothermia.

In our films, a topic or a concept is the frame within which our co-creative processes move. This was also the case in trying to explore the idea of deep time by producing *STRATA*. The emotional structure of the film's content is based on our memories and experiences made during production.

We perform in real time: the camera captures our actions, and in the editing, we process them into moving images. We never perform the same action twice. The spoken text is left to background voices in a poetic stream of consciousness. We seek to create a meditative atmosphere to tap into spiritual realities and convey an immersive, transcendental experience through cinematic language to allow the viewer to become absorbed in the film's images and sounds (Schrader 2018).

Our visceral way of performing in response to the environment means that we cannot foresee a performance before making it. We use the camera intuitively, and it must be an essentially practical device, like a mnemonic prosthesis, which aids memory.

I use my camcorder handheld, rarely setting it on a tripod. In this way, I can choose my positioning more flexibly according to the performer's prerogative. I do not consider gimbals helpful in constricted environments, as I use my camera as if it were a direct artificial limb. A performance in progress cannot simply be interrupted by technical concerns, so I need to be well-equipped to film it, being as adaptable, quick, and intuitive as the performers themselves. In most of the womb-like caves, I filmed with my medium-sized handheld Sony camcorder. We used a more compact Canon digital single-lens reflex cameras or small, versatile action cameras in tight caverns.

I prefer camcorders for their resilience in extreme environments and excellent automatic zoom capacity. I have filmed with my camcorders in locations where our colleagues with DSLRs panicked because their equipment failed, broke apart, or a piece rolled down a crevasse and was lost forever. Luckily, our self-contained compact camcorders—drenched in mud, humidity, heat, cold or dirt and dropped on the ground multiple times—have never shown any shortcomings, whether shooting in glacial Antarctica, in the dusty Negev desert or moist underground cave systems.

Another factor in my camera choice is the fully automatic function. The camera should do almost everything, as what cannot be done automatically needs to be sorted out in post-production with radical cuts and thorough colour grading. A powerful integrated zoom lens allows rapid close-ups without laborious, unfeasible lens changing.



Filming *STRATA*. Sara Simeoni and daz disley. Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



Filming *STRATA*. Verena Stenke (VestAndPage). Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



Filming *STRATA*. Verena Stenke (VestAndPage) and daz disley location scouting. Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou, 2021.

While filming inside the caves, I avoided moving around so as not to cause noise, stir up mud, or risk slipping with the camera in my hand. Canyoning shoes were helpful for protection and stability. Under dripping water with cold, sticky hands, in the dark and with a performance artist ready to act, it is impractical to lose time fumbling around with lenses or meticulously setting white balance, ISO, aperture, shutter speed, and focus by turning tiny wheels, pushing hidden buttons, or trying to read any setting details from a microscale, foggy monitor. The main factor involved is standing firmly without slipping and holding the camera firmly in my hands, not making a sound, and pressing the record button. We camera operators always wore children's bibs around our necks to clean our fingers of mud before touching the devices. This was because all our clothes would inevitably be muddy once we reached the chosen spot to perform and film. Caves are always technically challenging for filming. They are humid environments, cold and damp places with water seeping through the rocks, dripping from the ceiling, running along the walls, and collecting in pools as soon as it rains outside.

For example, the active water Falkensteiner Cave has passages filled neck-deep with chilly stream water. Its walls are rough and uneven, with jagged rock formations, and the riverbed is covered in large stones and loose gravel—often with smooth polished limestone, which made for treacherous footing. Crawling and crouching are necessary. The Gustav-Jakob Cave is a passage cave. Although awe-inspiring, with its unique combination of natural beauty and potential hazards, it can create a feeling of confinement or claustrophobia. It is extremely tight, with little room to manoeuvre, so that only one person at a time can proceed, mainly by sliding on the belly to squeeze through corridors barely wide enough to accommodate an adult body. Dragging or pulling backpacks containing large, sensitive technical equipment is impossible, and there is no room to rearrange once inside. Everything has to be small and handheld. In these challenging environmental conditions, the video operator can only capture what is possible in the immediacy and site-responsiveness of the performers making their actions. With limited time, in constrictive spaces characterized by low light levels, cool temperatures, and limited ventilation, every move must be focused and mindful.





*Inside and forth.* Performance by Sara Simeoni. Location: Gustav-Jakob Cave. Photo: daz disley, 2021.

We have shot about thirty hours of non-staged performance actions inside caves and caverns, along with recording poetic texts, sounds, and musical soundscapes. From this material, we have extracted up to two hours to realize *STRATA* as a feature film. For me, editing is composing, subjectively recollecting, and selecting fragments, scattered shards of an experience, to reassemble, replace, and reconfigure them organically into one whole. As part of our editing process, we subtract the unnecessary to reveal the intimate connections, possible links, and relationships between the chosen fragments. Digital treatments such as glitch, dissolve, reverse, or layering unveil perceptions of realities not visible but manifest in real life. I consider them elemental to the unfolding of a nonlinear narrative that can come into being through the editing process—one of the many possible configurations of the shattered shards. If a story arises, it will tell itself.

Our film editing process is not determined by a pre-established sequence of performances but by our “creative desire to associate images over time” (Schrader 2018, 3). We do so to blur the boundaries between reality and imagination and deliver poetic opacities and abstractions shaped by performing—the resulting moving images piercing through the curtain of the conventional. The film can be read by every viewer in a personal way. André Bazin scholars describe this as “the democracy of the eye—given the opportunity, the eye will explore” (Schrader 2018, 19). The viewer is free to create their narrative, being “the one who looks at within the womb-like, Platonic cave of cinema” (Vudka, forthcoming).



Filming *STRATA*. Verena Stenke (VestAndPage) and Douglas Quin sound recording. Location: Bärenhöhle (The Bears Cave). Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



Filming *STRATA*. Verena Stenke (VestAndPage). Location: Schiller Cave. Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou, 2021.

*STRATA* Film excerpt: <https://vimeo.com/763053904/f69ab8715c>.

## 6. The Sound of *STRATA*

By Douglas Quin

Mist and cigarette smoke curled around the table outside a café in Venice. It was early December and the waning din of revellers and conversations ebbed into the night. The 2016 Venice International Performance Art Week was in full swing and VestAndPage were already mulling over their next project. “We want to do something involving caves and deep time.” While still very much a nascent idea, they were keen from the outset to have sound as an integral aspect of performances, the resulting film, and whatever other iterations might emerge. If sound was to be included, they stressed, it had to be born of place and an expression of our fleeting encounters, rather than underscore as exogenous accompaniment.

So, where to begin? We are only beginning to wrap our minds around the fact that the aftershock of the Big Bang still travels through the known universe. What came before? Like the rest of our team, I was reminded of James Hutton contemplating the abyss of time as he tried to make sense of the craggy unconformity of rock outcrops on the windswept coastline of Scotland.

As a sound designer and composer, I tend to think of sounds—at least at the tactical, granular level—as having a life span: attack, initial decay, sustain, and release. What about deep time? I was intrigued and had more questions than answers. What role can sound play in the project? What complementary truths or perspectives can sound reveal about the performances, places, spaces, and what can it bring to the film?

I had had some prior experience recording in caves: melting ice caves in Antarctica; the exodus of bats in the Guardirikiri caves in Aruba; and playing with the reflections of my voice in the sheltered parabola of Arkaroo Rock in South Australia. In each case, I was struck by those qualities of sound that are specific to each location. Reverberation times, diffusion and echoes are unique to a given space. So are resonant frequencies, where the shape and size of a cave or chamber seem to amplify or colour certain sounds or discrete parts of the audio spectrum. I found it interesting that researchers were exploring the possible connection between sound and where art in caves are found. In many cases there is a distinct acoustic signature associated with

the location of a work of art—usually in the form of an echo or pronounced reverberation (Fessenden 2018).



Douglas Quin. Sound artist/cave dweller. Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou, 2021.

The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating . . . but partly the voice of the wood.

—Henry David Thoreau (2004, 95)

Over the course of the next few years of pre-production planning and site visits, Verena and Andrea assembled a widening circle of artists, scientists, and collaborators. We were invited to respond *in situ* to any one or series of nearly a dozen caves across the Swabian Jura. Each participant was given broad latitude with respect to the “what, how and why” of their respective contributions. What story could you find, or want to tell? How can your performance, actions, or research animate and connect present and past and body to space?

Matters of form and structure with *STRATA* are the subject of ongoing conversation as performances, video footage, and audio recordings have revealed and suggested different possibilities. Much of the production is complete as we begin post-production. The cave is the *mise-en-scène*, or *mise-en-abyme*, as Verena described it; that is, a “Chinese Box” or story within a story, a spiralling fractal. The caves are physical and liminal spaces with traces of human presence reaching back more than forty thousand years; propositions; vectors; questions to be explored; and a multivalent metaphor.

SPACE is just the question to ask if we think about TIME.

—Verena Stenke

Given the importance of sound, I have done a lot of listening to people and ideas as I work with Andrea, Verena, and daz toward an organizational strategy for sound design and music. We immediately gravitated to what the caves themselves might reveal by way of their acoustic properties. Early discussions included exploring resonant frequencies in individual caves and spaces and using impulse responses to measure reverberation and echo. I asked some of the artists to make recordings of their voices so I could start generating voice prints, looking at the particulars of formants and harmonic structure: first steps to connect body and voice with place once we were in the field. We also talked about how we might use data gathered from the stratigraphy and mineral composition of the various caves as a basis for developing a score based on sonification or a generative algorithmic approach. All very quantitative approaches in the beginning—a way of taking measure of the physical and knowable.



What seemed to be coalescing after many discussions and conversations was more of a heuristic journey, or poetic stratigraphy in a sense, and that sound and music would very much reflect the dynamic and nuanced layers of experience and idiosyncrasies of both individual and collective endeavour. This became more apparent and richer as we moved from planning into production and the negotiated realities of physical engagement with flesh, the senses, and the *prima materia*—the enigma of the caves.

For Susanne Weins and Ralf Peters, sound, particularly vocalization, was their primary avenue of expression—the *logos* of their performance and connection to place. Anguezomo Mba Bikoro’s wailing cries were powerful affective responses to myth, memory, and (dis)place.<sup>14</sup> Boris Nieslony’s emotionally charged “*Wo Was Du?*” and readings from the Book of Job seemed an existential entreaty at the entrance of the Bockstein Cave, the Sirgenstein Cave, and the Eyeglass Cave. Aldo Aliprandi performed on electroacoustic instruments he built. Andreas Bauer Kanabas (bass vocalist) and Stephan Knies (violin) performed arrangements of Bach and Schubert lieder. Others were primarily concerned with visual and kinesthetic expression, and there was little or no sound to record on location, but perhaps an opportunity for layering or added audio in post. Likewise, archaeologists, speleologists, tour operators, and conservationists brought their own reckonings and perspectives to the project.



*Voice/Rock/Body/Time*. Voice performance by Susanne Weins. Location: Gustav-Jakob Cave. Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou, 2021.



*From Sunset to Dawn*. Long durational voice performance by Ralf Peters. Location: Sirgenstein Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



Boris Nieslony. *On Access and Permission: A Conversation*. Location: Brillenhöhle (The Eyeglass Cave). The STRATA Knowledge Archive. Interview still. © VestAndPage, 2021.

However formative and expansive, I had to start somewhere and plan accordingly: from conceptual framing to the logistics of working in often demanding and unknown conditions. Like daz, I had to figure out how to accommodate an emergent aesthetic with practical and often very specific solutions on a budget. Having the “right tool for the job” for any eventuality meant making sure we had everything at hand on any given day: the right recorders and microphones to capture both performances and spaces. If the location audio was well-recorded, the post-production process would be creative and exciting rather than being mired in a nightmare of salvage, cleaning, and restoration. I have always bristled at the notion of “we’ll fix it in post” when it comes to production audio. Simply put, from my point of view: garbage in = garbage out. Besides, much like cinematography, the practice of recording—whether in a studio or in the field—is itself an art as much as it is a science.

The approach to the Gustav-Jakob Cave was a circuitous track from the staging area where we parked, slipping into the forest on slick polished, well-trod limestone and mud. It had been raining, with significant flooding in the area. We stretched out our line, all carrying equipment on our backs and in our arms, sliding and grasping at roots and branches to avoid falling. The soundscape in the middle of the day had settled into a gentle thrum of insects and occasional birdsong. We reassembled at the cave entrance, on a small, inclined porch with a steep drop-off, suspended high above the valley floor. The opening yawned before us and exhaled a cool, damp breath. Some of the team had been through Gustav-Jakob from one end to the other several times. This was my second visit. It is a twisting umbilical with switchbacks that rise and fall with several passages measuring no more than about fifty centimetres in places—either vertically or

horizontally, and sometimes both. A few places opened into chambers that could accommodate several people at once.

The rock surfaces were cool, wet, and the floor muddy and slippery from the rains. The watery surfaces provided a curious form of acoustic treatment, with some sounds appearing livelier and brighter. Given the confines of our movements and cramped space, we were all immediately aware of our own sound: of breath and the pulse of effort and of our clothing rubbing and scraping against the walls. Words from those a few metres in front or behind seemed to be swallowed up. We rounded a corner that Verena and Andrea had noticed because of a slight concave depression in the wall at head height. It produced a slight whispering gallery effect, amplifying the sound of one's voice if you were positioned just right. Further on, we entered a chamber that became known as "The Chapel."

The Chapel came as a relief in that we could stand up and stretch, even though the floor was on a steep incline and quite slippery. The ceiling rose about four metres and was dripping with stalactites that hung above like tracery in a Gothic chapel. High up to one side there was an alcove that opened to another passage: a good perspective from which to record. Susanne Weins prepared to perform here: dressed in a sweep of white fabric, with snakeskin, she breathed in the cave's vapours and vocalized while a bright green shaft of laser light illuminated her mouth and throat. The scene was short and shot from several different angles. For sound, I wanted to be able to capture both the intimacy of her performance using a lavalier microphone along with a directional shotgun microphone using a boom from further away. Finally, I used an ambisonic microphone placed on the ledge to capture the overall sound of the space, including dripping from numerous sources.

Briefly, ambisonic recording uses four microphones grouped tightly together, pointed in different directions. The utility of this is that a recording using this technique can be easily manipulated in post-production to render anything from a monaural, one-channel perspective to a sixteen-channel, fully spatialized rendering. It is very useful in film for surround sound where much of the spatial and acoustic qualities of the original location can be preserved.

Given the challenges of organizing lights and cameras in The Chapel, we decided that Susanne and I would take another pass at recording her voice after everyone else had moved on. "Quiet on the set" is often impossible.

Auditory space is very different from visual space. We are always at the edge of visual space, looking in with the eye. But we are always at the centre of auditory space, listening out with the ear.

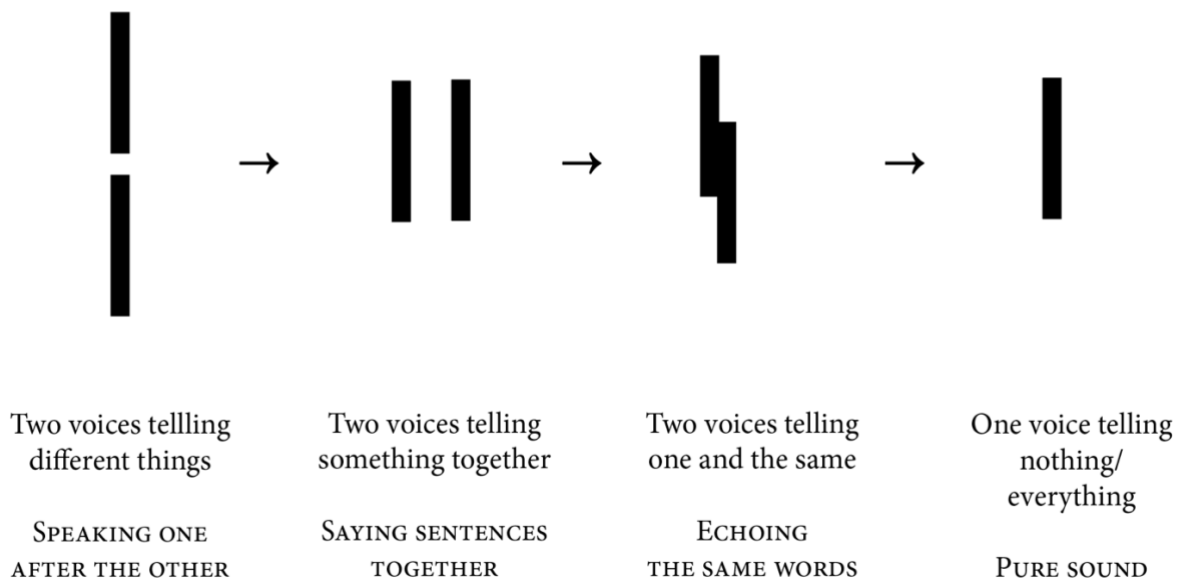
—R. Murray Schafer (2009, 33)

Susanne and I sat, still in the total darkness of The Chapel—the complete deprivation of the visual animated all our other senses. We could hear the rest of the group making their way deeper into the labyrinth. Their voices quickly became unintelligible with all the higher frequencies and sibilance dissipating. Soon all that was heard were occasional round low, hollow sounds, like irregular beats. Then silence. We stilled ourselves for several minutes and allowed our breathing to synchronize with the polyrhythms and percolations of dripping water. From one direction a steady stream of tiny droplets fell with the subtlest of impact on the floor. Every now and then a larger drop rolled off a rounded stalactite and fell into a small, shallow pool of water with an emphatic pitched plop. In time we could hear the extent of the space all around us and, while we had had a brief visual introduction by way of torch light, daz's theatre lighting and green laser, everything about The Chapel seemed heightened and more attenuated in the dark.

Susanne began to vocalize: from deep within her chest, stirring her vocal cords, giving life to a palette of phonemes and sounds that she modulated with her tongue and palate. She seemed to play the space as she shaped sounds, finding frequencies that amplified both within her body and with the sympathetic resonant frequencies of the chamber. Again, we sat in silence before joining the others.

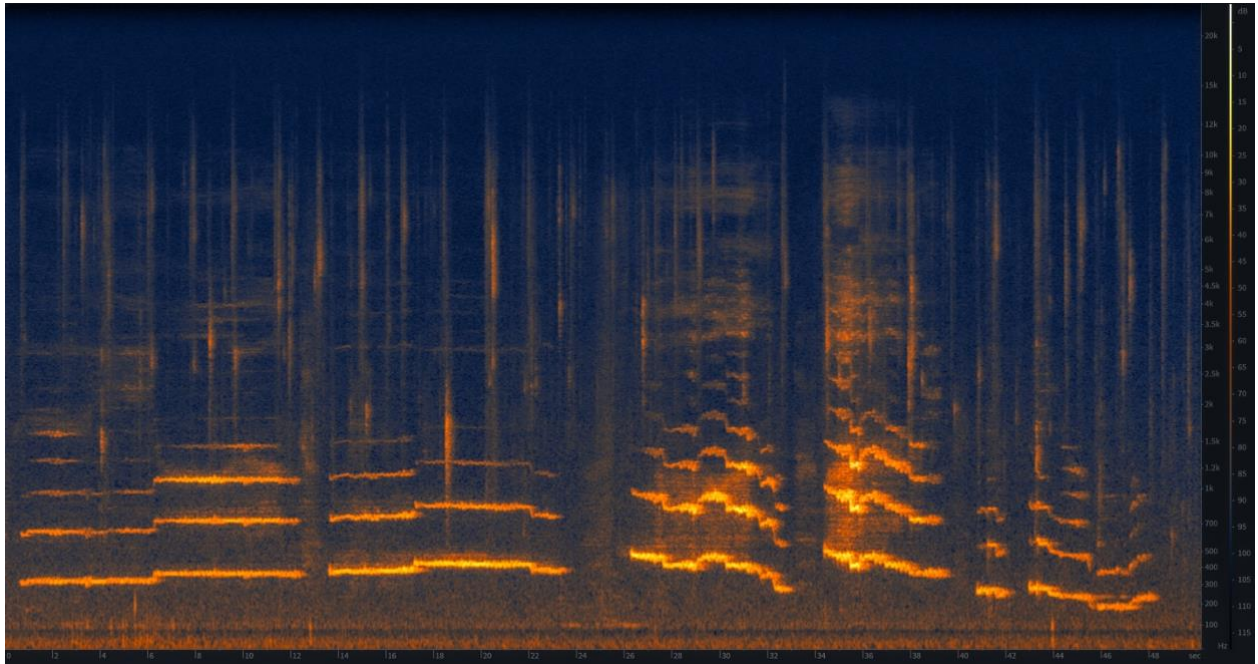
In the months and years following the field work, as footage and audio were logged and reviewed, greater clarity was emerging with respect to form and structure. Key to this, in terms of audio, is the role of voice and vocal performance: from verbal and non-verbal speech, improvised vocalization, to singing. We had a lot of material to choose from both in content and form. Verena created a template for how we might approach voice within the film, *STRATA (D) Evolution of Voices*. While not a rigid directive, it provides a guide for the dynamic interplay of vocal elements that are a central feature of the film’s soundtrack.

### STRATA (D)EVOLUTION OF VOICES



Verena Stenke’s template for the (d)evolution of voices: speaking in turn; voices in unison; echo and overlapping in time; and the last, “pure sound,” or vocal metamorphosis.

Back in my studio, I listened to the recordings and started analyzing Susanne’s voice. I was struck by the range, power, and delicacy of her vocalizations. An audio sample excerpt of her performance is represented visually by a spectrograph of the same. As an experiment within the “pure sound” purview of the *(D)evolution of voices*, I deconstructed her voice from The Chapel, isolating specific parts of the harmonic spectrum, reorganizing and superimposing them with different phonemes and vocal fragments: first steps taken in a compositional direction. A second audio sample and the corresponding spectrograph are an example of extracting specific formants. The spectrographs of her voice reminded me of stratigraphic diagrams and our study of geomorphology—more an intuitive and associative poetic observation than a rigorous methodology.



Spectrogram of an excerpt of Susanne Weins's vocal performance in *The Chapel* at the Gustav-Jakob Cave. Time is on the horizontal axis and frequency on the vertical axis. The bands show the harmonic overtones or formants of her voice. The brighter regions correspond to louder aspects of her voice, with the fundamental, or lowest, frequency being the loudest part. It is interesting to note that the first two harmonics of her voice to the right of the spectrograph are almost as loud as the fundamental frequency. This is a function of her vocal tract and chest resonance, the power of this particular passage, as well as the resonant frequency of *The Chapel*. The vertical lines are drops of water. Douglas Quin, 2023.

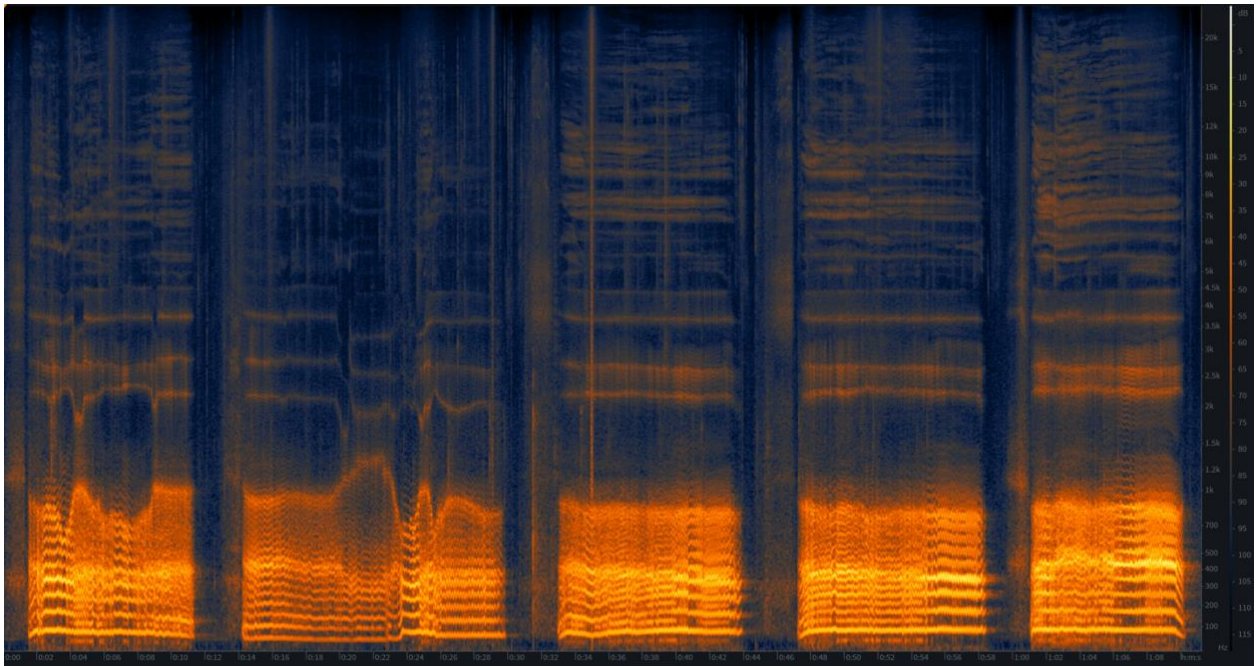


Spectrogram showing isolated harmonics from Susanne Weins's vocal performance in the Gustav-Jakob Cave. Douglas Quin, 2023.

I continued to analyze the recordings of the different performers, including Ralf Peters's from the Hohle Fels Cave. I had recorded him using a lavalier microphone to capture the intimacy and details of his voice as well as with an array of other recorders and microphones placed in various locations around the cave. Each gave a different perspective and varied qualities of reverberation based on proximity and the architecture of the cave. This is similar to a cinematographer choosing camera placement and lenses. A third audio sample and the corresponding

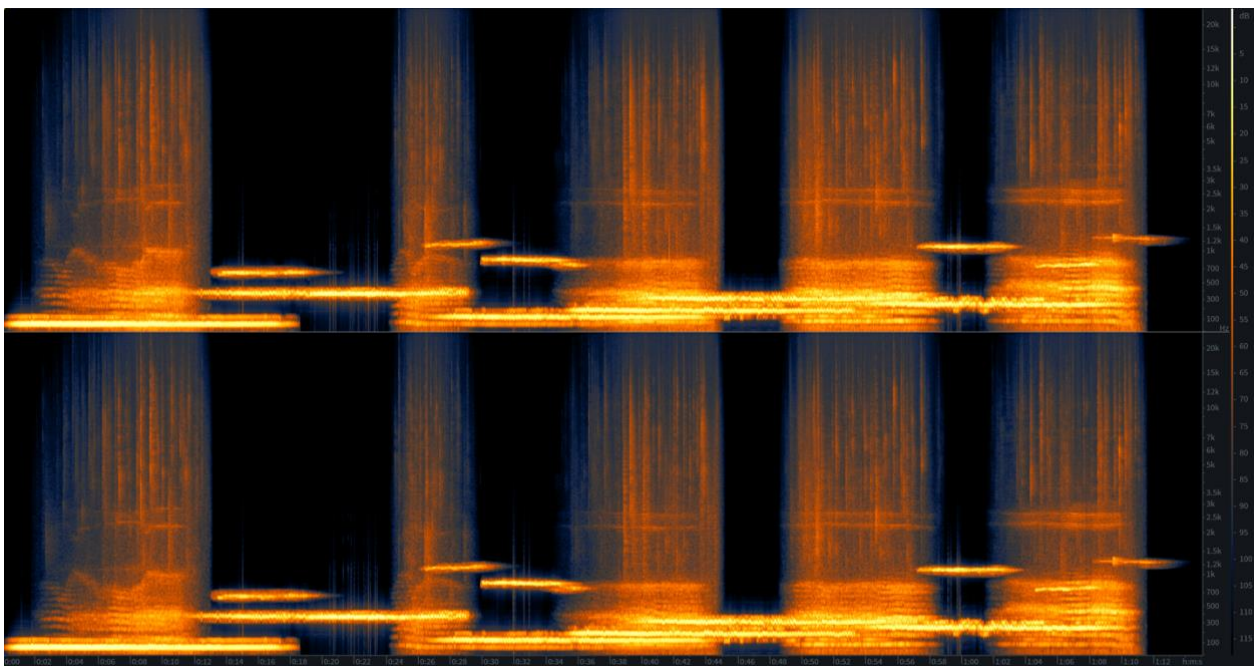


spectrograph are an excerpt of Ralf's performance from the lavalier recording. The richness of his voice and associated spectra provided many opportunities to explore compositional possibilities—much like Susanne's voice did in the previous examples.



Spectrograph of Ralf Peters's voice from his performance in the Hohle Fels Cave. Douglas Quin, 2023.

I worked with Susanne's and Ralf's performance recordings and deconstructed artifacts of their voices to generate some musical and soundscape ideas for the film. These explore the direction of "pure sound" that Verena had shared with me. A fourth audio sample and the corresponding spectrograph is an example of these explorations. It is a metamorphic passage of fragments, phonemes, and formants churning much like the strata of red sandstone and greywacke that Hutton observed at Siccar Point.



Spectrograph of *(D)Evolution Mix* audio sample showing fragments, phonemes, and formants from Susanne Weins and Ralf Peters. Douglas Quin, 2023.



This is but one example of how working with sound gathered on location is inspiring a number of ideas regarding the aural identity and compositional or sound design strategy for *STRATA*. The key moving forward in post-production will be creating a unified “sonic stratigraphy” that layers and combines the various voices of all the participants and the reciprocal resonances of each cave with the visual construction and sequencing of imagery.

## 7. The Lighting of *STRATA*

By daz disley

this environment.  
these hard surfaces.  
this interface.  
a forbidding welcome.

where I step is a negotiation.  
every meeting-point of stone and body, a knife-edge.

this welcome is conditional.  
for they will be here long after I am dust.  
these stones.

the dripping of millennia.  
and an encounter so slight.  
at this interface.

they will not kill me, these stones.  
but they will let me die here without a second thought.  
for their concern is not of me, or of here, or even now.

but of the ceaseless fleeting accretion.  
born of erosion, and deposition.

I am merely of these minerals.  
maybe from these minerals.

but I will never truly be with these minerals.  
as atom by atom, our encounter passes-by.

moves-on.

down-stream.

Layer by layer, digging down through strata to reach the bedrock on which my contribution is founded, I find copper, aluminum, phosphors, and lithium—a panoply of earths, both mundane and rare. Materials as deep-rooted in time as the locations containing the stories I am requested to illuminate—on the one hand, a seemingly simple request, and on the other, a complex dance of electrons and photons, blood and bone. I step out into the darkness, knee-deep into running water—fresh as it bites my skin, carrying with it traces of cave, and traces of time. The team is assembled and preparing to shoot, and as the strata of their bodies and various electronic devices begin to coalesce in a passing assemblage enchoired in the search for story, they are waiting.

Waiting for me, and getting cold, as I find myself as performer.



Filming *STRATA*. daz disley location scouting. Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou, 2021.

These surroundings are new to me, but older than I can rationally imagine, and my ad hoc audience looks on as I first cross the water, climb to find a platform, and begin to unpack my collection of now reassembled base minerals. We are in the mouth of a cave close to the edge of woodland, and I scan the surroundings for improvised mounting points, imagining potential cable runs, locating and demarcating what will be a temporary stage from which the search for this part of the story can begin. But nothing will be possible before a flood of photons brings clarity to the darkness and opens space for the material of the performances to emerge. The icy water seeps through my boots, reaching my toes to sting me as I locate an edge from which to pull myself up, reminding me of the energy and attention budgets I must diligently manage in the service of the story—budgets attendant to machines, and also to my body.

Weighed down by wetness, I climb a short way to place my first fixture, dirtying my hands as I thread my first cable. I surprise myself by my pace and have to double-check that the dark drop back down into running water neither injures me, nor derails the project. I move on, confident but tentative, the mantra of my peripheral awareness focused on the potential of an unseen stone—perhaps one waiting a thousand years for the opportunity to trip me up. Water splashes my face as I reorient myself back to my temporary base to find the next fixture.

The stones let me dance with them, as together we transit subtle balance points and I find permission to ease my way into relation with this environment. And more cold, and more wet; more energy expended, more time passing.

The sound of my boots plunging into the water ricochets around unseen back walls, as I head toward what might become a second fixture point. Higher than the first, above a shallow sandy bank, and requiring an underwater run of cable as its support. My striding becomes a scramble as I remember to count my points-of-contact in threading cable under, then over, around, and past. I am no longer aware of the passing of time, but instead of the waiting. Wet hands guide connectors into sockets, and I slide a potential explosion from its case. A few seconds to breathe, and a quick pause as I question my thinking, ticking boxes within my mental schematic. Did I miss something in my preparations?

Three clicks and numbers on a screen. Indicators: verification.

I look up from my improvised system to see first light, and I'm jolted into an oil painting of browns and greens, and reflections from microscopic crystal inclusions shimmering across the surface of running water.

Now we have scale and can begin to map spatial dimensions around the temporal core of the requests of the work, and within the space of what must have been perhaps fifteen minutes, I feel oddly at home, and I am ready to hold and mould space for the explorations of others.



Filming *STRATA*. daz disley lights setting. Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Film still, 2021.

In some senses, my research for *STRATA* never had a beginning, being instead another adventure in the rolling technical landscape of my arts practice. I make machines which make art—or at least systems which contribute to bigger creative pictures—each contraption informing the next, so locating my entry point is perhaps a little more diffuse than locating the invitation point for my contribution. As a team making a film, perhaps the best descriptor of our mode and approach would be one of “Guerrilla,” and while funded, certainly not equipped with a burn rate enabling us to simply buy-in all of the specialist tools we might desire to shoot with in caves and tight passageways and in chest-deep water. So the performer in me, the improviser in me, the crazy inventor in me, would provide a response in the form of a custom-built lighting system, designed specifically for the context.



Custom-built lighting system. daz disley, 2023.

Formally speaking, my research questions centred on:

How much light might we need?

What colours of light might we need?

How long might we need light for?

How might everything be best packaged for safe and reliable use?

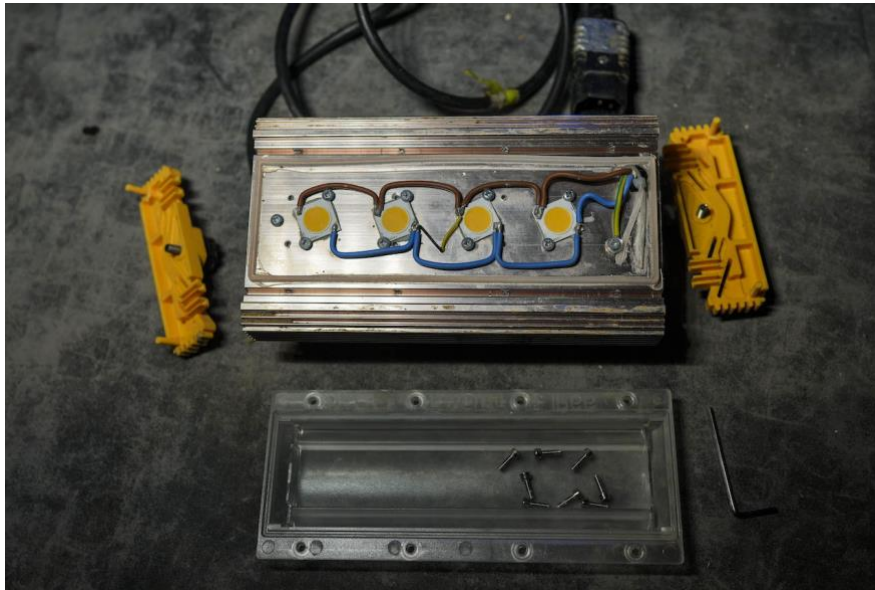
In pre-production dialogue, concrete answers to these questions were elusive, and we were quite literally in the dark as to how things might pan out. A supplemental but prominent question for me in this low-budget context revolves around the notion of how as a team we might “punch above” our nominal “weight.” As filmmaking goes, our technical resources were admittedly modest, and so I was keen to make the best use of our (at-best) semi-professional cameras by providing the most generous quantity of the highest quality light I could. Thus, for me, it sits very naturally to reimagine the word research as “reach-search,” as my search was concerned with how far we might reasonably be expected to reach given the limitations of both power and portability inherent in the idea of shooting low-budget in very tight, very wet spaces.

The sources deployed in illuminating my reach-search consisted of a small handful of websites, primarily the YouTube channel [@bigclivedotcom](#), eBay, and several electronics product catalogues, including RS Components, Farnell Electronic Components Distributor, and Cree LED. I worked my way through the process of balancing materials costs with the resultant affordances of different potential configurations. The design I eventually alighted on for the fixtures consisted of repurposing cheap generic floodlight bodies by replacing their low-quality light sources with architectural lighting chips. This would offer an increase in power density along with a colour rendering index in the 90–95 range, with the aim of being able to capture tonal range sympathetic to both the environments we were to visit and the skin of the performers. Super important for shooting video is to avoid the flicker commonly created by torches and other consumer-level lamps, which use modulated power signals to take advantage of our persistence of vision in order to reduce power consumption. So I had to find a way to provide continuous power, and to do so at safe voltages near/under water while maintaining ease of portability.



Cheap generic floodlight. daz disley, 2023.





Cree chips. daz disley, 2023.

Finding the solution to the question of power source was perhaps the longest part of the search during design and construction, and I was delighted to eventually stumble upon electric bike batteries, pre-packaged in tough aluminum shells capable of taking a bit of a beating, and if not truly immersible certainly geared up for use in the wet. But these items together solved only half of the problem. To enable a level of control over multiple fixtures, I built a slimline switchbox from plastics repurposed from a previous project, including a power meter, which might help in estimating battery life and therefore possible shooting durations. The final part of the puzzle once the equipment had been assembled was the question of transportation, and how to safely move through an environment of hard surfaces and much water. At some point during pre-production conversations, the use of plastic pipes for protecting cameras was mentioned, so I dug further into this idea, and fashioned a pair of rucksacks from lengths of toilet waste pipe lashed together with webbing and plugged with foam floor tiles, again leftover items from previous projects. To my delight, once fully loaded they were not only watertight enough to survive immersion, and tough enough to withstand being crashed into rocks, but also contained sufficient air to remain positively buoyant, which enabled us to float the equipment into the cave.



Switchbox. daz disley, 2023.



Battery and controller. daz disley, 2023.



Rucksack. daz disley, 2023.

Half-naked in the dead of night adopting a deep side lunge. My left knee rests on a submerged rock as my right leg stretches out over the stream bed balancing my weight on tiptoe. My chest hovers over the water, torso hinging forward from the pelvis. I bob-down under the view of the main camera, head tilted up with shortened neck as I lock myself into position for the scene. For twenty minutes I maintain this position, cold air flowing over my skin dragged along by the rush of the water, the lens of my camera positioned barely two centimetres above the water's surface. Skeins of hair removed during the action slip into the water, and drift toward and then under my lens. I no longer feel the cold and have lost contact with the sensation of the water. The invisibility of the endurance of my performance consists of pulling focus. Focus on and within the scene. Focus on my stillness. Focus on holding my attention with and for the performers. A



performance both for camera, and with camera, from both front and behind, as many strata of collective trust enables performative flow to encircle us all.

My reach-search for *STRATA* is part of a bidirectional composition traversing many strata of object-material boundaries through time. Object of stone giving way to material of mineral giving rise to object of component composing material of modules combined into object of illumination shining light on material of performance as object of gaze registering material of editing birthing object of film opening space for material of philosophy and further object of discourse. It is a journey spanning uncountable time, both in conception and in reification.

Some two hundred metres underground, beyond a low ceiling passable only by accepting the icy offerings of immersion, I am standing up to my chest in water and have been here for some time. The shot has just finished and the performers have hastily departed back to remedial offerings of towels and hot tea. Beside me is Doug, hand extended to take my camera so I can reach back to the relative safety of a muddy ledge. We hastily de-rig, packing our cases with numb fingers in preparation to again be confronted by immersion. But this time a dual immersion of both water and pitch blackness. Around us the empty hollowed-out silence of wet rock. We are now truly alone, without even our cave guides, and a peculiar, almost ominous, peace descends.

What is left in the now low budget of my blood sugar? Is there enough there for me to reach back out?

Before, and as a team, we had the psychological comfort of safety in numbers, but only now as a duo the true scale of our relationship to these passageways emerges. I am utterly insignificant to the flow of water here, and therefore to the flow of time. Nothing more than a thin leathery bag of diluted minerals in the face of the apparently immovable certainty of the rocks. The only signs of life other than Doug or myself, the muddy guano left by bats overwintering for millennia. The welcome this place has extended us is retreating, and at a pace hard to quantify. For a fleeting moment, I am tempted to dwell and submit to the inevitable comingling of my inner minerals with those all around us. I know not from where came the impulse to kick, but as my back foot re-establishes balance with the buoyancy of my luggage, a fresh wash of cold sluices its way across my chest, further motivating me back into movement. Through passageways and round corners, the depth of water subsides, and from somewhere I again find more pace. Emerging from the final point of immersion toward the exit, and as natural light starts to overpower our head torches, I become aware of vapour. First as a result of my breath, and then further diffuse wisps rising from my body.

Strata of hard and cold give way to layers of heat and soft. I smell the trees as my eyes adjust, and I am enveloped by the warm embrace of my collaborators. Through the illumination of my geological insignificance and the balancing of budgets external and internal, I verify my own materiality.

moving-on.

down-stream.

at the interface of these mutable surfaces.  
atom encounters atom.

and I will never not be these minerals.



Filming *STRATA*. daz disley glaring lights. Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: daz disley, 2021.

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## Notes

1. The film *STRATA* is currently in post-production. It will premiere on February 4, 2024, at the Altered States Film Festival, The Hague (NL). The significance and context of this research project and its findings can be partly described in words, although a better understanding is gained by looking directly at the outcomes. The present text is therefore accompanied by audiovisual documentation comprising models, diagrams, and voice and sound recordings. For more information, see <https://www.STRATAfilm.de>.
2. Hutton's concept of time was refined in the mid-twentieth century when it became possible to date rocks accurately using radioisotope decay.
3. As a section of the film *STRATA* website, the *STRATA* Knowledge Archive is an actual archive housing the video recordings of the conversations we had with archaeologists, speleologists, cultural scientists, philosophers, art historians and artists who inspired the construction of moving images. Navigating real and possible worlds, they examine complex systems, deep time, evolutionary consequences, the new and the unexpected, layers in the history of humankind and the role of art therein, questioning and deconstructing codified narratives and aesthetics. See <https://www.stratafilm.de/knowledge-archive>.
4. One of the primary challenges of caving, or spelunking, is navigating through tight spaces. It is an inherently dangerous activity, which often requires contorting, twisting, and bending the body in unusual ways, placing stress on the joints and muscles. Traversing the Gustav-Jakob Cave, the almost constant pressure of sharp rocks against the body would scrap the skin, causing cuts and abrasions. Inside the

Schiller Cave, although always relying on artificial light sources to see, the limited visibility inside the funnel makes it challenging to identify potential hazards, such as unstable, slippery slick stones. A single misstep can lead to injury. We were always in a heightened state of awareness, alert and sensitive to every nuance of surface and gesture.

5. In his studies of comparative religions, Mircea Eliade (1959) explores the notion that the Earth has no beginning and no end and time and the universe are cyclical, formulating the myth of eternal return.

6. *STRATA* Knowledge Archive: Anguezomo Mba Bikoro. <https://vimeo.com/710374901>.

7. Wilhelm Hauff's novel *Lichtenstein* (1826) and the Nazi research program "SS Ancestral Heritage" complicated geology's detachment from the region's factual historiography.

8. In a conversation with Neil deGrasse Tyson, Hawking said, "I adopt a Euclidean approach to quantum gravity to describe the beginning of the universe. In this, ordinary real time is replaced by imaginary time, which behaves like a fourth direction of space. In the Euclidean approach, the history of the universe in imaginary time is a four-dimensional curved surface like the surface of the Earth, but with two more dimensions... The boundary condition of the universe is that it has no boundary. In order terms, Euclidean space-time is a closed surface without end, like the surface of the Earth" (Hawking 2018, 14:58–15:47).

9. I refer to the rites of passage described as transitions by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1960). Liminal rituals known as rites of passage occurred in three stages: separation of the actors/participants from ordinary social life; trespassing the margin, limen or threshold—the actors fall into a limbo between their past and present modes of daily existence; aggregation—the actors of the rite return to mundane life after having experienced an altered state of consciousness (Turner 1979, 465–66).

10. I was born and raised in Venice (Italy), a city where we Venetians are used to saying that there are more churches than houses and where the passage of time is marked by the resounding and tolling of dozens of bells every fifteen minutes the whole day.

11. Timothy Morton's theory of hyperobjects refers to things massively invisible and distributed in time and space relative to humans. Hyperobjects are so large and complex that they are difficult for humans to comprehend or experience fully. Examples of hyperobjects include climate change, nuclear radiation, and the internet. Morton argues that these objects are not just physical entities and have a profound impact on our lives and ways of thinking.

12. For Bohm, the universe, although it appears to be solid, is, in essence, a hologram where every part of physical reality contains information about the whole and is characterized by a dynamic interplay of order and chaos. Everything is interconnected in a constant state of flux.

13. Memories are created through the process of encoding, consolidation, and retrieval. Encoding refers to the process of transforming sensory input into a form that can be stored in the brain. Consolidation is the process by which memories become stable and long-term. Retrieval refers to the process of accessing stored information when it is needed. Various factors, including emotions, attention, and rehearsal, can influence memories. They can also be subject to decay or interference, leading to forgetting or distortion of information over time.

14. Long-term memory is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that involves the encoding, storage, and retrieval of information over extended periods and can be influenced by a range of factors, including emotions, attention, and context, which makes it challenging to conceptualize.

15. *STRATA* Knowledge Archive: Nicola Fornoni <https://vimeo.com/712773514>.

16. Flowstones are speleothems that form when acidic water (rich in calcium carbonate collected from limestone rocks) flows down the walls or along the cave floor, depositing layers of calcite. They are typically found in solution caves, which are part of karst geology, and formed when the acidic water seeps into small cracks—dissolving the rock it touches and expanding the crack into a cave. As time passes, the cave grows.

17. The olm (*Proteus anguinus*) is a urodele amphibian, an aquatic salamander belonging to the Proteus genus. It is the only troglobitic vertebrate which lives and reproduces exclusively in caves, present in Europe.

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## Reflecting on *Bodily Listening in Place*: An Intercultural and Intersensory Research-Creation Project

Paula Bath, Tiphaine Girault, and Ellen Waterman

### Introduction

*Bodily Listening in Place* is an instructional score for intersensory improvisation commissioned by New Adventures in Sound Art (NAISA) for World Listening Day 2022.<sup>1</sup> It was composed by Ellen Waterman, a flutist and vocalist, improviser, and music researcher, in consultation with Tiphaine Girault and Paula Bath of SPiLL.PROpagation, an Artist Center for Creation and Production in Sign Language in Canada.<sup>2</sup> The score was distributed both as English text and video with ASL (American Sign Language) and people of all backgrounds, experience, and sensory modalities were invited to record and share their own realizations online in any medium (sonic, visual, or textual). World Listening Day is an annual event held on July 18, the birthday of Canadian composer and founder of acoustic ecology, R. Murray Schafer (1933–2021). Normally, the event focuses on the auditory dimension of listening, not surprising given that Schafer’s work on the soundscape ([1977] 1994) was designed to highlight the roles of sound and listening in the environment as a corrective to the dominance of visibility in Western society. However, the theme for 2022, “listening across boundaries,” suggested the possibility for an expanded approach to listening through different modes of sensory experience. *Bodily Listening in Place* became a research-creation project through which Ellen, Paula, and Tiphaine explored processes of intersensory and intercultural exchange across hearing and deaf experience, and through sonic, haptic, kinetic, linguistic, and graphic media.

In this critical reflection, we discuss our collaboration, which took place between February and June 2022 and comprised an iterative process of conversation, artmaking, photographic and video documentation, and writing. We, Ellen, Paula, and Tiphaine, share our distinct motivations and experiences of the research-creation process and together we reflect on specific moments in our collaboration, illustrated by examples from our documentation. We begin with Ellen’s explanation of the score, the inspiration for the piece in signed music, and her desire to decentre audition and adopt an expanded practice of listening through intersensory improvisation. Paula, writing on behalf of herself and Tiphaine, situates the work in SPiLL.PROpagation’s commitment to intercultural collaboration. She unpacks the dynamics of language, experience, and exchange, through an ethics of cocreation and the importance of “home” as a site of listening. We propose that intersensory improvisation is a productive research-creation methodology that can reveal new ways of relating to each other and the world.

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**Paula Bath** has studied sign language translation, communications, and institutions & interculturalism, and holds a BA and MA in communications. She is currently completing a PhD in Social and Cultural analysis at Concordia University. Paula lives and works in the intermingling spaces of sign and spoken languages, ASL, LSQ, English and French. Originating from France, **Tiphaine Girault** has a BA in Graphic Novel and works in French, English, and two sign languages. For over ten years Tiphaine has worked as a professional artist in comic arts, printmaking, and sign language translation and performance. Her work has been featured in several exhibitions and documentaries. **Ellen Waterman** is Helmut Kallmann Chair for Music in Canada and Professor in the School for Studies in Art and Culture at Carleton University. She is both a music scholar and a flutist specializing in creative improvisation. Ellen is founder and director of the Research Centre for Music, Sound, and Society in Canada, dedicated to exploring the complex and diverse roles that music and sonic arts play in shaping Canadian society.



## Ellen's Perspective

Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.

—Pauline Oliveros, *Sonic Meditations*

Listening, as the late great Pauline Oliveros (1932–2016) taught us, is not the same thing as hearing (Oliveros 2005, 2015). But like many hearing musicians, I am hyper-oriented toward aurality. When I improvise, my instinct is to close my eyes, to block out all sensory information that is not immediately connected to sound making and audition. Indeed, both of my preferred musical means, flute and voice, produce sounds at the mouth in close proximity to the ear. Sound is thus an intimate and visceral presence. But as Jonathan Sterne (2021, 74–77) has recently pointed out, vocal sounds are not produced in the mouth.<sup>3</sup> They involve a complex of bodily systems from the lungs to the voice box to resonating space in the chest and head. Both vocal and flute sound production are also kinetic—they rely on the expulsion of breath controlled by intercostal muscles and embouchure. For flutists, tilting the pelvis forward and bending the knees slightly releases tension and opens out the sound (Pearson 2006). It matters how the tongue feels in the mouth, where the glottis lies, the precise deployment of lip and facial muscles, where the lip-plate of the flute is positioned below the bottom lip and whether the skin is sweaty or dry, how the hands sit on the body of the flute and how the pads of fingertips feel on the keys. Sound is affected by the angle of wrists and elbows, the slope of shoulders, and posture. For me, playing the flute is an all-body experience. I sway and dip, and if the sounds I'm making are forceful, I may even feel compelled to jerk a knee up or bend suddenly at the waist like (my daughter jokes) a headbanger at a metal concert. My experience of the sounds I make varies according to my energy level and wellness, the time of day and ambient temperature, the nebulous atmosphere of the space I'm playing in with its sound-reflecting or absorbing materials, electronic amplification and processing, other sound makers present whether human or otherwise (birds, wind sighing in the trees, water lapping, traffic). During the 1990s, when I performed in R. Murray Schafer's annual environmental music theatre project, *Patria the Epilogue: And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon* (1983–), my experience was informed by the natural beauty of its forest location, playing flute while watching the mist drift over a lake in the cold pre-dawn light (Waterman 1998). All these elements—sonic, haptic, kinetic, and visual—affect my perception of the music. Together, they constitute the intersensory, intentional, attentive, and responsive act of listening. But although I have always had this embodied knowledge, my musical practice and my assumptions about music and sound have, until recently, been unquestioningly predicated on aurality.

In 2020, I went in search of Deaf musicians for a research-creation project in which musicians are asked to create in response to visual art exhibitions.<sup>4</sup> That's how I first learned about signed music, an entirely visual and kinetic form of music that has no truck with audition. Pamela E. Witcher's early piece "Experimental Clip" was a revelation (Witcher 2008).

Through modified ASL signs, abstracted hand movements, facial expressions, other body movements, and video editing, this dynamic piece clearly demonstrates musical features of rhythm, phrase, texture, form, and affect. Jody Cripps, a Deaf ASL linguist who leads the Signed Music Project, defines it as "a form of performance art that arises from within the Deaf community and is distinct and evolved from both ASL poetry and from translated signed songs which initiated from spoken language. It may incorporate ASL literary poetic features such as lines, meter, rhythm and rhyme and also incorporates basic elements of music such as harmony, rhythm, melody, timbre, and

texture, which is expressed as a visual-gestural artistic form” (Understanding Music Through American Sign Language, n.d.).

Pamela Witcher’s “Experimental Clip” immediately struck me as musical even though I had no knowledge of the genre. I likened it to experimental films, such as Dziga Vertov’s famously musical but silent 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera*, in which tempo, repetition, rhythm, crossfading and overlapping images evoke musical rhythm and counterpoint. But signed music is more than an aesthetic proposition. It embodies a politics that critiques our society’s audism and insists on the legitimacy and force of Deaf cultural expression.

As I took baby steps in learning ASL and educating myself about Deaf culture, my own engrained audism became more apparent to me. I had long been accustomed to teaching my students the twentieth-century composer Edgard Varèse’s (1966) famous definition of music as “organized sound” —an open definition that is intended to allow for an endless range of sonic manifestations as music. Encountering signed music, however, made me realize that the unquestioned primacy of sound in discourses of music and listening is no longer tenable. And to honour that position, I needed to explore the roles that my other senses play in my embodied experience of music. As ethnomusicologist, musician, and dancer Tomie Hahn notes, “If we consider that we inhabit different sensory worlds—personally and culturally—then building awareness of the sensibilities *someone else* might be experiencing can expand our knowledge of self/other and open communications” (2021, 2). But I want to emphasize that my developing intersensory approach to musical improvisation is not an attempt to enter into the experience of a Deaf musician or to adopt elements of signed music; rather, my desire is to decentre and reorient audition within my practice.

Improvisation is my musical *métier*, but it is also an important research-creation methodology. Rebecca Caines describes improvisation as an interdisciplinary research methodology that requires an ethos of a “perpetual state of fragility” through a “commitment to move through, and with, mistakes, admit naiveté, and to let go of control to create together with others” (2021, 325). Instead of starting from a defined research question, prompts, themes, and research questions emerge through improvisation, a relational methodology that encompasses “risk, active listening, collaborative response, and the reconfiguration of mistake into creativity” (325). Similarly, Sara Ramshaw and Paul Stapleton understand improvisation in terms of an ethics of cocreation that embraces “failure and error as a source of learning” (2020, 305). As a research methodology, then, improvisation focuses on process and experimentation, a receptive state in which participants’ bodies become “*excitable tissues* for gathering up the energetics and movements of the world, and manifesting these as perception, affect, and action” (Myers and Dumit 2011, 239). Above all, it is deeply relational.

In my approach to improvisation-based research-creation, relationality is fostered through what Oliveros called Deep Listening™, an expansive practice of focal and global attention and responsiveness. For Oliveros, listening “lies deep in the body and is as yet a mysterious process” (2016, 75). Although sound is clearly central to Deep Listening, in my experience of her workshops and performances, Oliveros paid careful attention to diverse stimuli, from bodily movement to the acoustic and atmospheric dimensions of space, including the psychic dimension of dreams. Significantly, such an expanded concept of listening-as-attention takes on an ethical dimension of relationality to all aspects of the environment, biotic and abiotic, including time and space. As Ramshaw and Stapleton note, “Listening with respect, openness, and responsiveness necessarily

enables the listener to meet otherness *as* otherness, without the need to reduce it to “the order of the same” (2020, 305).<sup>5</sup>

What would it take to reorient audition in my own musical practice? How might I express an expanded concept of listening through improvisation, and communicate it to others? Artistic director of NAISA Darren Copeland’s invitation to create an instructional score for improvisation to share with other people for World Listening Day 2022 provided the opportunity to explore these questions. In preparation for a residency at NAISA, from May 2 to 9, 2022, during which I wrote the score and recorded several realizations of it, I embarked on a series of consultations with Paula and Tiphaine, in which we exchanged creative offerings, discussed our experiences, and explored the intercultural space between hearing and Deaf cultures.

### **Paula’s and Tiphaine’s Perspectives**

No worldview ever encompasses or covers the plenitude of what is actually lived, felt, imagined, and thought.

—Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*

Tiphaine and I come to a creation process for different reasons and in different ways but, fundamentally, work together with art as a creative product and process of human communication and interconnection. We oscillate between David Howe’s concept of “sense” as being both sensation and signification, feeling and meaning, that includes a spectrum of referents (2022, 10), and Ruth Finnegan’s concept of communication as something that is found in the creative mutual interacting of individuals or groups in specific contexts rather than in abstract systems of codes or the transmission of bounded “messages” (2002, 7).

Tiphaine, deaf since birth, born in Paris, France, to hearing parents, first understood interhuman communication by flipping through the pages of her father’s graphic novel collection at age five. Life became alive in this visual pictorial form. Not only did she appreciate understanding the social world around her, but she began to draw, rooting her drawing practice as the modality to enable the world around her to understand how she experiences the people and things in her environment.

I, Paula, am hearing since birth. Born in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada, to hearing parents, I grew up engulfed in the language and culture of the majority. Then, at age sixteen, I learned that sign language existed and walked into the Deaf Community for the first time. It was a world where I could not speak, in either spoken or signed language. Communication, once taken for granted, was no longer there, and I needed to find new ways to reach beyond language, to connect to people, to deaf people. To do this I first had to relearn to “listen” in new and different ways—visually, haptically, and relationally.

These early experiences formed Tiphaine’s and my relationship to ourselves and with our world, and we infused these experiences into our collaborative approach to art creation. We call our approach cocreation and it forms the philosophical underpinning of SPiLL.PROpagation, a non-profit arts organization focusing on creation, collective process and research-creation projects, and public presentations.

Our methodology continued to evolve and later brought together the audacious artistic work of two other women. Jolanta Lapiak is a Canadian Ameslan<sup>6</sup> artist whose multimedia work is influenced by philosopher Jacques Derrida's concept of phonocentrism—a critique of society's rules that reinforce how sound and hearing oneself speak are collapsed into the meaning of presence itself (2016, 13). Lapiak's art installations expose and resist the subordination of sign languages to both spoken and written languages. As part of her resistance, however, she demonstrates how the boundaries of language modalities are fluid, and not categorically fixed (Lapiak 2007). Lapiak's work influenced our desire to work in spaces beyond identity politics (deaf people vs. hearing people). We sought to develop her ideas of a language continuum further and to show how different language modalities (sign-spoken-written) are connected.

We combined these ideas of language continuum and connection via different modalities with the artistic work of Josette Bushell-Mingo, a Swedish-based English theatre actor and director of African descent. Josette's work in theatre production brings people from different backgrounds together and unites them by speaking one common (artistic) language. Her work with deaf and hearing ensembles, in Sweden and Canada, has been particularly influential. We watched as she explored the advantages of a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic ensemble in a production of *The Tempest*, saying that at the place where these two points meet something new emerges (Bushell-Mingo 2019). Josette's work influences us to interweave cultural backgrounds in critical art making and what we find emerges at this art production-communication boundary is that, in their desire to interconnect, people “switch.”<sup>7</sup> The switch is a new relationship formation that helps to seed different connections between yourself and others. For example, Tiphaine worked as assistant director with Josette on *The Tempest*, with its cast of hearing and deaf actors. To create the switch, all the actors needed to work more visually, with more and different movements. The directing team also brought water into the experience of performance so that audiences could feel the wetness and further imagine rain and splashes from the ocean waves. Tiphaine's contribution thus went beyond standard translation. Often, integrated performances with deaf and hearing ensembles are written about by the majority group who claim that deaf and hearing people can have the “same” experience at the “same” time (Edmonton Arts Council, n.d.). This characterization, however, misses the significance of the piece, and of Tiphaine's contribution to its creative process and presentation. Tiphaine works to honour the creators in the room and their respective cultural and linguistic norms (Girault 2019). This creation process brings forward what Tiphaine and I call, not an experience of sameness, but a “parallel” experience: different experiences occurring in relationship to each other and at the same time.

Tiphaine also worked closely with the other assistant director and Métis actor Valerie Planche, and with the written Shakespearean text, to decolonize language and communication in ways that honoured values brought forward in sign language. This honouring means that two actors (deaf and hearing) would recite simultaneously the same Shakespearean text on stage, yet in different cultural ways. One scene shows how the text in spoken language sounded dramatic, while the text in sign language was visually bold and humorous.



Interpreting text through image in *The Tempest*, 2019. The Citadel Theatre's *The Tempest*, featuring Ray Strachan, Troy O'Donnell, Elizabeth Morris (seated) and Hodan Youssouf. Directed by Josette Bushell-Mingo. Set and costume design by Drew Facey. Lighting design by Bonnie Beecher. Sound design by Dave Clarke. Photo by Ian Jackson/epicphotography.ca.

The sign language, in particular, was no longer confined and conforming to language-experiential norms established by written or spoken languages. What emerged was how a deaf and hearing ensemble of directors and actors experimented at these artistic-communication boundaries and expanded our normative ways of performing and experiencing stories. Interhuman relationality is thus no longer limited to ideas of language and translation, or even enhancing the visual aspect of the work, but is about how, through a process of self-integrity and cocreation, we are each able to learn to feel the work differently and to experience the world, including our stories and the stories of others, through a variety of sensory ways such as sounds, lights, movements, vibrations, natural elements (e.g., rock, water, or wind), and material objects in combination.

Tiphaine and I work at the interstitial spaces where deaf and hearing people meet and where dominant social ideas, beliefs, and social structures are lived, felt, and discussed. In this way, we advance an interrelational concept we call signecology: a felt awareness of sign language co-existing with its environment. Signecology is a relationality that exists, or is uncovered, between sign language, yourself, other people, and natural or institutional environments (Girault 2017).

We find that this felt awareness includes all senses and is a concept that helps to establish the linkages among people, their histories, experiences, senses of place, and environments. Tiphaine and I are from different sensory-constructed life worlds, deaf and auditory, but we have both also learned four languages: English, French, ASL, and LSQ. Over the years, however, we have found that, in relation to the variety of ways we can know and experience the world, working within

the confines of any one language is limiting, and this includes working between one language and another language through the process of normative translation.

To move away from this confinement of language and to stretch into the senses, we understand the senses as not just a means by which we receive a stimulus that is generating in our environment; rather, we acknowledge that our senses play an active role in our overall sense of our world (Rodaway [1961] 1994, 5). As such, our creative process calls on participants to consider all of the human senses and to work with different communication modalities, employing sound, sight, touch, smell, and taste, and working multidimensionally with material, narratives, and movement to achieve diverse experiences of communication and interconnection.

In addition to multimodal and multidimensional methods, we also work cocreatively. This means we work with a sense of “home” in ways that offer alternatives to the established oral/auditory/sound normativity in society, and to the idea that meaning is created and structured around centres, such as a deaf centre or a hearing centre. Rather, we create meaning together in an interstitial space, in our own ways and in relationship, while abandoning a bias toward contained and symmetrical meaning and instead valuing interhuman connection as asymmetrical experiences. Our approach is further illuminated by cultural anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992, 7), who question the “assumed isomorphism of space, place and culture” and call for an anthropology of space to be grounded in an understanding of the realities of boundary erosion, diasporas and dispersal, mobility and movement (qtd. in Feld and Basso 1996, 4). Metaphorically, one could say that instead of a defined centre versus margins, or an entanglement, our approach is like a weave. Each individual material has its own integrity and plays a part in the creation process and final structure that then becomes a part of a new integrity of a whole. The cocreation process, then, must not be prescriptive, but responsive to the relationships produced in the time and space in which it was created in relationship to the materials, tools, time, and creative forces at play. Our cocreative process resonates with the concept of improvisation as an ethics of cocreation, discussed by Ellen above.

For the project *Bodily Listening in Place*, each creator, Ellen, Tiphaine, and Paula (each thread), found themselves on both a language spectrum—spoken and written English, ASL, and LSQ—and on a sensory spectrum. Ellen, a hearing flutist, was in one place with a sound whose register/vibration is high and unpalpable by Tiphaine, a deaf multimedia artist. However, this story is not about Tiphaine’s inability to access sound, or other common notions of accessibility. We don’t consider this to be a “gap” and find it a mischaracterization to establish our social world based on a series of differences and social disconnections. Rather, we find it to be evidence of how the senses are constructed and lived differently in different periods and societies, and how this reflects the ways in which people understand their environment and the people and things in that environment (Howes 2005, 399).

In the early creation stages, Ellen and Tiphaine connected as artists, working with and through Paula, who facilitated process, language, and cultural knowledges, in ways that were not about working to form a bridge of understanding from one person to another person, but about working interculturally in a weave that honoured the cultural integrity of each person. This meant maintaining each collaborator’s individual senses of “place” and “home” in balance, while expanding their sensory range, informed by new sensory perspectives offered by the other person’s sense of being in the world. Here, the concept of *home* follows Michael Jackson’s notion of home, as a way of being-at-home-in-the world, where one must work out a kind of balance between acting and being acted upon (2013, 32). As we discuss in the next section, working at home was both a pragmatic response



to collaborating during the COVID-19 pandemic, and an important evocation of bodily listening in *place*.

### Reflecting on Moments of Discovery

In this section, we reflect on several “aha” moments that occurred during our iterative process of collaboration. Between February and May, we exchanged and responded to each other’s artistic prompts, both through Zoom calls and by delivering materials to each other’s homes. For example, Tiphaine and Paula asked Ellen to record a short improvisation and send it as an mp3 file. Ellen recorded a short flute improvisation using a painting by Michael Waterman hanging in her music studio as a graphic score.

[Audio example: Ellen for Tiphaine, improvisation for solo flute, February 24, 2022.](#)



*A is for Asparagus* (2000), Michael Waterman, acrylic on canvas. Used by permission. Graphic score Ellen used in improvising flute piece *Ellen for Tiphaine*.

Tiphaine played the recording through the Woojer vibrotactile vest, which has six transducers that express sound as vibration. Paula also acted as a sort of “human transducer,” interpreting the piece through dialogue, using analogies with nature (e.g., “sounds like the slow start of rain tapping on your face”) and, at times, through touch on Tiphaine’s back, shoulders, and hands. Tiphaine, in turn, described her experience of Ellen’s music through narrative and drawing.

[Video example: Tiphaine with Woojer Vest.](#)



Tiphaine drawing her perception of *Ellen for Tiphaine*, March 5, 2022

Using Tiphaine's drawings as graphic scores, Ellen then improvised while consciously employing movement and facial expression in addition to sound.

[Video example: Ellen improvising to Tiphaine's drawing of \*Ellen for Tiphaine\* as graphic score, March 20, 2022.](#)

### Haptic Dexterity

Paula particularly liked seeing how, during the early phases when Ellen and Tiphaine were sharing their respective perceptions or “listenings” of various musical notes and rhythms, they communicated their perceptions back to each other in different ways. For example, Tiphaine explored haptically, though the vibrations of the Woojer vibrotactile vest. The decibel limitations of the vest's transducers are such that only lower range sounds are captured and transformed into repeated vibrational movements. As described above, in the spaces of vibrational absence, Paula experimented with listening to the higher frequencies, auditorily, and interpreting the piece not into a visual signed language but rather into a tactile combination of shapes, speeds, and pressures moving along Tiphaine's back, shoulders, arms, and fingers. Tiphaine communicated back that same piece in drawn pictorial and material forms to Ellen. However, neither Ellen (nor Paula) was able to sense or derive substantive meaning from the music emitted from the vibrotactile vest at Tiphaine's

level of sophistication and detail. For Ellen, this was a humbling experience. Despite decades of musical training and experience, she realized that her sense of touch is seriously underdeveloped. She is working to increase her dexterity with haptic sensation.

### Material Sensation

One of the early pieces we listened to was Ellen's performance of *Temple on the Lake* (Pura Ulun Danu Beratan), for solo flute and Sundanese gamelan by composer Bill Brennan (2016).<sup>8</sup> The piece includes melodic material on flute and the stratified and interlocking gong and metallophone sounds of the gamelan. Tiphaine was again able to translate her perception of the piece in both pictorial and sculptural media, capturing phrasing, rhythm, texture, and form with great accuracy (especially impressive since she was unfamiliar with gamelan, the traditional ensemble of Indonesia). She offered Ellen her Tibetan singing bowl as an assemblage, with instructions to fill it with water and one or two basalt rocks before striking the edge of the bowl with a wooden mallet. Tiphaine said that, for her, the piece was like watching the series of ripples that formed from the centre to the edge where the water meets the bowl.

#### [Video example: Singing bowl with rocks and water.](#)

These visual and material representations of *Temple on the Lake* could be “listened” to and sensed by both Ellen and Paula. Indeed, Ellen found the experience of putting her fingertips into the water while striking the singing bowl to be intensely affective, perhaps because of the way her fingertips are attuned to touch through flute playing. For her, these watery vibrations were more intense, specific, and meaningful than those generated by the Woojer vest. This illustrates our point that sensorial interconnection is asymmetrical. People come together from different backgrounds but also with different sensory frames, yet interconnection still exists. This intersensory exchange of music is a powerful means for people to communicate their lived experiences and their sense of being in the world.

#### [Video example: Ellen improvising kinetically and haptically with singing bowl, rocks, and water.](#)

When Paula saw Ellen's response, she reflected on something Josette had once told her in Sweden while with the artistic director for Riksteaterns Tyst Teater<sup>9</sup>—a sign language theatre department in Sweden—watching an ensemble of deaf and hearing actors rehearse their performance of the *Odyssey* in 2009. There was no translation from the sign language on stage into spoken language for the audience. She asked Josette, “How will people understand what is being said in sign language? The audience may be confused.” Paula remembers Josette replying, “let them.” This was a pivotal moment for Paula. Rather than attempting to impose structure, Josette released peoples' self-expression to encourage our different modes and capacities for “listening” and “hearing.” In the same way, Paula and Tiphaine wanted Ellen to experience ambiguity and uncertainty while exploring and expanding into new sensory listening experiences.

### Home as Place

Tiphaine particularly liked how collaboration could be done from “home,” an idea we originally adopted because the Omicron variant of COVID-19 was active in Ottawa/Gatineau during the winter of 2022. Working together with masks would have seriously impeded our ability to communicate in sign language. But home was more than a consideration of convenience; it holds our most intimate senses of place. Each of our inner circles, our living environments, consists of

materials and tools that express how we best sense and relate to the world. Therefore, instead of meeting in an unfamiliar or neutral place, we chose to stay rooted in the times and spaces that best reflect the integrity of who we are. Working at home enabled us to “listen” to the music, to engage in sign language and, most importantly to Tiphaine, to engage during the project with her children, who both hear and sign. Her children are multi-lingual and multi-modal being children of a deaf adult, known as CODA.<sup>10</sup> The transducers in the Woojer vest are calibrated so that they transmit vibrations without an auditory signal, but it is also possible to connect headphones and listen to the audio signal. Tiphaine’s son, Léoghan, would sit next to her. Tiphaine felt the music, while Léoghan listened to it. Then with each sound Léoghan would sign back in sign language (LSQ) what musical instruments he imagined made each unique sound in the piece. This provided more cultural insight for Tiphaine into the auditory-music and hearing world of her son and a medium of connection between mother and son through music by way of co-listening.

### [Video example: Listening at home—Tiphaine and Léoghan.](#)

And while we shared objects (such as the Tibetan bowl and basalt rocks, and Tiphaine’s drawings) with Ellen, we also wanted Ellen to explore our offerings and discussion from within her own chosen sensory world, from her “home,” where she could use familiar materials to communicate back to us and make offerings of her own perceptions of the music we were exploring together. This iterative and relational process brought forward a nourishing way to self-express and cocreate that aligns well with maintaining the “felt self” while also engaging with people from different backgrounds. It allows for expanded sensory exploration and greater access to “listening” and ways of knowing and relating to people and to the world.

To explore this intimate role of home as place, Ellen began regularly to improvise in a patch of sunlight from a south-facing window that often spills over an old wooden chest and the variegated maple floor of her music room. She experimented with concentrating on the visual and haptic qualities of sunlight, how it intensifies colours and warms the skin, and she focused her improvisation on minute and controlled movements of her feet. Documenting the process in the form of a score, she shared it with Paula and Tiphaine:

*Improvisation with Sunlight, for Moving Player with Open and Closed Eyes*

Go to a window through which the sun is directly shining. Explore the space delineated by the patch of sunlight streaming through the window. Treat what you can see and feel—both in front of your open eyes, and behind your closed eyes—as a graphic score. Focus your attention on feeling your body present in this space. Move around in the patch of sunlight. Make music, but let it be a by-product of your exploration of the space.





Sun Patch Place.

In discussing this score with Paula and Tiphaine, Ellen realized that the experience of improvising repeatedly in this sunny spot turned a defined “space” into a familiar and welcoming “place.” This insight carried over to the final instructions for *Bodily Listening in Place*, which has four sections.

### **Bodily Listening in Place**

Our focus in this critical reflection is on the iterative collaborative process that preceded Ellen’s writing of the score for *Bodily Listening in Place*. As we’ve already noted, the score and several realizations of the piece, are available online. Here is a basic summary of the score:

1. Select a place, spend time in it, document it, and get to know it through your senses over several days.
2. Before improvising in response to your place, orient your body by moving and warming up in any way that is meaningful to you.
3. Listen (the piece starts now). Listening is not hearing—it is active attention. “Listen” beyond audition—with your eyes, skin, heart, emotions.
4. Improvise in response to the place in any way that makes sense to you.
  - a) Sing or play an instrument
  - b) Move/dance
  - c) Draw
  - d) Write



Ellen performing *Bodily Listening in Place* at Warbler’s Roost, South River, Ontario, May 8, 2022. Amplified flute, pitch shifter pedal, and maple syrup barrel.

As both a process and a composition, *Bodily Listening in Place* is deceptively simple. Like many exercises in meditation and mindfulness, and within a tradition of instructional scores for improvisation, it calls the participant to pay active attention to their surroundings and to focus on sensory data.<sup>11</sup> Considered in terms of improvisation as a research-creation method, however, performing *Bodily Listening in Place* raises complex questions that merit continued thought, dialogue, and musicking. What does it mean to “make” music? How does music engage the senses asymmetrically across different modalities of perception, across different bodies? How does the privileging of a particular sense (hearing) and a particular medium (sound) work to limit our conception of music? By attending to the diverse ways in which we “listen,” and by expanding our



own multi-sensory ranges, we, in turn, expand our opportunities for interconnectedness across both arts practices and human cultures.

## Notes

1. *Bodily Listening in Place* was funded in part by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Government of Canada. The score for *Bodily Listening in Place* is available in text and video with ASL interpretation at <https://naisa.ca/media-archive/sound-art-text-scores/bodily-listening-in-place/>. Waterman's realizations of the piece are also linked here. As the score notes, "Anyone, of any experience and from any location, is invited to participate. You are encouraged to interpret the score and express yourself according to your body's way of perceiving the world, and your understanding of music." Waterman held two improvisation workshops in the lead up to World Listening Day and participants uploaded their own realizations as sound/audio, video, image, or text. We shared our realizations of the score in an online gathering on Sunday, July 17 (the day before World Listening Day). <https://www.worldlisteningproject.org/>.
2. <https://spill-propagation.com/>.
3. See Sterne (2021) for a fascinating discussion of voice, vocality, and impairment. He presents a "practice-based model of voice" as a "historical and culturally located practice, connected to people's agency but also to cultural contestation" (65). One might consider listening in the same way.
4. <https://carleton.ca/mssc/research/resonance-towards-a-community-engaged-model-of-research-creation/>.
5. Ramshaw and Stapleton (2020) here draw on Cobbussen and Nielsen (2012).
6. "Ameslan," a word that combines the concepts of person and language (American Sign Language), is an obsolete term coined in the 1960s that Lapiak (2007) revitalizes.
7. Signed in ASL and LSQ by taking your right hand like you are holding a key, placing it the middle of your forehead and turning quickly to the left and down.
8. Available at <http://www.ellenwaterman.ca/performance.htm>.
9. Now known as RIKSTEATERN CREA.
10. CODA: Children of Deaf Adults, <https://www.handspeak.com/study/index.php?id=146#:~:text=A%20Coda%20is%20a%20child%20of%20Deaf%20adults,of%20children%20born%20in%20Deaf%20families%20are%20hearing>.
11. See, for example, Oliveros (1971).

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## Field Recording, Autoethnography, and the Entanglements of the Heard: Author's Note and References

Debashis Sinha

The following notes are in response to the insightful comments of the reviewers of my audio essay, “Field Recording, Autoethnography, and the Entanglements of the Heard,” which is my contribution to this special issue of *Performance Matters* on “Performing Practice-Based Research.” Audio essays are a relatively new form of scholarship that combine spoken text and soundscape. As a sound producer, this way of thinking feels intuitive, but of course, it is not innocent. Yet I begin my meditation on sound and recording by suggesting that autoethnography follows “the impulse of the moment rather than an extractive compulsion” (2:03).

[Listen to audio essay here.](#)

The idea that “autoethnography is not extractive” is, of course, a strange claim to make, given that we are listening to an audio essay that relies on extraction on so many levels—to record, to edit, even to equalize and mix audio are actions that are predicated on removing or repurposing (extracting) information from one mode or context to another. That astute observation, shared by one of the reviewers, has made me realize that it is imperative to contemplate the assumptions embedded in my passionate and arguably naïve statement. Could the extraction I practise in the course of my research-creation be part of the continuum of violence that plagues so many research methods? Is there some place in my process to investigate that thread? Is the repurposing of the information of our lived reality to seek other hidden or personal meanings necessarily always connected to colonial modes of removal, expression, sublimation, erasure, theft . . . ? The list of questions goes on.

Clearly, the history of recording and listening has deep and profound connections to colonialism and coloniality (Budhaditya Chattopadhyay [2022] engages deeply with this idea, but there are myriad other sources that also examine this relationship, such as the *Sounding Out!* blog [<https://soundstudiesblog.com/>]). The teasing out, disruption, and refusal of these relationships in our research-creation practices is a long but necessary road, some of the many complicated and intersectional steps on the path.

In every moment, I listen for story. And in every moment, I listen for how to lift the story up, to let it be the thing it is.

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Driven by a deep commitment to the primacy of sound in creative expression, **Debashis Sinha** has created numerous audio-centred solo and collaborative projects across Canada and internationally. Sound design and composition credits include works for contemporary dance, video, film, and Dora Award-winning productions with many of Canada's premiere performing arts companies, including numerous works for Peggy Baker Dance Projects, The Stratford Festival, Soulpepper Theatre Company, Canadian Stage, Why Not Theatre, and many others. Currently, Sinha has been researching sound production using machine learning and AI with an ear to uncovering new strategies and avenues of story creation. He is an assistant professor in The Creative School at Toronto Metropolitan University, and the 2023 Louis Applebaum Composer's Award laureate.

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## Weaving an Artistic Research Methodology

Jane Frances Dunlop

The production of knowledge is always a collective effort, a series of back-and-forth conversations that produce multiple results.

—Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*

[The] promiscuous traffic between different ways of knowing carries the most radical promise of performance studies research. Performance studies struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice.

—Dwight Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research”

There is the obsessive, addictive quality to spinning yarn and the weaving of cloth; a temptation to get fixated and locked into processes, which run away with themselves and those drawn into them.

—Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture*

Practice as research in the performing arts pursues hybrid enquiries combining creative doing with reflexive being, thus fashioning freshly critical interactions between current epistemologies and ontologies.

—Baz Kershaw, “Practice as Research: Transdisciplinary Innovation in Action”

In June 2016, I exhibited (*tfw*) *spin measure cut* at Seventh Gallery in Melbourne. The exhibition included several components: central to it was a multichannel video installation in the gallery, made up of two video triptychs looping on three screens. The exhibition also included a triptych of performative video works, created in the gallery and projected into the front window of the gallery as well as presented in an online installation. In (*tfw*) *spin measure cut*, weaving is a crucial feature structurally as well as aesthetically: the “textile triptych” literally weaves together found video footage to create a new visual language for exploring the interrelation of digital technologies, bodies, and women’s labour.



Still from “cut,” part of (*tfw*) *spin measure cut* (2016). Jane Frances Dunlop.

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These videos then “weave” through the performance triptych, appearing in the online installation and gallery projection as the work moves in and out of online and real-life spaces, marking their entanglement. The title references contemporary Internet shorthand (“tfw” stands for “that feel when” or “that feeling when,” an Internet acronym) and the gestures of the Greek Fates (who spin, measure, and cut the thread of a person’s life). The textile “weaving” of video turns the metaphorical weaving of ideas, spaces, art, and academic forms into an aesthetic model. My most recent project, *select important things*, uses similar techniques to different purposes as it interweaves stock footage with personal anecdotes to explore the construction of knowledge systems.

In 2022, the first iteration of my newest series of artworks was exhibited as part of *Personal Structures*, the European Cultural Centre’s Venice Biennale exhibition. *select important things* makes use of many of the same techniques as *(tfw) spin measure cut*: it is a work that intertwines found footage with my own creative writing to create a series of videos that can be reordered into different configurations to become different installations. At the end of a hallway in the Palazzo Bembo, there are two dark rooms illuminated by the light of looping videos. Walking down the hallway, the low buzz of voices coming through the screens can be heard. In the first room—a vestibule more than a room—two screens face each other with headphones hung beside them. On these screens, the “knowledge system videos” play in alphabetical order. These micro videos—each less than thirty seconds long—are the content of the work, made to be organized and reorganized. Here, they are presented as a dataset that has yet to be activated: a deceptively simple list of things and actions and feelings illustrated by stock footage and narrated by definitions that careen through the memories and ideas that lend significance to the most minute details of the world. This set of “knowledge system videos” takes inspiration from theories of Knowledge Representation (Davis, Shrobe, and Szolovits 1993), from the ways that humans try to capture the “richness” of the world for machines. In this work, the weaving is conceptual not aesthetic: the threads of the personal and the generic run side by side in the “knowledge system videos,” ready to fold into new patterns within the fabric of each installation.



“patterns, rocks, gold, planets,” collage created for *select important things* (2022). Jane Frances Dunlop.

In the second room, three large screens mounted at eye level loop through different arrangements of the “knowledge system videos.” These arrangements capture experiments in categorization: the division of the knowledge system into related groups (things, feelings, actions, attributes) and then again into smaller subsections (things that are places, feelings that scratch, actions with thinking, . . .). In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write, “In order to understand the world and function in it, we have to categorize, in ways that make sense to us, the things and experiences we encounter” (1980, 162). Lakoff and Johnson are talking about the world-making power of metaphor: how ideas of likeness shape culture and thinking. Metaphor, in Lakoff and Johnson’s book, is a powerful performance that not only describes but also defines what is possible (and impossible) through these categorizations.

In *select important things*, the knowledge system metaphor weaves between a subjective and—for lack of a better phrase—deeply human activity through to a machinic process of categorization and then back toward the human. The installation (mis)takes the process of categorization by shaping its data and datasets via instinct and whim. The making of knowledge systems, the categorization of datasets: these epistemological tools are mis-deployed one on top of another to build and organize a version of the world that is so specific, so personal as to be possibly useless. The installation practices categorization at a personal level, as a way of making sense; it is a practice of shaping a world, for knowing what the world is and how it operates. And so, the work performs one system of knowing. I capture one version of the world and its possible categorizations. As the arrangements play out in parallel, they are cast together in different ways. These arrangements become a score for false randomness: the videos interweave in a pattern that is too big to see, too unintended to explain. This is the aim, with *(fiv) spin measure cut* as well as *select important things*: to see what patterns might emerge unintended from scores that—like certain algorithms—function in ways that can exceed intention or control. These works do not end in answers but rather take and remake the systems that shape the world and lay them back out again as aesthetic propositions, as art systems that echo real systems, moving between one another in curious ways.

Weaving, as I will try to conceptualize it here, is a performative approach; it is a performance score as mode of discovery that tries to send certain threads flying together to see what patterns might emerge. The warp threads—held stationary by the loom—are bound together by the weft, which moves back and forth to produce the final textile. Weaving, as metaphor and score for artistic research, enables us to think through what is bound together in a work and why. It suggests both constraints as well as possibilities, a unified whole that is simultaneously made up with discrete threads. Weaving is a score that lets me operate with intention and precision before I let a work unfold (unravel) into its own disorder. Central to research, and therefore to thinking practice as research, is the fact one does not necessarily know where the exploration will lead. My artist statement ends with the claim that “my work begins with the concrete structures and abstract ideas that make the world, shaping how we are together. It ends in aesthetic propositions that provide no answers” (Dunlop 2023). This statement is one attempt to articulate the uncertainty of research and the centrality of exploration, as well as to highlight a particular epistemological position that views knowledge (or, research outcomes) as something other than answers. In what follows, my aim is to present this methodology for artistic research. It is informed by performance studies and visual art approaches, and it binds a feminist epistemology to the different forms artistic practices take.

I work through the metaphor of weaving because it enables me to highlight how information and ideas move from one context to another as well as how information and ideas bind together and fray apart. While textile metaphors appear across a range of theories (such as Collins 2016; Ingold 2010; Paavolainen 2017), weaving, as I will outline it here, is intended to capture the

practical aims and methods of artistic research into performance and contemporary digital technologies. In the theorists I situate myself through (Haraway, Plant, Kember and Zylinska), weaving is a practice that reflects feminist perspectives on technology and places them within a broader landscape of technological history that includes the critical perspectives of cyberfeminism (Braidotti 1996; Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright 2002; Kember and Zylinska 2012; Goh and Thompson 2021) as well as other recent interventions (Laboria Cubeoniks 2014; Russell 2020). Building on these theorists and the artistic legacies of feminist approaches to digital art, I present weaving as a methodological approach that unites these theories in artistic research. In working with weaving, the different threads of the artistic research provide a means for situating my work theoretically and artistically within broader cultural studies and digital humanities settings, as well as in relation to the progression of my own line of inquiry. Central to this practice of situating is relation: the warp and weft threads of my practice operate through their relation to one another.

My use of weaving as a model for my processes of inquiry is indebted to intersectional feminist theories from cultural and performance studies, as well as media theory, which I bring together here. It is this work of entangling ideas and practice through artistic research that I refer to as a process of “weaving.” As others before me have identified (Boddington 2006; Haraway 2016; Paavolainen 2017; Plant 1998; Bal 2002), weaving necessitates multiple threads and thus implies the strength and frictions of things—different contexts, people, or concepts—as they come together. Through my work as an artist and as a researcher, I investigate the structures of digital technologies as they interface with material and cultural infrastructures to consider how our concrete systems shape and are shaped by abstract ideas. This broad project finds specificity in the interrogation of technological and social systems: *(f/w) spin measure cut* focused on the impacts of Internet communication technologies and the politics of emotion, while *select important things* explores the paralleled impacts of machine learning and Internet culture on the knowledge systems and subjecthood within digital ubiquity. In all instances, weaving as metaphor and model attends to the movement of relation within those overlapping concerns. It is a generative process, a process in which pieces come together in new totalities, where threads can be traced through an array of work. By thinking through weaving as artistic research, it is possible to point to the threads of art making, the influences of outside resources and the written considerations that together form a critical practice. These threads are bound together by this practice: they remain distinct while also becoming part of the fabric of a process or a project. Weaving is a process that moves back and forth between the various components of a project and pulls them into tight relation. It captures the different elements of research, the useful frictions they produce as they are bound together.

Relation is essential to this project because it signals the ongoing social interactions through which the politics of emotion—wherein the affects generated by interaction gain meaning from their broader cultural and social context—overlap with the systems of digital technologies. Relation is performative, it is generative and ongoing; it is both constituted by its context as well as capable of (re)creating and (re)interpreting the paradigms that produce it. My artistic and theoretical investigations proceed for the conceptual as well as concrete ways the relation of ideas, objects, and systems generate meaning and consequence. Working with weaving is a way of thinking with the generative collisions research renders. It also emphasizes the parallel between personal or social interactions and technological exchanges. By weaving digital technologies and system analysis with more familiar tools and tropes of self-expression, my work demonstrates the ways in which the personal has become technological—to rephrase the famous second-wave feminist maxim. It is through the repeated practices of our relations with one another through digital systems that the social and technological become imbricated. This is an overriding preoccupation within my work: how relationships are formed or enacted through

negotiations of the technological and emotional infrastructures that support them. It is through the efforts of these practices that togetherness is experienced, often as a temporary condition within the context of digital networks, but an important aspect of how mediating technologies have become part of our daily lives.

Elsewhere, I have argued that generosity and dissonance are two concepts that, taken together, enable an understanding of how affective, emotional and technological frictions are imbricated in artworks (Dunlop 2017). When weaving is used as a way of thinking and making, generosity and dissonance become the productive consequences of that work. Generosity describes the practice of care and reciprocity within the exchanges that constitute relations. It is an openness to the difficulty of difference as it aligns with the will toward putting things, people, and ideas together. Dissonance names these difficulties, the frictions produced in those actions, the imperfection and inequality as well as in the lags, latencies and glitches produced by relation. These are not separable concepts: generosity moves the threads of an artistic process forward and wills them together and it is only within that unity that dissonance—the insights found in the frictions and noises of being together—can fully be encountered. Generosity weaves the fabric; dissonance works in the tension of the threads one against another: both are vital to process and finished product. In the Sadie Plant quote at the opening of this article, weaving is described as a process that stabilizes as well as unravels: it is a bringing together and a fraying apart. Taken from *Zeros + Ones*, it comes from the cyberfeminist's compelling theorization of the influence that textiles and womens' collective labours had on the invention of computers (1998). Plant demonstrates how weaving as model and metaphor enacts this approach practically, situating the process in the intersecting histories of digital technologies and the “women's work” of textile weaving or embroidery. Generosity and dissonance, as modes of knowledge making as well as relation, enact the temptation of being “fixated and locked”—the will toward the together of generosity—but instead “runs away—” the resounding frictions named by dissonance (Plant 1998, 62).

Throughout, I will return to *(f/w) spin measure cut* (2016) and *select important things* (2022) as a way of demonstrating weaving as an artistic research methodology. My work is invested, artistically and epistemically, in the slippage between the material and conceptual that characterizes many key ideas in both digital philosophies and performance studies. The Derek Conquergood and Baz Kershaw quotes that begin this article explicitly address this proximity of different modes of knowing and making as a central quality of performance studies. Taking inspiration from feminist approaches to knowledge making from theorists such as Sadie Plant and Diana Taylor—who provide the other epigraphs—I approach this hybridity through a model of weaving. Weaving as an approach to artistic research provides a way to intertwine academic and artistic research processes, it is a way to navigate the relationship between the concrete structures and abstract ideas that shape the world. It is both the framework and impetus for my artistic research methodology. Weaving is a central motif in my work, a score that operates as a model and a metaphor for exploring ideas, generating material and situating these practices in the world.

### **Weaving: Artistic Research**

Weaving provides a tactic for negotiating the simultaneity of online/offline that characterizes the contemporary digital ubiquity that I work across, as well as the slippage between the abstract and the concrete of the terms associated with it. It functions to enact the generative and relational qualities of feminist epistemologies. The possibilities and importance of practices of relation as a site that generates knowledge and meaning is present throughout the work of the feminist scholars that ground my methodology. Sara Ahmed's work addresses how emotions are generated through the interactions of people and culture (2004, 2017); Rosalyn Diprose's

definition of generosity foregrounds the potential of an ethical interpersonal encounter (2002); in the work of Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska, the interaction of new media and creative practice is vital as a means for producing things (ideas, artworks) that can intervene in the normalizing forces of culture (2009, 2012). It is through these thinkers that I weave my own work, topically, as a study of emotion and technology, as well as methodologically and politically as invested in feminist approaches to cultural objects and to the knowledge processes that render them meaningful. Thinking with these theorists provides new insights into how artistic research can intervene in and enact new politics of knowing, while acknowledging how these insights are located within a genealogy of feminist thinking-doing.

This playing with the ways in which conceptual and concrete objects operate in close proximity is central to my work: terms such as *network*, *interface*, or *performance* refer to concrete actions or physical systems as well as to the more effusive theories or conditions. This is symptomatic of the “promiscuous traffic” of performance studies referenced by Conquergood: “[The] promiscuous traffic between different ways of knowing carries the most radical promise of performance studies research. Performance studies struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice” (2002, 145). Here, Conquergood highlights the methodological promise and potential of performance studies: the epistemological terms and possibilities of movement within the apparent opposition of theory and practice. The generative value of this movement is tied to its potential for performing feminist modes of knowledge through generosity and dissonance. This counter or parallel generation of knowledge seeks to interrogate how that knowledge is generated by extending what constitutes its making. For Kember and Zylińska, the epistemic implications and applications of the insights provided by practice is central to their work. Writing about their collaboration research process in *Interfaces of Performance* (Chatzichristodoulou, Jefferies, and Zerihan 2009), they demonstrate how their “creative media” are a “creative/critical practice” that intervenes in media practices (Kember and Zylińska 2009, 13). With “creative media,” they entangle artistic methods with media and theory to extend the impact as well as insights of their work. The importance and possibilities of a different performance of knowledge resonances with my own methods: Kember and Zylińska capture how artistic research is an investigation into the specific concerns of a project, as well as a means for producing new knowledge through its enactment.

This is key to both my work and theirs: the performative potential of artistic research enables them to generate epistemic interventions in new forms. This is how they “produce things,” create insights whose scope exceeds the written analysis that captures it. Addressing imbalances of institutionally inscribed power, such as those that surround knowledge, is central to an inclusive intersectional feminism that aims to empower historically suppressed ways of knowing, thinking, and generating ideas.

The terms for how artistic practice is used in research inquiries are numerous and their definitions shift with usage. The effort to define and distinguish these terms, as well as their regional and practical differences, is present throughout the literature on methodologies related to artistic practice, research-creation, or practice as research (Biggs and Karlsson 2011; Nelson 2013; Kershaw 2011; Smith and Dean 2009; Riley and Hunter 2016). I choose to frame my methodology as artistic research while acknowledging that it runs parallel to (or is perhaps synonymous with) these other terms. All these terms signal the centrality of practice as both mode and output of a research inquiry. They refer to the ability of research to modify art making, and art making’s ability to change the terms of research, to expand the terms upon which new ideas are encountered. The artistic research processes that govern my work, and the conceptual justification for them, are indebted to—and built upon—feminist approaches to epistemology.

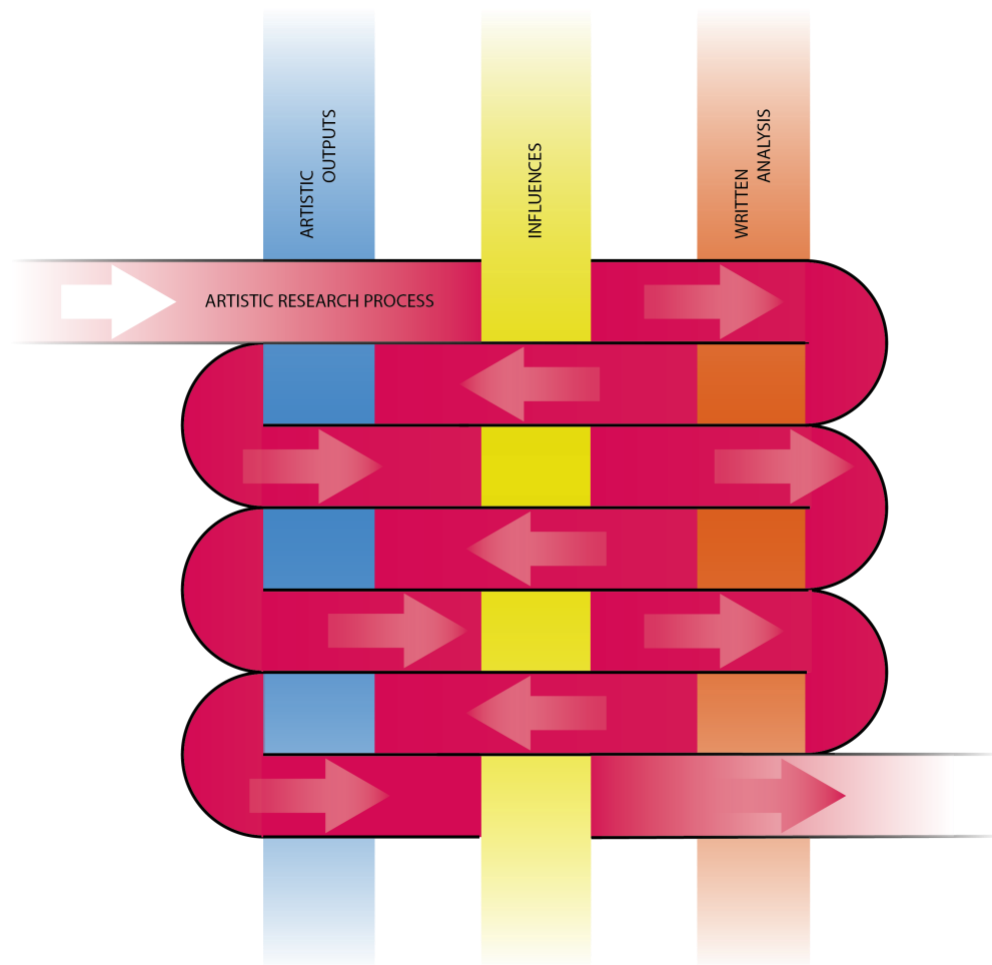
This work is, ultimately, deeply invested in how, as Taylor writes in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, “the production of knowledge is always a collective effort, a series of back-and-forth conversations that produce multiple results” (2003, xx).

As a discipline, performance studies is skilled at interpreting the movement between artistic and social practices because its central object of study does exactly that. The “multiple results” of the “back-and-forth” relations, through conversation as well as exchange and performance, provide the strategies for negotiating this relation. Weaving, theoretically and in my artistic practice, foregrounds frictions produced in the intersubjectivity of relation, a necessary concern of a project focused on interpersonal relation and one that concentrates on the intersection of emotion and performativity in exchanges situated on Internet communications. An intersectional feminism provides—structurally and conceptually—both framework and justification for this focus on relation and, as a result, on relationality. My emphasis here is on relation, on the processes and consequences of proximity and connection. However, these connections and proximities are inseparable from relationality, which is to say from the ways relation unspools into socially, culturally, and politically situated networks and structures. I aim to amplify the claims of relation—as well as its emotional or affectual consequences—as modes of knowing, and to use those modes of knowing to engage with contemporary technology. Generosity, distance, weaving: all of these terms work to think through how relation occurs, what it produces, what problems it makes, and what problems it solves.

Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean capture the dynamic nature of practice as research process in their introduction to *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts* (2009). Smith and Dean prefer the term “practice-led,” which they complement with “research-led practice” (7–9, 20). Their multidirectional “iterative cyclic model” demonstrates the multiplicity of paths within the possibilities of artistic research. The diagram of research processes they provide maps how ideas move into artworks, returning to ideas and cycling through theoretical outputs (20); their model foregrounds the dynamic and mobile nature of practice as research (19–25). Within Smith and Dean’s modelling, my work could be classified as practice-based—which is generally used to emphasize studies in which the artwork is a form or output of the research and set in opposition to a practice-led approach in which the artwork leads to insights presented in a more traditional written style. I use artistic research in order to acknowledge both the multidirectional relationship between these different approaches within my work and that my practice is central to the research output.

In weaving, there are two kinds of threads: the warp and the weft. The warp are stationary threads that form the frame of a cloth; the weft moves between the various warp threads—its path is held in place by the warp, and it binds the warp threads together. Thinking through, and with, weaving demonstrates how the progression of an artistic research process operates as a weft that binds together the warp of artistic outputs (experimentation and exploration; analysis and synthesis), influences (inspirational theories; artworks) and writing (analysis and synthesis; experimentation and exploration). These strands form the warp of my work: they are the parallel threads that run concurrently and give shape to the inquiry that moves between.





**Weaving as Artistic Research Process.** The artistic research process is represented by the weft thread: it weaves between the warp threads, binding their insights together into a single coherent contribution. The warp threads represent key methods that run parallel to one another and are bound together by the artistic research process: Artistic outputs include practical, aesthetic and intuitively motivated explorations into the research topic. Influences include investigations into the work of others that provide context and inspiration. Written analysis includes critical interrogation that articulates line of inquiry.

In “The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research,” Henk Borgdorff writes: “Artistic research . . . unites the artistic and academic in an enterprise that impacts both domains. Art thereby transcends its former limits, aiming through the research to contribute to thinking and understanding; academia, for its part, opens up its boundaries to forms of thinking and understanding that are interwoven with artistic practices” (2011, 45). My use of weaving actively emphasizes the “forms of thinking and understanding that are interwoven with artistic practices,” clarifying their value and application by bringing them together with feminist approaches that are likewise invested in opening up the boundaries that define knowing.

The warp and the weft are different approaches, different paths through the same project of binding ideas together. As weft moves through the warp, it creates a fabric that includes the nuances of different threads as well as the outcome their entirety produces. The artistic outputs account for the practical, aesthetic, and intuitive explorations of research through the creation of artworks. The artworks produced provide insights into the inquiry through their processes of making as well as in the reflection upon finished works. The artistic research process interweaves the insights gleaned from the process of making these artworks, as well as the critical impacts of their final form, with the situating support of the artistic and theoretical influences. It binds the influences, the artworks, and the written analysis that constitute the artistic research process

together in a single contribution. The influences and contexts thread accounts for investigations into the work of others. Weaving captures how the artistic research brings together engagements with other artists, theorists, and writers as they attend to related areas and themes. This puts the artistic outputs as well as any written analysis that might accompany them in relation to broader historical and conceptual legacies. This thread represents the written processes that articulate the outcomes of the artistic research process by analyzing the relationship between the artistic outputs and the influences. Within this process, what I have termed “written analysis” can take a variety of forms, including academic articles (such as this one), essays in exhibition catalogues, project statements, and more experimental forms of creative nonfiction. All these different modes provide a means for critical reflections that explore and capture the synthesis of artistic outputs and influences. The frictions, the points of crossover during the weaving process, are vital to the evolution of a project. These are the points that generate new perspectives and possibilities. This approach to artistic research proves to be productive in multiple ways: it evokes the experience of friction between the different strands of a broader work as well as in the strength of the new “textile” that the process generates.

The weft thread of the artistic research process moves through these warp threads; it moves over and under each in turn. It brings their insights into relation with each other: following the weft is following the line of inquiry that is shaped and supported by the processes represented by the warp. In *(tfn) spin measure cut*, themes are captured in the videos that interweave within the gallery: the cut of a knife through a body, the mechanization of a factory floor, the rhythm of a loom. The work takes its structure from the Fates, the Greek muses who spin and measure and cut the thread of a life’s fate. The title combines their actions with the Internet acronym “that feel when” to reference the inevitable feelings of living and making a life in digital ubiquity. The work is made of a series of videos, one for each action. The videos have two parts: the first is a video poem in which lines of writing are read aloud as they appear on screen, the second is a video textile that weaves together stock footage. In “cut,” the textile interweaves video of open-heart surgery with a person cutting colourful plants; “measure” makes threads of men in suits measure a model of a future city and birds on the shore of a lake; in “spin,” it is dancers and a large moving machine. Throughout all three, a factory loom moves in black and white. In the gallery, the videos loop on three screens so that all three always play simultaneously. The sound plays simultaneously, making a whispering chorus while the poems appear between the cacophony of sounds that accompany the textiles.

Weaving layers and layers again in the piece: ideas are captured in the found footage and then intertwined in the videos, echoing through the poems before being woven once again in the gallery space. These gestures—related labours that perform and define living—frame an approach to the intersections of the functional, material, and emotional terms of contemporary networked life. Between the warp threads, the weft of process crosses back past itself. These cross-backs mark the instances of refinement, revision, return, and focusing during the artistic research process and inform the weft as it moves onward. *(tfn) spin measure cut* uses the weft to bind lines of thought into an examination of intimacy—embodied and emotional—as it unravels in contexts of digital ubiquity. It was part of a series of works I made between 2015 and 2018 that interrogated the cultural functions of Internet communication tools through their misuse. The use of video chorus, and glitching caused by the looping of videos through unstable Internet networks, continued in other works such as *burl outward at a certain pace* (2016), while the concept’s grounding theories were captured in talks and essays. The specific textile woven within *(tfn) spin measure cut* contains threads that continue into future ideas. The process of weaving occurs over time, but the result is not fully understood until the weaving has been completed. Each section is a story, but the fabric continues. The aim is to enact, concurrently, an aesthetic

and epistemological weaving that generates new objects through the relation of the strands pulled together.

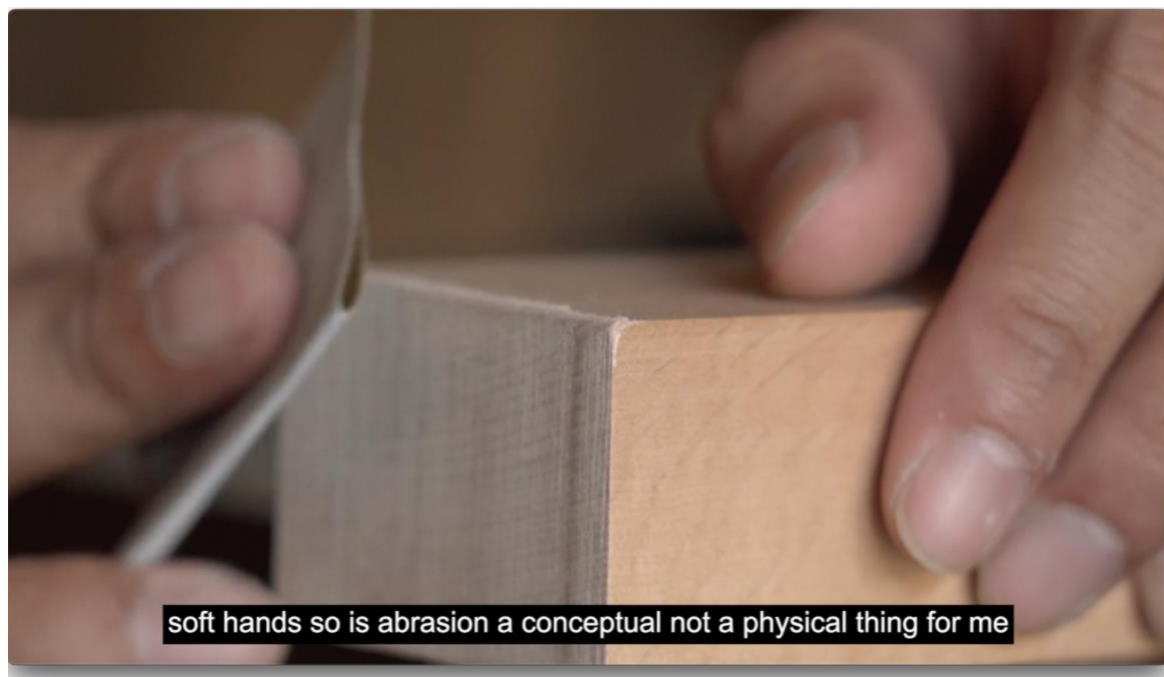
### **Weaving: A Feminist Epistemic Paradigm**

Weaving, as a way of understanding the interconnected movement of ideas, owes its conceptual lineage to contemporary feminist theories. It finds origin in feminist epistemological approaches that foreground movement and the entanglement of different perspectives (Bal 2002; Haraway 2016; Plant 1998; Tsing 2011, 2015). Weaving aims to make actual this entangled knowledge making and understanding, seeking not only to analyze but also to enact new ways of knowing and being in relation. In her vital work “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives,” Haraway writes, “The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (1988, 584). Weaving is one way of making methodology through attention to “the possibility of webs of connections”: the fabric of process is both solidarity and conversation made through “partial, locatable, critical knowledges.”

Donna Haraway’s writings articulate the feminist necessity of situating ideas, of working with ways of knowing that acknowledge the processes and structures that produce these ideas as knowledge. The changing knowledges that Haraway gives voice to echo the model for interdisciplinary cultural studies proposed by Mieke Bal in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002). Bal advances a methodology for “travelling concepts” that focuses on how the movement of a specific concept enables a scholar to “grope” through the shifting definitions of key concepts as they move across disciplinary lines (Bal 2002, 11). Bal’s methodology reinforces the power of this situating by forming an interdisciplinary methodology that tracks the shifting meaning of an idea as it moves across different disciplines (that is, different structures for producing knowledge). Importantly, “groping is a collective endeavour”: it is the negotiation of contingent meanings, the acknowledgement that things do not “mean the same thing for everyone,” that makes interdisciplinary work important (2002, 11). For Bal, attention to how a concept “travels,” how its meaning shifts within different contexts, provides a strategy for undertaking interdisciplinary work that acknowledges and makes use of the impact that context has on meaning. For both theorists, there is a feminist emphasis on the relational nature of knowledge production. The emphasis on tangles (Haraway) and collective groping (Bal) casts this relational knowledge as something that is gestural, in process and in tension. It foregrounds a sense of embodiment, as it emphasizes a materiality to both knowledge as information and as thought.

This relational and tactile sense of knowledge and knowledge making is key to my use of weaving. In *select important things* (2022), weaving as an epistemological tactic is the foundation for the work’s structure. *select important things* begins with Knowledge Representation, with the theories that consider processes and procedures for representing the world as data for machines (Davis, Shrobe, and Szolovits 1993). At the centre of the project is a knowledge system: the micro videos that capture the world through a combination of stock footage and personal anecdote. The first of the collection (which is ordered alphabetically), “abrasive,” opens with close-up footage of hands sanding down the edges of a piece of wood as the voiceover says “soft hands so is abrasion a conceptual not a physical thing for me.” As the twenty-one-second video unfolds, the narrator talks about schoolyard pebbles and scraped knees and the video cuts to images of children in a playground, then to a sneaker stepping on pebbles. What this video captures is an idea of “abrasive” that is specific and associative. The narration does not offer a

definition but instead situates “abrasive” in experience, illustrating the threads that move off the idea to give shape to the concept itself.



Still from “abrasive,” part of *select important things* (2022). Jane Frances Dunlop.

The footage of the video begins with something that is abrasive—the productive abrasion of sandpaper on wood—but then departs from the explicitly abrasive to illustrate the images of the narration. The “abrasive” captured is a conceptual not a physical thing, even if it is illustrated through a story about a physical experience. It is a contradictory piece of knowledge: experience, action, and consequence tangled up together. Each of the videos in the knowledge system unfolds in a similar way: footage is chosen to reflect the anecdotes that form the entry as often as the thing itself. The stock footage is high quality, clear, and cleanly shot. It was made to be used for anything or everything: commercials and corporate videos, personal or professional projects. In the depositories of stock footage that I used, single ideas or things are distilled and then endlessly repeated. For each entry in the knowledge system, I would begin with the entry as keyword (abrasive; alive; Antarctica; artist; boredom; bricks; butterflies; charisma). Sometimes the results were endless: hundreds of videos of butterflies are available, free to use, from the stock footage site Pexels. Others necessitated more careful authoring: there are few videos labelled charisma, yet so many videos of performers and speakers and dancers. With each video, I set what I know about an idea against what others know as I tried to align the two through these generic images. Each piece weaves a composite from ways of world knowing, combining the collected understanding of a database with stories and images from a single life.

*select important things* is a project in its early stages. Its amalgamation of different modes of knowing collected and repurposed to reflect a single, deeply subjective mode of knowing is intended to reflect the increasingly fraught landscape of twenty-first-century epistemologies (McIntyre 2018). The work of artistic research brings together concepts and concerns from multiple disciplines. Weaving is a way of conceptualizing a relational and discursive approach to the problems of knowing that arise within the fracturing of contemporary politics and news cycles. It is language for thinking through how the various threads of this project are brought together: the “intellectual-creative practices that also produce things” that Kember and Zylinska identify as the centre of their work across artistic and theoretical modes (2009, 10). There,

Kember and Zylinska are describing artistic research: the process of making that, as it becomes entangled with thinking, can “produce things.” These “things” are the artefacts (objects, performances, videos, essays, poems. . .) that an artistic inquiry produces, but also the ideas that those artefacts are catalysts for. There are many “things” in artistic research. Framing my own approach as weaving foregrounds the contact between those things; how these objects interact with each other and the world concerns me, and is central to any “thing” they produce.

This attention to interaction, to frictions and syncopations, is a situating in Donna Haraway’s sense: understanding how context informs meaning, and imposes assumptions, to comprehend the situation of meaning. In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway expands upon her earlier work on “situated knowledges” (1988) with the model-metaphor of “tangles”: “I try to follow the threads where they lead in order to track them and find their tangles and patterns crucial for staying with the trouble in real and particular places and times” (2016, 3). Thinking through situated knowledges is, in *Staying with the Trouble* and in critical responses to Haraway’s work (Haraway 1988, 2016; Goh 2017; Lewis 2017), informed by a feminist politic concerned with the dismantling of historical hierarchies of knowledge by accounting for a broader set of perspectives and possibilities. For Haraway, this is a way of understanding the “tentacular thinking”—that is, thinking that is operating with a multiplicity of orientations—necessary for situating knowledge through difference (2016, 31). Here, the “real and particular” that focuses my work in both *(f/w) spin measure cut* and *select important things* are the concrete consequences that unfold with the modes of thinking/knowing instantiated by new and emerging digital technologies.

The theorists I draw on provide a methodological precedent for feminist epistemologies that emphasise the mobility of knowledge, particularly as it is constituted through processes of relation. The embedded nature of the insights produced through artistic research is the way in which it is able to action these feminist epistemic models as practical approach. The siting of my work within contemporary technological discourse and practice, and more specifically in the digital tools that mediate contemporary relation, is an example of the practical manifestations of this. The tools and the aesthetics of digital ubiquity are the material of my work: I pull footage from stock libraries and livestream performances and frame my practice through screen capture and search engines. The individual approaches of each artwork reflect the shifts in my line of inquiry, as I investigate particular aspects of digitally entangled relation and presence. However, this reoccurring technical and aesthetic choice locates my practice, and my research, firmly within the context that it seeks to understand.

This embeddedness reflects the situated and responsive nature of a feminist epistemic that functions through mutual influence: I respond to the context that I work in at the same time as I acknowledge how my work is shaped by that context. As Borgdorff states: “Works of art and artistic practices are not self-contained; they are situated and embedded. The meaning of art is generated in interactions with relevant surroundings” (2011, 47). By deploying the techniques and technologies of relationships, I am able to investigate how we are embedded, surrounded by, and interacting with these conditions. The corruption of objective data through this artistic meddling is important to the process, or irrelevant, depending on perspective: I am a product of my times, already entangled with the practices of relation that each project engages. It is for this reason (and with this in mind) that artistic research provides a crucial insight into contemporary practices of relation mediated by new and emerging technologies.

Relation weaves knowledge together, and forms from the friction produced by these encounters. Throughout the work I have produced as an artist and as a theorist over the last decade, I have engaged with various theoretical and artistic practices that make this manifest. I have used

weaving to work practically with different threads of an artistic research process: to bind the different modes of inquiry together and to draw attention to the importance of the frictions found in that process. This approach has enabled me to directly engage with the digital technologies that mediate relation, social practice, and knowledge production, and that in doing so define this cultural moment and its constituent webs of context. By playful intervention into the digital systems that frame daily exchanges, my artistic research is able to document as well as intervene in contemporary postdigital contexts. Documenting these technologies makes their functions available for future critical engagement, contributing to historical understandings of technologies. The reproduction of digitally mediated practices of relation, reframed as performance, also serves to intervene in contemporary understandings of that mediation.

These artworks complicate how we understand our relationships, provoking viewers to reconsider how technologies and practices are obscured and invisibilized by ubiquity and habit. The threads of my approach enable me to bind together the insights that weave through my research, bringing together the ongoing fabric of my practice. It is the ability to negotiate ways of knowing that artistic practice entangled with contemporary systems captures and re-creates, a weaving that reaches edges before doubling back on itself: the work makes propositions but often resists conclusions. Instead of seeking unity or completion, these works make use of the friction of relation as it is paralleled by the tensions of digital mediations. Friction is present in all modes of mediation, in all the ways that our current practices of relation are always already performing the social into its future iterations.

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## Postmemory: Fragments / Crypt

Ben Spatz with

Lxo Cohen, Lindsey Dodd, Nazlihan Eda Erçin, Paula Kolar, and Agnieszka Mendel

This photo essay gathers evidence of the video works *Postmemory: Fragments* and *Postmemory: Crypt*, which ran from June 27 to August 4, 2022, at Holocaust Centre North at the University of Huddersfield in northern England.

Included here are photographs from the video works and their installation, as well as the complete exhibition program. In this accompanying statement, I (Spatz) position this work within the Judaica project, an extended investigation of contemporary Jewish identity that I have led over the past decade, and in relation to the four themes suggested by the editors of this special issue: ethics, knowledge, affect, and power.<sup>1</sup>



Still from *Postmemory: Fragments* (single-channel video, 2022). I confront a combination of Jewish ritual objects (“Judaica”), contemporary sculptures, and canvases left in the space by a community painting class.

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## I. Ethics: A Laboratory of Fragments

The notion of fragments carries a long history in Jewish mystical thought, perhaps best known through the popularized notion of *tikkun* or repair. Yet, as the editor of the journal *Protocols* observes in reference to Israel/Palestine: “Contemporary Jewish power relations clearly complicate any simplistic allusions to repair as an unambiguous ‘Jewish value’” (Ratskoff 2019). Perhaps this is why I prefer to stay with the notion of fragments themselves: the shards, sparks, filaments, or crumbs of life that are said to have fallen to earth after some original vessels of light were shattered. If *tikkun* is the act of repair, understood here as the gathering of broken fragments, then I am thinking here less of what the repaired world might eventually look like and more of what the practice of gathering involves.<sup>2</sup> What are the fragments of the past and present that we encounter when we see the world through the lens of a catastrophic shattering? How do we encounter these fragments and what can we do with them?

My mother creates fragments. Through a unique process of pouring and breaking plaster, she produces objects that appear to have been generated by destruction, like the crumbled bits of buildings after a bombing or an earthquake. Upon these rough objects, she paints breathtaking images: forests, skies, swimming pools, always broken where the surface meets the edge (Spatz-Rabinowitz 2022). Like her, I search for ways to make fragments luminous, but my approach has developed through experimental theatre rather than painting. More than twenty years ago, I first encountered Tim Etchells’s description, in *Certain Fragments*, of the fragmentary as a starting point for creative process: “They had this unspoken agreement that no one would bring anything too completed to the process—a few scraps or fragments of text, an idea or two for action, a costume, an idea about space, a sketched-out piece of music—everything unfinished, distinctly incomplete—so there’d be more spaces for other things to fill in . . . more dots to join” (Etchells 1999, 51).

Since encountering the work of post-Grotowskian practitioners in 2003, I have been working with song fragments: bits and pieces of songs, hints of melody, simple rhythms, qualities and timbres of the voice. Song fragments became the most stable feature of my artistic practice, at once malleable and unbreakable, constantly shifting their meaning yet undeniably evocative and somatically resonant across bodies. The Judaica project began in 2012, when I started to work with Jewish songs. Following Grotowski’s formulation of the theatre as laboratory, while increasingly in conversation with the methodological and archival questions posed by “practice-based research” and similar developments, I gradually developed an audiovisual approach to embodied research that short circuits the living practice of songwork to new forms of video publication. In this essay, I focus on a single pair of video works from the Judaica project.

*Postmemory: Fragments* and *Postmemory: Crypt* are two single-channel video works, each just over forty-five minutes long. The audiovisual material used in each video comes from a single session. Those two sessions were recorded just four days apart, during a week in September 2017 when I visited a number of ruined and partially restored synagogues in the rural Świętokrzyskie region of Poland with my two research partners, Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel. It was Agnieszka’s idea to visit these sites. I had been focusing on more urban and culturally active locations in Poland, such as the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków, and the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław. Yet this initially minor addition to our itinerary generated some of the most resonant audiovisual material out of six months of lab sessions. In 2021, I began to explore the possibility of collaborating with Holocaust Centre North, a regionally oriented

archive located in my own university, and for the first time directly faced the question of holocaust memory in relation to the Judaica project.

I had previously produced a thirty-minute video article focused in part on our lab team's preparation for the journey to Poland (Spatz et al. 2018). Eda had also produced an eighteen-minute video essay using the recordings from our visit to a different synagogue, in Działoszyce (Erçin, Mendel, and Spatz 2021).<sup>3</sup> After speaking with historian Lindsey Dodd, who agreed to contribute to the exhibition, I decided to work with approximately four hours of video that had been recorded at two other synagogues: in Szydłów on September 8 and in Pińczów on September 12. When I sat down to edit this material, I intended to produce a single twelve-minute video essay, combining video material from both sites with annotated texts in the style of “illuminated” video I had been developing (Spatz 2021). But I found that I could not do this. Perhaps not only because of the material itself, but also because I was now thinking of it explicitly in terms of holocaust memory, it now felt impossible to cut and montage the sessions as I had done in some earlier videos. As I watched the material, I was surprised by the degree of narrative complexity that appeared, even without any editing. During the lab sessions, we had not attempted to generate narrative. Indeed, we had spoken very little to each other, relying on the lab's methodological division of labor to structure our practice.<sup>4</sup>

As I wrote in the exhibition program: “In these practice sessions, we lay our songs and our bodies against the particularities of each site. We did not plan what would happen or draw explicit distinctions between memory and imagination, tradition and innovation, the proper and the improper. We worked with care, supporting each other in our practices. As each of us takes the role of performer in turn, we perceive different aspects of the place and respond in different ways.” The lab method itself was designed to prioritize an ethics of embodiment. Yet I realized, watching these videos, that this ethics of embodiment was also revealing an ethics of emplacement. Just as the songs and song fragments, drawn from many different sources, circulated through our bodies, energizing and vibrating them, producing shifting cultural meanings in a kind of alchemy, so our bodies circulated through these unique sites, interacting with them and revealing their layerings in a kind of embodied research on and with each place.<sup>5</sup>

I noticed, for example, how all three of us carefully removed our shoes, as well as jackets and other items, when we transitioned from the “director” and videographer roles into that of the practitioner/performer. This is a common practice in theatre pedagogy and ensemble-based performer training, but its effects are intensified and transformed when bare feet come in contact with the cold stone or hardwood floors of such overdetermined sites as these synagogues. Bare feet are blasphemy in a place of worship; yet these places are no longer active, and we did not arrive to them as religious pilgrims. Bare feet, from a post-Grotowskian perspective, are above all a way of restoring contact with place and ecology. Once released from the bondage of shoes, the feet become sensitive instruments, feeling into the textures of each place as much as the hands, eyes, or ears might do. We remove our shoes and other extra garments in order to become porous or even vulnerable to the space, so that we can more fully hear and feel its invitations.

The ethics of this lab, as I understand it, is an ethics of fragments. We do not work with hard, mathematical particles or with technoscientific substances but with fragments of livingness: songs, bodies, identities, places, all of them mutually constituted with each other, none of them existing alone. For me, practice-based research asks how an ethics of embodiment—like that which I associate with the intercorporeal relations of shared embodied practice—can be carried through into various forms of mediation, toward the institutional and the social. This text is composed of



fragments, as are the video works it discusses. While I have written it alone, I follow scientific laboratory protocols in attributing authorship to all those who have made vital contributions to the lab process at various stages. As of this writing, Eda and Agnieszka have not met Lindsey, Paula, or Lxo in person, yet in this document we are all mixed together through a mediated synthesis of videographic and textual materials.



Still from *Postmemory: Fragments* (single-channel video, 2022). Without my realizing at the time, Agnieszka's videographic choice juxtaposes my face against that of Moses in Kazimierz Gustaw Zemła's sculpture *Decalogue*.



Still from *Postmemory: Fragments* (single-channel video, 2022). Outside the synagogue, Eda breathes and stretches near a sculpture that I later interpret as Baba Yaga, a figure from slavic folklore.

## 2. Knowledge: Audiovisual Becoming

I am continually amazed by how much remains to be discovered in this video material that was recorded over five years ago. It is not only that I notice elements of the synagogues themselves that I had not noticed originally or had forgotten. More surprisingly, our interactions with these places appear narratively rich in ways that belie the improvisational nature of the sessions. To give one example: The synagogue in Szydłów has a warm feeling, contrasting starkly with the cold stone floors at Pińczów. The floor is wood, and sunlight was streaming in on the day we visited. The main room contains an exhibition of “Judaica” in the proper sense (jewish ritual objects), but also a number of contemporary sculptures and, on the day we visited, numerous canvases that had been left behind by a community painting class, which seemed to have used the space without regard for its history. There is a moment, early on, when Agnieszka as videographer has framed the image so that my face is juxtaposed against that of a massive statue of Moses carrying the Ten Commandments. When I first saw this, I felt embarrassed. The statue is kitschy enough on its own—a totalizing patriarchal icon, exactly the opposite of the fragmentary approach to jewishness I have been seeking—let alone in comical juxtaposition with my own appearance. But I returned to this moment later, after encountering another moment from the same session, in which the videographer (now I was in that role) creates a parallel framing, this time with Eda’s face juxtaposed against a very different statue outdoors. The outdoor statue shows a woman’s face, wrapped in a shawl—perhaps an older woman, an archetypal peasant, or even a kind of Baba Yaga figure.<sup>6</sup> Now I see the two juxtapositions in a different light, alongside one another. The two statues offer a dynamic opposition: male and female, indoor and outdoor, historical and contemporary, heroic and mundane. What does their juxtaposition with our bodies—a composition generated uniquely by careful but entirely improvised dynamic relations between performer, videographer, and location—reveal about our presence in those places and the archetypes that haunt our every movement?

This diachronic juxtaposition within the Szydłów video is particularly striking to me because it cannot have been planned. As far as I remember, I was barely aware of the Moses statue, let alone the way in which Agnieszka had framed my face against it in the camera lens. There is no way that I could have been referencing that compositional choice when I decided to frame Eda’s face against the outdoor statue in a symmetrical way. Other compositional synchronicities are more consciously intended. For example, when Agnieszka begins to sing the song “Es Brennt” (It’s burning) by Mordkhaï Gebirtig—a song that she introduced to the project from her own research, which describes the burning of a jewish shtetl in a pogrom—I turn away from her, in my role as videographer, and walk across the room with the camera to record a black and white photograph of the synagogue, after its destruction and before being partly restored. This is a cinematic moment, one produced by the videographer in response to the performer’s choice of song, creating an explicit historical link.

Intended or not, such narrative fragments emerge from the dynamic interaction of our bodies, the songs, and these two places. Any other team of people, any other selection of songs and song fragments, and any other site or location would generate very different videographic data. Nathalie Fari refers to this phenomenon as the “narrative agency” of the camera (2023), its capacity not only to capture but to produce meaning through the juxtaposition of elements that come together within the frame and through the microphone. All of the Judaica lab videos have something of this quality, because of the experimental structure of the lab method, but the synagogue material is particularly rich because of the density of the sites at which our embodied songwork takes place. The Szydłów synagogue collapses time and history into the present by setting objects with radically different



provenance and function next to one another. The Pińczów synagogue is less cluttered, more sombre, but no less complex in its layered accumulation of multiple histories. A poetic documentary of these places, perhaps with a documentary-style voiceover, would be interesting in its own right. But there is something about the presence of our bodies, conducting our somatic experiments and offering our embodied songwork, that opens the spaces up in unanticipated ways, generating meaningful juxtapositions that verge on the magical.

Gil Z. Hochberg writes of the “archival imagination”:

Archival imagination involves imagined archives: imagining existing archives differently as well as creating new archival effects and affects. It is archival in that it is citational, mimetic, intertextual, and often mobilized by archival fever: it cites, recites, and revisits archives new and old, creating new archival sites and undoing others. It is often playful and mischievous, but it never takes the archive lightly. It is drawn to footage, documents, and photographs of the past, but it mixes and remixes toward potential futures. Archival imagination returns to the archival drive to preserve, collect, store, and document, but also to the equally powerful drive to destroy, displace, manipulate, and radically alter. (Hochberg 2021, 16)

Perhaps the titles I have given these two videos suggest two different modes by which I have attempted to grasp and grapple with the past through these sites, which themselves are material archives crying out for reimagining. On the one hand, the archive is a crypt, a place of death and secrets, heavy with memory and a sense of loss. On the other hand, the archive is a set of fragments, seeds, or crumbs, available for citation, editing, and reinterpretation as Hochberg describes. But I would not want to suggest a simple division of the archive or the historical site into these two modes alone. I rather see the encrypted and the fragmentary as starting points for a host of strategies to unearth, reinvent, reconstruct, rework, reencrypt, and reencode the past. In video, this reworking iteratively comments upon itself: Upon repeated viewing, Baba Yaga seems to comment upon Moses; the presence of amateur paintings alongside shattered masonry comments on the layering of time; and the coldness of Pińczów comments on Szydłów’s light.

Holocaust Centre North (HCN) is an archive as well as an exhibition centre. Its central feature is a small museum exhibition that follows the familiar timeline of the European, Jewish Holocaust, from the rise of Hitler to the freeing of the camps. At HCN there is a particular focus on what happened next, as the primary purpose of the centre is to commemorate the experiences of a number of Jews who resettled in the region around Leeds. Within the exhibition is a small auditorium, which has since its opening continuously displayed an eleven-minute, four-channel video on permanent loop. It is in this auditorium that I presented the *Postmemory* videos, with all the implications of that emplacement, both in terms of its position relative to the main exhibition and its unique multi-screen setup. But before I consider the politics of Holocaust memory in more detail, another word is needed about the production of videographic knowledge.

Since the 2017 Judaica project lab, I have been exploring the textual annotation of video material—what I call “illuminated” video—as a way to draw out its layers of meaning.<sup>7</sup> Here I faced a different challenge: Whether and how to edit these videos across multiple screens? What kind of additional knowledge might this generate, beyond what was already there? The strategy I chose balanced my desire to experiment with the constraints of technological feasibility. I created a three-channel video installation, using three large screens that are positioned next to each other in the auditorium—

effectively a single screen with triple the standard aspect ratio, except that the two outer screens are also angled inwards, adding an aspect of spatial immersion. (A fourth screen, which I did not use, sits opposite those three in the space.) I also decided that I would follow a simple rule when transforming the single-channel videos into a three-channel installation: The single-channel video would always be displayed on at least one of the three screens. In that way, nothing from the single-channel version would be lost. The other two screens would display either the same video, a cropped version of it, or nothing at all. This ruled out certain kinds of complexity—for example, I would not be taking the three channels out of sync. The video playing on each of the screens is always the same, although in some cases the doubled or tripled image is cropped.

Cropping became an exploration and interpretation of knowledge embedded in the video. Once again, choices that were in a sense random became, by magic or synchronicity, unexpectedly revelatory. For example, I might crop the video on one or two of the screens in order to highlight a specific part of the image. But the camera moves and the crop does not; moments later, that same cropping choice would reveal an element of the image that I had never noticed, in many cases almost seem to speak, as if proclaiming the significance of this background element. In the Szydłów video, I would most often crop the image to show the performer's face. That same crop, a moment later, might highlight an object in the space, or focus in on a gesture of the hand, or bring attention to the play of shadows. The crops speak to each other, like commentators, interpreting the underlying video. In the Pińczów video, I found myself drawn to more schematic and geometrical crops. Rather than cropping from all four sides of the screen, to focus a box around a particular part of the image, I would crop the images to change the relations between the three screens. For example, by removing the left half of the leftmost screen and the right half of the central screen, I could create a “flipped” version of the fullscreen image, which still played on the rightmost screen. The flipped image is not simply reversed; rather, the right half is pulled over to the left side. This kind of flipping was surprisingly interesting, often seeming to change the relation between performer and place. Sometimes, when the camera would pan up to show the extraordinary painting on the walls and ceilings, I would have the same full image play across all three screens, in a mosaic, producing the sense of a much larger space—fabulating an imaginary, grander synagogue than the one that exists.

I felt, in this process, as if it were not even just the video recordings but the places themselves that were guiding me in the videographic editing process, or which I was still continuing to research, despite having visited them each for only a few hours, several years ago. With each cut and crop, I was learning something about the place, listening to its voice through the videographic trace. The two spaces called for me to edit them differently. Szydłów, with its chaotic jumble of objects, asked me to crop the image so that a viewer could direct attention to what might otherwise go unnoticed. Pińczów, with its juxtaposition of tomb-like solidity and aching beautiful colour, demanded that I work with its images so as to bring out its hidden geometries. The two spaces feel different at the editing desk, just as they sound different.

Video editing is *editing* because the first round of work, writing a draft or substantial notes, has already been done. One sits down to edit video not like staring at an empty page, but with the videographic “page” already full, indeed teeming with meanings far beyond those that can be fully planned or anticipated. With audiovisual material—particularly when it has been produced through an experimental method and when technique is linked robustly to the identities of the performers and the places of enactment—numerous potential narratives are always already present, bubbling up from the video material. Each moment is dense on its own and may be connected to a thousand

others. Video editing is the final (or finalizing) moment in a knowledge generation process that begins when the camera is turned on, if not long before.



Still from *Postmemory: Crypt* (single-channel video, 2022). Agnieszka, in the role of director or “primary external partner,” gently tells Eda that her session in the role of performer / practitioner has finished.



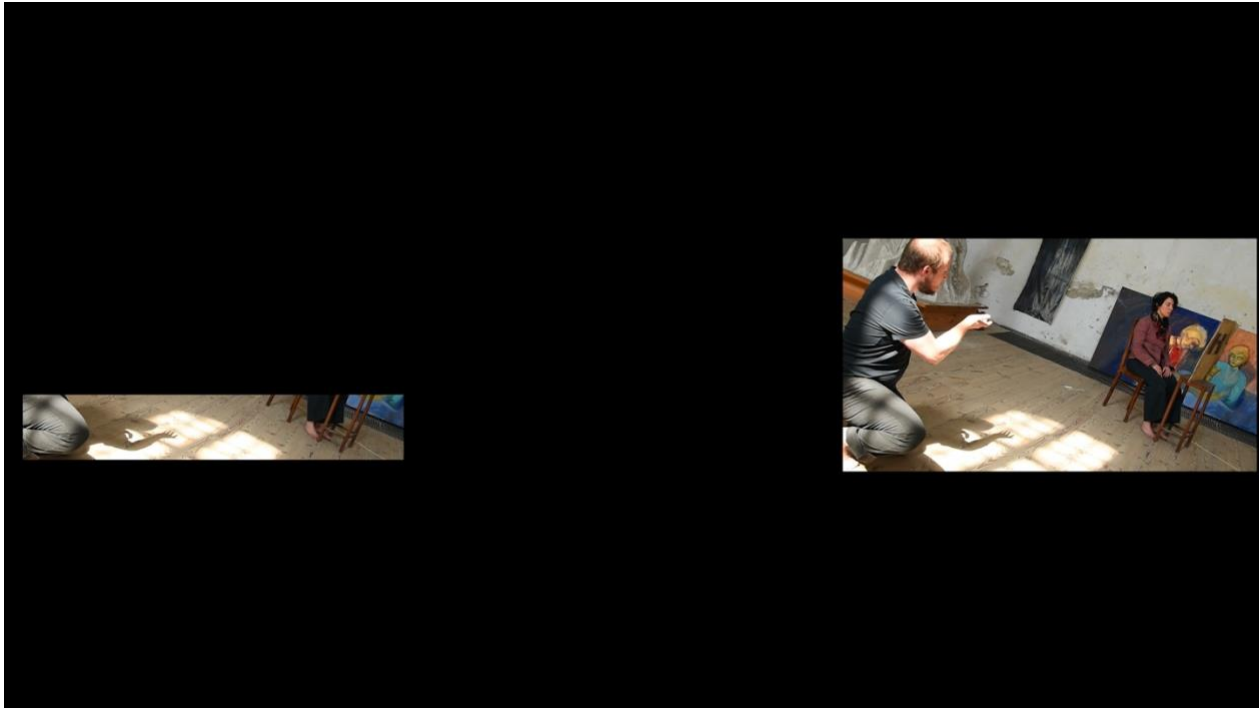
Still from *Postmemory: Crypt* (single-channel video, 2022). Agnieszka sings and moves in response to the partially restored wall paintings. Every now and then, I offer a few suggestions or invitations in the role of director.

### 3. Affect: Postmemory and Historiography

I asked historian Lindsey Dodd to work with me on the *Postmemory* project because her research pushes the boundaries of historiographical methodology. After watching Eda's video essay from the Działoszyce lab session, Lindsey expressed interest in the lab method's affective dimension, the ways in which our songwork activates these historically loaded sites in nonverbal, embodied, resonant ways. Lindsey worked from the raw songwork videos to produce written distillations of her affective responses to them, which came out looking more like poetry than prose.<sup>8</sup> These not-quite poems also teemed with meaning, shaping their own set of narratives through Lindsey's feeling, knowledge, and interests. She explains her process and position in the short essays "Postmemory: A Dialogue of Concept, Song and History" and "Towards an Affective Historiography," written for the exhibition program.

In *Postmemory: Fragments*, when it is Eda's turn in the role of performer, she speaks to the camera and explains that she will go upstairs to the office area instead of staying in the main hall, where Agnieszka and I had been singing. She says: "We are now going to the space which was an addition to the synagogue, for women only. It's just an office right now, but the windows are still there." Orthodox Jewish religious spaces are more or less strictly segregated by gender. This may involve separate seating areas on the same level, with or without a partition between them. But in several of the synagogues we encountered in Poland, the women's area was entirely separate, often located above the central men's area, placing women in a spectatorial position, observing the action of religious service without participating. (The same architecture is visible in Eda's video essay: Erçin, Mendel, and Spatz 2021.) The camera follows Eda as she goes upstairs, finds an alcove of interior windows overlooking the main hall, and opens its panels, so that we find ourselves looking with her over the main space, through the small opening. As she does this, the background noise of a vacuum cleaner suddenly disappears, the sudden silence giving additional emphasis to Eda's words. She says: "It's totally like different worlds. There's not even a connection, just kind of a cold breeze. So. In fact, I don't feel good being here. So I think I'm going to leave soon."

Eda makes a few more observations about the upstairs space. Then she goes downstairs and leaves the synagogue, walking out into the field of grass behind the building. There are many ways to read this exit, but the critical feminist perspective embodied by her investigation of the spectatorial position of the women's area is clear. Knowing that Eda's relationship with secular Islam in some ways mirrors mine with secular Judaism, I can guess that the binary gender architecture of this space resonates with others she has encountered, perhaps closer to home. By commenting upon and then exiting from the synagogue, Eda enacts a politicization of the ethics and affects of the lab method, revealing how it was already implicitly political. For the three of us to enter and sing in that space, with our multiple genders, diverse religious backgrounds, and bare feet, was always a political act, even while it was an ethical and affective investigation of place and memory. The lab method itself, in its short-circuiting of embodied practice and videographic output, links ethics to politics, knowledge to power. These links are especially palpable in our encounters with sites like these synagogues, where multiple layers of past and present fuse in a series of improvised videographic moments.



Still from *Postmemory: Fragments* (three-channel video, 2022). Cropping the image unexpectedly highlights certain details, such as the shadow produced on the floor by a gesture.



Still from *Postmemory: Crypt* (three-channel video, 2022). Cropping and repeating the image reconfigures the space.

#### 4. Power: A Cryptojudaic Prelude

My perspective on the politics of jewishness continues to evolve. Holocaust memory is a deeply vexed and contested site at which to attempt to resituate jewishness within a broader context of antiracist and decolonial thought and practice, as is suggested by Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory (Hirsch 2012; Hirsch and Miller 2011), as well as Michael Rothberg's work on multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009) and the ethics of implication (Rothberg 2019). Both the memory of the european holocaust and the general concept of antisemitism are increasingly weaponized today, following what Santiago Slabodsky (2014) calls the "re-racialization" of jewishness as white in the second half of the twentieth century, as often used to bolster white supremacy and colonialism as to work for peace and justice. As a result, any consideration of holocaust postmemory, if it aims to be in dialogue with critical race and decolonial black and indigenous praxis, must radically rethink the meaning of the holocaust itself.

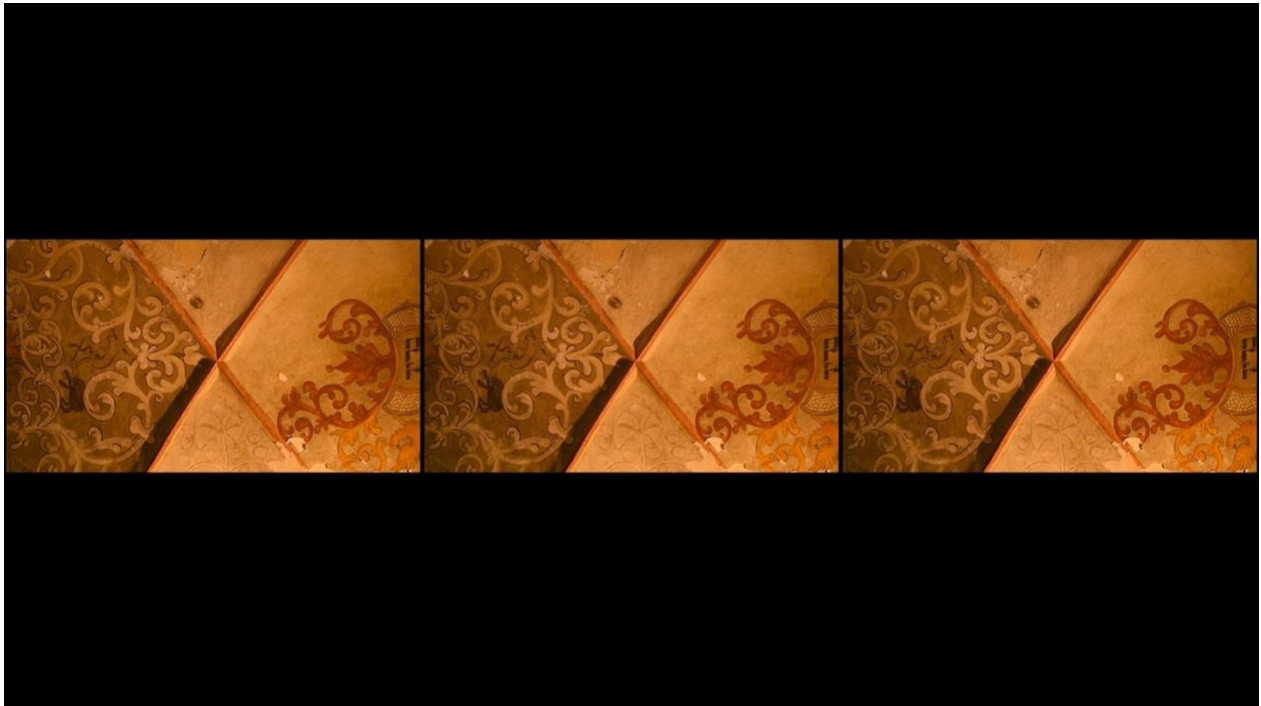
As I wrote in the exhibition program: "Today it is impossible for me to speak of Holocaust memory without invoking the prior genocides of european colonialism and slavery; ongoing indigenous erasure and antiblack violence, from the united states to the mediterranean sea; the twisting of history to justify further catastrophe in israel/palestine; and the present and future of a climate catastrophe caused by extractive capitalism. With the current rise of nationalism and fascism across the world, we must ask ourselves what it means to say: 'never again.'" Following Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin's foregrounding of diasporic jewishness (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002; Boyarin 2023) and Slabodsky's crucial but cautious evocation of a potentially decolonial judaism, I find myself drawn now to reimagine the concept of the *cryptojudaic*. The term "Crypto-Judaism" is usually applied to the spanish and portuguese jews, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, who converted to christianity under duress and in many cases continued to practise judaism secretly (Boyarin 2009). But, as Agata Bielik-Robson suggests, the cryptographic of those historical cryptojews could be applied more broadly, in particular to that generation of "philosophical Marranos" who developed radical critical theories and counterphilosophies before and despite the racial whitening of jewishness following the end of World War II and the founding of the state of Israel (Bielik-Robson 2014, 20).<sup>9</sup>

The Judaica project was always intentionally diasporic, locating the ethical and political foundations of jewish radical praxis in diasporic experience and attempting to provincialize the zionist narrative that would define jewish diaspora in relation to a colonial "return" to Palestine. The project's orientation was subsequently transformed by my encounter with Slabodsky's idea of decolonial judaism. In this context, I offer the *Postmemory* videos as fragmentary instances of contemporary cryptojudaica: attempts to dislocate and disentangle the radical and transformative potentiality of jewish identification from a dominating whiteness. If the colonial zionist narrative, inextricable from euro-american hegemony, is the sole unencrypted version of state or official judaism, then where might we discover all the many hidden and encrypted counter-judaisms at work beyond its reach? What codes and techniques might be hidden in the crypt-like stone of the Pińczów synagogue, waiting to be decrypted or reencrypted for other purposes? For each israeli delegation of schoolchildren that visits such synagogues, absorbing their holocaust postmemories into a triumphalist narrative that ends with the founding of the israeli state, are there not countless others—jewish and not—who might find and enact very different meanings at these sites?

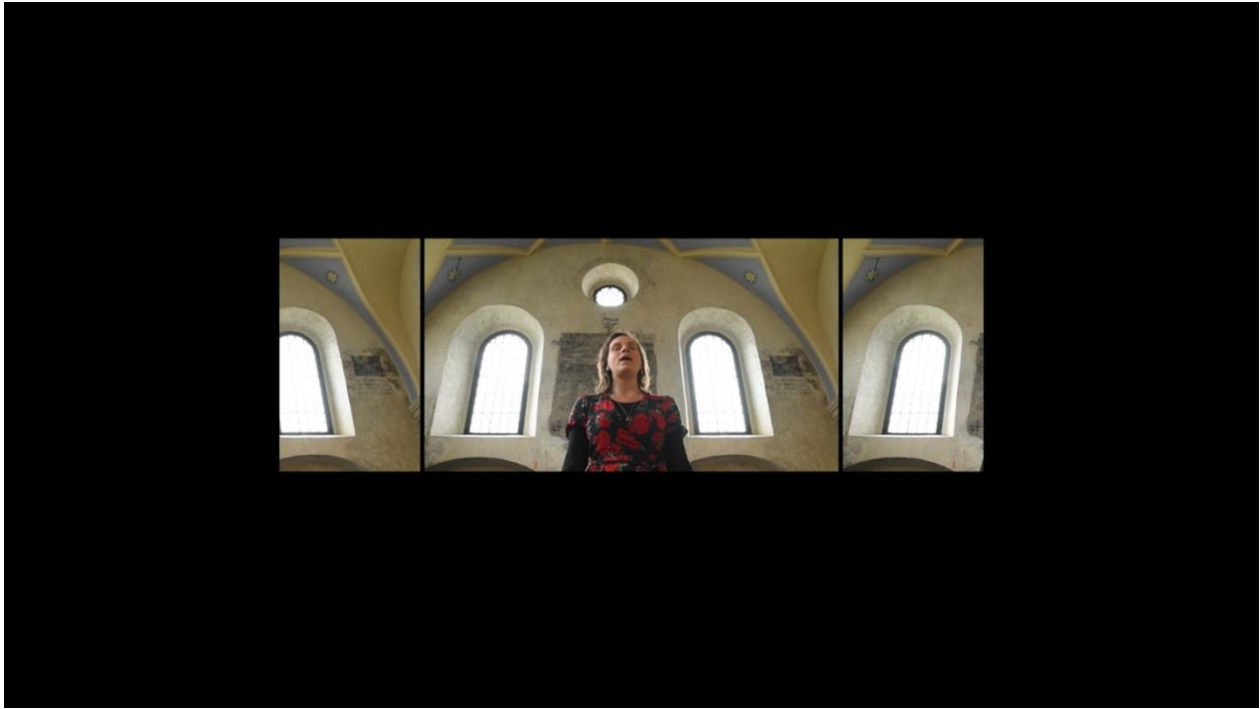
The essence of the cryptojudaic is that it points backward and forward at the same time. The concept derives from and is grounded in a particular moment in european jewish history, when forced conversion to christianity produced a mode of judaism that is not merely diasporic but also



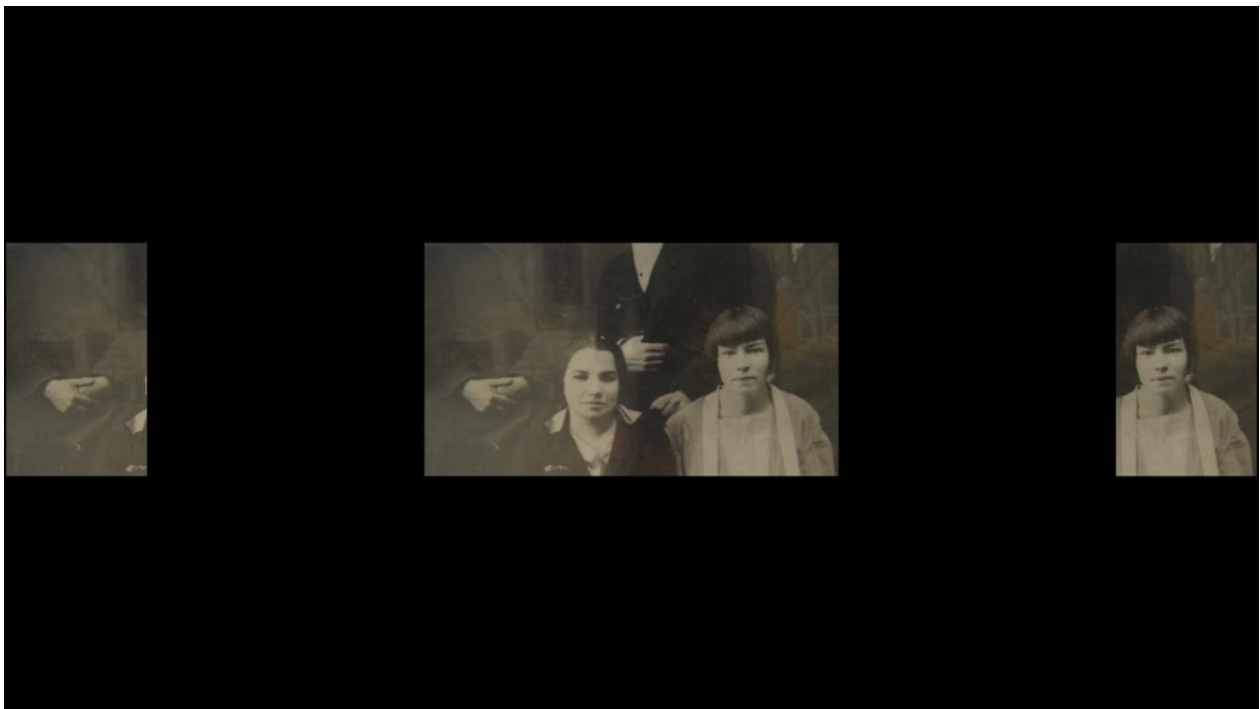
encrypted. But the crypto of cryptojudaica also resonates with that of encryption and cryptography. In this way, I draw cautiously on the visionary example of afrofuturism as a strategy to rework technology through an alternative ontology, activating at the level of form what is too often politically contained as mere content. This is not to suggest an equivalence between jewish and black diasporas but rather to acknowledge the ways in which radical black and indigenous thought must be centred and made indispensable to any future jewishness.<sup>10</sup> If cryptojudaica can learn from afrofuturism how to radicalize diaspora, then perhaps other lineages, those that have been even more deeply absorbed into the hegemonic monoculture, might learn from jewishness how to disentangle themselves, step by step. What other counterworlds and leverage points are waiting to be activated? What else has been boxed and contained within the category of “cultures,” when really, with Cadena and Blaser (2018), we should have been saying “worlds” all along? Watching and listening to the video recordings that became *Postmemory*, I search for them: the seeds of another world.



Still from *Postmemory: Crypt* (three-channel video, 2022). Repeating the image reconfigures the space, here as if the painted ceiling were much larger than it is.



Still from *Postmemory: Crypt* (three-channel video, 2022). Cropping and repeating the image reconfigures the space, here as if the synagogue were larger and had even more windows.



Still from *Postmemory: Crypt* (three-channel video, 2022). Cropping the image highlights particular details. I had not paid much attention to the clasped hands until they were repeated separately from the rest of the photograph.



Still from *Postmemory: Crypt* (three-channel video, 2022). Cropping the image highlights particular details.

## Notes

1. Since 2017, I lowercase “jewish” to avoid the dual implications of orthodoxy and nationalism (see Spatz 2019). Since 2020, I also lowercase other religious, national, racial, and linguistic terms. In this article, I lowercase “holocaust” in deference to other genocides. Audiovisual materials from the Judaica project can be accessed via the Urban Research Theater (2022) website, although the two works discussed here are not currently available online.
2. For a beautiful reading of jewish diaspora itself as a positive image of generative scattering, rather than one that would need to be recuperated into a sovereign nation-state, see the recent Boyarin (2023).
3. Both of these videos were on display in the *Postmemory* exhibition, looping on television screens with headsets, in the main reception area, where they were intended to serve as an introduction to the new works screening inside.
4. All of our 2017 lab sessions made use of the audiovisual embodied research method Dynamic Configurations with Transversal Video. In this method, a specific set of relations based on the conventional roles of performer, director, and videographer are “configured” through an iterative process of lab design, producing audiovisual material from within the experimental practice. This method is described and contextualized in detail in Spatz (2020).
5. My thinking about place and emplacement has been influenced by critical indigenous theories of place, as in Tuck and McKenzie (2014). I will examine the implications of those influences more fully in a different context.
6. The Moses statue, *Decalogue*, was created by by Kazimierz Gustaw Zemła. I do not know who created the outdoor sculptures, including the racist caricature of the jewish man with which *Postmemory: Fragments* begins.
7. For a set of examples, see *Journal of Embodied Research* 4 (2), a special issue of illuminated videos. And see Spatz (2021) for a discussion of illuminated video in relation to contemporary queer and trans media production.

8. Lindsey's poetic texts refer to the Szydlów and Pińczów video selections in the Songwork Catalogue, a set of more than three hundred short video clips published on the Urban Research Theater (2022) website, rather than to the edited video works discussed here.
9. Bielik-Robson (2014) does not suggest a racial or decolonial dimension. Following Slabodsky (2014), I believe it is crucial to understand that the radical thought of these Jews was related to their racial positioning and marginalization. Since writing this essay, I have launched a new project on Instagram to explore the concept of cryptojudaism through videographic form: <https://www.instagram.com/cryptojudaica/>.
10. Some of the sources I have been thinking with include Bey (2020), King (2019), McKittrick (2021), and Robinson (2020). My ideas about the complex and asymmetrical relations between figural Jewishness, whiteness, blackness, and indigeneity are more fully developed in my forthcoming book, *Race and the Forms of Knowledge: Technique, Identity, and Place in Artistic Research* (Northwestern University Press).

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Postmemory in the North





# Postmemory in the North

## VIDEO EXHIBITION

27 June – 4 August | Monday – Thursday | 10am-5pm

Holocaust Centre North  
University of Huddersfield

### video works by **Ben Spatz**

with **Nazlıhan Eda Erçin & Agnieszka Mendel**

accompanying texts by **Lindsey Dodd**

programme design by Paula Kolar

#### works presented in the Toni Schiff Auditorium:

**Postmemory: Fragments** (46:10)

Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin & Agnieszka Mendel

**Postmemory: Crypt** (47:22)

Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin & Agnieszka Mendel

#### also on display:

**Diaspora: An Illuminated Video** (30:48)

Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Agnieszka Mendel & Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz

**Działoszyce: Song, Border, Body** (17:38)

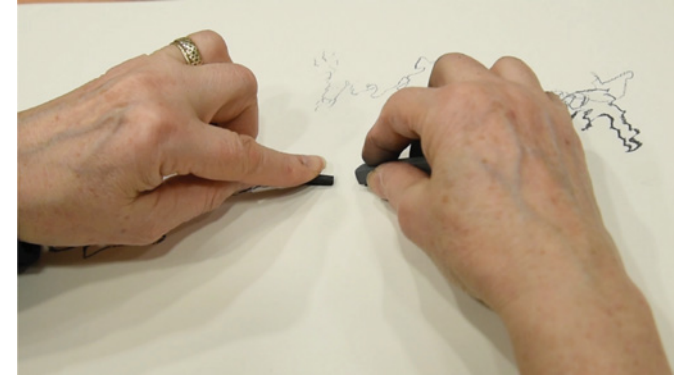
Nazlıhan Eda Erçin with Agnieszka Mendel & Ben Spatz

### guest talk by **Nafhesa Ali**

**Wednesday 29 June @ 17:30**

‘There were bodies everywhere’: childhood memories of Partition, gendered sexualities and (inter)generational ageing in the UK.

How do memories of the past impact on ageing experiences in the present and on (inter)generational relationships? Trauma, memories from the place of birth and passing on transnational (inter)generational gendered identities will be explored in this talk, in relation to older South Asian migrant women (between sixty and eighty years old) who settled in the UK and have lived here for the majority of their adult lives.



stills from "Diaspora" and "Działoszyce"

## Artist Statement

I grew up with the weight of Holocaust postmemory, both implicit and explicit. In 2012, when I began to investigate the politics of jewish\* identity through artistic research, I did not intend to deal with the Holocaust directly. But, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett once asked: Isn't every jewish cultural project in europe necessarily a project of Holocaust memory?

Today it is impossible for me to speak of Holocaust memory without invoking the prior genocides of european colonialism and slavery; ongoing indigenous erasure and antiblack violence, from the united states to the mediterranean sea; the twisting of history to justify further catastrophe in israel/palestine; and the present and future of a climate catastrophe caused by extractive capitalism. With the current rise of nationalism and fascism across the world, we must ask ourselves what it means to say: "never again."

The videos presented in this exhibition follow the encounters of the 2017 Judaica project lab team with ruined and partially restored synagogues in the rural *świętokrzyskie* region of poland, where we undertook a kind of *research on place* as well as memory. In these unique places, we encountered the relics of genocide alongside museum exhibitions, archival traces, and objects ranging from the mundane and the kitschy to the downright racist.

In these practice sessions, we lay our songs and our bodies against the particularities of each site. We did not plan what would happen or draw explicit distinctions between memory and imagination, tradition and invention, the proper and the improper. We worked with care, supporting each other in our practices. As each of us takes the role of performer in turn, we perceive different aspects of the place and respond in different ways. Two new video works, *Postmemory: Fragments* and *Postmemory: Crypt*, have been created for this exhibition.

The songs we sing in these videos come from a variety of sources. Some were selected for the Judaica project, as part of its methodology. Others arise from our individual histories of personal and artistic research. Through the process of video editing, I cast about again in the ruins for a different way of becoming present and a different way of grappling with history.

This work is done in solidarity with decolonial movements and explorations throughout the world, as a search for jewishness beyond the nation-state and even beyond diaspora.



\* Since 2017, I lowercase "jewish" to avoid the implications of orthodoxy and nationalism. Since 2020, I lowercase all religious, national, and racial identity terms; sometimes also the names of places.

## Video Works

### **Postmemory: Fragments** (46:10)

Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel (2022)

*Postmemory: Fragments* was recorded on 8 September 2017 at the ruined and partially restored synagogue in Szydłów, Poland, which is now a community centre. The main room hosts an exhibition of jewish cultural and ritual objects, as well as sculptures by Kazimierz Gustaw Zemła, including a four-meter tall statue of Moses called *Decalogue*. When we visited, the room was filled with canvasses that had been left by a community painting class.

The word "fragments" refers to the juxtaposition of dissimilar things, the fragmented space of memory and contemporary community this place has become. The idea of the fragment has been part of my artistic practice for decades, perhaps since I encountered Tim Etchells' book on artistic fragments more than two decades ago. In the Judaica project we worked with "song fragments," or what we also called "crumbs of song." Fragments are a key image in jewish mysticism, following the kabbalistic story of the breaking of unity into shards or sparks.

### **Postmemory: Crypt** (47:22)

Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel (2022)

*Postmemory: Crypt* was recorded on 12 September 2017 at the ruined and partially restored synagogue in Pińczów, one of the oldest in Poland. The main hall contains an exhibition about the Jews of Pińczów. Since 2005 this synagogue houses two stained glass windows created by the artist Jacek Nowak, while a project to restore the wall paintings and other architectural elements was carried out by the World Monuments Fund.

The word "crypt" refers to the physical structure and somatic texture of this synagogue, its coldness and its abandoned inner chamber. Of course, it also refers to the contemporary status of such synagogues as places of death, memorials to genocide. More recently, I have been thinking about another meaning of crypt, the cryptic or cryptographic, as in the identities of "crypto-jews": those who are jewish but, for whatever reason, find themselves "passing" as members of christianity, or what we would now call whiteness.

### **Diaspora: An Illuminated Video** (30:48)

Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Agnieszka Mendel & Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz

*Diaspora* was recorded on 3 August 2017 in the Patrick Stewart Building, University of Huddersfield. It was published in the journal *Global Performance Studies* 2.1 (2018).

### **Działoszyce: Song, Border, Body** (17:38)

Nazlıhan Eda Erçin with Agnieszka Mendel and Ben Spatz

*Działoszyce* was recorded on 8 September 2017 at the ruined synagogue in Działoszyce, Poland. It premiered online in the 1st International Ecoperformance Festival, São Paulo, Brazil (2021). This video work was composed and annotated by Nazlıhan Eda Erçin.



**Ben Spatz** is a nonbinary scholar-practitioner working at the intersections of artistic research and critical theories of embodiment and identity. They are a leader in the development of new audiovisual and embodied research methods, publishing across scholarly writing, video essays, and video art. Ben is Reader in Media and Performance at University of Huddersfield; founding editor of the videographic *Journal of Embodied Research* and the Advanced Methods book series; and author of *What a Body Can Do* (2015), *Blue Sky Body* (2020), and *Making a Laboratory* (2020).

**Nazlıhan Eda Erçin** is a performer/researcher with a background in sociology and ethnography. She holds a practice-based PhD in drama from the University of Exeter, specializing in the performance of gender, ethnicity and language. She is currently teaching in Communication Studies at Louisiana State University and managing the HopKins Black Box Performance Laboratory. Her work has been published in *Performance Research* and *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*.

**Agnieszka Mendel** is a vocalist, actress, and coach of voice and stage presence. She graduated from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland in Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology and the Gardzienice Theater Practices Academy. For 15 years, she was closely associated with the European Center for Theater Practices Gardzienice, where she created leading acting and vocal roles in performances by Włodzimierz Staniewski. As part of her own artistic activity, she composes, writes texts and performs concerts. She is the leader of several music groups, including Tara Gayan and Yaron Trio.

**Lindsey Dodd** is Reader in Modern European History at the University of Huddersfield and has published widely on children's lives in France during the Second World War, memory, and oral history. Among other things, she teaches on the university's MA in Holocaust & Genocide Studies. She is author of *French Children Under the Allied Bombs, 1940-1945: An Oral History* (2016) and *Feeling Memory: Remembering Wartime Childhoods in France* (forthcoming). She is collaborating with Ben Spatz on the 'Postmemory in the North' project for the School of Arts & Humanities Cultures of Place festival.

**Nafhesa Ali** is an interdisciplinary sociologist with expertise in the everyday lives of racialized and minority communities. She is currently a Research Associate for the Towards Inclusive Environmental Sustainability (TIES) Leverhulme-funded project in the Sustainable Consumption Institute (SCI) at the University of Manchester. Nafhesa has a PhD in Sociology, completed in 2015 from the University of Huddersfield. Her publications include two edited books, *Storying Relationships* (2021) and *A Match Made in Heaven: British Muslim Women Write About Love and Desire* (2020) and journal publications in *Sexualities*, *Ethnicities*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* and *Cultural Geographies*.

In *The Generation of Postmemory* (Columbia University Press, 2012), Marianne Hirsch explains her concept as follows:

'Postmemory' describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. (p5)

Postmemory describes a kind of personal (rather than collective) remembering performed by the generations which come after. It may manifest as forms of memory, as behaviours, or it may be held in objects, images, places and so on. It is, in its stricter sense, a feeling of knowing a past as though the memory of it is one's own. Postmemory may be characterized as familial, transmitted down family lines, and this is, perhaps, its most evident form. But Hirsch also writes of 'affiliative structures of memory beyond the familial' and of 'connective memory work' (p21). Thus, postmemory may also encompass communities of care and alliance which feel and remember with and for others. Such communities support and bolster important reparative work. But there are reasons to tread carefully. Hirsch asks:

What do we owe the victims? How can we best carry their stories forward, without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them? How are we implicated in the aftermath of crimes we did not ourselves witness? (p2)

This question is a burning one for descendants of the second or even third generations. Yet for those people who are not directly descended from Holocaust victims and survivors, the issue of owing something to this suffering is also relevant. But is owing quite the right word here? Is it indeed a feeling of duty or something else? A desire? A responsibility? A need? A wish? A whim? A penance? A fantasy? A hope? I do not want or seek other people's suffering, nor do I pretend to feel it. I am mindful of Hirsch's point about appropriation, and gaps and chasms. I am distant. Why do I seek to care, though? While Hirsch's generation has been directly shaped by their parents' experiences, are not all of us who come after 'shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events' (p5), especially when our work brings us into contact with wide-ranging traumatic residues and echoes? And although these traumatic fragments may 'defy narrative reconstruction,' they exist affectively nonetheless.

I am shaped by the knowledge I have; not in the same way as Marianne Hirsch, say, or as Ben Spatz, or as anyone with their own connection to this past. But I am not untouched by it, and it affects what I am capable of knowing, thinking and feeling. This is not a question of appro-

priation as a facile kind of empathy; it's a question of alongside-ness which recognizes separation; of sympathy and an ethics of care. Hirsch comments on engaging 'in patterns of affiliation beyond the familial, forming alternate attachments across lines of difference' (16): with this, Postmemory in the North takes this concept into different contextual realms, to see where new attachments may form and grow.

Likening postmemory to a Post-it note, Hirsch writes:

Post-its, of course, often hold afterthoughts that can easily become unglued and disconnected from their source. If a Post-it falls off, the post-concept must persist on its own, and in that precarious position it can also acquire its own independent qualities. (p5)

A concept has its own life: it can evolve and develop. Postmemory will stretch and grow as we use it. If, as Hirsch suggests, postmemory is 'a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience' (p6), then such elasticity is inherent: we are dealing with multiple combinations – assemblages, perhaps – of generationality, memory, trauma, knowledge, experience and embodiment. The image/metaphors which my own engagement with the synagogue songworks have generated are, perhaps, some of postmemory's lines of flight, sparking their way to other constellations of experience. And indeed, postmemory should move away from dominant forms of Holocaust memory which, as Hirsch rightly states, may engender the occlusion of 'other, more proximate histories of violence' (p20). We can thus extend postmemory to the intergenerational remembering of suffering during and after the Partition of India and Pakistan, as one example. The way painful memories surface and manifest, inhabit and cling, reshape and mutate in the everyday lives of diasporic populations is a context with relevance in the United Kingdom and in the Huddersfield region specifically.

Marianne Hirsch issued a call to historians to broaden our repertoire: my recent work on affective historiography – writing histories through feeling – has been doing just that. Traditionally, historians are positivists: they demand evidence. But where is the evidence for that which, as Hirsch writes, 'exceed[s] comprehension' or 'def[ies] narrative reconstruction'? (p5) Nonrepresentational and affective methodologies 'can shift the frames of intelligibility so as to allow new experiences to emerge, experiences that have heretofore remained unspoken, or even unthought' (p18). For an historian, what evidence can derive from this songwork? Hirsch states that working with the ideas of postmemory, and broadening our historiographical repertoire may open a space

for the consideration of affect, embodiment, privacy, and intimacy as concerns of history, and [...] shift our attention to the minute events of daily life. (p16)

My engagement as an historian with the synagogue songwork videos at Szydłów and Pińczów synagogues has been an experiment in affective historiography, and an attempt to broaden the repertoire of historical concern in ways which are productive and therefore valuable, as well as interesting and thought-provoking.



## Towards an affective historiography

By Lindsey Dodd

How might these songwork videos – artistic, abstract, and distant in time, place and person – be of use to an historian? History is grounded in evidence. It tells stories of what was, not of what is, and it bases them on fact. In its traditional form, history seeks to represent faithfully the events of the past in the present, as fully and accurately as extant sources allow. But there are more ways of approaching our understanding of the past. Recently, I have turned towards thinking affectively: what can we know through feeling? How can becoming better attuned to the felt realm help us think or know differently? What could I learn from Ben Spatz, Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel singing, moving, feeling their way around two synagogues in Poland in 2017? How could it enrich my thinking? My engagement with these videos developed as a process of layering, moving from the sensory and affective, to dialogue and consolidation, to tentative interpretation and budding lines of flight away from this context.

In early 2022 I watched a series of extracts from the songworks made by Ben Spatz, Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel at Szydłów and Pińczów synagogues. These songworks are extracts from longer recordings which have since been re-edited for the Postmemory in the North exhibition. As I watched, I scribbled notes in pencil on folded sheets of paper, rendering sounds and images into words. These were my words, carried along by my knowledge and practice as an historian and scholar of affective methodologies. I noted freely, messily, what I experienced visually, auditorily and affectively as I watched. I was both a filter and a tool. Difficult though it was, I tried to write what I saw and heard directly. I tried to detach evaluation and interpretation from experience. I tried not to think but instead just to do. Each video became an unwitting poem: a distillation of my experience. Resonant intensities emerged around bodies, buildings, voice and gaze, shadows, and around me, an outsider. I added a second layer more consciously: with the songworks in mind but drawing on my distillations, I pulled my recent writing on affect and history, and ideas from others, into dialogue with them. This consolidated a sense of connection and of purpose: an affective kind of historiographical writing began to seem possible. Finally, with Marianne Hirsch's book *The Generation of Postmemory* to hand, I focused on the most striking, stickiest images that the songwork videos had imprinted on me, and the ideas with most intensity. I wondered what they might be made to mean as metaphors in relation to postmemory.

These usable image/metaphors can tell a story of a questing: a postmemorial exploration of knowledge, identity and possibility. The singers are tentative, probing with their bodies and voices the spaces and objects in which memory might be lodged; which memory, and indeed whose, is another matter. What is certain is that new memorial layers now dwell in these crumbling, beautiful buildings, and that other rememberers distant in time, place and person are being pulled into an assemblage which they had not anticipated.

The songs flow like a liquid into the voids of these synagogues, under the flaking paintwork, into the cracks and through the cobwebs. They re-place memories here. Probably, though, this is not about memory. Not quite, anyway. Postmemories not quite memories; they are a kind of knowledge. So by finding, placing, re-placing and generating memories at Szydłów

and Pińczów, and in Huddersfield too, what is being found, placed, re-placed and generated is a kind of knowledge. Affective knowledge is knowledge known (or present, available, experienced) because it is felt. This knowledge is embodied by the searchers – the singers – but it is generable by other searchers – me and you, who may or may not sing – further down the affiliative line, who may encounter it through these films. This knowledge is illusive and allusive. It is generated in between the singer, the watcher and the place; between my time, their time, the time before and all the times in between. It is subjective and relational, contingent on the people involved. Each of the image/metaphors which I have derived from this layering process contains something of hope and intention, of failure and false starts, and of quite optimistic transformations.



**Probably, though, this is not about memory.  
Not quite, anyway. Postmemories not quite  
memories; they are a kind of knowledge.**





Their songs haunt, lament the body of the place, its paint the colour of flesh and blood, Of life.

Of flesh.

The place is a body, peeling and flaking;

The body hurts.

Words I cannot read, signs and symbols,

Signs and symbols peel from the ceiling,

The ceiling peels and flakes.

Peeling, flaking

Of memory and knowledge.

The body hurts.

By Lindsey Dodd, from the songwork *Dust and clay*, Pińczów synagoga



### The peeling and flaking of memory and knowledge

From these images, a feeling arose which suggested the process of the natural, but painful, erosion of knowledge and memory over time. This is a starting point for re-placing knowledge and memory into the synagogues through the songwork. As the experiential and phenomenological knowledge and memory of situated experience recedes – as it flakes and peels, revealing, perhaps, something underneath, as it disintegrates into the atmosphere, becomes dust – this loss hurts. The place where it was held is pained; it does not disintegrate quietly or go with good grace. Layers are underneath: something new, something other, and that is fine. It is how things are. But the dead layers are gone, and that hurts.

By Lindsey Dodd, from songworks *Warming my bones*, *Reading a painting through a song* & *I need "your" song*, Szydłów synagoga



### As two in gaze and voice

This image/metaphor suggests the impossibility of identity, as in being the same. It rejects empathy as facile, and embraces the necessary side-by-sideness of an alliance which does not pretend to share in experience. This experience can be powerfully connective; it is the precondition of affiliative postmemory. It is about sympathetic companionship and a plea never to usurp experience or to make unfounded assumptions about that which one cannot know; to recognise that one walks alongside and not in the shoes of someone who has experienced suffering or antecedental suffering.

They are parallel, together,  
but they gaze differently at the world  
I am lost by her experience.  
Together, in tune,  
but regarding the world differently  
As two in gaze and voice.

They try to fill the doorway – the room is empty beyond, and grey.  
 They are watched. Another voice joins.  
 They feel the edges of this space. Try to fit into it –  
 A stopper or a gateway?  
 Why this doorway? A gap, a door, their fingers feel all sides of the  
 doorframe.  
 They support themselves in this frame. It holds them:  
 Their balance, their pressure, their effort.



By Lindsey Dodd, from the songwork Dust and clay, Piłchów synagogue

Do members of postmemorial generations act as stoppers or as gateways? Do they prevent something flowing, something from being seen, something coming to light? Or do they open up ways of seeing and viewing? They probably do both. Two points arise: one is the control and ownership that postmemorial generations have, and the way in which they gain and enact that control and ownership; the other is how that control and ownership affects them, is embodied by them, and is a question of balance, pressure and effort. They might wish to caress the antecedental past because it is something precious. There is also a sense that their antecedental past supports them, holds them up, but not without an effort on their part.

### A stopper or a gateway

By Lindsey Dodd, from the songwork In contact with stone cold, Piłchów synagogue



### The light seems brighter when she leaves

This is both uplifting and melancholy. Is there a need, at some point in life, to shed some of the burden – of worrying? Of feeling sad? Of feeling guilty? Or of questing and searching? – in order to gain clarity, or lightness: a brighter light, and a lighter load? Perhaps this means handing over something to someone else, whether another generation, or an outsider. This act is neither to ignore, bury or silence, or even to retreat, but to shed something in order to shed light, to see better, by letting in some of the light.

She ceases, pants, holds the wall, confused removes her shoes.  
 Layers of light –

She undoes her top and leaves.

The light seems brighter when she leaves –

Light floods in.

As she sheds her layers, her shoes, this place is illuminated.



They crawl into light.  
 The shadow of the window, the bars are written in light and dark on  
 the swirling, knotty grain of the floor.  
 Within a shadow frame  
 – their shadow sharp in bright light –  
 They touch shadow and light, fingers feeling textures  
 Light fills and –  
 This ceiling is devoid of decoration.  
 Window panes, shadows of a grid, a cage.  
 They become enlivened and sing – their shadow is encased in light;  
 Walking loudly, in a frenzy, calling to the ceiling, sinking under its  
 weight, rubbing at their cheeks, their strike their cheeks.



By Lindsey Dodd, from the songworks *Trans/space*, *Szydlów synagoga* & *Floors and windows*, Pińczów Synagoga

**Within a shadow frame** Postmemorial generations and their members may live within shadow frames created not just by the past, but by their present questing. What casts the shadow frame? What is cast by it? Is it the person or the past? Or the interpretive weight of retelling the past, or of trying to make sense? Shadow frames create borders of light and dark, and someone may be trapped inside – although the frame is a shadow: intangible, unreal, an illusion of light. It may disappear or mutate. Shadow frames may act as barriers inside which people feel they should or must operate. The presence of individuals may also throw a shadow frame across the past, casting both light and dark in their shape. Shadow frames may cast their somatic effects into lives as well, as disquiet, a burdensome weight or self-attack.

By Lindsey Dodd, from the songwork *Follow the voice*, Pińczów synagoga



### She sings and makes voices, metamorphosis

Here we encounter a rapid, inexplicable, varied form of vocalized expression, that was embedded and embodied in place and face, but which was not a song. This was an experience of becoming: bits of everything were in everything else, and everything was tending towards something else. It was multiplicitous; it was full; transformations were happening as the singer moved on unseen lines, near-simultaneously and always holding what came before, from status to status, pulled or drawn where an affective flow led her. This forced a recognition of the sheer impossibility of interpretive fixity: a tendency towards movement rather than stasis. The singer was becoming the life of this place, tending towards it in its multiple forms, times and objects. In becoming, the life of this place entered her too. Here is a moment of inter-affectivity in a visceral, embodied form. It evokes the becoming-tendency of research and researcher, and the becoming-tendency of affective practices. To do affective research, we must tend elsewhere, and embrace openly happenstance, flow and unknowability.

A cry of horror – animal – bird call – a door squeaks open – an animal – a baby – a song, a singer, opera, scales – off – just off – clicking – horses' hooves – a dog barks – a Christian church – shift elsewhere – from grimace to horror – grimace to horror – a gargyle – stuck – voice creaks – the beauty of this ceiling – sound leaps up – sounds make scales, make tunes – metamorphosis – animals, laugh, monkey, squawk.

She sings. She makes voices. Metamorphosis. All life was here.



By Lindsey Dodd, from the songworks *Dust and clay*, Pińczów synagoga, and *Echo and Distance*, Szydlów synagoga

**A questing is happening here** A postmemorial generation might struggle to fill the empty spaces left by missing people and missing parts of culture, but also the spaces and gaps in knowledge. Groping fingers touch the walls of what is known, trying to discern shapes and consolidate what is there, and feel into the dents and divots. What groping fingers cannot touch, sound strives to fill. The voice enters all spaces, into the nooks and crannies and even the fingerprint swirls of the groping fingers themselves. Filling these spaces, mostly, must fail; sound ceases, it bounces back. Knowledge cannot stretch that far. But it is the act of searching, seeking, feeling gingerly and tenderly, touching and sensing texture, that matters. Doing the work of feeling, of running hands over stone and of probing the walls with song, takes them somewhere and creates, for them, a knowledge that differentiates what was from what is (existence), what was from what could be (permission), and what was from what might be (possibility). Questing is a leap into possibility and potential, and its achievements are always inconclusive.

It is a struggle to fill this space, a puzzle.  
 Not filling, then, but questing, seeking.  
*Tâtonner.*  
 In a doorway, on a threshold.  
 The space fills with voice,  
 Voice and arms reach up, reach down,  
 reach around.  
 Voice and arms quest:  
 A questing is happening here.

Black absorbs her song.  
 She speaks of light, she touches the painting  
 – an eye? –  
 Looking out from within the darkness, dark is differentiated by light,  
 by her touch, her voice  
 – What looks out?  
 This darkness is differentiated.

By Lindsey Dodd, from the songwork *Light is born*, Szydlów synagoga



**Darkness is differentiated**

In contradiction, perhaps, to shedding something which may act as a constraint, here there is a sense that by engaging, doing, singing, feeling, searching and questing into something that appears very dark that the darkness can be differentiated. It is not brighter, but it is differentiated. What appears to be wholly black, wholly lost and wholly depleting may be found to have something else to offer. But it is only through effort – affective effort – that the darkness of a damaged or damaging past can be differentiated, and made, productively, generatively, creatively, into something else.

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**The performance of return (the actual visits to the destroyed villages) is not a display of nostalgia or an act of mourning. Rather, it is framed and takes place in a temporality of becoming.**

— Gil Z. Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine*

Please scan this QR code to take a short survey on your experience:





recurrence (in two parts)<sup>1</sup>

Julia Ulehla

## part I: of eagles

I'll begin with a song:

Ej, na tej skale vysokej  
 na tej skale širokej  
 ej, sedm párov orlou  
 Ej, nečakaj ma má milá  
 má frajerka rozmilá  
 ej, nečakaj ma domou

(Ah, on that tall rock  
 on that wide rock  
 ah, seven pairs of eagles  
 Ah, don't wait for me my love  
 my most beloved darling  
 ah, don't wait for me to come home)

Audio example: “Ej, na tej skale vysokej.” Recording courtesy of Songlines Recordings. Recorded by John Raham at Afterlife Studios. [https://soundcloud.com/julia-ulehla/01\\_ej-na-tej-skale-vysokej-seven-pairs-of-eagles](https://soundcloud.com/julia-ulehla/01_ej-na-tej-skale-vysokej-seven-pairs-of-eagles).

Among other things, this recording is a trans-temporal conversation. The first half is a recording of my grandfather Jiří (“Jura”) Ulehla and cimbalom player Antoš Frolka that was made in the 1950s. I found it in a stack of dusty old cassette tapes in my grandparents’ kitchen. Since my *děda* (grandpa) left this world, the recording is a striking remnant of his presence. His voice is a little raspy, hooded, and heroic. I hear his heart bursting open when he sings, with nothing hidden and nothing feigned. Like other South Moravian men, my *děda* became very straight and tall when he sang. His hand often raised to punch the air when approaching a high note mid-phrase, or when signalling the beginning of a song that started at the very top of his range, like “Ej na tej skale vysokej.” I always felt he needed to move his body that way in order to be filled with the note he aimed for. It always seemed that songs made him bigger than he was at other times.

My *děda* was a fairly small man—not much meat on his bones, about 5’7”. He had a large, hooked nose, which I inherited. For years after he died, my grandmother liked to draw near me and gently stroke the hook on my nose, muttering over and over, “Jura, můj Jura” (“Jura, my Jura”). Those moments were a window into the tenderness and longing she felt for him, which were of a different character than the love and affection she usually directed at me. During those moments, I willingly

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An artist-scholar, **Julia Ulehla** received a PhD in ethnomusicology from the University of British Columbia, where she held the Killam Doctoral Scholarship. She is currently a SSHRC postdoctoral fellow in the Cultural Studies Department at Queen's University.



became him. Each time, I would stand straight and still, as he was wont to do, giving her time with her lost husband through the portal that was my nose. It's not the only moment my grandfather draws near. "Ej, na tej skale vysokej" is a potent song, one that palpably and visibly endowed my grandfather with power and vitality, and it does something similar to me, affording me the opportunity to draw near him, to bridge a gulf that we couldn't fully overcome while he was alive. A gulf created by my father's decision to leave home. A gulf the song itself elliptically evokes: "ah, don't wait for me my love, don't wait for me to come home."

My practice-based research (PBR) involves a coming to terms with the embodied performance of familial song heritage given conditions of cultural rupture. I was born in the United States to an American mother of European and Indigenous ancestry and a South Moravian father who escaped Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia in 1968 and entered Canada as a refugee. Although my father sang folk songs at home, and my grandparents sang when we visited, my relationship to the tradition has always felt fractured. But there is more to this family legacy with folk song. My great-grandfather Vladimír Úlehla (1888–1947) was a plant biologist, philosopher, filmmaker, and proto-ethnomusicologist. Among other scientific publications and works of philosophy, his posthumously published magnum opus *Živá píseň* (Living song; [1949] 2008) chronicled the musical traditions of Strážnice—a small town in the region of Slovácko near what is now the border of the Czech Republic and Slovakia.<sup>2</sup> Strážnice was Vladimír's childhood hometown and a place to which he returned throughout his entire life.

For Vladimír, songs were living organisms, intimately related to their ecological conditions and carried through time by family clans. The book contains more than three hundred of his painstakingly detailed song transcriptions, some of which were based on songs sung by his (and thus, my) consanguineal relatives. He wrote a biographical sketch of each of his singer-interlocutors, which in some cases was informed by decades of friendship. Vladimír's transcription practice began in 1906, when he was eighteen years old, and continued until 1947, just months before he died. Much of *Živá píseň* was written during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, as people and lifeways that he loved were being exterminated. His act of salvage—for it was that, among other things—involved chronicling the cultural practices of his family and community with the hope that they would not be annihilated or forgotten.

Over the last ten years, I have engaged in a process of heritage reanimation within the frame of a performance project I called Dálava; the second half of the recording is a sound document of this PBR. *Dálava* is a Czech word that refers to the disappearing line on the horizon—the hazy frontier between land and sky where it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. The word implies a great distance. My PBR began in early 2011 as a domestic experiment—domestic insofar as I began singing the songs my great-grandfather transcribed in my home in New York City, and experimental insofar as I had no idea what I might do with them and how they might adapt to life in North America. Some of the questions that concerned me most included: *What is a "living song" from Strážnice? By which practices can I best address and come into contact with a song's life? What happens when I transplant a song from Strážnice to a place like New York City or Vancouver? Will it survive the transplant? How does a song react to different environments? Can a song be more alive or less alive? How do my actions and manner of approach impact a song's life?* At the time, I was a new mother, and I felt that domestic musicking was the most desirable and feasible avenue available to me. Part of me also recognized that the songs were a means to orient one's daily life, and not just for exhibition or entertainment for others to consume. I had no aspirations or long-term goal, other than to see if I could make the songs alive and what that might mean. Over the years, my focus has shifted to ask what it means to

continuously care for songs and help them thrive. In my practice, this means allowing the relationship with the songs to change and transform as need be. I try to remember to keep listening to what a song wants, rather than treating it as a thing to be used.

Although the project began in New York with a cohort of experimental musicians from the avant-garde downtown scene—including my partner and guitarist Aram Bajakian, bassist and gimbri-player Shanir Blumenkranz, and violinists Skye Steele and Tom Swafford—Dálava began in earnest in 2014, one year after I began graduate school in ethnomusicology at the University of British Columbia. Aram and I began collaborating with friends of friends from New York, who were some of the first people we met upon arriving in Vancouver: cellist Peggy Lee, drummer Dylan van der Schyff, bassist Colin Cowan, and pianist/accordionist/keyboardist Tyson Naylor. The collaboration grew out of burgeoning friendships and interpersonal chemistry—an extension of the domestic realm in which the songs had been brewing. At this point, Dálava had not yet emerged into a public, mediated domain. Even though Aram and I had made the first record in New York in January of 2013, moving to Vancouver and having a second baby delayed its release. Our first public performance was a record release concert at the China Cloud on October 17, 2014, with Peggy, Dylan, Colin, and Tyson, even though they weren't the musicians on the record. We enjoyed the concert and decided to keep playing together. Several significant opportunities came our way shortly thereafter. Because of initial opportunities like these and the encouragement of individuals in the creative and experimental music community in Vancouver and beyond, Dálava slowly made its way out into the world. On research trips to the Czech Republic, I entered the field as ethnomusicologist, kinswoman, friend, song carrier, great-granddaughter of Vladimír Úlehla (for his renown is still evident), and experimental artist working with traditional materials who had been hired to give concerts. My own performances, and the subsequent song-bartering they afforded, were an integral part of my ethnographic methodology.

A tension exists between immanently co-created works such as Dálava and single-authored forms like this article. Although Aram and I act as bandleaders and our collaborative work is based on my song heritage, my PBR owes its existence to the countless hours Peggy, Dylan, Aram, Colin, Tyson, and I have spent musicking together, not to mention the countless hours I have spent in conversation and music with colleagues, friends, and family in the Czech Republic. Then there are the songs, which I also perceive as active, agential collaborators. In 2016, after two years of regularly playing together, Aram and I realized that as a sextet Dálava had become something very different from its beginnings in New York. We decided to record the work that had been emerging. I was awarded a research grant to fund a new album from the Public Scholars Initiative, an initiative coming out of the public humanities at UBC that is looking to rethink and expand the scope of doctoral education, especially its relation to a wider community. *The Book of Transfigurations* (Dálava 2017) was the record that resulted. “Ej na tej skale vysokej” is the first song on the album.

I am still in the process of understanding how to responsibly forge a relationship with the songs from Slovácko. I was not interested in pretending that the ruptures weren't there, and thus my intention was never to imitate Slovácko tradition bearers. Because oral transmission, linguistic continuity, and connection to the place from which the songs came were for the most part absent, and because I did not want to erase or ignore the complexities that marked my relationship to heritage, I had to look for other ways to forge a connection with the songs. This is where the body itself became a terrain for inquiry, something Kuna Rappahannock theatre practitioner Monique Mojica describes as “blood memory”:<sup>3</sup> “Our bodies are our libraries—fully referenced in memory, an endless resource, a giant database of stories. Some we lived, some were passed on, some dreamt,

some forgotten, some we are unaware of, dormant, awaiting the key that will release them” (2011, 97).

For many South Moravians, songs are a means to connect with the lives of their ancestors; I have heard several Slovácko singers and musicians express sentiments that echo Mojica’s. In a 2016 interview, renowned *primáš* (lead violinist and singer) Martin Hrbáč remarked: “In music and songs there are a myriad of moods and truths that our ancestors have already experienced, and I only follow the beautiful ones that they left us in those songs and music.”<sup>4</sup> Song texts often contain conversations between living humans and their deceased relations, which tells me that people know how to talk to their deceased ancestors and have been doing so for a long time. Hrbáč’s comment suggests that within the performance of folklore, there is a trans-temporal collective frame, invoking the past and (re)enacting it in the present. The process involves some measure of personal choice or intuition (what one chooses to follow or continue). The temporal breadth gives clarity to the present. For me, the songs my great-grandfather Vladimír collected are such keys for releasing emotions, stories, associations, memories, bodily sensations, and experiences.<sup>5</sup> The body’s pathways are subversive, disrupting and erupting through the narratives of belonging and longing that shape one’s reality. Following the affectual trajectories of the singing body reveals realities that my conscious mind is not able to access.

In our co-creative process, I began by working with a song from Vladimír Ulehla’s book, or a song I learned from my father or grandparents. I would experiment with the song until I felt that I could *follow* it—that it was leading me, rather than the other way around. When a song began to make itself known to me—and by this, I mean several things (I began to sense it moving proprioceptively in my body; it began to appear affectively in my body, at times pleasantly and other times unpleasantly; I began to have certain associations or visions, or it would change the way that I perceived my surroundings; I would experience changes in my body temperature, or begin sweating, or feeling butterflies in my stomach)—I perceived this moment as a gesturing toward the human by the song, which felt and continues to feel like the beginning of a consensual, genuine relation between a person and a song. In other words, this critical moment of bi-directional affinity marks the beginning of reciprocal relation between a person and a song. I found that to keep going forward in the relation between a person and a song, there was much to be done, much to be curious about and explore, much to take care of and attend to. As time goes on, my awareness of responsibility only grows. Just as relations between people are in a constant state of flux, the relationship between a song and a person can wither from neglect, and even mistreatment. I have found that an entire ethics of relation opens between humans and songs. Songs are pedagogues, ethicists, catalysts, hosts, shit disturbers, and occupiers if you know how to let them. Sometimes it can go too far. And sometimes the relation doesn’t happen. I didn’t manage to begin relationships with every song.

In my research with Slovácko song, once a relationship had begun with a particular song, I brought it to Aram. I explained my intuitions about its life, its densities and trajectories, and what was at stake when one sang it. Through this intuitive, somatic process, we began to find sound worlds that perpetuated that life. It was very clear to me when a musical element harmed its vitality or was artificially imposed. The song would fall flat—bland and empty—as if it did not want to work with us. My body would feel relatively cold and stiff, my mind blocked and empty. Once we had a living germ, we brought the song to the rest of the band. The songs’ vivid texts are richly evocative, recalling scenarios of, for example, silent crystalline ice worlds or the unrestrained intensity that erupts where death and eros meet. I would translate the text, describe what I felt was the song’s experiential terrain, and offer a few associations. Aram and I suggested small structural elements for

each song—a certain mode, a seven-beat meter, or a particular harmonic progression—but for the most part, we invited each person to intuit their way in. They are all experienced improvisers and wildly creative people, and it wasn't hard to drop immediately into the song. Part of the joy of performing with Dálava is an open-ended sense of play, of “worlding” a song into being.<sup>6</sup> I never know how the songs will materialize on a given night. Such an approach asks for vulnerability, and for those involved to, in some sense, detach from what has happened in the past in order to fully respond to what is occurring in the moment. Part of our work as a collective has been the honing of our capacity to listen to one another, enabling us to do what sometimes feels to me like jumping off a cliff into the unknown.

A video of a Dálava performance of “Ej na tej skale vysokej” evinces the search for body memory and collective cliff jumping named above. In 2015–16, the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI) invited me to give a series of workshops around my PBR. I called the series *Encountering Life in Song*. The video captures a moment in the final workshop, *Affect, Vibration, and the Architecture of Sound*, in which my colleagues in Dálava and I gave a short work demonstration. When creating “Ej, na tej skale vysokej,” it was important to me to conjure a sense of looming rupture, and a thickly hovering, foreboding quality. The song's protagonist augurs his own fate. The image of seven pairs of eagles upon the mountain—a harbinger of his imminent departure—carries tremendous gravity. In the performance on video, a new quality unexpectedly emerged in our collective performance, one that felt to me like the breakneck, uncontrolled gallop of a spooked horse. I hear it in the rough slap of Colin's playing, in Aram's staccato ostinato, in Peggy's scratchy textures, in the expanse of Tyson's timbres, in Dylan's restless shuffle. As I watch the video and remember the performance now, years after the fact, I see in myself an acceptance of rupture, and a receptivity to living in its consequences.

For me, there is also something that surpasses the human in this song. Bird-human relations are common in Slovácko folk songs. The antecedents could be any number of Slavic pre-Christian deities who were bird-human hybrids or beings who could transfigure from human to bird form, such as the goddesses Alkonost and Gamayun (both of whom appeared as birds with a human woman's head), and the god Perun, when manifesting in his eagle attribute. In an even older cultural stratum, archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1974) discovered a large number of bird goddess figurines that she linked to an ancient civilization (circa 6500–3500 BCE) in the Middle Danube Basin, which includes the area that is now Moravia. In the folk songs of Slovácko, women are often associated with doves and swallows, while men are associated with falcons, hawks, and eagles. In the context of “Ej, na tej skale vysokej,” the seven pairs of eagles may symbolically refer to an accumulation of male power, such as an army. The relationship between humans and birds isn't always symbolic, however. People believed, and still believe, that souls can move between physical forms: “In Slavic belief the soul is a being quite distinct from the body, which it is free to leave even during life, so there are many stories of human souls coming forth from the bodies of sleeping persons and either dwelling in trees or, in the shape of white birds, fluttering about in the world and finally returning to their normal habitations” (Máchal 1964, 227).

According to belief, birds and other animals were often inhabited by itinerant souls after death: “The Slavs universally believe that the soul can leave the body in the form of a bird (a dove, a duck, a nightingale, a swallow, a cuckoo, an eagle, a raven) or else as a butterfly, a fly, a snake, a white mouse, a hare, a small flame, etc. For this reason, whenever a man dies, the window or the door is left open, thus freely enabling the soul to come and go so long as the corpse remains in the house” (Máchal 1964, 229). This belief existed when my father's grandmother died in 1982. For several days

after her death, his parents left the window open so her soul could come and go. Both of his parents were scientists and atheists, but they observed a private, mundane spirituality, maintained by careful attention to and knowledge of their local environment. My perception of my grandparents and their friends was that they knew their local environment as one knows an old friend, acutely aware of predictable cyclic changes, and celebratory of its notable attributes, like sacred water sources or beloved river swimming spots. It's hard for me to say if their knowledge and predilections were unusual, or if such an orientation is inherent to Czech culture in general. Scholars of folklore and Czech art music composers are quick to draw links between Czechness, music, and nature (Johnston 2010; Beckerman 1994). Many aspects of Czech culture reveal an intimacy with the physical world; the names of the months are a telling example: January is *leden* (from *led*, ice); February is *únor* (from *nořiti*, to sink, as when ice breaks and sinks under water); March is *březen* (from *březí*, pregnant [referring to the season of animal pregnancy] or from *bříza*, birch tree, which was tapped in March)<sup>7</sup>; April is *duben* (from *dub*, oak tree); May is *květen* (from *květ*, flower, the month plants begin to bloom); June is *červen* (from either *červ*, worm [worms eating fruit], or *červená*, red [the colour of ripe fruit]); July is *červenec* (from *červená*, red, the colour of ripened fruit); August is *srpen* (from either the Lithuanian *sirpstis*, to ripen, or *srp*, sickle, as in the month of the harvest); September is *září* (from *za říje*, in the rutting season); October is *říjen* (from *říje*, to rut); November is *listopad* (from *list*, leaf and *padat*, to fall, as in the month of falling leaves); and December is *prosinec* (most likely derived from *simj*, pale, grey).<sup>8</sup>

As a child, because I stood in between English and Czech, and because Czech was not my dominant language, Czech words could sometimes imbue the world with newfound significance. The month names, for example, opened new modes of perception for understanding human life in a different configuration from what I knew as a girl growing up in North America. *Říjen* was dedicated to the sexual activity of deer—from the violence of male battles for procreative rights to the new life being created. I encountered a world in which the events in the deer world became a way of organizing and understanding human life; I loved to play with the shed antlers that graced the shelves in my grandmother's cabinet, eat their meat in *svíčková*, my grandmother's best dish, and wear antler jewelry made by a forester friend. *Únor*, whose thaws meant that ice would break and sink down underneath the surface of the water, provided an analogue in the natural world for the overwhelming sense of submergence and sadness that came over me at that time of year. Similarly, in the song poetics like those of “Ej, na tej skale vysokej” and many others, I encountered a world in which a song would allow me to take flight, to become a bird, in a manner of speaking.

The video of “Ej, na tej skale vysokej” participated in various “afterlives” that profoundly influenced my research methods and creative process/output.<sup>9</sup> The video's reception reveals missteps that occurred—missteps that are an inherent part of intercultural research that deals with rupture. I share them to emphasize that the research process is emergently enacted by a process of trial and error in which incomprehension and disagreement are part of the terrain. The process is not teleological—a straight line toward a goal—but full of stops and starts, and lateral movements along the way. At the workshop, I wore a *rubáč*, part of my great-grandmother Marta's *keroj*, the traditional dress or “folk costume,” from the Hornácko microregion of Slovácko. The *rubáč* is the underdress of the costume, a garment made by hand from hemp, modestly adorned with ancient fertility symbols. Other than dust mites, mine was the first living body that had been inside that dress for eighty years. My grandmother later saw the video because it appeared in an article in the Czech Republic, and she told me, “I don't mind that you wore the *rubáč*, but someone might mind.”<sup>10</sup> I was so naïve at that point that I hadn't even considered that someone in the Czech Republic might ever see the video, and that it might be inappropriate to wear the underdress of the folk costume in public. My



grandmother's reaction made me realize that in Slovácko no one would ever think to wear only the underdress because it is akin to wearing underwear (even though by modern North American and Czech standards it looks like a modest sundress). The video later inspired all kinds of reactions, some glowingly positive, others vitriolic and misogynistic. Once again, rupture caused unforeseen blunders.

On the other hand, continuity—that my grandmother stewarded her mother-in-law's *keroj* for decades and gifted it to me—offered an opportunity for relation. Putting myself inside my great-grandmother's dress, which carried musty-sweet human smells and sweat stains within its weave, I was reminded of my own iterative materiality. Like nested dolls, or rings of growth in a tree, I imagined concentric iterations of female relations diachronically housed in the ornamented hemp of the rubáč. Although it is still too big for them, my daughters also love to don their great-great-grandmother's dress. Hemp (*konopa* in Czech)—the rubáč's material—has magical, protective significance. In several Strážnicians songs, a young woman directly appeals to *konopa* for protection from unwanted or harmful suitors (Ulehla [1949] 2008, 544–45). According to Petr Bogatyrev's *The Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia* (1971), the hempen rubáč was believed to be a magical garment, capable of healing animals and humans when applied to an injury. Its magical properties were further derived from its proximity to the female body, which was itself believed to be magical because of its ability to create new life. In Slovácko folk belief, as in pre-Christian Slavic belief in general, a strong relationship exists between the life cycles of humans and plants, love, divinity, fertility, generation, and iteration. Bogatyrev also mentions an “emotional element” expressed in folk costume in Slovácko:

“Observation of the life of primitive people shows that, among them, costume and wearer are closely, intimately connected” [here Bogatyrev cites L. Lévy-Bruhl, *L'âme primitive* (Paris, 1927, 137–41)]. We find something similar in a whole group of magical acts among the people of Europe. In order to exert a magical effect on someone, the magical act is performed on his hair, feet, and on his clothing. Thus, we find, among the peoples of Europe, cases where clothing is considered almost organically connected with its wearer. And besides this closeness to one's personal costume, there is also the relationship of the whole community to “our costume.” “Our costume” is close to the individual member of the community, just as the community is close to him. (1971, 96–97)

The statement accounts for both the negative reactions my grandmother was anticipating (a violation of the manner in which “our costume” should be worn), and perhaps also the extra-rational possibilities afforded by wearing my great-grandmother's underdress. This particular rubáč opens a door to my great-grandmother Marta. Its single strap and dense fabric affords a certain kind of movement and a particular, partial degree of concealment. I imagine the way Marta's body moved inside it ninety years ago, and I invite her to coexist with me. For the tradition bearer of Hornácko, the rubáč has a proper way and occasion in which it must be worn. I am still curious about wearing it despite its possible transgressions, for its connection to Marta and the affordances and possibilities it gives to my body. My father jokes that I can wear it as long as no one from the Czech Republic sees it. I haven't worn it in public since the night of the performance; it's hibernating in the closet.

As it turned out, there was a typhoon on the night of the performance. Meteorologists predicted the storm would last three days. All the ferries were cancelled. Fallen branches and trees littered the streets. People were advised to stay indoors. Tens of thousands of people in the Vancouver area lost

power. Although the wind and rain were severe, we decided to proceed with the event. This work demonstration was the second time I had ever laid an offering for my ancestors in connection with singing their songs. I gave them *merunice* (apricot brandy) made from fruit that my family and I had picked together a few months earlier in my grandmother's orchard. When we left the venue after the performance, I expected a raging storm. But the night was eerily calm, windless, and dry. No one was on the streets. My ancestors had propitiatory practices to alter the weather. It's not impossible that something we did had an effect on the typhoon. I'll never know. What matters is that it felt like a reply.

Video Example: Live performance of "Ej, na tej skale vysokej." Video courtesy of the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation, Prof. Kevin McNeilly, UBC site coordinator. Filmed by Carbon Media. <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/822135759/privacy>.



the dividing line (circa March 2020)

*if the dividing line had a color, it would black.  
if it had an edge, it would be blurry.  
if it had a weight, it would be heavy.  
if it had a texture, it would be soft, like velvet, with some unexpected knots of barbed wire, tangles  
of filigree hairs, and a polished black stone.  
if it had a sound, it would be what you hear when you are submerged in a fast-flowing river.  
if it had a direction, it would be in,  
and then back,  
and then down.  
if it was a catalyst, it would bring disintegration.  
if it was an element, it would be water,  
then dark black soil,  
particulate and warm.*

*i have learned that i like very much to lie there.*



## part II: of speckled mockingbirds

Let's begin again with a song:

Vydala máti vydala céru daleko od sebe  
Přikázala jí nakázala jí nechod' cero ke mně  
Já sa urobím ftáčkem jarabým a já k vám doletím  
a sednu si já na bílú leluju a svůj žal vám povím  
Ej akši akši ftáčku jarabý odlet' s tej leluje  
lebo ju zlomíš a nedolomíš ona mi uvadne  
Ej nedošla sem mamičko milá leluje lámati  
lež sem já došla mamičko milá žal vám žalovati (Ulehla [1949] 2008, 636)

(Mother gave away her daughter, far away from herself  
 She admonished her, ordered her, daughter don't come back to me.  
 I will turn myself into a speckled mockingbird and I will fly to you  
 And I will sit on the white lily and tell you my troubles.  
 Eh, shoo, shoo speckled bird, fly away from that lily  
 Or you will break it, but not break it off, and it will wilt.  
 Well I did not come, my dear mother, to break the lily  
 But I came, my dear mother, to lament about my grief)

Part II re-approaches the narrative in part I, but this strophe comes from below. During COVID lockdown and the years that followed, my PBR crossed a threshold from which I haven't returned. Like many families, mine was polarized and fractured by QAnon and the Trump presidency. Members of my family became increasingly radicalized Trump supporters. Relations became extremely fraught. I started a practice of solo improvisation that I can't even say was musically or aesthetically oriented. I'm disintegrating. These past two years have left me wondering if repair from White, patriarchal violence and the colonial project involves—at least in some part—grieving one's way to a reconstitution of flesh and a recovery of spirit.<sup>11</sup> This reconstitution and recovery is different in each person, for each body carries the sum of its experiences, and is marked by dramatically different inheritances of trauma arising from dispossession, displacement, dissociation, numbness, personal/intergenerational/ethnocultural erasure, assault, victimization, and perpetration. The dehumanizing force moves differently, but in all directions, diffracting its way through all it touches.<sup>12</sup> For me, glimpses of my own reconstitution and recovery irrupt in dreams, unruly and uninvited. The glimpses come bearing a message to be deeply felt, to be taken by. The messages arrive as images experienced in and through the entire body, as if the body were one large “eye,” of sorts. If you can manage to crawl inside them, the images begin to slowly do their work. I invite you to close your physical eyes for a minute or two, to activate this bigger eye. Listen for whatever animal or machine might be lingering outside your window. Let logic slip from its throne so that the doorway to the mythic might open up a crack. And then when you are ready, please, begin.



A young boy stood with his father at the edge of a lake.  
 For lunch, each was allotted a boiled egg.  
 “Don't drop it, *mij synečeku.*”<sup>13</sup> Almost as soon as the words had been uttered, the boy dropped the egg.  
 He searched the murky waters, hoping to eat it, even if it was dirty.  
 He didn't find it.  
 The father ate his own egg, sharing none with his son.

The boy grew up.  
 He left home, he left his parents, he left his country, never to return.  
 Would a bite of his father's egg have kept him there?  
 We'll never know.

He settled in a new country, across the sea.

He worked hard. He had no one to depend on, but he didn't expect there to be anyone anyway. That was the lesson his father had taught him years ago. He became a citizen of the place, got married, had children. He grew old there. One day, he realized that he didn't recognize the world around him. Suddenly, he couldn't understand it.

Bitterness filled his heart. Everything looked like poison. For weeks, fire raged through the mountains and hovered uneasily at his door. Trees in his garden dropped their leaves and started to die.

Would it have been different if he had never left his country?  
Would it have been different if his father had shared his egg?

What are eggs?

For some, they are lunch.

For others, they participate in a hard lesson about righteous, self-reliant behavior. Maybe this lesson is particularly manly. Maybe it is particular to the immigrant. Maybe it is particularly characteristic of Whiteness. But maybe not.

For others still, eggs are a potent symbol of fertility. In folktales, they are a talisman of divine love.

Some see the sun in their bright yolks.

In spherical form, they represent the sacred unity of the world.

For geometers, they comprise the great oneness of form.

Genetically, they are miniature capsules of life in its fullest expression.

Among other things, they are potency, potentiality, rebirth, continuation, iteration.

You may have already guessed that I am the boy's daughter.  
He remembers the loss of his egg as a lesson well-learned.  
Through it, he learned that self-reliance was the only way, and those are the lessons he delivered, believing in them completely.  
But the truth is, he is heartbroken.  
Some days I worry that his domain is too lofty.  
Is there still a chance that he can retrieve the egg—even after its disappearance into the turbid water long ago?

Are elders really elders if they don't know how to love with more generosity than the young?  
Is it wrong of me to make such a demand of my elders?  
Should I be the one with love to spare?

Wait—do I still have my egg? Or did I also lose it long ago?

If I have it, am I willing to share it? With whom am I willing to share?  
 If I share with one, can I share with all?  
 In my dealings with my daughters—who once were eggs themselves—have I already unwittingly initiated the next generation of eggless humans?  
 You were an egg too. We all grew inside the shells of our mothers' dark wombs. Did you manage to keep your egg, and did you help others keep theirs?

I wonder what happened to the egg he dropped. That unfortunate egg that led to a hungry belly, and perhaps a far more insidious hungry heart. A longing that he learned to ignore.  
 Did the egg roll to the lake's bottom-most point?  
 Or get stopped by a stick, stuck in the mud?  
 Did it eventually rot on the sandy bottom, contributing to murkiness?  
 Did a fish come along with a wide-open mouth and suck it in whole?  
 The egg sits inside the fish's belly.  
 Perhaps the fish had eggs of her own and she soon set them to the water.  
 But not before the little boy's egg that came to be in the fish's stomach nourished the fish's eggs.

Perhaps.

A week ago, I dream I am the daughter of a snake. I too can turn into a snake. My snake form is enormous, jet black and shiny. I am in a large room with three companions, all of whom are children of different animals—one feathered, one furred, one antlered—and all of whom can shapeshift like me. One now looks like an older White man. He is bossing everyone else around. There is a waterhole in the middle of the floor. I jump in and turn into a snake. Underwater, an entire world exists, even though the hole to get in is small. I attack the man under water. I bite him.

I climb out of the waterhole and decide I don't want to attack anyone anymore.

Did I find my father's egg underwater?

No.

But I came to the decision to stop biting people.

In the dream, there is a kitchen in the corner of the room. Hundreds of crystal glasses have been washed, some not very well. I must bring the glasses to store them on shelves that line the walls. The glasses are glittering, as if lit from behind. They are beautiful. It requires many trips back and forth.

What are these beautiful diamond vessels that I must steward and convey to their spot on the shelf? Some a little dirty, some brilliantly shining, but all arriving to the same place? In their translucence, they refract every color. Kaleidoscopic beams are bouncing in every direction as I carry them. I am careful not to drop or chip them.

I'm not sure what they are. Maybe they are souls. I suspect that not attacking means bringing the dirty ones and the clean ones alike.

In the song "Vydala máti," the daughter turns herself into a speckled mockingbird in order to return to her mother, her origin. This same bird appears in the Slavic folktale "The Snake Husband."<sup>14</sup>



In the tale, a girl is swimming in a lake with her friends. The day is hot, and they are relieved by the cool water. They laugh and splash around. As she climbs out of the water to return to her work, she sees that a snake is coiled on her dress. She tries to push the snake off her dress, but he refuses to move. He tells her he will move only if she agrees to marry him. Eventually, she acquiesces, not believing that her word matters, for how could a human girl marry a snake?

The next morning, she wakes up to the sight of hundreds, thousands of snakes outside her bedroom window. The ground is motile and writhing with their bodies heaped upon one another. At the head of the groom's party is the groom himself, who, you might have guessed, happens to be the Snake King. He takes the girl and escorts her to the lake where they enter into his subterranean, aquatic realm. It is beautiful there, more beautiful than she can believe. A handsome man stands before her, the most handsome she has ever seen. They fall deeply, utterly in love. Soon, children are born—one boy and one girl. Years pass happily and full.

One day the Snake-wife has an urge to see her mother again. The Snake King agrees, with two conditions: she must not stay overnight, and she must not reveal the magic words which allow her to reenter the lake into his realm. She agrees and says goodbye to her little family.

She returns home and her mother is full of mistrust, envious of her daughter's radiance and disapproving of the strangeness of her condition. What appears to be handsome and loving to the daughter appears suspicious and monstrous to the mother. She tricks her daughter into revealing the secret words and then administers a sleeping potion. As soon as her daughter is asleep, the mother goes to the lake and utters the secret words. The Snake King appears, eager to greet his wife. But instead of his beloved, his mother-in-law stands alone on the shore, a knife in hand. She slices off his head. Brutally, callously. He is no relation for her. She does not care if he is dead. In fact, she is glad.

The next morning the Snake-wife wakes up in a panic, her stomach is filled with dread. She rushes to the lake, and there on the shore is her beloved husband. Limp. He is in two pieces. She cries a cry like you have never heard. Or maybe you hear cries like that every time someone sees someone they love lying murdered. She dives into the water to find her children and tells them what has happened.

The Snake-wife's daughter transforms into a speckled mockingbird, the same bird that the daughter in the song "Vydala máti" turns into.

The Snake-wife's son transforms into a nightingale.

I don't remember what the Snake-wife turns into. It is some kind of bird. I could look it up, but I don't. I feel the impulse to turn her into a snake, so that the knowledge of what it is to be human-snake won't be lost now that her husband is dead. I feel the urge to save her and her husband. I would like to have them as my ancestors. But the Snake King is dead. And the Snake-wife doesn't turn into a snake, she turns into a bird. Do I get to have my way and make her a snake if I want to? Do I get to play the valiant role of saviour? Might I long to know them and grieve their demise without fixing things up as I would like them to be?

What is it to be a White woman in North America today? Looking through the glasses of our own stinginess, our stingy fathers and mothers, and grandfathers and grandmothers, and great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers? I feel a tidal wave is looming close by. At least, I notice inside

myself something stirring or becoming dislodged that hasn't until now. Last night, I dreamed that I was walking down carpeted stairs in an old house. Suddenly water starts gushing out of my body, gushing out of my vagina. An old skinny White man stands at the bottom of the stairs, watching me, repulsed and horrified. I rush past him to hide in a small room downstairs. The same thing happens a second time. I am walking down the stairs and water starts gushing out of my vagina, pooling onto the carpet and running in rivulets down the stairs. This time my grandfather, my mother's father, is there to witness this, and he too is horrified and disgusted beyond belief. I rush past him to hide in a small room.

What happens when we long to claim certain ancestors as our own even as we exile or push aside others? What does it ask of us to gather up all the glasses, both those that sparkle and those that to our eye seem unclean? What do I see when I raise the glass of the Snake-wife and her husband to the light? What do I see when I raise the glass of my father? What do I see in the glass of my Southern, Christian grandfather, from whom I feel the need to shamefully conceal the vulgarity of my watery explosion? What might these questions have to do with Whiteness and what it has perpetrated on the world? When all we can see behind us are ancestors we'd prefer not to claim, whose ancestors do we turn to in our hunger for something we might call lineage? What does it look like to claim those exiled ones? Does it involve examining dirty glasses, or not hiding—from those we imagine will disapprove—the birthing waters that are bursting forth from our bodies?

The truth is that I am still learning how to be in relation to my Indigenous ancestry, and the extent to which it should be named in any kind of public-facing manner. I recognize that to discuss claims of Indigenous ancestry is potentially harmful and dangerous, as the growing number of fraudulent Indigenous ancestry claims and “pretendians” attest. Because over the years I have found myself in research and creative co-practice with a number of Indigenous artists and scholars, I have felt a growing need to clarify my position. At this moment in time, it feels important to articulate it as no more and no less than what it is. On my mother's side, I grew up with the information that we are Cherokee, Welsh, French, and Scottish. I have never self-identified as Indigenous in any official capacity or through any funding or application process because these threads never felt substantial enough to me. I am not an enrolled member with tribal affiliation, nor have I lived in community. But I have come to feel that to not name these ancestors also feels irresponsible—a furthering of the colonial project of Indigenous erasure. Although my genealogical research is far from complete, I haven't found specific proof of the Cherokee part. On my ancestors' official documents, their race is sometimes listed as “Native” and sometimes as “White.” My mother had her DNA tested, and her mitochondrial DNA—her matrilineal line—links her to North American Indigenous populations. Through research I have discovered that at least one of my ancestors, Ben Self, was living on the Chickasaw Reservation in Oklahoma, and that his trajectory across the US followed the path of the “Great Removal” or what is also known as the “Trail of Tears,” during which the Woodland tribes of the Cherokee, Muscogee Creek, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chickasaw were forcibly removed from their homelands and relocated to what was known as “Indian Territory.” For a while, I thought I had found my family on the Creek Reservation, but I think the Ben Self in Creek Territory has a different middle initial (although I am still not 100 percent sure about this). My grandmother Dardanella was proud of her Native heritage, but she lived in the consequence of her own ruptures. To my knowledge, she thought she was Cherokee, and didn't know she might be Chickasaw—I only discovered it by researching family members after she died. Her father, Jackson Lister, was orphaned as a small child when his father, Enos Lister, was killed, and his mother, Helen Self, died shortly thereafter from a nervous breakdown. Jackson was brought up by a White foster family from the age of seven. He married my settler great-grandmother, Jenna Ferol Bradley, but soon after my

grandmother Dardanella was born, Jackson left them. After serving as a nurse in World War II and marrying my Welsh settler grandfather Kent, my grandmother Dardanella bleached her black hair blond and passed into Whiteness, inhabiting the role of suburban Southern housewife. I'm not sure why she thought she was Cherokee and not Chickasaw—my guess would be that the Cherokee were more widely known in public discourse, and her link to that culture disappeared when her father left. Or perhaps when the Great Removal occurred, her family members became dispersed and disconnected from their ethno-cultural origins.

I reckon with the fact that while I have engaged in acts of heritage reclamation on my father's line for the last ten years, I have not yet done similar work with my mother's line. Jackson occupies the same position on my family tree as Vladimír Úlehla—why have I not engaged with him as I have Vladimír? There are reasons—I heard my father and his parents sing folk songs at home and speak Czech, but I never once heard my mother or her mother sing a Cherokee or Chickasaw song or speak Cherokee or Chickasaw. I've continued to visit family in the Czech Republic since I was five years old, but the only relatives I had in Oklahoma or East Texas have died. In my father's line, the rupture was much more recent, and therefore, able to be inhabited. I acknowledge that by neglecting the Cherokee and/or Chickasaw and privileging the European (even if it is a small Slavic nation whose language nearly died out and whose lands were formerly occupied and colonized for hundreds of years by other hegemonic powers), I am furthering the erasure of Indigenous life brought about by settler colonialism, even within my own hybrid body. Which glasses do we celebrate and perpetuate? Which glasses do we forget or neglect? Which glasses are we entitled to claim? The situation is far from straightforward. Tuck and Yang (2012) are critical of “settler moves to innocence” that erase complicity in the violence of the settler colonial project; one such move to innocence is “settler nativism,” the (at times fictitious) belief that one has an Indigenous ancestor. How can I look through my grandmother Dardanella's and great-grandfather Jackson's glasses, not to parade them around to guarantee my innocence, or to speak from a place of consolidated authority, but to care for the ways they walked in the world, and to further refract the wavelengths that we share?

My grandmother's half-brother told my mother about the “Indian ways” of fishing and hunting and being on the land that he learned from his dad. My grandmother didn't grow up with her father around to learn these ways, but for me, she modelled behavior that I perceive as belonging to Indigenous ways of being in the world. From her I learned to take my time, to not rush, to look around and see what is there. She gave so much of her attention to the smallest creatures—tiny birds and insects. She taught me not to overlook the littlest ones and their lifeways. The Cherokee legend of the Origin of the Pleiades and the Pine, which links the Pleiades and the Pine to one another, as well as to the Cherokee people, was one she held close. It taught me to look up and down to know myself and my world. I'm trying to proceed like she did: slowly, carefully, gently, with spirit, with love, with sweetness, with style, by taking my time to look up at the stars, to look down at the pine seedling, and to notice the littlest ones.

But what should we do with the glasses that we *really* don't want to look at? In our own lineages, as in both the song and the story, we might be appalled by the mothers' cruelty. They don't seem to have eggs, if you know what I mean.

Indeed, what do I see in the glass of the cruel mother?

And is she a cruel mother, or does she act cruelly? We might say that cruelty is an attribute of an action specific to a moment in time; cruel is an attribute that is fixed to a person across all time. Might cruelty have some function that is not bound to the one who wields it? What happens when we make mothers cruel, or make fathers bitter, or any of the other ways we might ask behaviours to bind themselves to personhood, including our own? What does that do to the possibilities for change, or repair? What are other relationships that a human might have to attributes like cruelty other than being? For example, wielding, carrying, tending, dancing with, meeting, feeding, clutching—all these could be ways that we approach cruelty, or any other given attribute. Maybe the mothers are here to remind us that we too wield cruelty. What space could open up in recognizing ourselves as enacting different functions in different moments, wielding or dancing with behaviours/patterns/practices/approaches?<sup>15</sup>

Or maybe the mother's cruelty is here to remind us—in those moments when much appears brutal and anaesthetized—that there are other tethers that steady us.

Maybe she is here to remind us that there is work to do underground and underwater, that we are part mother and part daughter, part father and part son, and many linkages and pathways exist in between.

Maybe we will grow weary of attacking people.

Or maybe when we do, we will start to notice and be troubled. Or we will learn to see and name the attacks of those we come from, and we will learn to find the courage to not turn away.

Maybe the mother's cruelty indicates that among all the attributes we might embody—in our cruel acts as in our generative ones—there is a practice to be practised. Maybe we will start the long work of conveying glasses, the glistening and the dirty, and holding them up to the light.

In the Slavic folktale “The Maiden Tsar,” the Maiden Tsar, who is the incarnation of the divine feminine, is wronged by her betrothed. In her pain, she removes her love from her body and hides it inside an egg, which she puts in a duck, which she puts in a hare, which she puts in a little wooden chest, which she places inside a hollow oak tree. Her egg is never to be mentioned or discovered. But the person who wronged her must find this egg. He must go to the underworld and figure out a way to survive. With the help of an old woman, he finds the egg. With the help of an old woman, the Maiden Tsar eats the egg. Her love is restored. Wrongdoing is redressed. Life flourishes again.

I am willing to bet that sometime in her long life, the old woman ate her own egg, or, if for some reason she lost hers, someone else shared with her.

And actually, I don't think the boy's egg is lost. Sometimes it looks that way to me, but then I remember the twinkle in his eye when he plays with his granddaughters. I remember the way they used to fall asleep on his chest when they were babies. I remember that now that they are a little older, he is one of their favourite people to tell their triumphs and heartbreaks to because he is a really good listener. I remember the hundreds if not thousands of hours he has spent wondering about life, spirituality, physics, and folk song with me. I remember that my practice-based research owes its existence to him in many ways, from the ruptures, to the continuities, to the numerous shoots of new growth. I remember how he works tirelessly in the orchard with a secret smile on his face, as sweat pours off of him. I remember his heartfelt appreciation of creativity and hard work.

And I think, maybe his egg has been there all along. I just didn't have eyes to see it. Maybe I mistook stingy acts for a stingy father.

If you've lost your egg, may you find it. May you break it in two and share it with someone who dropped theirs.



The editors of this special issue of *Performance Matters* ask: what is the performative force of practice-based research?<sup>16</sup> From where I stand, it lies in PBR's ability to address the intergenerational trauma caused by White, patriarchal supremacy. PBR affords a chance to linger inside the ruptures caused by colonial histories of domination and feel into the ways that song and spirit move there. Embodied questions and their felt answers open new ways of perceiving a known terrain. These new ways of perceiving are troubling, because we can no longer not ask when and where we cause harm. We can no longer be unconcerned or numb. This has rippling ramifications for family and social relations, our practices of academic scholarship, the means by which we define and delimit what counts as knowledge or research. Our experience of social, material, and spiritual reality can be seen and experienced anew. The force arises in our bodies, in between bodies. This performative, phenomenological force is a chance at recovery, and love.

**Video Example: Solo practice. Video courtesy of Music on Main. Filmed by Collide Entertainment.** <https://vimeo.com/822141273?share=copy>.

## Notes

1. The ideas and practice explored in this article were created on the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm (Musqueam) people, in what is also known as Vancouver, British Columbia. Some of the ideas explored in this essay were inspired by an invitation—from music theorists Michael Tenzer and John Roeder—to write about musical cycles. Rather than engage in music analysis about aspects of Slovácko songs' cyclic structure, as I believe was their expectation, the invitation inspired me to think about the many other kinds of periodicity and recurrence that inform my relationship with the songs, some of which are detailed here.
2. A little bit of context on geography: in 1993, Czechoslovakia went through the Velvet Divorce, in which the Czech and Slovak Republics were separated. In 2016, the Czech Republic started using the shorter "Czechia." Czechia is divided into several regions, which are also sometimes referred to as the "Czech lands": Moravia, Bohemia, and Silesia. These regions are further divided into subregions and microregions. These sub- and microregions are important demarcations for ethnographers and folklorists. South Moravia is a subregion known for its viticulture and folklore. Slovácko is a smaller subregion within South Moravia. Dolňácko and Horňácko are even smaller microregions within Slovácko. Strážnice is in Dolňácko.
3. The Kuna are an Indigenous people from the territory of what is now the countries of Columbia and Panama. The Rappahannock are an Indigenous people from what is now the state of Virginia in the USA.
4. In the original Czech: "V muzice a v písničkách je nepřeborné množství nálad a pravd, které prožívali už naši předci, a já jenom navazuji na to krásné, co nám v těch písničkách a muzice zanechali" (Vrchovský 2016).
5. Compare also with Ben Spatz's discussion of song as "epistemic object" (2015, 63).
6. See Savage (2009) for more on music's "worlding power."

7. See for example Svanberg, et al. (2012, 348): “The month of March is called in Czech “březen” – “the month of birches.” Tapping sap from birch, maple and beech (*Fagus sylvatica* L.) is described from the Bohemian Forest. The best sap came from the birch, though. In some areas of Bohemia young girls and boys used to gather on 23 March in order to tap birch sap. This was celebrated by eating food and dancing around a birch. The girls consumed the birch sap in order to be healthy and, as grown-up women, fertile.”
8. Taken from Machek (1971).
9. See Benjamin (1968) for more on the afterlives of works of art.
10. The article that appeared on the Czech National Radio was titled “Slyšet to pradědeček, zabil by vás! Radikální verze moravské hudby šokuje tradicionalisty” (If your great-grandfather heard this, he would kill you! The radical version of Moravian music shocks the traditionalists; Moravčík 2017).
11. There is some debate about whether or not to capitalize the word *White*. The Chicago Manual of Style advocates for capitalization of both Black and White: “It is with a spirit of equity and with an eye toward future generations—and with a debt of gratitude owed to those [Black and Brown authors and their allies in publishing and elsewhere] who have led us here—that we embrace the changes. . . . We hope you will embrace them too.” See <http://cmosshtoptalk.com/2020/06/22/black-and-white-a-matter-of-capitalization/>. The Associated Press capitalizes *Black* but not *white* because “after a review and period of consultation, we found . . . less support for capitalizing white. White people generally do not share the same history and culture, or the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color. . . . AP is a global news organization and there is considerable disagreement, ambiguity and confusion about whom the term includes in much of the world.” See <https://apnews.com/article/archive-race-and-ethnicity-9105661462>). Although I agree more with the rationale offered by the AP, I use the term White here to trouble the invisible normativity of North American Whiteness that hasn’t stopped to examine its privileges, its ways of enacting harm, its ruptures and specificities.
12. I’m grateful to Reed Jackson for their insight and co-thinking through this passage, especially regarding their emphasis on the vast heterogeneity of experiences and lineages of harm, and the different kinds of repair that are needed.
13. “Don’t drop it, my son.”
14. The story can be found in Kononenko (2007). I read it several years ago, and it has stayed with me. In accordance with the mechanisms of oral folklore, I write here the version that I remember, rather than a perfect replica with a standard citation. I have probably added descriptive details, but the essential components are the same.
15. I’m grateful to Annie Levin for her insight and co-thinking through this passage.
16. In my communities of practice, the word *performative* has two very different meanings. It can either refer to actions or events that occur in the realm of artistic performance, or it can be used pejoratively to refer to an action that is done insincerely, falsely, superficially, or that is primarily intended to fortify one’s image or status. I refer to the first meaning here, in that PBR invokes a realm of artistic performance action, which in my case is also linked with repair and the sacred.

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## Practice-Based Research: Working in Crip Time

Heather May

I am two days away from the extended deadline I have negotiated for this submission, and I am seemingly decades away from finishing. I've been writing steadily, but not without massive fits and starts.

*I just want a vacation.*

I had been left burned out by energy and time spent trying to assist flailing college students in 2022, the third year of the COVID pandemic, when our administration pressed us to “get back to normal” while students rotated in and out of quarantines and I had to cancel live performances of the production I was directing. I find myself railing with Maureen Connolly and Tom Craig that “it is unconscionable, given what we know about ergonomics, the relationship between environment and disease, and the neurophysiological basis of cognition, that educational institutions continue to design structures, schedules, and curricula as if the actual body did not exist” (2005, 252).

*Sitting in front of my large screen monitor on an uncomfortable office chair for the sixth straight hour, it is clear to me that my body exists. My therapist asks why I don't find a location more conducive to associating pleasure with the act of writing. I tell them this is the only place I have access to a monitor that allows me to enlarge my text so I can actually read what I write. As an overzealous editor of shitty first drafts, I wonder if maybe this is part of my problem and relocate to my porch swing with my laptop. Fits and starts.*

Every burst of writing and research raises more questions than it seems to answer. Last night, I came up with yet another key research question that would ideally require me to start from scratch. Again. I am out of time and if I want to publish this article, I need to live with the research I have completed to this point and finish my writing so that it can be sent off to editors and then reviewers. While these scholars will help me further hone my argument and offer additional perspectives, this process ends before the work is published and reaches its audience. Once in print, idea development happens without the ability for development with a collaborative audience.

*My mind drifts to the dear friend and collaborator I lost to cancer in October. She was deeply embedded in all stages of this research project, from Friday writing / sharing / happy hour sessions to feedback on rough drafts and performances to working to fight for accessibility on campus. The sensation of loss sets me reeling. I stare at my screen trying to understand why I am blocked. Is it because writing about the project without her feels like betrayal? Am I stuck because I still haven't carved out time to mourn her loss and begin the process of healing? Am I incapable of generating insights on my own? I go grab a scarf of hers I inherited and put it on, imagining her hugging me and then try to refocus. Fits.*

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The material realities of writing, editing, and printing work require deadlines, deadlines set to a colonialist clock created in very different circumstances for different types of scholars, generally scholars from privileged backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> Though I also have a hard upcoming deadline for a livestream performance of “Awaiting Tiresias,” I know that performance will be followed by others in an ongoing cycle of writing, rehearsal, performance, discussion, self-reflection, rewriting: a cycle of revision with indeterminate conclusion. This cycle has repeated intermittently over the past four years, and every time I think I am ready to put it behind me, the moment tells me otherwise. While any individual performance date provides a firm deadline for the version of the work as shared with an audience, that version of the research is always already incomplete. It has no shape of its own and leaves no rigid / tangible residue. Instead, the research questions evolve simultaneously with the input of my live audience—research transformed in real time. In other words, “Awaiting Tiresias” moves on crip time.

In her groundbreaking book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer defines crip time as “flex time not just expanded but exploded” (2013, 27). Crip time explodes time, and the space cleared by this explosion provides fertile ground for practice-based research—research that happens in the body and in community. Crip time reimagines “notions of what can and should happen in time” and “recogniz[es] how expectations of ‘how long things take’ are based on very particular minds and bodies. . . . Rather than bend[ing] disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (27). Crip time acknowledges the real, embodied experience of the individual in relationship to their society to ensure the scholar is not sacrificed at the altar of their scholarship. I suspect nearly everyone working in higher ed today relates to Elisabeth Griffiths’s observation that “it is often assumed that the ‘willing, capable and able’ worker can perform to an excellent standard in everything all of the time, but this creates a highly pressurised working environment and this frenetic pace of activity has somehow become normalised” (2020, 125). Furthermore, this frenetic pace frequently breaks down the health and immune systems of those working in higher ed, knocking already disabled scholars out of the profession altogether and disabling others who were previously among the “willing, capable and able.”

*Fits and starts engender new fits. In the five years since I was diagnosed with vision impairment, I have accumulated hundreds of emails regarding my needed accommodations. Most remain unmet, and those that were met initially are generally lost anew in the endless cycle of campus staff comings and goings, the development of new software, and lost paperwork. This exhausting cycle of self-advocacy, ongoing disclosure, and lost ground has stolen my time, my enthusiasm, and set back my hopes of learning new technology that would make research and writing easier.*

Alice Andrews imagines a crip intervention in neoliberal research practices, “the autoimmune self-destruction of the contemporary university might be reconfigured as the self destruction of the immune system that protects the neoliberal, racist, ableist and individualist university, with the aim of opening in its place a system of protection, interdependency and mutuality that might take care of all forms of suffering” (2020, 105). In their call for proposals for this special issue, editors Peter Dickinson and Ellen Waterman defined “the underlying proposition of the various methodologies” they classify as practice-based research as belief “that creative practices may be used to seek out knowledge while also challenging the epistemological assumptions that produce the concept ‘research’” (sent through the ASTR listserv). Nisha Sajani defines practice-based research as “involv[ing] individual or collaborative reflection and inquiry in an effort to improve upon a

particular practice” (Sajjani, Sallis, and Salvatore 2019, 78). Through its commitment to challenging assumptions and collaborative research methods, practice-based research meets Andrews’s call for crip intervention and is a powerful crip methodology.

Crip scholarship recognizes the humanity of the person engaged in doing research as well as the scholar’s interdependence upon various communities: research specialists with shared interests, campus, local, familial. Crip scholarship prioritizes the health of those who engage in it and the transformations that occur through the research and dissemination process instead of results.

*I wonder when or if the book chapter I wrote about performative autoethnography as a disability research method will be published. Submitted in October 2021, notification about acceptance was moved from December to March then July 2022 and now to sometime later this year. I suspect that the lived experience of crip time by those involved in this project is part of the renegotiated timeline. I’m grateful that this delay did not negatively impact my promotion to Full last year. It could have been otherwise.*

Recognition of the researcher as human challenges traditional models that imagine the researcher as an enlightened mind who engages in careful layers of study in order to uncover a Truth worthy of sharing with the world: “a post-positivist paradigm . . . that tells [us] that knowledge is finite, knowable, observable and measurable and that there is a truth, ‘capital T’” (Sajjani, Sallis, and Salvatore 2019, 88). This paradigm places value upon individual “discoveries” and scholarship. As one example, though far from universally true, promotion and tenure guidelines often privilege solo scholarship over that shared by multiple authors. In traditional academic structures, “the organisational framework . . . is not conducive to knowledge production in the spirit of solidarity and collaboration. The excellence framework is devoid of incentives for knowledge based in social realities for the simple reason that it is not produced fast enough to be published in the highest-ranking journals and for a university to maintain its position on prestigious ranking lists” (Gilbert 2020, 25). For theatre scholars and practitioners, these pressures manifest in things like institutional requirements to publish traditional research about practice-based research before the work can fully qualify towards tenure and promotion.<sup>2</sup>

Although institutions of higher education often articulate themselves as “families” with deeply connected communities, the work they prioritize and celebrate is that which can be easily quantified and evaluated based upon previously established standards.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, disabled communities have developed intricate mutual aid networks in response to structures that systematically develop policies and procedures that exclude them. These mutual aid practices use lived experience and dialogue to determine communal needs and the best ways to meet them. As a form of crip research, mutual aid provides a powerful model for practice-based research: ignore pressures to quantify and medicalize that impede the researcher’s ability to speak directly with and to real communities through “polyvocality, emergence, and contingent knowledge that is socially provocative” (Sajjani, Sallis, and Salvatore 2019, 88).

### **“Awaiting Tiresias” as Crip Scholarship**

*I’m distracted by a sherbet orange dawn on the lake during my morning run, contemplating where the best place will be to catch it in a photo. I weaned myself from competitive distance running by stopping to take photographs of things during my runs. It’s a habit I don’t intend to abandon even*

*though I can no longer remember the last time I was registered for a race as an elite athlete. I'm thrown into the air and land on my hands and knees. Only when I hit the ground do I register the knee-high boulders that mark the entrance to the state park. I run past them every morning, yet this morning I never even saw them coming. I will feel their impact for the rest of my life.*

As a disabled scholar, I find myself profoundly frustrated by a traditional model of scholarship that asks me to imagine my knowledge as removed from the body (politic and individual) that shapes it. After all, my bodily experience of the world changes constantly depending on my immediate circumstances and this, in turn, transforms my relationship to my work. On particular types of overcast days, my vision is obscured in shades of grey, blurring things together and leaving me to grope my way through the fog. On bright morning runs, sunlight turns everything painfully white, stopping me in my tracks as I listen closely for traffic in the hopes of avoiding running straight into an oncoming car. These changes impact me physically, but they also change the pace of my thoughts, the depth of attention I have available to give to my world. Reading in a library with white walls and fluorescent lights gives me a headache in short order, limiting the time I can devote to research—and that's when I'm lucky enough to find a book printed in a font large enough for me to read. The literally painful association between research and my body, in turn, pushes me to contemplate both my work and my relationship to scholarship and the field. It is impossible for me to ignore my body as I work.

*I reread the submission guidelines, noticing for the first time that I will need to extract anything that could identify me in my scholarship before I submit this piece for “blind” peer review. I'm distracted by blindness. In so many vision metaphors, blindness is used when we really mean willful ignorance. In this case, willful ignorance is conflated with objectivity—a belief that scholars can and should judge work on the strength of ideas severed from the individuals who created them.<sup>4</sup> Objective ableism. I can imagine no way to remove the body from the knowledge.*

*My mind jumps from blindness as objectivity to a feel-good article a friend shared a while back. The article was about a family with a blind child given a pair of specialty glasses that allowed her to see for the first time. According to the article, these glasses finally allowed the toddler to identify her mother, as if this child did not already recognize her mother by using other senses such as hearing (Veljanovski 2021). Blind peer review assumes that reviewers do not engage knowledge such as contextual clues to make assumptions about the identity of the author—either in specific, or in terms of assumed identity group.*

My body brought me to performative autoethnography, to practice-based research.

Shortly after I upended my world by running into that boulder, I was diagnosed with a genetic disorder that causes significant vision loss and will likely lead to blindness. As with many diagnoses, this information named what was happening to me, but it did not provide clarity about my future.<sup>5</sup> Isolated from other vision-impaired scholars and theatre artists, I embarked upon practice-based research to better understand my prospects in fields that define themselves primarily in terms of vision and sight. This form of research felt especially useful given that I was early in the stages of learning about vision impairment, far from the depth I would need to publish traditional scholarship. Contrary to the expectations of my institution, I did not yet understand the full scale of my disability, much less have the knowledge I needed to advocate for specific accommodations and

alterations to the way I traditionally worked. I wanted to deeply investigate my own relationship to the theatre, higher education, and disability culture writ large.

Initially my questions were mostly framed in terms of acceptance and capability. My own immersion in ableist culture made me question whether I would have the skills to continue working as a successful director and professor when I was unable to see. I was also concerned about acceptance as a theatre artist, professor, and scholar by students and colleagues who knew I was going blind. Nearly all the training I received as a theatre director was grounded in visual components: blocking / stage pictures, eye contact, and other forms of visual storytelling and community building. I studied “visionary” stage directors like Robert Wilson, Anne Bogart, and Bertolt Brecht. The only blind models I had in the theatre were fictional characters like Tiresias, Pozzo, and Gloucester, none of whom inspired great confidence.

My first explorations of my changing circumstances were short self-reflexive performance sketches inspired by my diagnosis. While a student at La MaMa Umbria’s International Directors Symposium, I zipped myself into a piece of my “baggage” and filmed a frantic phone call from inside a suitcase where I pleaded to be found. (Given the ninety-degree day on which we filmed, this piece did not require a great deal of acting.) I also performed a short segment about blindness from *Oedipus Rex*’s Tiresias while tucked under a sheet and the scrutiny of the twenty peers who I crammed around my literal bed. A few months later at Pig Iron Theatre Company’s Something for Nothing workshop, a photograph of a bull skeleton in the desert inspired me to create a stumbling, falling character who begged others not to look at or help him.

*We are in an acting workshop doing trust exercises based upon shared body weight and pushing the limits of safety. We are sweaty and slippery and I am supposed to catch you as our weight shifts dramatically and suddenly. We’ve blocked it that I am to go from your shoulders to catching you by your ankle. Slow motion, everything is fine. It’s go time. We move faster now, adrenaline and exhaustion urging us to get through the routine as quickly as possible. I cannot see your ankle. You take yourself out of the exercise to catch yourself before I can drop you . . . and I am left feeling inept and dangerous. The next time we engage in a trust exercise I opt out.*

My early pieces placed me under the scrutiny of those who watched them—and by extension the larger culture from whence those audiences came. Because I did not spend a great deal of time with the disabled community, I imagined my audience to be abled and I constructed pieces that reflected this worldview. Although these creations did not deeply interrogate my relationship with my society, they did make legible pieces of my identity that are otherwise invisible and largely unacknowledged.<sup>6</sup> While I came at the work from an abled perspective, my performance served to bring my “body into the conversation,” and refused to “divid[e my] experiences into public and private spheres,” moving instead “towards integrated forms of knowing” (Sajnani, Sallis, and Salvatore 2019, 93).

There was a rebellious component of my work to claim disability—which US culture prefers to confine to the private realm—in public spaces that nearly always encourage people to hide it.<sup>7</sup> Both academe and the theatre are ableist institutions. For example, a study of contracts issued with the professional actors’ union between 2016 and 2019 notes that only 3.46 percent went to actors or stage managers with disabilities (Actors’ Equity Association 2020, 9). To the best of my knowledge, no data has been collected on the number of directors, designers, or other theatre professionals with disabilities. A 2021 article on disabled faculty notes that the most recent data from 2004 shows only



4 percent of faculty members in the United States have reported disabilities, as compared with 27 percent of the general public (Burke 2021). This data is unsurprising given that “much of what people experience around disability in academia is hidden for fear of stigma and the perception of not being able to ‘keep up’” (Griffiths 2020, 126).

While traditional disability studies scholarship brings disabled people into the consciousness of those who read it, it cannot physically challenge the homogeneously abled composition of the community in which it is consumed. Performances, however, place the disruptive disabled person in the midst of a primarily abled space. As I discovered in conversations with audiences following my early informal showings of solo pieces, however, my embodiment reinscribed ableist attitudes of revulsion and pity. Audiences described things like having an impulse to come onto the stage space to help me get up when my bull stumbled and fell. They remained seated due to both theatrical conventions of audience passivity and the fact that they resonated with the shame my character expressed when he begged them not to help. They accepted my shame without questioning the society that created it. At that stage in my personal journey their pity validated me, which was sufficient for me at the time.

I never intended to continue to use performance as research, because I was unaware that my explorations were engaged in this work. After all, they largely came out of assignments given to me when I was studying various directing and devising approaches at professional workshops. I turned to the material because it was top of mind, not because I consciously wanted to study the relationship between disability and theatre. When a friend encouraged me to propose a short solo performance for a panel she was organizing for the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) conference, however, I made the conscious decision to use autoethnographic performance to explore my sense of isolation from the institutions in which I worked.

*I'm in a faculty reading group to discuss Eli Clare's Brilliant Imperfection. For the first time in my life, I recognize that there are alternatives to cure and the power of acceptance. I decline my ophthalmologist's offer for genetic testing to determine if I have a variant for which they are close to finding a cure. When I return a year later, I agree. The results shake me. I'm not close to a cure but my genetics show me to be likely to face losses beyond my vision. I question the value of this knowledge and set it aside.<sup>8</sup>*

Still deeply embedded in an ableist mindset, my proposal for ASTR was titled “Fumbling around in the Dark.” While it contained a reference to Tiresias, something I have kept in all iterations of this research, the rest of the short proposal was devoted to the following:

[I am] a director who stands “visionary” at the edge of my vision. A lifetime of crafting images from the dark and teaching others how to paint evocative stage pictures appears to have left me without insight. I scour textbooks for answers to the question of how one directs without sight—but either those words aren't there or they've scurried out of eye's range.

This performance art piece wonders...

Why is darkness full of fear?

As I began developing what turned into a performative lecture entitled “Rearranging the Furniture,” I realized that I wanted to challenge this negative association with blindness.<sup>9</sup> Coming to terms with my diagnosis, I recognized that darkness is frightening but also carries potential. I wanted to demonstrate for myself and for audiences the possibility that darkness is more than a void—that it can be defined and explored.<sup>10</sup> Answering Alice Andrews’s call to mobilize “crip knowledges” to create “a system of protection, interdependency and mutuality” (2020, 105), I strove to find a way to use the performance to emphasize the concept of interdependence in community. Fears of being dependent upon others or of being isolated as a blind person are the reason that blindness was named as the top fear for Americans in a 2016 survey (Preidt 2016). I hoped to challenge ableist narratives about inspiring people who individually “overcome” their disabilities with the crip understanding that we survive disability by developing and relying on community. While our structures and institutions disable us, we learn how to survive them from those who have already done so.

Given that this initial performance would likely happen in a conference room with limited control over lighting, I decided to create darkness and interdependence by asking audience members to blindfold themselves. This allowed me to navigate the space around them as a means of encouraging the engagement of other senses. As soon as I had a draft of a script and long before I had anything resembling an embodied performance, I invited an audience of primarily non-theatre colleagues to the studio to help me edit. My first attempt to demonstrate an interdependent community was to tie myself up in strings. I intended to place the other end of these strings in the hands of blindfolded audience members when they raised their hands to acknowledge a shared experience with something I described. I imagined this connection as a means of tethering us to each other. The attempt was an abject failure. My yarn became a tangled mess within seconds and while I might have tried to find a better mechanism for the tethering, an audience member noted that they were so stressed by being asked to hold something for me and not wanting to fail that they didn’t hear anything else I said during the performance. In other words, I had become a literal embodiment of Tami Spry’s depiction of performative autoethnography as a place where “we may sometimes lurch within the boundaries of performance only to stumble upon a shard of language telling the messy beauty of being with others” (2011, 27). I replaced the string with a less metaphorical exploration of interdependence by engaging the audience in communal activities such as: brainstorming common vision-centred language like “turning a blind eye,” singing “three blind mice,” and standing up and stretching together.

*My head hurts and I’m having a hot flash. I’m hours away from my deadline and still not close to finishing a first draft. I’ve been sitting at my desk for the past five hours, stopping only to go lie on the hardwood floor in front of the fan when the sweat starts to run down my back. I contemplate the irony of working myself to exhaustion on a paper about the value of not working ourselves to exhaustion. I write an e-mail asking for a few more days, shut down my computer, and shuffle off to bed.*

The core of “Rearranging the Furniture” was an attempt to transport my audience to an experience I had while waiting on my diagnosis: a fifteen-minute test that required me to sit locked in a closet-sized room, in the dark, wearing a blindfold, with a stranger. This experience came at the end of a four-hour appointment full of bright lights and other mechanisms that strained my eyes, my patience, and my sense of time. It was disorienting and a perfect example of the way “disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and

cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings” (Samuels 2017). I was drawn to the timeless crip space of the exam room for its liminality (while I sat in the dark, I was between sighted and blind), and I hoped the space would evoke the power, fear, and potentiality of darkness in my audience. My narrative followed crip logic, meandering back and forth (direct dialogue in the present with the audience, the exam room two years earlier, a student ten years in the past, etc.), crossing numerous places (exam room, Maui, theatre classrooms), and exploring a variety of topics that seemed to follow stream of consciousness (ableism in academia and theatre, inaccessible physical structures, blindness, interdependence).

After multiple rehearsals and revisions in front of invited audiences, I took the piece to ASTR.<sup>11</sup> Responses were generally positive, most especially in terms of the lively discussion we had afterward about ways to make our spaces and practices more inclusive and accessible. People also noted that the blindfold helped them attend to their own perspectives on the described experiences rather than relying on what they saw me portray. At the same time, other members found it impossible not to worry about how they were being perceived by people who could watch them, were distracted by trying to place my location in space, or fretted about what might happen to them during the performance. Most distressingly for me, two members of the audience shared stories with me about family members or friends who had confided that if they were ever told they were going blind, they would commit suicide. While those audience members told me they wished they had been able to share the performance with those loved ones to provide a different perspective, I worried that the decision to blindfold the audience reinforced an association between darkness and fear.

Indeed, blindfolding the audience without providing a meaningful empowering embodied experience of blindness simply reinscribed concepts of blind people as lacking access to the world. A number of studies over the past two decades have demonstrated that what are known as disability simulation exercises “fail to account for the diverse coping mechanisms acquired from living long-term with disability” and instead reinforce “an ableist perspective that emphasizes loss and limitation rather than the lived experience in an often-discriminatory world” (Nario-Redmond, Gospodinov, and Cobb 2017, 327). Given that I located my audience in the precise moments in which I faced my own perceived loss of ability, this consequence should have been apparent to me when I created the piece. It took an embodied experience with an audience, however, to help me understand that abled audiences know only the moment of loss and not the lifetime of adaptation.<sup>12</sup> I learned through processing this research with others that “Simply gathering, assembling, and staging stories may reproduce institutional colonisations of voice and re-assert norms and conventions which become embedded in particular circumstances if care is not given to how scenes are organised, presented or received.” (Raynor 2019, 695). Although I made thoughtful intentional decisions about all performative and textual choices and paid careful attention to the ways I brought audience members into the crip space of the play, I needed to witness audience response to my performance to understand that some of my decisions reinscribed institutional conventions I was trying to challenge.

When I received word that “Rearranging the Furniture” would be part of PortFringe in 2019, I decided it would be wise to revise the piece to work harder to counter negative associations with blindness by including blindfolded creative engagement that would demonstrate that coping and beauty are possible without sight. While I daydreamed about large-scale communal sculpture or the creation of soundscapes, the reality of having to transport all materials in the trunk of a car and knowledge that the fringe festival would allow just one brief technical rehearsal and sparse

technology convinced me to scale down. I drew upon my crip theatre knowledge to assess the resources I would have and to plan for a variety of circumstances, deciding to place small canisters of play doh under each seat. At one point during the performance, I invited the audience to stand up from their chairs, stretch, and then sit down and open the container under their seats. I guided them through a tactile exploration of the sculpture made by a previous audience member in an attempt to reinforce that we are able to perceive shapes, create images, and have emotional responses to things without using our eyes. Then I asked them to remold the object into their own sculpture while I talked. Audiences were never encouraged to look at their creations. As reviewers of the performance at PortFringe noted, this was “a tactile experience that reveal[ed], ever so briefly, different ways of engaging with performance” (Weldon 2019) to let the audience “use artifacts from people who sat where we did before” and recognize they were “people who were okay after the experience” (M 2019).

*I am blindfolded in front of an audience of disabled artists telling my story about hiking the Haleakala crater. I am lost in the narrative, caught up in the glorious underscoring of improvised sounds they are making to score my stumbles through the rocky terrain. Aware of the beauty and chaos in disabled adventures, we find joy in simply indulging the experience as it happens in that one moment. I perform almost nothing I had planned and exit the stage, breathless and laughing.<sup>13</sup>*

I left PortFringe hungry to explore in-depth and evocative collaborative audience creativity in nonvisual mediums. A short residency and collaboration with fellow artists at Indy Convergence inspired a number of possibilities: using body mics to create an auditory experience of the space as I navigated it; tethering audience members to each other and asking them to engage in tasks such as sculpting or shifting locations; and allowing audiences to shift around furniture on the set before I entered the space. I was excited to research these ideas in a rehearsal space to discover where they might lead in shaping additional performances. I was fortunate enough to be heading into a sabbatical—the one moment in higher education that follows crip time to encourage innovation.<sup>14</sup> Joe Norris, Lynn Fels, and Yasmine Kandil describe innovation as “about finding what gems there are rather than determining success by predetermined outcomes. To be innovative in research one must surrender to the quest, the (quest)ion, often being lost, and risk capsizing” (2019, 102). While fearful of capsizing and injuring people in the process (especially if I encouraged them to move furniture or to move themselves through the dark), I was excited to surrender.

I lined up a residency to spend a month at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in late spring to experiment with technology a friend and colleague had acquired to make their productions more accessible to audiences. In the first months of sabbatical, I crippled time to spend it in the way that felt most productive and healthy for me: I ran in the morning and then met my dear friend and fellow disabled faculty member (also on leave) in the afternoon. We spent those sessions reading disability theory and history, sharing what we learned, and writing new work when the spirit moved us. I finished a shitty first draft of a full-length performance piece and presented it to an invited group to get feedback before I took it to EMU to rework. The response was lacklustre, and I was decidedly “lost” in my research. I learned the person I planned to collaborate with at EMU was leaving and we began to pare down expectations to find things we could explore in a one-week residency instead. I continued my daily research routine, finding footing in expanding my knowledge of disability studies and trusted that at some point, a new direction would present itself to me.

*We sit in a corner of the bar after a successful week's work, revelling in the way that liberating ourselves from productivity pressures has led to richer work. We toast the community we feel together and feel inspired to write a proposal for a grant to work with faculty at other liberal arts colleges to develop what we are calling Universal Design for Faculty. We plan to "apply the core UDL principles of flexibility in engagement; reduction of barriers to research, teaching, and service; and the provision of appropriate accommodations and supports for our essential work as faculty members." We find the names of colleagues at other schools who previously led successful grants on UDL and bring them into our planning sessions. They inform us that the granting organization is "structurally conservative" and encourage us to use justice language sparingly, replacing it with individual, rather than structural, transformation. Deflated, we discuss whether we are willing to abandon structural critique.*

*It is March 2020. Over the next three months, all plans for the year are cancelled.*

I have to reboot. As a disabled theatre artist, I am well prepared for this moment. As I tell my students, theatre teaches us how to assess our circumstances and resources, consider our intended audiences and goals, and make decisions that best use our resources to meet our goals. Given that no theatre process unfolds exactly as planned, successful theatre practitioners are skilled at adjusting calmly in the moment to challenges and existential threats. Disabled people are also accustomed to adjusting in the moment to changing circumstances, both internal and external, as we navigate an ableist society and a constantly shifting internal landscape. "The apprehension of disability forces individuals to come to grips with the way the body changes and can change further without warning, betraying the self's conception of who and what one is" (Hirschmann 2015, 208). As disabled people, our understanding of our world and ourselves is constantly changing, and we are prepared to remake ourselves in an instant.

In the earliest moments of COVID, everything locked down in response to a dangerous and easily transmitted airborne virus. People were told to avoid shared contact of items and spaces, to stay at least six feet apart, and to wear masks. My dream of spending sabbatical investigating physical interdependency, sensory indulgence, and closely intimate creative collaboration in dark spaces became a nightmare. If I hoped to be able to perform my piece, it would need to utilize film and/or streaming technologies, where I could be in one space and my audiences in another. Recognizing that the camera allows for greater control over what people see and hear, and that it is particularly adept at rendering interior spaces, I decided to return to the exam room as a central location to explore the relationship between the thoughts in my head and the ways my body/mind navigates its world. This time, instead of blindfolds, I hoped to utilize film itself to place audiences in the darkness with me. Whereas "Rearranging the Furniture" plunged audiences into relatively total blindness via blindfolding, "Awaiting Tiresias" allows them to exist simultaneously in the (generally) sighted world in which they watch the film (often at home) and in the sightless world in which I exist via the screen. Like me, audiences are in a crip liminal state.

Because the first performance of this piece was scheduled to be for the American Society of Bioethics and the Humanities (ASBH) conference, which moved online due to the pandemic, we shot from the perspective of the technician who shared the room with me. The audience, therefore, attended the performance from the position of medical professional. My goal shifted to "represent the complexity of the body's critical expression of interacting with others in the frames of social norms and expectations, and then write the body's transformation of those norms" (Spry 2011, 100).

In other words, I wanted to draw attention to the challenges that my disabled genderqueer body poses in a medical space and encourage medical professionals to change the norms in their practices. The performance followed crip logic, shifting fluidly between naturalistic dialogue between myself and the offscreen voice of the medical technician observing me (visually represented by live imagery of me sitting uncomfortably blindfolded in a chair) and monologues of internalized thoughts during periods of time in which I am waiting in darkness for the exam to finish (visually represented by prerecorded dark watery rippling motions over tiny fragments of light or other unidentifiable objects). The latter segments are underscored by sparse musical accompaniment.<sup>15</sup> In order to maintain the sense of being trapped under a medical gaze in an exam room, I removed the interactive segments with the audience from “Rearranging the Furniture” (such as brainstorming vision phrases) and scripted them into conversation with the technician.

Nearly all other textual elements were new to this piece, and they drew upon the research I was reading during my sabbatical. They also incorporated immediate issues such as the withholding of ventilators from disabled people during COVID. Given the nature of the form, audience interaction became limited to post-performance dialogue. Although most performances since ASBH have been for audiences outside of the medical profession, I have kept the framing from the perspective of the technician for all of them. I am still studying the efficacy of this decision. I would prefer to film the full piece from my perspective, showing the disjointed and fragmented images that I received during that medical examination. Such a choice would maintain my position as authority on my experience and provide a way for me to scrutinize the medical field that (often callously) determines the fate of disabled people. It would also help me avoid being subject to the medicalizing gaze, a gaze that takes agency away from those it observes. Rosemarie Garland Thompson compares the male gaze to the medical stare, noting, “The male gaze produces female subjects; the normative stare constructs the disabled. While both are forms of visual marking, gazing trades on a sexual register and staring traffics in medical discourse. Both visual exchanges prompt narrative. Gazing says, ‘You are mine.’ Staring says, ‘What is wrong with you?’ Gazers become men by looking at women, and starers become doctors by visually probing people with disabilities” (2005, 32).

Training the camera on me feels natural to audiences due both to film traditions, which show protagonists on screen even when telling a first-person story, and to ableist behaviours that scrutinize disabled bodies. While I would like to challenge this perspective, I do not have access to any medical spaces for the purposes of livestreaming performances. Furthermore, placing me in a liminal dark room is an accurate reflection of my experience, but it would not be accurate for the medical technician. He went into the space as a (presumably) able-bodied white male technician with knowledge and authority and his status was never challenged.<sup>16</sup>

*Conversations with medical students following a performance lead them to ask me if I ever tell my doctors that they are misgendering me when they call me “miss.” I don’t. It doesn’t feel worth it. They tell me they wish their patients would tell them so they could be accurate in how they address their patients. I update my pronouns in my online medical portal. The next time I see my everyday ophthalmologist, he tells me he can’t do anything for me, even though the last time I was in he had suggested a tweak in my prescription. My general practitioner also suddenly treats me as if I am a nuisance. Is it coincidence or my pronouns? Should I change them back?*

While I haven’t been able to find a way to film my livestream performances of “Awaiting Tiresias” from first-person perspective, I took what I learned in those iterations of the research and created a



film version shot entirely from my perspective by using a GoPro mounted to my head.<sup>17</sup> The segments in the exam room are similar to those in the livestream, with the voice of an offscreen technician, but instead of shifting to their perspective of me, we remain in the murky watery darkness. We have more control over sound in the film and are able to change the quality of the room through reverb and other processing in order to further distinguish between what is in my head and what is happening live with the technician.

The film allows me to counter audience tendencies to pity my disabled experience by beginning and ending the film running on my favourite trail in the summer. It is lush green and lined with flowers. I used film editing software to create shadows in the periphery of the field of vision. The shadows extend further into the frame in the closing segment than in the opening, but whereas I fall hard in the first moments of the film, I run with joy and unscathed at the end. I am accompanied in the last segment by a man on a bike, and this image of us working together is an attempt to provide audiences with an example of interdependent joy and community. I am not the only person who benefits from this companionship. I neither “overcome” my disability nor am I gutted by it. I exist in the moments long after diagnosis, long after the initial shock of perceived loss, as someone who has developed coping mechanisms and community. The film ends after I photograph a flower and the man on a bike asks if it smells good. My answer goes unrecorded. In my crip world, there are no final answers, just curiosity and exploration.

*Awaiting Tiresias* is designed to follow crip time and to incorporate crip methodologies. To ensure the film is as accessible as possible, it embeds both captions and audio description (AD) into the design. While most audiences are familiar with captioning by now, familiarity with audio description is much rarer.<sup>18</sup> Given that it needs to be turned on or accessed via specialized equipment, most sighted audiences have no experience with AD and are unsure how to place it within the context of a production. For example, an outside reviewer of my production of *Tone a Blind Eye*, interpreted the AD as “voice over ‘stage direction’ type narration,” which they assessed to be a “Brechtian alienation technique to keep the audience distanced from the story” and a “distraction” (Anonymous 2021).<sup>19</sup> Because *Awaiting Tiresias* is largely set in darkness with an emphasis on careful listening to stream-of-consciousness thought, it further challenges the overwhelmingly visual focus of the medium. It moves slowly, methodically, with minimal action and no seeming conflict beyond my internal struggle to understand my identity in the context of a gendered, ableist society.

Although I committed to creating a crip experience for audiences of the film, the process of making it adhered closely to rigid scholarship traditions. Because I served as producer, screenwriter, lead performer, director, cinematographer, film editor, audio description author, and captioner, I controlled the timing of the production process. I was, therefore, able to work at a speed that matched my knowledge base, other demands on my time and attention, and my mental and physical capabilities. Since I had no previous knowledge of filmmaking, one of the earliest parts of the process that I felt confident undertaking was performing the dialogue. I had one day in the studio with the actor playing the technician and recording my monologues. This happened well before I began my livestream performances and the process of iterative practice-based refinement. That process led me to discover changes I wanted to make to the script. While I was able to rerecord the monologues, I was unable to bring the actor back for another round of edits to the technician. Furthermore, over the course of the year that it took me to collaborate with my sound designer and teach myself how to edit film, I discovered additional changes to the script and film that I wanted to make. Each one of those would have caused a string of additional revisions that would have been

time consuming and possibly ruined the film.<sup>20</sup> At some point, I simply had to accept that the scholarship would not reflect my most current thinking about the project.

## Conclusion

For *crip time is broken time*. It requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world. It forces us to take breaks, even when we don't want to, even when we want to keep going, to move ahead. It insists that we listen to our bodyminds *so* closely, *so* attentively, in a culture that tells us to divide the two and push the body away from us while also pushing it beyond its limits. Crip time means listening to the broken languages of our bodies, translating them, honoring their words. (Samuels 2017)

Both crip time and practice-based research require us to break traditional patterns of being and thinking, to “critique conventional understandings” of research and scholarship, as Peter Dickinson and Ellen Waterman wrote in the call for proposals for this special issue. Disabled scholars have much to teach us in terms of learning how to listen to “the broken languages of our bodies” in order to create crip spaces and times for new ways of working. Theatre scholars are capable of translating these broken languages of our bodies. Our profession teaches us the value of listening deeply and transforming people and processes. We play games to build community. We imagine new worlds and use the material of the world we inhabit to create new ways of living onstage. We translate words on a page into embodied experiences that we share with audiences. We listen to audience energy and change the pacing of a production to allow us all to breathe together. We are the perfect emissaries to crip the future, but it will not be easy.

As with my own process of creating the film version of *Awaiting Tiresias*, theatre in the academy denies crip methodologies. Our work is structured by the timing of the academic calendar, and we schedule our rehearsal processes down to the moment to make the most of the time we have, assuming we will be able to hold ourselves and our collaborators to those deadlines. We base our processes on abled artists and our products on abled audiences, denying the broken languages of those who might teach us new ways of working. We are evaluated at our institutions on the basis of rigid accomplishments and quantifiable data like numbers of citations. We understandably sacrifice the iterative process of learning through meandering to earn job security.

Transforming this process will require us to embrace crip methodologies and shed deeply embedded ableist ideas about productivity and value. We will have to fight for new standards, and those of us with institutional power need to do much of this labour. The acknowledged experts in the field upon whom we rely for validation frequently achieve their positions because they believe in old models. Like my own, many institutions rely on professors of theatre at other institutions to evaluate the quality and importance of our work as part of the process for going up for tenure and promotion. These professionals are valued for their expertise, but much of this expertise was gained working for traditional institutions and in traditional methodologies. Scholars and artists who engage in crip scholarship often find themselves at odds with these standards. For example, while the reviewers recruited by PortFringe from non-academic circles were able to understand the crip structure and goals of “Rearranging the Furniture,” the academic external evaluator critiqued it for lacking in theatricality and a narrative that “introduced a lot of ideas and tried to stitch them together, resulting in a hodgepodge narrative that the audience is left to puzzle out.” While they were able to discern

that it was an intentional “metaphor or analogy for how the world is all jumbled as one struggles to keep from unravelling while facing a debilitating diagnosis or illness,” they ultimately condemned the performance as merely a “serviceable presentation” in need of the “aid of a good dramaturg” (Anonymous 2019). Similarly, specialists in their disciplines are trained to expect particular conventions and are frequently disinclined towards those who break them. The Rochester International Film Festival rejected *Awaiting Tiresias* for being too long at twenty-three minutes, “particularly the middle section where the audience is only looking at the dark world of a visually impaired person. Film is such a visual medium. Our concern is that the audience will tire of the film even though the topic is a worthy one” (Shellenberger 2021). I tire of these gatekeepers. Yet as Alice Andrews illuminates, “Cripistemologies . . . are *already* at work in the university and should we come to centre these, perhaps we might find with and within the autoimmune moment potential for *sustainable* transformative work to take place on both local and potentially more global scales” (2020, 119). Practice-based research is one way that we can encourage sustainable transformation to our field.

## Notes

1. Some of those circumstances include: a professoriate primarily populated by white men with partners who did domestic labour, freeing them up to focus on research; a lack of email; minimal expectations for technological innovation; graduate school training that ensured a foundation in the subject matter and colonized curriculum they were likely to teach; etc.
2. As is obvious from the title of her foreword to *Drama Research Methods*, Anne M. Harris’s “The Both/And of Performance Research” makes a strong claim for the potential performance research has to bridge these models.
3. Certainly, when I was a faculty member at Auburn University, the administration routinely addressed us as “Auburn family.”
4. This practice also is grounded in the idea that the scholar remains separate from their community rather than in regular communion with others working in the same discipline. A scholar in dialogue with others about the field is unlikely to be completely “anonymous,” even if their name is removed from their scholarship.
5. Contrary to the way disability is typically presented in the popular imagination, disability is situational and constantly transforming. As a result, the relationship between a disabled person and their environment is constantly shifting. This often leads to accusations of faking disabilities on days when the relationship more closely resembles that of an abled person.
6. At the time of this writing, five years after my initial diagnosis, I am only beginning to train to use a white cane when navigating unfamiliar spaces where there are many obstacles. While I have been willing to address my blindness in public performance where I directly challenge audiences to reconsider the capabilities of those with disabilities, I have been unwilling to out myself as disabled in the world beyond the theatre. This unwillingness stems from fears of being infantilized, feared, or otherwise attacked for my disability and the way I handle it.
7. Or where disability is completely absent due to inaccessibility in spaces and practices. Carrie Sandahl’s “Queering the Crip” (2003) provides a powerful analysis of the ways that making queerness and/or disability visible onstage is a practice of rebellion against cultural oppression and exclusion.
8. Earlier this year I learned from a genetics counselor that the results of this test had been poorly communicated to me and I was simply a carrier of the problematic gene, leading me to further distrust the value of ranking medical knowledge over the lived experience of disabled people.

9. The title comes from a joke I told in the performance: How do you punish a blind professor? Rearrange the furniture.
10. Generally, people understand blindness to be experienced as darkness. In actuality, blindness is a spectrum and the majority of blind people retain the ability to see something.
11. Rather, I took it to the ASTR forum since the official conference was cancelled due to a strike at the conference hotel. As a result, the piece was performed in a small rehearsal room on the University of California San Diego Campus.
12. Ruth Raynor (2019) describes a more effective example of an immersion of audience members in blindness via blindfolding in the Vancouver-based sensory experiment “Do You See What I Mean?” Audience members were led on an extensive immersive tour of the city, which ended in contact improvisational dance. Although she does not use blindfolds in her performances, Jessica Watkin (2017) uses lighting effects and audience engagement to evocatively immerse audiences in empowering experiences of vision loss.
13. Performance at the Eastern Michigan University Disability Arts and Culture Conference, December 2019.
14. Although scholars are often expected to return from sabbatical with quantifiable, concrete outcomes from their research, there is an understanding that the process will be leisurely and that it will provide time and space for scholars to work at a pace and in a manner consistent with the scholar’s human experience. While not in the scope of this paper, there is much to untangle in terms of the ways that sabbaticals are often only available to the least precarious members of the professoriate—people on tenure-track lines not at community colleges. Given the prevalence of historically excluded faculty outside of these positions, sabbaticals are an example of *crip time* being used for the benefit of the most empowered. Furthermore, BIPOC, disabled, and other historically excluded faculty ineligible for sabbaticals are often forced to increase their labour in order to cover the work left behind by privileged faculty on leave.
15. The size of the space from which we stream this performance and the need to keep to as few people as possible involved in the performance limit some of our choices. Kelly Walker handles technician’s lines, running the camera, switching microphones off and on, switching to prerecorded sound and video as appropriate, and interfacing with venues to ensure our technology works with their service providers. With only one person to handle all technical components, the camera has to remain near the computer controlling it and the person controlling the computer.
16. My livestream performance of “Awaiting Tiresias” for the Digital Research in the Humanities and Arts Conference has been published by *Body, Space & Technology* (May 2023) and is available for streaming.
17. The film version of *Awaiting Tiresias* is available at [www.drheathermay.com/awaitingtiresias](http://www.drheathermay.com/awaitingtiresias).
18. Audio description is a narrated description of relevant visual components to provide the necessary information for fully comprehending a piece of entertainment. Film and television programs do not consistently have audio description, and when they do it is often very difficult to access. For more information about audio description, check out the American Council of the Blind’s “The Audio Description Project” (n.d.). This site also offers numerous definitions of audio description.
19. These external reviews are done as part of our tenure and promotion process and are given anonymously to the candidate. *Tone a Blind Eye* is available at [www.drheathermay.com/tone-a-blind-eye](http://www.drheathermay.com/tone-a-blind-eye).
20. Because I am not a particularly adept filmmaker, any revision that would require re-filming was likely to throw off the composition of the movie in ways that I could not fix without starting everything from scratch.

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## **Researching Spontaneous Doing: Random Dance as Decolonial Praxis in *Dancing Grandmothers***

Minu Park

South Korea is known for immense popular support for dance as entertainment, exemplified by the growing K-pop business that includes dance as an important part of the music. However, under the hyper-visual presence of dance as a commodity lies its diminishing accessibility and utility as a practice (Ahn 2019). Modern Korea suffers from dance deprivation; most people in contemporary Korea relate to dance through viewing rather than doing. Dance as doing exists as an exclusive opportunity for the courageous few, practised by the small number of people who choose dancing as a profession, despite an uncertain future and no income. As a consequence of valuing the carefully choreographed dance routines in popular media, under-practised or untrained movements in everyday contexts are frequently rendered as funny and shameful. The more dance becomes a subject for consumption, the more the viewing bodies become immobile as they sit still to watch.

In this essay, I examine *Dancing Grandmothers* (2011), a contemporary dance piece by Eun-me Ahn Dance Company, to study the piece's production and transmission of physical knowledge. Elaine Scarry famously analyzes the un-transmissibility of pain in *The Body in Pain* (1985), taking note of the inexpressibility of pain and its materialization through various social, political, historical, and cultural channels (3–11). And yet, this raises the question of how senses and bodily experiences are transferred. For instance, how are “hunch” and “intuition” passed on? My analysis of *Dancing Grandmothers* answers this question by arguing that this dance performance revives connection with the physical unconscious by decolonizing cognitive and embodied knowledge. I employ performance as research (PAR) as a helpful frame to inspect the decolonial effects of the performance, which is also considered a work of Body Anthropology by critics to indicate the ethnographic focus of the project (Ahn 2011, 9; 2016; Jeon 2020, 135). I borrow from Ben Spatz's (2015) epistemology of embodiment to analyze how the “amateur” dance portion of *Dancing Grandmothers*, a section of the work that goes on stage without a rehearsal, reciprocates with both intuitive and learned physical memory. I then investigate the work's dramaturgy of raw imperfection, foregrounding the live body as a rich site of research and practice.

### ***Dancing Grandmothers*: Enacting Korean Grannies' Club Dance on a Proscenium Stage**

The performance is already underway as the audience enters the Yeongdeungpo Art Hall, located west of the National Assembly Building in Seoul. A vast screen hanging upstage plays travelogue footage, delivering the raw texture of its having been shot in the Korean countryside from a moving vehicle. No sound accompanies the images, as the vividness of the journey is conveyed by the shakiness of the camerawork, which induces mild dizziness in the viewers.

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Without lights dimming, Eun-me Ahn, choreographer and artistic director, appears on the stage in front of the unprepared audience. She walks alongside the bottom edge of the screen, still projecting the video, at first with bent shoulders and scurrying steps, echoing the cinematography and implying she's travelling along with the images on screen. Ahn seems almost unconscious of the stage setting, with her gaze fixed in front as if engaged with the day's routine. Occasionally Ahn looks up, opens her shoulders, and breathes confidently. These small moments gradually connect to replace the bent posture she assumes at the beginning. Then, slowly moving away from the screen, Ahn blows performative energy into the space through gradual shifts in her movement. Through dance, she shifts the ground-gazing and drooping everyday body into one of open arms, shoulders, movement, and joyful eyes that gaze toward the audience members and the sky.

Once the energy is ready, Ahn's company members appear onstage in brightly coloured apparel that represents senior women in Korea and proceed to fill the space with wacky motions (Jeon 2020, 260). They emit exploding energy through powerful stretches and extensions of arms and legs, sometimes even with jumps and somersaults. This hectic dance sequence continues for a while, during which the dancers change their costumes several times with almost unnoticeable continuity. The dancers' motions are disorganized and unidentifiable, but the application of colourful flower patterns across the changing costumes, along with loose-fitting trousers and red long johns, attire emblematic of Korean grannies, indicate that the dance is inspired by the grannies. This claim of embodying the old body creates a discord with the dancers' energetic jumps. In effect, the dancers paint a scene in which countless numbers of senior women flock on and off stage with extraordinary cheerful energy. Throughout this sequence and for the rest of the show, a disorderly and jumbled quality—tinted with Ahn's signature neon lights, brilliant colours, and bouncy yet uneasy music—sets the unique, otherworldly tone of the performance.

After this joyful energy has filled the space for some time, all dancers gather on the stage and start repeating simple movements. The dancers roll on the ground, lying on their sides and folding their bodies frantically back and forth. What began as merriment now transitions to a deep agony that puts physical capacity to the test as stark red light floods the stage, dyeing the scene with a bloody tint. Although the dancers pop up from the floor from time to time, as if to jump out of the pain, they fail and fall again to the ground. It takes a long time before the dancers, one by one, stop their movements and stand up.

The dancers exit, and the screen runs another set of videos, this time featuring actual senior women dancing at different locations in the Korean countryside. While each filmed dance lasts less than a minute, the entire video sequence runs for almost twenty minutes, and is thus a significant part of the performance that commands audience's attention. The grannies' movements, shown without music, consist of simple arm hovering and knee bending. The raw emotion of the grannies captured in the video exhibits a combination of awkwardness, shyness, cheerfulness, and carelessness, conveying their confusion at the anomaly of filming such random movements.

After the video sequence, the stage comes awash with bright lights again, this time with the grannies depicted in the video appearing in person. Coupled with the young dancers, they begin a slow blues dance, making small steps while facing their partners, holding both hands. A series of short skits follows, featuring various interactions between the younger dancers and the grannies, such as the dancers cheering the grannies with playful movements. A main part of this sequence spotlights the grannies performing solo or in groups, dancing to the pop music of their generation, bringing the video-streamed dance alive.

The performance ends with a club dance scene that invites audience members onstage. If the show starts slowly, then this last scene is a culmination of blasting energies comparable to an after-party, blowing the generated power out across the auditorium. The agents of dance exchange now include audience members, who become co-creators of the piece, equipped with their own stored embodied repertoires. They are called in to take part in active listening, which translates to responding, imitating, and exchanging movements. Ahn has remarked on how the energy in this concluding section would build up to the point that people would continue dancing even after the music ended (Kim 2011, 222).

### **Decolonizing *Makchum* Historically**

*Dancing Grandmothers* embodies rigorous on-site research the company conducted throughout the country. Due to the difficulty of meeting grannies in the cities, Ahn and four dancers journeyed across the country for three weeks to meet, interact with, interview, and record 220 senior Korean women (Jeon 2020, 257; Gladstone 2020). This research comprises an essential backbone of the performance, appearing in the pre-show travelogue, the recorded videos of grannies' dancing, and the grannies invited from those locations to perform live in Seoul. *Dancing Grandmothers* is a response to modern Korean history and culture and an attempt to counter the stiffening of bodies under public shaming. The project began with Ahn realizing she did not know how to understand her mother's dance. She found this ignorance stemmed from an absence of knowledge about the quotidian body's movement language (Gladstone 2020). Indeed, the grannies' free dance represents what is called *makchum* in Korea, a derogatory term for random dance. By investing serious attention toward and appreciation for *makchum*, *Dancing Grandmothers* resists dismissing "unartful" bodies as devoid of substance.

*Dancing Grandmothers* remaps the concept of dance in modern Korea by demonstrating the presence of dance in every body. Resisting the dismissive undertone in *makchum*, Ahn reframes it as the valuable primordial language inherent in the body. *Mak* is a Korean colloquial adverb indicating a manner of carelessness, spontaneity, or randomness, often of a wild and rough quality. When combined with *chum* (dance), *makchum* translates to "random dance." *Makchum* describes the dance styles that reflect no sense of expertise, congruity with the music or rhythm, creating the effect of a physical comedy. Because *makchum* is the opposite of mastery, Eun-me Ahn's nickname, "master of *makchum*," invites spectators to challenge their preconceptions, to mull over the seeming incompatibility of the conflicting terms. Ahn describes *makchum* as a dance that comes out of a person without learning: "It is a real dance, a dance of life, the dance people do because they want to live, a desperate one. . . . *Mak-chum* is about right now, on time, this very moment" (Ahn 2016). Here, Ahn positions *makchum* as a natural language of survival, reflecting life in its spontaneous expressions. According to Ahn, *makchum* is a language most intimate to the essence of one's being as it retains the vibration of the childhood body. She says, "[*Makchum* is] swaying when there is wind instead of standing unyielding. . . . A language that does not compel, that recognizes the other, and notices the beautiful eyes" (Ahn 2019).<sup>1</sup> A sense of bareness and rawness lies in Ahn's interpretation of *makchum* as she places emphasis on the stripping down of restrictions imposed on bodies, enabling instinct and acceptance to take precedence.

Critical analyses of *Dancing Grandmothers* characterize this unlearning process as bodily liberation, historicizing *makchum* in modern Korea (Chun 2011; Kim 2011; Seo 2019; Jeon 2020). For example, cultural critic and sociologist Dong-jin Seo examines the phrase "dancing wind" from 1970s Korea

to explore the historical unconscious associated with amateur dance culture in relation to Ahn's work. "To develop dancing wind" means too much immersion in dancing, resulting in debauchery and neglect of familial and social duties. The phrase reflects a sense of fear and anxiety around dance, which is portrayed as a destroyer of the normal life cycle, potent with deviant or subversive power (Seo 2019, 76). Additionally, it mirrors the expression "to develop wind," a phrase for cheating on one's partner, acquiring a further sense of indecency. The 1970s was also a time of compressed modernity, when devotion to labour was imposed on the nation's constituents (Chang 1999, 43). Folk dance disrupts modernity by progressing against labour. For instance, folk dances of the '70s and '80s were labelled "tour bus dances," bearing the demeaning connotation associated with Korean group tour culture indulging in revelry. The fear of un-labouring bodies gradually stigmatized folk dance as immoral and profligate (Kim 2019, 142). Ahn repeatedly evokes this anti-labour quality of *makchum* in her lectures, saying that her duty is to "take [people] to the time of life that is free of labour" (Ahn 2016). According to Ahn, Korean folk dance involves spreading the arms wide and facing the sky. While labour compels one to engage the front muscles by bending forward, folk dance opens the chest and the body, releasing the tightened muscles (Lee 2011).

Dong-jin Seo (2019) interprets *Dancing Grandmothers* as an archaeological work that not only listens to the grannies but also redeems their long-censored bodies through proper acknowledgement (78–79). The word *taenssen* in the Korean title, *Taenssen Dedicated to the Ancestors*, is a term closely connected to "dancing wind." *Taenssen* is a Korean dictation of the English word dance, with an exaggeration of the Korean accent delivering a sense of crudity. It gives dance a lighthearted, funny, and shallow nuance. This Korean title makes a deliberate choice not to include *chum* (dance) or *muyong* (the more dignified word for dance), which are more "proper" words to use in a title. Rather than adjusting *makchum* to obtain *muyong*'s elevated status, *Taenssen Dedicated to the Ancestors* modifies dance semantics so that *makchum* would become legible as is.

I read this stretch for liberation through unlearning public movement protocols to be grounded in a decolonial imperative that is simultaneously a practice-based inquiry. The significance of this cognitive shift enabled by accessing the knowledge of doing echoes what Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh call the "decolonial cracks and praxis of fissures" in *On Decoloniality* (2018). Mignolo and Walsh understand "decolonial cracks" as incoherences within the colonial system of thought and the "praxis of fissures" as the process of exploring and expanding those cracks (82–83). In their words, "The cracks . . . enunciate, reflect, and construct another place and postulate of decoloniality in/as praxis" (81). Mignolo and Walsh's idea of decoloniality centres on a praxis that illuminates the strength of drawing new forms of thought through being in action. Implementing praxis means to "think with," not "study about," social movements, actors, and thinkers (93). While Mignolo and Walsh focus primarily on decolonial pedagogies in the university context, they also introduce tracing and cultivating ancestral knowledge as an effective example of decolonial praxis. For instance, Juan Garcia Salazar's Afro-Andean Document and Archival Project recognizes the presence of Afro-Ecuadorians through documenting the communities, "giv[ing] lived presence to collective memory and ancestral knowledges" (85–86). In this example, the process and act of documentation is a praxis that creates a new map of cognizance through which underrepresented communities can explore and enrich their own knowledge and experience.

Mignolo and Walsh's emphasis on praxis evokes PAR's endeavour to involve practice as an essential part of academia. Praxis functions to address the nonlinear and process-based quality of decolonial projects, not unlike how practice centres on ambiguity and inconclusiveness. Considering decoloniality as "the ongoing serpentine movement toward possibilities of other modes of being,

thinking, knowing, sensing, and living; that is, an otherwise in plural,” Mignolo and Walsh identify the decolonial project as unending and constantly in action (81). They also alert readers to the danger of becoming blind to the cracks when locating decoloniality only on the outside of coloniality. This call for reconceiving the conventional thought system from within echoes Spatz’s demand that PAR engage actively in new knowledge production, without fear of reproducing academic conventions, assuming practice as a radical new methodology that gains significance through dismantling academic principles. Spatz (2015) writes, “To demand of embodied practitioners that they produce stable, transmissible documents of the technique . . . opens the door to a radical transformation of academia, not through the dismantling of its standards but through an extension of the logic of scholarly epistemology itself” (234–35). Likewise, the example of Juan Garcia Salazar shows that praxis does not have to be caught up in the enigma of the research-practice binary. Knowledge stemming from the perspective of invisible or marginalized communities, which foregrounds continuity and variation, is already decolonial because it involves the praxis of working with the community.

By introducing an alternative way of processing *makechum*, with the *makechum* carriers at the centre of knowledge production, *Dancing Grandmothers* returns bodily sovereignty to the grannies. When *makechum* turns into a cherished asset to be transmitted to the younger generations, the grannies recover respect for ancestral wisdom. In the following sections, I investigate *Dancing Grandmothers’* dance dramaturgy through PAR perspectives to investigate its somatic decoloniality.

### **Kinesthetic Knowledge for Body Anthropology**

*Dancing Grandmothers* is an iconic piece in the Eun-me Ahn Dance Company repertoire and is its most performed piece out of over one hundred and fifty of Ahn’s works. It is the first in a series of works featuring various social groups at the centre. Critics have identified the series as a work of Body Anthropology, as the projects are interested in documenting the movements of certain bodily collectives. After featuring the grannies, middle-aged men, and teenagers, respectively, in the first set of works, Ahn continues the project with more diverse minoritized groups.<sup>2</sup> When considering the dance company’s performance history, there is ample room to conclude that the Body Anthropology series has played a crucial role in defining their public image. Monographs compiling or interpreting Ahn’s works are notably recent, released a few years after *Dancing Grandmothers’* success. *Scoring the Space: Eun-me Ahn’s Dance Archive* (Seo et al. 2019) examines Ahn’s oeuvre in great detail, and *Dancing Rugby Ball, Eun-me Ahn: Dancer Eun-me Ahn’s Dance Stations* (Jeon 2020) gives an overview of Ahn’s life and work, interpreting her style, mission, and philosophy.

It is worth noting that *Dancing Grandmothers* is the only piece that receives intense enthusiasm and ovation, as opposed to similar works featuring middle-aged men or teenagers.<sup>3</sup> Some of her subsequent works in collaboration with amateurs suffered from the criticism that not consulting a professional therapist when tackling sensitive and traumatic topics rendered the performances uncomfortable and, at times, irresponsible.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the Body Anthropology series does not have the impressive spectacle or wild creativity that usually characterizes the Eun-me Ahn Dance Company, as it is a collaborative work positioning amateur performers at the centre. Ahn’s typical “kitsch” aesthetic, which critics have identified with reference to her employment of “cheap” materials such as neon colours and popular music in creating the stage design, is apparent in some, but not all, parts of staging, costuming, and lighting in these collaborative pieces (Jeon 2020, 197–

98). *Dancing Grandmothers* displays a certain roughness in its quality and content as well, with its loosely woven scenes and untrained movements taking up a majority of the performance time.

I trace *Dancing Grandmothers*' popularity to the antiquity of the grannies' bodies, which corresponds strongly to the aims of a Body Anthropology that frames the body as a container for its own experience and inherited DNA. If the body is an "automated encyclopedia," and dance is "the history of recording," as Ahn suggests, then the grannies' bodies carry by far the oldest and most deeply fermented memories (Ahn 2019). Moreover, the performance provides an important site for restoring the transgenerational connection severed by the social exclusion of elders. To understand how the grannies' bodies are historicized and liberated at the same time, I focus on studying the dramaturgy of the "rough" elements of the performance. While the show's cognitive decoloniality has received critical attention, its significance as a radical form of practice-based research has not been investigated in depth, leaving major parts of the performance inaccessible. Using technique as a starting point, I explore the epistemology of movement embedded in the dramaturgy of *Dancing Grandmothers*.

As the name PAR already postulates, the disparities between thinking and doing, or mind and body, are deeply entrenched in human history, making them challenging to bridge. Although there are varying approaches to and interpretations of PAR, as reflected in subtle differences between the names of the various lines of inquiry involving practice and research, I am less interested in distinguishing between them than in adopting the generative concepts these inquiries provide.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I attend to how PAR recognizes particular art-making modes that bring with them decolonial possibilities. To this end, I ground my analysis in Ben Spatz's (2015) employment of "technique" as a methodology for pursuing physical knowledge.

Spatz's scholarship is largely a response to the preceding PAR discourses that centre on creating room for experiments. For instance, Robin Nelson's definition of the relationship between practice and research is neat in the sense that it provides a clear identity for a group of disparate interrogations; but this definition is also inevitably left general and vague in terms of the specific academic insight such interrogations yield. Nelson (2013) writes, "[PAR] involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry" (8–9). While this definition emphasizes the blending of practice and research, Nelson also identifies challenges to compromising the disparate languages employed by the two modes of inquiry. He writes, "Artworks, and other material practices, are often very complex, resonant and multi-layered, while the articulation of a research inquiry needs to be as clear as possible" (10). Indeed, the "complex, resonant and multi-layered" aspect of doing evades linguistic elaboration, rendering an edited volume surveying various experiments with arts the ideal model of exploring the relationship between practice and research. In the introduction to *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, Estelle Barrett (2019) follows a similar trajectory, leaving practice as is, unassimilable within the linguistic realm. Barrett interprets artistic practice as "philosophy in action," implying that artistic knowledge lies in the senses prompted by doing (1). Although they mention that tacit knowledge could also be explicit, their compilation of various practice-research methods offers a survey of different attempts without suggesting an epistemology of doing.

Pointing out the limitations of prioritizing infinite interdisciplinarity and the dissolution of surface-depth divisions, Spatz (2015) calls for the need to acknowledge the depth of knowledge within the



practice (230–31). Spatz’s focus on technique is an attempt to complement the scarcity of particular methodologies bridging the distance between academic inquiry and embodied practice. When technique “functions . . . as the structure of embodied repetition,” it helps address the concrete formation and constitution of embodiment (8). Spatz is concerned with elaborating the connection between “specialized and everyday practices” (10). Thus, for him, technique is instrumental in analyzing everyday action’s transition into staged performance. At the same time, my study connects with the decolonial impulse reflected in the abstracted approaches of Nelson and Barrett, which grapple with the complex issues of working through the colonial inclinations embedded in producing knowledge through clear linguistic articulations. The resistance to continuing research-based academic inquiry in its customary form underlies the essential inquiry of performance studies, which surfaces in PAR when it examines the fundamental assumptions about performance scholarship. Spatz’s theorization of technique as its own kind of academic language attempts to reformulate ideas of research without avoiding research as a whole.

When habits become sites of knowledge, the distinction between specialized and everyday movements dissolves. Spatz (2015) writes, “Technique, once discovered, becomes available for dissemination. As knowledge, it has the potential to travel beyond its community of origin and to effect widespread transformations far beyond the imagination of its original discoverers” (177). Practice, as episteme, creates new languages, enabling people to see things in ways that escape notice. In *Dancing Grandmothers*, research and practice are one and the same in that knowledge is found in the movement of everyday bodies.

### Locating the Technique in the Unconscious

*Dancing Grandmothers* explores the embodied aspect of “the hunch” or “intuition” through *makchum*. The striking similarity in the grannies’ spontaneous movements demonstrates that the “primal” or intuitive muscle language manifests the cultural and historical unconscious of the community. My employment of the term *primal* corresponds to contemporary dance scholars Shirley McKechnie and Catherine Stevens’s (2009) distinction of dance vocabularies from linguistic modes of perception. I follow their observation that physical imitation can be much more instantaneous than that of the linguistic (85–86). The process of making *Dancing Grandmothers* affirms this view, as the research of working “with” the grannies is made possible through dancing. Ahn recounts how the grannies would be reluctant to engage in interviews and recordings at first, but when her crew started dancing, their eyes would shine with pleasure and a desire to join in (Lee 2011). Soon grannies would begin dancing, and from then on, would bring food to share and tell their life stories (Gladstone 2020). This anecdote illustrates dance’s impact, as a practice, in building immediate connections that facilitate active relationship-making and bonding, allowing collaborative research (Lee 2011). Wooyoung Chun, a hospital historian, also comments on the primacy of the body as the container of history in his introduction to the performance: “History is first expressed by our bodies before it is recorded in writing. The life of history expressed by our bodies is short, compared to that of history written in a book, but the contents of the history expressed by our bodies can be much more condensed and extensive” (Chun 2011, 20).

To bring out this primal texture of *makchum* in the performance, Ahn minimizes the effects of repetition by not holding any rehearsal for the grannies. Spatz (2015) writes, “Training—the passage of technique from one person or community to another—is a crucial part of how technique functions” (60). In other words, training leads to the development of technique, or physical fluency,

through the series of imitations and repetitions in the process, which is not the effect Ahn was seeking. The desire for mastery, implicit in training, is founded on an eschewal of failure and interferes with the spirit of carelessness and recklessness in *mak* (random). *Makchum* is uninterested in the particulars or how-to of movement as intuition takes over. *Makchum* derives partly from the Korean shaman's dance, which is thought to be led by the unconscious and consists of simple hops that gain traction as their contact with the spiritual intensifies (Noh 2016). If the technique is rooted in training, it contrasts with the unconscious movement of *makchum*, as the dancer pays great attention to the dexterity of movement. However, the conscious and unconscious are not divided concepts in *Dancing Grandmothers*. Ahn's removal of rehearsal for the grannies evinces that spontaneous dance may bear the most recent muscle memory, picking up the repeated gestures instantly. If repetition creates movement protocols in the body, then technique forms part of the unconscious when repeated enough to the point that it is inscribed into the body. In the case of the untrained grannies' dance, centuries of imitation and repetition accumulated in the somatic and cognitive genes emerge as a technique from the unconscious, through instinctive response to music. When knowledge lies in repetition, doing serves as a research methodology to identify and interpret this embodied knowledge. Ahn observes: "[Audience members] see that the grandmothers . . . bring an authentic energy, that dance is not just about physical power and technique. The grandmothers dance straightforward, from their heart, but they can convey anything with their body: happiness, joy, but also sorrow and suffering" (quoted in Van Leeuwen 2018). This remark conveys an awareness that minimal artistry may draw out the performer's unconscious more effectively than advanced technique.

While exploring *makchum*'s language in itself, Ahn also paints a bigger map of dance on which *makchum* can claim its place. Ahn plays with the relationship between the technique and the primal, or, choreographed and untrained dance. She employs a horizontal or lateral repetition to exhibit the technique of non-training in *Dancing Grandmothers*. The performance is structured to walk the audience members through recognizing the artistry in *makchum*. It begins with demonstrating the technique of the grannies' dance by the highly trained dancers' bodies. The dancers perform creative movements inspired by the grannies, eliciting new aesthetics from rough amateur gestures. Exploding energy and strength conveyed in high jumps and somersaults introduce fresh perspectives to the uneventful elderly dance. The following video sequence eases the audience members into accepting the artistry of *makchum* by highlighting its archival value as a folk dance repertoire. In the recording, each random dance presented carries a sense of disorganization, but when collected and presented together, consistency and collectivity emerge, affirming the existence of cultural inheritance. The absence of music helps viewers to focus on the movement patterns that may have escaped eyes accustomed to looking for technique. When the grannies take the stage in the next segment, the audience members should be ready to perceive the familiar movements from a different perspective. At the same time, the order of presentation reverses the traditional idea of progression from raw into polished material. The masterful dance progresses into the secondary and then the primary source material: the recordings and the grannies' live dance. It even goes into suggesting further developments, making transgenerational transmission by inviting the audience to join the dance. The form of the work demonstrates research and practice in synergetic collaboration, where the boundary between them becomes indistinct as each sequence serves both as research and practice.

## Meeting of Live Bodies

In the part of the performance where the grannies appear onstage, their “technique” is not the only centre of attention. The performance distinguishes between actual bodies and archived bodies by requiring different modes of engagement from audience members. The grannies derive courage from the emotional support in the auditorium that immediately expresses respect for their bodies through erupting applause at their appearance (Gladstone 2020; Kim 2011, 222). The Korean title, *Dance Dedicated to the Ancestors*, implies there is more to this dance than seeing the grannies on the stage (Lee 2011).

The grannies on the stage are definitely not “killing it,” as their shyness and awkwardness are conspicuous. However, the aged bodies of the grannies conjure the memory of modern historical traumas, evoking the sorrowful aesthetics of Korea, with maternal suffering at its core, represented by the word *han* (accumulated sorrow in the body). The idea of maternity carries a particular affective dimension, exemplified in the common use of the sacrificial mother trope in Korean cinema, which draws tears from audience members, giving them immediate cathartic satisfaction. Also, *han* is most often associated with women’s and mothers’ hardships. The grandmothers’ generation has lived through World War II, Japanese colonialism, the Korean War, and compressed modernity. Although the show never delivers interviews or explains the grannies’ living conditions or their stories, their collective hardships are conveyed by the young dancers crawling on the floor in the first part of the performance. As a result, audience members are led to associate the grannies’ bodies with loaded memories and experiences with little room for release (Chun 2011, 22). Ahn comments on how the grannies’ joyful dance would elicit tears from her, as she could see falling bombs and flying bullets (Hyeon 2019, 370–73).

The popularity of *Dancing Grandmothers* evinces the effectiveness and particular strength of meeting the “ancestors” body-to-body.<sup>6</sup> The decision to present the grannies in their home place first, via the recorded video footage, before letting the audience meet them “live,” avoids appropriation or assimilation of the grannies’ *makchum* to the semantics of the stage. Practice-based ethnographic research takes precedence in the video sequences as the various backgrounds against which the grannies dance are carefully curated to depict the texture of the Korean countryside. This allows the audience to contextualize the dance and understand the fleeting quality of the live bodies in the performance. The work’s ephemerality emerges not from the sense that every moment is new but from the presentness of the intergenerational meeting. The archival impulse and the “ancestors” in the title underscore that these bodies will pass away and take with them the arm-waving movements lying inactivated in the younger generations. The communal dancing in the show’s last part is crucial in this sense; it is a scene of transmission, an opportunity for the younger generations to find the technique buried in their genes. It prompts the audience members to awaken the physical language embedded in their bodies.

Ahn’s nickname, “techno-shaman,” and the shamanic emphasis embedded in the word “ancestor,” render this communal dance a form of ritual, helping the audience connect with the body’s unconscious (Jeon 2020, 319). The significance of dancing together in this piece corresponds to how anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) discusses the terms “liminality” and “communitas” together to delineate ritual powers of performance. He observes that a sense of horizontal community and camaraderie emerges from entering a liminal state of stripped-down, naked humbleness (95–96). When audience members are invited to the stage in *Dancing Grandmothers*,

communality activates liminality and facilitates the challenging process of tapping into one's unconscious. To join the dance in the conventional indoor proscenium theatre space, audience members would have to unlearn the social prompts of moving, overcoming the shame associated with the clumsiness implied in *makechum*. In essence, this final dance solicits corresponding effort from audience members to return the research and practice in their own forms.

The epistemological model of practice grounded in somatic exchange can be found in Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, which extracts academic value from the multidirectional meeting of different entities. The rhizome uses the image of extended roots and calls for an epistemological shift in Western thought from a hierarchical mapping to a lateral one. It centres the cognitive practice on multiplicity and heterogeneity, deviating from its previous structure based on coherency and linearity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 6). Writing that "a rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles," Deleuze and Guattari suggest six principles that this new concept embeds: connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography, and decalomania. These principles underscore the rhizome's engagement with the present, constantly changing as each entity interacts and forms new relationships with other entities. Similarly, heterogeneous and multiple bodies meet and greet in *Dancing Grandmothers*, following each other's motions in the form of decalomania, and plug in and out of their connection with others as they see fit, creating asignifying ruptures.

The rhizome is an oft-summoned philosophical framework in PAR. Scholars have repeatedly expanded upon it to discern the nonlinear model of cognitive and embodied knowledge in (re-)configuring the relationship between research and practice (Smith and Dean 2009, 21). Spatz opens his book with a quote, "what can a body do?" which is a question Deleuze borrowed from Baruch Spinoza (Spatz 2015, 1). Kim Vincs, a creative arts researcher, employs the concept of the rhizome to analyze the research aspect of her studio-based dance projects. For Vincs, the rhizome's focus on fluidity and change helps break down the split between process and product, establishing doing as a proper site of inquiry. In this vein, Ahn's research process is also an end product in itself since it aims not only to collect data but also to serve the community by performing active listening to life stories. Although the profound depth and extent of the harrowing war memories that the grannies shared appear in Ahn's interviews now and then, their exact words are not part of the production (Hyeon 2019, 371–72).

Instead, the collaborative structure of *Dancing Grandmothers* presents onstage subjectivity as fluid. The participants of *Dancing Grandmothers* share the authority, as the choreographer, dancer, and audience members are all pushed out of their comfort zones and encouraged to make contributions. For instance, the show compels honesty from the grannies, to drop the desire to pretend that dancing without an agenda in front of silent gazes is unusual. Moreover, while Ahn gives amateur dancers centre stage, the professional dancers of Ahn's company participate in the creation and engage actively in relationship-making with the grannies. Ahn is also present as the weaver of the piece, appearing onstage for short periods. Vincs (2007) demonstrates how rhizomatic mapping works well with dance, as dance involves meeting individual bodies that carry respective subjectivities (109–10). She finds subjectivity in dance "a process of individuation and assemblage that challenges the sale of capitalized 'ready-to-wear' identities by producing an individual, physically unique and material set of meanings" (111). The individual subjectivities born out of the process-based quality of dance evince that the grannies' authority is not entirely dependent on audience support.

Simultaneously, the absence of choreography itself stops audience members from the analytical process of deciphering the artist's intentions. Dance philosopher Anna Pakes (2004) affirms the significance of PAR in its acknowledgement of how "the performing arts necessarily involve collective production and collective action, a number of agents working together to produce performance events" (4). The greater number of people involved in the creation, the more equivocal the piece becomes, particularly in the absence of detailed action prompts. Pakes contends that such proneness to intersubjectivity in performing arts, or noticing the multiplicity of agents in the art-making process, animates "a different, more flexible kind of rationality, sensitive to contingencies" as "decisions are not generally made in accordance with a technically rational view of how to achieve a preconceived effect" (4). When the grannies take the stage in *Dancing Grandmothers*, they come with equal artistic authority as the director and the dancers. The scarcity of set choreography in their random dance aids the audience members to focus on the grannies' presence and the intersubjectivity at play rather than probe for the meaning beyond. *Makchum* ceases being a failure in *Dancing Grandmothers* because it affirms the creative sensitivity of each body.

As utopic as it sounds, the rhizome's envisioning of infinite meetings leads to corresponding glitches, reluctance, and rejections in practice. During the third part of the dance, when the grannies and dancers perform short skits, a dancer comes onstage with a microphone and tries to register the sound of laughter by various people on the stage. At this point, a group of grannies and dancers are filling the stage, exploring the group *makchum* dynamic. The dancer endeavours to circulate the microphone among onstage individuals, asking them to input their voices. This attempt is unsuccessful as the grannies' uneasiness at creating artificial laughter is conspicuous. They avoid getting into the situation by not approaching the dancer with the microphone. It is obvious that the grannies are not following the prompt, but this slippage from set expectations adds to the performance's rawness. The grannies are not pushed to make unwilling contributions as other dancers eventually step up to take on this job. This scene expresses a relaxed anticipation for the contingencies of the present—there should be no disappointment or stress to fulfill the prompt if the unconscious is "not feeling it" at the moment. The same scene will unfold in vastly different ways at each performance. A sense of discomfort may arise from awkwardness or failure for the grannies, dancers, or audience members alike, but the show compels that they practise accepting imperfections.

## The Joy of Moving

Joy is the driving force that fuels a reconsideration of *makchum* in *Dancing Grandmothers*. Ahn's characteristic playfulness and inviting air gives the performance a strong sense of unity and inspires participation. Pleasure is put forth in spurring audience members to join the dance, indicating that collective motion in decoloniality can evolve in jubilation. On Ahn's stage, decoloniality materializes in the form of exultation based on human connection and a sense of release. It contends that effective praxis lies in the spirit of sharing and that it should not be conceived as the researcher's sole responsibility. Instead, including community reaction is vital, such as responding in doing/embodied listening.

*Dancing Grandmothers* is a form of decolonizing from within, where knowledge shifts mainly through remapping the perceptual rhetoric. It attempts to let the bodies speak for themselves, with minimal imperatives modifying the content to fit the existing knowledge structures. Ahn chooses to invite the grannies onto a proscenium stage, a conventional platform preserved for hyper-able bodies, and

changes its meaning by rendering it a space for celebrating the knowledge in imperfection. At the same time, the authority and respect that the stage possesses are kept alive, from which Ahn extracts a significant part of the joy powering the performance.

On top of contributing to a cognitive turn, the practice serves as a reminder that animation, vitality, and revival are essential parts of knowledge, generating new energies by stimulating the senses. *Dancing Grandmothers* seeks a balanced approach of mental and physical provocations, creating a stable triangle of rigorous research, proficient bodily practice, and a readiness to enjoy failure or discomfort, which come together in each performance to awaken the somatic unconscious.

## Notes

1. All English translations are the author's. However, due to the heavily Korean-resource-based nature of this project, I do not announce my translation each time.
2. In this second set of collaborations, Ahn works with blind people, people with dwarfism, mothers who have lost children in the military, and differently abled people through the performances *Abnsim Dance* (2016), *Daeshim Dance* (2017), *Sri Srirang* (2017), and *Good Morning Everybody* (2018).
3. Jeon (2020) identifies apparent shortcomings in the range and variety of researched and archived bodies and too much directorial intervention as factors in their underwhelming reception. While he offers some valid criticisms, I am interested in how the grannies' distinctive qualities allow Ahn to sidestep pitfalls associated with archiving the historical body through dance.
4. Ahn has collaborated with civilians who volunteered, continuing her work of Body Anthropology that archives movements inherent in the body in *Spectacular 88 Dance* (2014), *A Minute and Fifty-Nine Seconds* (2014), *OK! Let's Talk About SEX* (2014).
5. The list of different names includes *practice as research*, *research as practice*, *practice-led research*, *research-led practice*, *practice-based research*, and *research-based practice*. See Smith and Dean (2009, 5).
6. To be clear, Ahn is not intent on valorizing the live body; in *Dragons*, Ahn's successful 2021 piece, she promotes meetings of bodies across the Asian continent by employing hologram and digital technology. Ahn includes a collective dance scene with audience members at the end yet again, letting the hologram of Southeast-based dancers enact simple taps on their bodies, encouraging audience members to follow those movements. Overall, *Dragons* conveys the message that limited availability of live bodies can bring further creativity to dance.

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## **The Participatory Creative Music Hub: Process Over Product**

Louise Campbell and Terri Hron

A community-based project, the Participatory Creative Music Hub (the Hub) was developed by the Canadian New Music Network (CNMN) to research, create, and distribute an online resource to inspire creativity in music and sound for all. In addition to inspiring people of many backgrounds to create their own music, the process of building and sharing the Hub helps develop a sense of community among diverse creative practitioners across Canada. In doing so, it has raised questions about both the aesthetic and social values of music. For us, it also questions the utility of the Eurocentric term *new music*, the standard nomenclature for contemporary art music (currently embedded in our organization's name). The Hub represents an expanded and inclusive conception of creative music and sound that encompasses diverse professional and nonprofessional practitioners. In this article, we propose that the Hub also performs socially engaged practice-based research (PBR) that models an expanded imaginary for creative music and sound in contemporary Canadian society.

Nomenclature is a thorny problem in music. Of course, all music is arguably “creative” and not all “new” music is “art” music. Furthermore, there has been “new” music in every era, as in the “ars nova” of fourteenth-century Europe (Nádas and Cuthbert 2009). By adopting the term *creative music and sound* we seek to capture a diverse range of practices and aesthetics by people who often (but not always) consider themselves to be artists, while avoiding the historical baggage of *new music*. The term *creative music* has previously been employed to denote both composed and improvised music that, among other things, “grapples with the unresolved musical issues of our time: polyphonic and poly-temporal rhythm, the movement of sound in space, the social context of performance, redefining or attacking the traditional parameters of music (form, melody, harmony, etc.) from moment to moment, the identity of musical instruments and so on” (DeLaurenti 2001). *Creative music and sound*, in our conception, is even more expansive, both because it recognizes the full breadth of sonic arts (including, for example, noise music, sound installations, and radio art) and because it privileges participation over innovation.

As an arts service organization, CNMN is considered a part of the Canadian arts sector, and more specifically the performing arts sector. In recent years, CNMN's focus and scope have transitioned from being a primarily industry-focused network dedicated to building professional opportunities toward being a knowledge- and resource-sharing network actively cultivating a more diverse member base and connecting with other sectors. The Hub is one of the CNMN's recent initiatives that aims to redefine the place of creative music and sound in Canadian society. By reaching out to people and organizations making creative music and sound in healthcare, social services, prisons, education, and community,<sup>1</sup> the Hub is actively working to shift ideas around who can and does participate and benefit from this practice across Canada, and where, how, and why this happens.

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Showcasing process over product, the central approach of the Hub, is one of the drivers of this work. Indeed, the Hub’s primary mandate is to collect, archive, and share documentation of existing participatory creative music processes. We argue that fulfilling this mandate constitutes a form of PBR, only one outcome of which is a wide-ranging, searchable database grounded in the adaptable, thriving community of music and sound-makers across Canada. Our discussion details how this process, and its presentation to the CNMN board, members, and stakeholders has also sparked debates around terminology, aesthetics, and accepted practices, challenging individuals and organizations to examine how they think, how they operate, and who they serve. We begin by outlining the development of the CNMN and the “problem” of new music. After defining and contextualizing participatory creative music, we describe some of the key elements of the Hub and provide several resonant examples. Through a deeper discussion of one project—the Piece of Mind Collective—we demonstrate ways in which the Hub performs PBR. We conclude by returning to the ongoing impacts on CNMN.

## Context

Founded in 2005, CNMN was initially focused on creating more visibility and opportunities for artists creating and performing new music—that is, contemporary classical concert music, a niche genre within Western art music. Unlike the visual and theatre arts, where Eurocentric ideals and values began to be challenged decades ago, Western art music has been slower to reflect on its own exclusivity and uniformity. Despite the growth of jazz, popular, and non-Western music traditions in the academy, Western art music is still the dominant type of music taught in music conservatories and university music programs in North America, and this has defined a narrow range of music *as* art. Perhaps this is in part because much of what defines music, and art music in particular, is specific to a tradition, including the instruments used, the kinds of venues where it is performed, the roles that have been set up for those who perform it or compose it, and the rituals of performance.

Furthermore, Eurocentric art music has, since the nineteenth century, been focused on the creation of singular, innovative musical works composed by individual composers. This commodification and ownership of musical ideas is encapsulated in our systems of copyright and creative capital (Goehr 1992). As CNMN makes efforts toward decoloniality, however, it has put many aspects of “new music” under scrutiny; the category itself is highly problematic indeed. In 2017, CNMN thus embarked on a mission to change the community’s definition of new music, and in 2023 is undergoing a complete revision of our mandate and name. This turn has been influenced in no small part by a greater focus on *practices* of music and sound creation rather than musical *works*. As such, the organization has put greater effort in creating knowledge-sharing and community-building activities around the practices of its members, and in researching practices outside of contemporary classical concert music. Likewise, because we are committed to decoloniality and diversity, redefining the services CNMN offers seems appropriate and has led to greater investment in getting to know, and creating resources that address underserved and historically marginalized creative music and sound practitioners. Managed by project lead Louise Campbell and executive director Terri Hron, the Participatory Creative Music Hub is one of CNMN’s multi-year projects that works toward redefining the organization and the field.

## The Participatory Creative Music Hub

Funded by the Canada Council for the Arts from 2019 to the time of writing, the Hub is an online resource that aims to celebrate creativity in music and sound by and for people of all ages and backgrounds. The Hub aims to share resources and build connectivity among facilitators, participants, and newcomers to music making from a variety of backgrounds and fields. Projects come from diverse areas including education, healthcare, social services, prisons, and other community groups.

Users, including project facilitators and participants, can submit projects via an online form that is designed to accommodate a wide range of documentation, including text, images, audio and video files, and links. Users categorize their own projects to optimize find-ability through the Hub's search engine. Media release forms from the facilitator and participants are required for publication. To date, the majority of the published projects have been solicited by Campbell during community consultations and through two juried Open Calls in 2021 and 2022 where chosen projects were given a small amount of funding.

The Hub represents CNMN's long-standing interest in researching aspects of creative music and sound practice. For example, previous research projects included a survey about what material, educational, and practical circumstances bring people toward a career in creative music and sound. The Hub itself performs PBR in two important ways: (1) it showcases research into diverse participatory creative music and sound practices and their affects; and (2) by doing so, it raises fundamental questions about the status and value of creative music and sound in Canada.

### Participatory Creative Music

Who is involved? How is it done? Where does it take place? What approaches or processes are used? What does it sound like? The answers to these questions are as variable as the projects taking place. As CNMN's Public Engagement committee puts it, Participatory Creative Music (PCM) is a "multitude of approaches to creating music in which everyone involved, regardless of their prior experience in making music, has active input in the creative process. Authorship and decision-making are shared to greater or lesser degrees, depending on context" (Canadian New Music Network 2020a).

PCM projects often have a facilitator and one to many participants. The extent to which participants contribute to the creative process varies from project to project. In some cases, the participants take full responsibility for the creative process and decision-making, with little to no differentiation between their role and the facilitator's role. In other cases, facilitators may lay out and direct the process, asking for specific contributions when appropriate from participants. Participants contribute to the extent that they wish and according to their abilities. The key features in PCM are participation and an expanded conception of who is perceived as an artist. As François Matarasso (2019) states, in PCM, "everyone involved in the artistic act is an artist" (49). If active participation in the creative process is key to PCM, how this participation occurs is equally important. According to Diane Conrad and Anita Sinner (2015): "The notion of process is at the heart of many of the practices represented; the stirring, mixing, evolving, and emergent nature of process is seen as central to the arts practices. Oftentimes, processes of creating together involve listening, seeing, attunement, and attentiveness, mindful attendance, or 'with-ness.' In these ways an ethics of relationship is at the heart of this arts research" (xvii-xviii).

PCM is a subset of Community Music, or music making by, for, and with a group of people or individuals, often with a focus on relationship building for the purposes of fostering community cohesion (Matarasso 2019, 88). Community choirs, orchestras, and bands rehearsing and performing preexisting music are examples of community music (e.g., a community choir singing arrangements of pop songs). These groups create community through music, some with members coming from a variety of backgrounds and others serving specific communities. Many are open to members with varying levels of experience or training in music. In the case of Community Music, the music being made may or may not be co-created by participants themselves. Where these groups follow a creative process in which the participants contribute to the creation of a work, event, or experience, this is considered Participatory Creative Music (e.g., a community choir creating their own mash-up of pop songs).

### Process Over Product

An approach that values process over product emphasizes the creative process over outcomes. Whereas research and value in creative music and sound has often been associated with final works—products—by “professional” musicians, PCM focuses on process and the participants as the heart of the practice. Many processes are designed for and by participants. In general, the process is facilitated by an individual who may or may not consider themselves to be a professional artist. In contrast to the hierarchical relationships often found in Eurocentric traditions of music-making (e.g., a conductor who wields absolute authority and decision-making over an ensemble), roles in PCM are deliberately more egalitarian. If a facilitator identifies as a professional artist, this person’s stance sets the tone for the group, project, and process. In their edited collection *Creating Together*, Conrad and Sinner (2015) state, “Participatory practice may be described as a disposition that is rooted in humility, conviction, trust and vulnerability on the part of the artist-collaborators and researchers. In these ways an ethics of relationship is at the heart of this arts research collected here—honouring relationships with others, with the land, with stories, and with the past” (xvii-xviii). This “ethics of relationship” is the cornerstone for building respect and trust with participants, regardless of whether the facilitator identifies as a professional artist or not. Participants are generally not expected to have training in music or the arts (although some can be quite experienced), and reactions to embarking on a creative process can be quite varied, sometimes bringing out strong emotions such as joy, pleasure, uncertainty, and even fear. Importantly, participants’ engagement is not bound by professional artistic expectations. For example, timeframes can be much shorter or longer than professional rehearsal schedules, and the level of commitment from participants can be far greater or less than that of professionals, depending on context.

Taking note of these issues, a skilled facilitator takes care to foster a group dynamic in which mutual respect is paramount so that participants are willing and excited about contributing to the creative process. A process generally emerges out of, and responds to, participants’ interactions and contributions and can radically shift throughout a project as a result. Ideas from participants can be surprising and frequently lead projects in unexpected directions. PCM welcomes participants’ ideas and values the creative process that emerges in response to these ideas. Whether or not a final product is created is dependent on the facilitator and participants; it is generally considered an extension of the process and relationships built rather than the ultimate goal.

### Development

Developing and building the Hub has itself been an evolving process. It was designed in response to extensive research into existing resources as well as community consultations with PCM facilitators.



Our research focused on understanding and evaluating online tools in Canada and internationally, with a focus on those that are free and open source, excluding those that are solely meant to sell products or services (see Appendix). The offerings across Canada in participatory arts and related areas are exciting and inspiring, particularly those available in the fields of community arts, such as [ArtBridges](#), and visual arts, such as the Montreal Musée des Beaux Arts' [Éducart](#). Some elements of participatory music are embedded within the projects on these sites. As of 2019, there were no online resources dedicated to PCM that featured and cross-referenced projects occurring across the arts and other sectors. Our research into existing resources defined what role the Hub could play and the needs that it could address, which then influenced the choices in design and functionality.

Beginning in summer 2019, Campbell conducted community consultations in the form of phone calls, Zoom calls and in-person meetings to help focus our knowledge of current practices and the needs of various sectors. We identified challenges such as access to appropriate resources and lack of visibility and recognition of PCM by stakeholders and the public. Many facilitators practise in isolation and respondents expressed a desire for inspiration and a place to connect with like-minded people. In addition, many expressed their reluctance to use an online resource that is too wide in scope, unsearchable, or not applicable to their needs. Such responses shaped our goals to create an inspiring, accessible, and searchable resource. Consultants in the health and education sectors requested specific functionality to address searchability: music therapists requested tagging by population (e.g., the elderly, those with memory issues, etc.), and schoolteachers requested tagging by grade and age.

Inevitably, the global coronavirus pandemic, declared in February 2020, affected our progress. Adjustments were made to accommodate changed realities, including postponement of consultation projects requiring in-person documentation, seeking projects with appropriate physical distancing, adopting flexible timelines, and collecting online "[At-home activities for music creativity](#)."

At almost the same time as the pandemic was declared, worldwide outrage erupted over systemic injustice and racism. This prompted a re-evaluation of how the Hub can support equity and anti-racism. Ongoing actions include assessment of Hub projects and activities for equity, diversity, and inclusion using Quebec's English Language Arts Network's (2019) Inclusion Plan as a guide and gathering online resources on equity and anti-racism for musicians in leadership and education for distribution on CNMN social media.

Following its launch on October 29, 2020, Campbell presented the Hub at a variety of conferences. Feedback was positive, and several changes suggested by attendees were subsequently implemented. For example, attendees at an online presentation at the [Canadian Association of Music Therapists](#) Conference in 2021 were enthusiastic about accessing content on, and submitting to, the Hub. They clearly stated that a tool such as the Hub has been needed in music therapy circles for quite some time. An attendee at this same conference requested search criteria for online facilitation. As a result, we added the search criterion "appropriate for online facilitation" to the search engine (Campbell 2021b). Discussions with partner organizations in music therapy, music care, education and arts organizations have also generated interest and enthusiasm in the Hub, resulting in interviews and guest blog posts (Campbell 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

Consultations with music therapists revealed that public-facing documentation is challenging in this field due to professional ethics concerning privacy of the therapist-client relationship. To encourage appropriate documentation that respects professional protocols, we chose a focus on health for the

second PCM Hub Open Call in 2021. Resulting projects made the Hub a more useful resource for facilitators working in the healthcare sector and provided examples of how future users can frame projects so that they respect professional ethics and privacy concerns while sharing successful processes and strategies.

Community consultations also made it clear that PCM activities occur very differently in the different sectors we wish to serve and reach. As a result, Sector Focus Resources are being created by relevant practitioners in response to issues and questions of practising PCM within those sectors. [Creative Music in Education](#) is the first of the resources to be completed. Co-directed by Campbell and schoolteacher Doug Friesen, the education resource profiles five Canadian music programs directed by schoolteachers, including Keshini Sananayake, Katherine Fraser and Nathan Gage, choir director Edmee Nataprawira, and private fiddle teacher Keitha Clark. The resource features video demonstrations of games, activities, lessons, and units as well as reflections by teachers and students. The focus questions for resources in healthcare, community groups, and prisons will likewise be designed and responded to by practitioners working in these sectors. The goal is that facilitators can use these resources to quickly orient themselves both to critical issues in their sector and to the Hub as a whole.

### Processes

The Hub is designed to showcase process, and in this section, we describe a number of resonant examples. Consultants (project facilitators or organizers) have responded to this mandate in a variety of ways, depending on the forms of their projects and the needs of their participants. Some consultants have tended toward “how-to” instructional videos or text scores, in which games and activities are presented with precise instructions and a lot of room for play. For example, composer and percussionist Germaine Liu’s [Task-Based Games](#) uses video and text to demonstrate sound games with various household objects. These games evolve over time according to verbal and physical cues given by players. The combination of instructional video and text score makes the rules of the game clear, while providing an audio-visual example of the game as it is being played by Liu and her participants.

Some consultants provided examples of multiple iterations of the same process with different participants and/or different results. In [Preserving Language Through Music & Film](#), Julia Weder and Jiixa (Gladys Vandal) created multiple music videos following roughly the same process. Weder and Jiixa are “Sijjuu Jaadas *Cool Ladies*, consisting of Haida Elder, weaver, and language teacher Jiixa (age 84), along with settler Julia (age 25)” (Weder and Jiixa 2022). Each video addresses a different topic, naturally bringing up vocabulary in the Haida language related to that topic. In [Moi Espace Public](#), musician Thais Montanari followed an identical process with several different women on the theme of their experiences of public space. This highly personal starting point led to very different creations based on the women’s particular experiences of a variety of spaces such as a public park in a large urban centre, or a rural open-air market.

Other consultants emphasized a structural approach to setting up conditions for music-making in a certain sector. For example, rather than focusing on a music-making process, [Building Meaningful Programming in Correctional Institutions](#) features instructional videos with musician Hugh Chris Brown explaining how to gain access to prisons, and, once inside, create sustainable music programs for prisoners. Similarly, Opéra de Montréal’s [Prends garde à toi, After Bizet’s Opera Carmen](#) created “how-to” video guides for arts organizations on collaborating with community organizations. Using

their project with Espace Transition (CHU Saint-Justine) and La Gang à Rambrou as an example, the videos communicate the importance of long-term relationship-building and show how meaningful the project was for all involved: the participants with different intellectual abilities sharing their experiences through re-writing and performing *Carmen*, the opera singers with whom they shared the stage, and the audience members who attended the production.

Several projects combined multiple approaches. For example, [Songs That Connect Us](#) provides a downloadable [instructional guide](#) that addresses intercultural music-making, and a [video](#) that features testimonials and demonstrations of an online song-sharing and storytelling process. Facilitators from education frequently demonstrated process using a lesson plan format with accompanying handouts and video demonstrations. MariEve Lauzon and Michel Frigon also address assessment in their project [Matter At Your Fingertips](#), in which elementary school students co-create graphic scores out of playdough and perform them by treating their chairs as joyful percussion instruments.

As mentioned, facilitators working in healthcare expressed concerns around client privacy. To protect the therapist-client relationship, some consultants provided written materials detailing process and examples of themselves demonstrating. Music therapist Ruth Eliason took this approach in [The Beat of the Heart](#), a project in which she creates legacy recordings with palliative patients and their families by capturing and recording the patient's heartbeat and pairing it with their preferred song. In the event that documentation features clients, Hub projects are required to demonstrate proof of consent from all participants in the form of a media release form provided to CNMN. In addition to providing signed documentation confirming informed consent, music therapists are explicit about asking and receiving consent within the documentation they provide for viewing online. Music therapist Laura Gillis provides an example of this with [Vintage Voices](#), a project in which residents of a long-term care centre, some of whom are experiencing varying stages of cognitive decline, DJ a publicly aired radio show.

Facilitators in prisons also expressed privacy issues in addition to concern for the safety of inmates and their families. The videos in [Building Meaningful Programming in Correctional Institutions](#) are narrated by musician-facilitator Brown, and do not feature inmates. The Pros & Cons Program featured in this project produces [albums](#) of music by inmates and guest professional musicians in which individual artists remain anonymous. Anonymity protects inmates' identity while providing a way for them to give back to society (proceeds of the albums are donated to the charitable organization of the inmates' choosing) and have their voices and stories heard beyond the walls of the prison.

Having described numerous projects that have a final product such as a performance or recording, it is important to state that most of the current Hub projects do not. Many are games and activities guiding an artistic process meant to be shared by the participants. Whether these processes are shaped into a final product is the choice of the facilitators and participants. But regardless of the format, feedback suggests that facilitating and participating in the PCM Hub is an impactful experience.

### Effects on Participants and Facilitators

Participants and facilitators in PCM are wide-ranging in experience and background, from people who are making music for the first time to people for whom music-making is a daily activity. Of working in prisons, Brown notes that “when you go in there and you start playing music, you start to

meet other musicians. You also start to meet people who've always wanted to play music, or maybe people who are poets, writers. And all it takes is that first step of going in and engaging. You don't really have to worry much beyond there" (Brown 2020). [Piece of Mind](#) (which we discuss in more depth below) brought together people living with Parkinson's Disease (PD) or dementia, neuroscientists, and artists. At times, participants drew on their experience to occupy multiple roles. Lili Saint Laurent, a participant with PD, is an accomplished author whose poem [Sur le fil](#) formed the basis of her group's creative process. As Lili said:

Ce poème revenait toujours dans ma tête et car il illustre le propos. Du coup j'ai demandé à la fin d'une séance : "est-ce que je peux vous lire quelque chose?" Pour moi c'était plutôt un cadeau, quoi. . . Cela les a beaucoup touché et c'est revenu dans la discussion, puis il est devenu un fil conducteur et. . . il est resté. (Piece of Mind 2021d)

(This poem kept coming up in my head because it illustrated the point. So, I asked at the end of a session, "Can I read you something?" For me it was more of a gift, you know. . . It really touched them, and it came back in the discussion, and then it became a through-line and. . . it stayed. [DeepL translation])

Several artists in Piece of Mind also have family members diagnosed with neurodegenerative diseases. For example, Louise Campbell drew on her grandmother's cognitive decline, during which she rehearsed her children's names repetitively. The science-art work [...sounds like static..](#) featured caregivers in Piece of Mind naming the people who are important to them and their loved ones, a concept that is touching and disturbing to many people in the project (Piece of Mind 2021a).

Indeed, many participants were deeply affected by these musical projects. As one person living with PD said of the experience of collaborating with a musician, "She started playing the violin, and at first I had a lot of tremors, but her music calmed me. . . . I managed to control my body." Of the discussion with the neuroscientist and an artist in their group, this person added, "You just described me as though you've known me for a long time" (Piece of Mind 2021b). Similarly, participants in [Let's Reimagine, Challenging the Stigma of Dementia Through Collaborative Song-Writing](#) expressed the importance of music in their lives. As one participant said, "I use music to chase away the brain fog on those days where I can't really think straight. . . . I do a lot of reimagining, especially on rough days, and it was great and a wonderful opportunity to do this" (Dupuis and Kontos 2022).

Community-based projects also tend to bring people together from a wide range of backgrounds, including [Songs That Connect Us](#) by RECAA (Ressources Ethnoculturelles Contre l'Abus envers les Aîné(e)s; Respecting Elders Communities against Abuse). With a mandate for inclusion, RECAA is "an organization of elders from Montreal's cultural communities who work across age, gender and ethnic lines to promote a culture of respect for elders from all our communities" (RECAA, n.d.). Through PCM, facilitator and choral director Dina Cindric led RECAA's community choir in a song-sharing process that led to intercultural and linguistic exchange. One participant responded during the sharing process, "I want to cry! It's so powerful!" Another said, "I feel like in my heart, I am rich. Because I know you and I know a lot of beautiful people, you know, and that really warms up my heart when I hear that song" (RECAA 2021). These types of sentiments are woven through much of the Hub project documentation, indicating the special place the arts and PCM have in many people's lives.

Facilitators' conviction and passion for the work is implicit in the ways in which they formulate and write about their projects. However, to date, documentation provided to the Hub has placed the focus on participants' experiences and feelings rather than those of the facilitators. [Music Takes You Higher: Collaborative Song-Writing with People with Dementia](#) is one of the few projects that addresses PCM from the facilitator's perspective. Public health researchers Pia Kontos, Sherry Dupuis and Christine Jonas-Simpson asked facilitators what collaborative music-making meant to them. One facilitator who identifies as a professional artist indicated a clear shift away from a Eurocentric "art-for-arts-sake" approach. In her words, "I quickly realized that that was the point, in a way, it was just to bring people together. I would arrive as myself where I was at as an empathetic human being and all of the members would meet me there with their individual life experiences and how they were feeling on the day. And we would engage with each other and the art that we would bring to the space." (Kontos, Dupuis, and Jonas-Simpson 2022). Further documentation and research into the experience of PCM facilitators is needed and would be a welcome addition to the Hub.

### PCM as Creative Music

As the Hub homepage states, "The Hub showcases people from all walks of life creating music together. Whatever you call it—participatory creative music, community music, jamming, co-composition, improvisation, music exploration, listening games or having fun with sound—The Hub celebrates music creativity for everyone" (Canadian New Music Network 2020b). But what does this sound like? Leading the PCM Hub has pushed Campbell's definition of what constitutes creative music, making wider than it was before. Sometimes PCM may sound like it fits into prescribed genres such as pop music, musique actuelle, or soundscape, and it may follow familiar ways of making music through improvisation and composition. Other times, the music being made completely blows apart any ideas of genre and may use a process new to everyone in the room.

After years of researching and leading PCM, Campbell still has conversations with practitioners who claim that what they do is not "new music" (that is, contemporary classical art music), at times implying what they do is not "good enough," harkening back to Eurocentric notions of creativity, authorship, and virtuosity. For Campbell, the important thing is not so much what music is made as it is how it is made, what it means to the people making it, and the relationships that evolve between people throughout the process. The music comes out of that, and sounds as unique, personal, and interesting as each person involved.

One of the projects that challenged Campbell's conception of PCM is [Vintage Voices](#), a project led by music therapist Laura Gillis in which residents of her long-term care facility host a radio show featuring their favourite music. If this project was evaluated according to the standard definition of creative music in which participants create all the musical material, Vintage Voices would not meet that criterion. In this case, the radio host curates music and hosts the radio show, frequently telling stories about the music they have chosen to feature, and the meaning it holds for them. Given that the radio hosts are experiencing varying levels of cognitive decline, a creative process that requires short- and long-term memory is not appropriate, or possible, for many participants. Hosting a radio show based on music of their own choosing provides an elegant way for people experiencing cognitive decline to participate in music creativity, within the constraints of their condition, and that brings them great joy. The creative element of this project is in the radio hosts' choices and the ways in which they present that music.



In Laura Gillis's words,

As a Psychotherapist/Music Therapist working in the Long Term Care sector, I believe that creativity does not necessarily have to be generative, but can also be about the process of consuming and responding to art; this is critical to enabling individuals with complex health issues, such as those I work with in Long Term Care, to be able to contribute to the world of art and creativity. In my work in Long Term Care, I witness the negative effects of our society's ageism and ableism: Individuals living in Long Term Care, families, and healthcare providers often struggle to have a voice, to be noticed, valued, and to receive the support and recognition that is needed. The tone of *Vintage Voices* is light and fun, however it serves to amplify seldom-heard voices and to put a face (or rather a voice!) to individuals living in these settings, allowing them to show the value of life at every stage. (2022)

The question of what music is made is therefore tied up in who is making the music, why, how, and what it means to the people making it. A focus on participation and process, rather than genre, style, skill, creativity, originality, and so forth, might be construed as simply “community service”: it is worthy but is it art? We contend that it is precisely in this moment of doubt that the Hub most effectively performs PBR because it turns our previous conceptions and constructs, aesthetics and attitudes on their ears and opens out new possibilities. To further underline this point, we turn now to a deeper engagement with a single project.

### **Performing PBR through the PCM Hub**

PCM as PBR is exemplified by Piece of Mind, a collective that mobilizes the performing arts to synthesize and translate knowledge about neurological conditions such as Parkinson's disease (PD) and dementia. Piece of Mind uses the performing arts to synthesize and translate knowledge about these conditions. The project frequently uses a round robin technique for creation, in which a person with PD or dementia speaks about a specific aspect of their experience which an artist then interprets, after which a neuroscientist provides scientific context. In the work documented here, multiple round-robin sessions were held on Zoom, providing ample video documentation that demonstrates the range of creativity that emerged from these sessions, and the connections that were formed among the participants.

The project was initiated by neuroscientist Naila Kuhlmann during her doctoral studies, when she realized that she had little to no contact with people living with the disease she was studying. Of her experience as a researcher prior to founding Piece of Mind, Kuhlmann states,

J'avais beaucoup de connaissances au niveau moléculaire, mais pas de contexte de ce que c'est de vivre avec cette maladie. Je sentais que je n'étais pas seule là-dedans, qu'il y a beaucoup de chercheurs qui n'ont pas vraiment de contacts avec la communauté de parkinson et que ça empêche l'échange de connaissances. Non seulement ça empêche que les chercheurs partagent leur travail, mais ça empêche aussi qu'on ait des retours de la communauté et qu'on apprenne quelles sont les priorités des personnes vivant avec la maladie et quelles sont les connaissances de tous les jours que l'on pourrait utiliser dans notre recherche. (Ouatik 2021)



(I had a lot of knowledge at the molecular level, but no context of what it's like to live with this disease. I felt that I was not alone in this, there are a lot of researchers who don't really have contact with the Parkinson's community and this prevents knowledge sharing. Not only does it prevent researchers from sharing their work, but it also prevents us from getting feedback from the community and learning what the priorities of people living with the disease are and what everyday knowledge we could use in our research. [DeepL Translation])

Kuhlmann set out to address the source of the problem, which is not uncommon in her field: lack of contact, understanding and, at times, empathy between researchers and people living with the diseases they are researching. Kuhlmann outlines the project as follows:

Our participatory research-creation project brings together artists (circus performers, dancers, musicians, visual artists), researchers, individuals living with PD or dementia, and caregivers to co-create artistic works based on scientific research and lived experience. The overall goals are to:

- 1) facilitate knowledge creation and exchange between the seemingly disparate communities participating in the creative process and
- 2) create performances that can engage a wide audience on both an emotional and intellectual level, and spark meaningful conversations around PD and dementia.

We use an emergent and iterative process to identify the key themes and messages to communicate in our performances, and to ensure that multiple perspectives are incorporated along the way. Our research process has included numerous virtual workshops, facilitated discussions, and movement/music sessions to build relationships and explore both scientific and lived experience knowledge through creativity and embodiment. (Piece of Mind 2021d)

The resulting postdoctoral research-creation project involved two focus groups on the subjects of PD and dementia. Extensive collaborations between members of these focus groups resulted in seven art-science videos, eleven making-of vignettes, and two full-length shows distributed online and in-person (totaling over 3,500 views on YouTube as of this writing).

Kuhlmann writes,

Piece of Mind highlighted how a participatory, interdisciplinary approach can support the co-production of knowledge between diverse stakeholders, particularly in the unexpected ways that research and practice inform one another. Neuroscientific findings served as the initial source material for artistic exploration; in turn, the resulting art-science videos enabled an openness to interpretation that prompted not only further ideas for creation, but also thoughtful reflections on scientific research. Participatory arts created common ground between participants with different knowledge bases and experiences, allowing for the lived experience of

illness to be approached from an angle not typically employed in health research. Indeed, several participants with PD noted that the performers posed questions that doctors had never thought to ask them, despite the resulting information being equally pertinent in a clinical context. (Kuhlmann, personal communication with Campbell, March 9, 2023)

One of the PD subgroups comprising Anne McIsaac, a woman diagnosed with PD, neuroscientists Anusha Kamesh and Claire Honda, and musician Louise Campbell, discussed the influences and intersections of lived experience, scientific knowledge, and art extensively, and the impact the research-creation project had on each of them and their practices, whether scientific or artistic. Their process was centred around how Parkinson’s disease shapes one’s perception of time, and how this perception is shaped and controlled by medication. McIsaac began by describing an aspect of her sense of time. Campbell invited McIsaac to communicate her experience of time through conducting improvised music played by herself, Kamesh, and Honda, who are accomplished musicians in addition to being neuroscientists. After the conducted improvisation, Kamesh and Honda provided feedback on McIsaac’s own reflections on the experience based on their scientific knowledge of PD and the effects of medication on perception of time (Piece of Mind 2021c). McIsaac’s response to the experience was instantaneous. In her words, “It was incredible—it was as though my brain was singing. It was really, really beautiful” (Piece of Mind 2021c). This process was repeated in five one-hour sessions over the course of five weeks, each based on an element of McIsaac’s experience of time.

From the point of view of a researcher, neuroscientist Anusha Kamesh attributes participating in this project, and particularly improvising music while being conducted by McIsaac as key to deepening her understanding of PD. Kamesh states:

Je cherche maintenant des occasions d’intégrer le côté humain des choses à ma recherche et ça a changé ma façon de communiquer la science. La motivation derrière mon projet de recherche est aussi devenue plus forte. Je veux rester en contact avec Anne, car elle m’inspire et j’ai tant appris d’elle. Je me sentirais un peu vide si je n’avais plus de liens avec la communauté de cette façon. (Ouatik 2021)

(I now look for opportunities to incorporate the human side of things into my research and it has changed the way I communicate science. The motivation behind my research project has also become stronger. I want to stay in touch with Anne because she inspires me and I have learned so much from her. I would feel a bit empty if I didn’t have a connection to the community in this way. [DeepL Translation])

Grounding the musical process in McIsaac’s lived experience as a person with PD and Kamesh’s and Honda’s scientific knowledge directly influenced the music being made. As Campbell states, “The music that came out as a result was absolutely informed by [Anne’s] experience. It would never have existed otherwise” (Piece of Mind 2021c).

In turn, McIsaac hopes that the collaborative process and the resulting art-science videos, vignettes, and performances will continue to have an impact on the scientific community and the way that research into PD is conducted. As she notes:

Je l'ai faite dans l'espoir que les gens regardent ce film-là et à la fin se disent "ah, je comprends un peu mieux comment les gens avec le Parkinson, comment ils se sentent, parce que ça s'explique pas en mots comment on sent dans nos corps. Je pense qu'on a réussi avec le mouvement, avec ce qu'on a fait avec la musique, avec le 'conducting.'" Anusha, Claire, puis Louise, quand elles l'ont fait, elles on eu comme une illumination. Surtout Anusha, c'était intéressant parce que Anusha fait de la recherche sur le Parkinson dans la boîte noire. Elle avait dit qu'elle avez augmenté sa compréhension d'une coche importante de ce que ça pouvait être, le Parkinson. Je me dis, ça. . . ça va peut-être mener à des nouvelles avenues de recherche. Si on s'en allait par là, et la compréhension dit "woah," c'est peut-être quelque chose d'autre dont on a jamais pensé. (Piece of Mind 2021c)

(I did this in the hope that people would watch this film and at the end of it say "ah, I understand how people with Parkinson's, how they feel, a little bit better" because how we feel in our bodies can't be explained in words. I think we succeeded with movement, with what we did with the music, with the conducting. Anusha, Claire, and Louise, when they [followed my conducting], they had an insight. Especially Anusha, it was interesting because Anusha is doing research on Parkinson's in the black box [of the laboratory]. She said that her understanding of what Parkinson's might be increased by a significant amount. I'm thinking, this. . . this may lead to new avenues of research. If we move in that direction, and the understanding says "wow," maybe it's something else we never thought of. [DeepL translation])

McIsaac's hopes were echoed by other project participants living with PD. The experience also opened up new possibilities for the other researchers and participants in the project. This small example demonstrates how PCM as PBR can potentially challenge and change standard methods of research in scientific fields as well as the art that comes out of following such a process by encouraging a better understanding and communication of people's lived experiences. PCM projects like Piece of Mind have, in turn, encouraged CNMN to broaden its mandate and membership.

## **Making Change**

In gathering and presenting a wide range of participatory creative music projects and inviting practitioners to submit their community collaborations, the PCM Hub is effectively redefining the boundaries of the practice and the range of people involved. To be sure, CNMN spent some time developing its definition of participatory creative music to explain the practice and invite facilitators and practitioners to identify their work as such, and to differentiate the Hub from adjacent tools and resources. In our view, however, the projects that make up the Hub collectively perform PBR, first, by yielding powerful insights about the diverse themes explored in the projects and, second, by upsetting the entrenched attitudes and aesthetics traditionally constituted by "new music."

As an increasing number of projects are catalogued, we also begin to see how many people are effectively creating music across a wide range of experience. For CNMN, the focal point of participatory creative music is that participants share in the creation, regardless of their prior abilities or knowledge. This works to decentre the value historically placed on individual creators in many Western art music. It also pushes up against notions of professionalism in the production of art that is deemed valuable. Highlighting the wealth and scope of participatory creative practices challenges

and expands definitions of what creative music and sound is and can be and who we can call an artist. This questioning of basic categories used in determining value and merit is part of a larger social reckoning of historically Eurocentric definitions in the present moment as we move toward decoloniality, pluralism and greater equity. The Hub provides exciting models for collaborative, co-creative and inclusive interventions in both art and the social that are instructive for the broader aims of the arts sector in Canada. It is also radically affecting our own organizational mandate and structure.

In parallel to the sector-wide questioning of the legacy of colonialism, CNMN continues its mission to represent as wide an interest group as possible within creative music and sound. Recent efforts to increase pluralism in our contributors, presenters, and membership have shown that language is not enough. We understand pluralism as a positive attitude toward diversity, where different cultural and social backgrounds are considered and encouraged to be in positive engagement and respectful relationship, as encouraged by the Pluralism and Organizational Change Through Inclusive Equity Education in the Arts training that CNMN followed, given by the Cultural Pluralism in the Arts Movement Ontario (CPAMO). In its Reopening Retreat in May 2022, CNMN's board of directors decided to embark on a questioning, with the help of its membership, of the suitability of "New Music" in the organization's name. This speaks to an acknowledgement that new music is often considered a genre within Western art music, which has been historically coded as white and Eurocentric. Consensus among the board was that the term no longer represents the goals and aspirations of the organization in its recent efforts with regard to pluralism and greater access. Hron has addressed some of these concerns in a recent article (2021). The PCM Hub also represents CNMN's commitment to creating resources for knowledge sharing where it might not yet exist and to establishing networks among nodes that are as yet unconnected. At the time of writing, both CNMN and the Hub continue to evolve, so that our PBR into arts and structural change is very much a work in progress.

## Conclusion

The PCM Hub project offered CNMN a chance to expand its reach outside of performative and presentation-based music- and sound-making into communities of practice that had previously not been represented in its membership and service. This opportunity allowed CNMN to work toward redefining what services it provides the creative music and sound community in its role as an arts service organization. Furthermore, in performing this research around current participatory practices, CNMN expanded the communities that it serves. The design and goals of the Hub emerged from research with the facilitators practising participatory creative music and sound that demonstrated the need for a searchable resource that can cross-reference the activities and focus of practitioners. In that sense, CNMN is engaged in both building a network of existing networks by sector as well as connecting practitioners within and across these sectors that may not yet know of each other's work. And while CNMN, and in particular project lead Campbell, has been helping practitioners provide documentation and resources that can usefully be tagged for searchability, the PCM Hub is not creating new content. Rather, it is a tool for showcasing the wealth of activity that is already happening throughout Canadian society, offering enormous benefits to healing, community-building and connection, improving the lives of many in very direct ways. This is part of a larger ethos of valuing creative practice not only as an aesthetic and inspiring pursuit for professionals, but also as a functional, world-building activity in which everyone can participate and potentially reap benefit. This showcasing and appreciation of facilitators underlines CNMN's

increasing commitment to supporting relational and collective art-making, and to making concrete gestures toward decoloniality.

Until now, submissions to the Hub have largely been based on solicitation through personal invitation and remunerated calls for projects. An important piece of the puzzle for the continued sustainability and impact of this resource is figuring out how to either make the PCM Hub visible and useful enough to facilitators so that they spontaneously submit their work or to secure funding to continue the supported archiving work that we have been doing. At present, we are pursuing both possibilities. The latter option requires convincing funding bodies that facilitators involved in participatory creative music and sound do not have adequate resources to participate in archival work unsupported, but that there are nevertheless great benefits in creating those resources and that it is our role as an arts service organization to provide such support. In funding structures where art practices are often evaluated on audience numbers or some degree of commercial success, practices that are not meant for public consumption other than that of the participants themselves, and that do not result in any product other than the increased well-being of those involved, do not necessarily score highly. The PCM Hub and the enthusiasm of those who have been consulted about its usefulness and benefit is therefore a useful example for advocacy toward changing policies about what constitutes valuable art making and who should be supported in its creation.

## **Appendix: Resources for Participatory Creative Music**

A number of music organizations have learning modules that include participatory elements:

- [Music Alive](#), National Arts Centre
- [Educational Kits](#), Société de la musique contemporaine du Québec (SMCQ)
- [Soundmakers](#), Soundstreams
- [The Music Room](#), Vancouver Symphony Orchestra
- [Pedagogical Guides](#), Orchestre symphonique de Montréal

Some organizations have developed sections for online resource sharing and/or mapping projects aimed at connecting interested parties:

- [Canada's Map of Arts And Learning](#), Canadian Network of Arts and Learning
- [Mapping Arts & Health Across Canada](#), Arts Health Network

Other organizations have developed sections for online resource sharing and professional development:

- [MusicCare](#), Room 217
- [Resources](#), Culture pour tous
- [Ressources](#), Observatoire des médiations culturelle

Unusually, the Opéra de Montréal has developed resources *for* cultural mediators:

- [Guides pour artistes-médiateurs](#)

The Alliance for Canadian New Music Project site provides a listing of existing compositions for young musicians:

- [Syllabus](#), Alliance for Canadian New Music Project (ACNMP)

A number of university research projects are dedicated to specific participatory music practices such as:

- [Improvisation Tool Kit](#), Improvisation, Community and Social Practice (ICASP)
- [Pedagogical Material](#), Music Engagement In and Out of School Contexts (Université Laval)

A number of individual practitioners publish blogs on PCM, including:

- [Creative Music Ed](#), Doug Friesen
- [Making Music with Anyone](#), Louise Campbell

Internationally, [Pass the Sound](#) features multilingual instructional videos with subtitles by facilitators from across Europe. Britain has an extensive history in and institutional support for Community Music, resulting in quite impressive resources. Among other organizations based in Britain, Culture Days' [Get Creative](#) is very active and engaging in terms of online content, with a focus on participant storytelling. Contemporary Music for All, [CoMa](#), features an online score listing for all abilities of through-composed scores as well as some process-based pieces. Huddersfield's [Go Compose](#) features works by amateur musicians.

## Note

1. By *community*, we mean both community organizations and groups of people who self-identify as belonging to each other, for whatever reason. The term is vague, in large part because the structures that support community are often trickier to find and access than those involved in healthcare, social services, prisons, and education.

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## “That’s Not Art, It’s Just Consultation!”: Performing Innovation in Socially Responsive Creative Technologies Research

Rebecca Caines and Brandon Watson

### Introduction

This article, with an embedded research instructable, brings together two perspectives on the field of creative technologies and explores its place in practice-based research. Creative technologies is an eclectic field that somehow encompasses teenagers sharing instructional videos on YouTube, scholars seeking new digital methodologies for their research, and DIY crafters discovering electronics. Self-defined creative technologists might include artists creating in nonartistic spaces, computer scientists and engineers in creative roles, staff in military and policing research labs seeking technical solutions in unlikely places, and teachers in educational institutions building interdisciplinary programs to capitalize on the excitement of the new. As we demonstrate below, “innovation” is both a term denoting creative potential and a crass performative label, a tension that must be negotiated in the field. Creative technologies initiatives may be run by fine artists in galleries or other professional arts spaces. The artists may be working in intermedia, or in art/computing hybrids such as new media art, now sometimes referred to as digital art. Alternatively, there could be no artists involved at all. The field relies on innovation from engineering and computer science, but unlike those fields, it also has room for projects with aesthetic, emotional, quixotic, or experimental outcomes that could be nonrepeatable, unstable, or overtly localized. New Zealand-based scholars Andy Connor and Ricardo Medina Sosa have sketched out the edges of this expanding field. In “The A-Z of Creative Technologies,” Connor and Sosa suggest that “as an emerging field, Creative Technologies covers different meanings including: the creative use of technology, the use of technology to enhance creativity, and also the creative inception of new technologies” (2018, 3; see also Connor 2020). We return to Connor and Sosa’s useful frame throughout this paper. Creative technologies projects can also bring communities, artists, scientists, and academics together in new constellations to create socially responsive projects that use repurposed, ubiquitous, and/or emerging technologies, while also incorporating artistic techniques. It is the socially responsive possibilities of creative technologies that most interest us, as we are both involved in creative and technical research in collaboration with community partners.

For Rebecca Caines, a self-described interdisciplinary weirdo and early-career humanities professor, the porous, transdisciplinary framework of creative technologies has provided her with the excuse to explore new types of collaborations, codevelop unusual art/research/engagement hybrids, and

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improvise across and between institutional, cultural, and economic divides (with varying degrees of success). A number of these projects are discussed here and can also be seen on her website (<https://rebeccacaines.org>). The openness of creative technologies has provided an academic and artistic home for Rebecca's particular mix of training and experience in multimedia theatre, performance studies scholarship, and socially engaged art. This nomenclature has become even more useful as she has collaborated with an increasing number of computer scientists and engineers in her research and teaching, including many collaborations with her partner John Campbell, who is a software designer and new media artist. Her community-facing projects have also become increasingly technology focused. Naming herself into this field, however, has required her to find new methodologies to work with others in the field who may have very different vocabularies, expectations, and backgrounds to her own. She has also had to find imaginative ways to share her hopes for the field with students, colleagues, families, and partner organizations over the past ten years, as she has been employed to build programs in creative technologies at two Canadian universities. As a cisgender, able-bodied, and economically privileged white settler scholar living in Canada, she constantly navigates the ethical complexities of centring technology in her research, while working with a wide range of collaborators who may have been systemically denied the same types of capital and/or access. This article is a chance to share some of the hopes she has for creative technologies as a form of practice-based research that can disrupt exclusive art and research cultures to make room for difference and value diverse kinds of innovation.

As a relative latecomer to creative technologies, however, Rebecca decided to invite her graduate student Brandon Watson to share his perspectives as he begins his career in the field. As an undergraduate, he transferred from an engineering program into a brand-new creative technologies degree, and he has continued to expand and explore what it means to be a creative technologist in a master of fine arts program in interdisciplinary media, art, and performance. With a limited art background, for Brandon, entering a world that bridges fields such as fine art, engineering, and computer science has posed a challenge at times. Of particular interest to him is how community-based creative technologies research can confront, replace, and redefine how we interact with commercially available products and expose the shortcomings that come with them. As a student keen on exploring many different technology-based fields, creative technologies has provided a firm grounding as he continues to locate himself within the academic landscape.

Brandon is currently working with an ageing community (his own lawn-bowling club, where he is one of a few younger members) to discuss and develop custom pieces of technology that can create and recharge social connections by increasing social and physical accessibility within the community. For example, he is exploring technological solutions that might allow members to avoid kneeling down to measure gaps between balls and lines, if this is physically difficult; or tools that could support holding or throwing balls differently, for those who struggle with gripping or moving in certain ways; or new, more accessible entertainment technologies or other creative projects that might better support the social goals of the club by bringing the members together. There has traditionally been some concern around adopting new commercially available technology within the club. It has been challenging at times to navigate a path that simultaneously increases the functionality of existing technology, while also reducing the anxiety that can come from change and complexity. Additionally, writing this article has enabled Brandon to better understand his identity within the realm of creative technologies and subsequently, in the realms of both engineering and art. He has found that there is not enough time to reflect on creative technologies and what it offers him while working on his interdisciplinary MFA. The concepts and ideas discussed here have

assisted him in getting to the meat and potatoes of what it means for him to be a creative technologist.

We share an interest in the possibilities that creative technologies offer us as researchers, artists, and community members who are committed to the communities in which we live and work. With a practical focus on making and the possibilities for producing new knowledge (artistic, scientific, *and* social), creative technologies projects can clearly contribute to ongoing discussions around practice-based research. We have, however, received pointed criticisms of our work from those who find that it contests their idea of appropriate research. We have been accused by artists of not making real art, “just doing community consultation,” or of not building “technical enough” outcomes for engineers and computer scientists, or of being “too focused on art and creative experimentation” for research contexts. Yet we see working in-between as a strength of the work and believe that simultaneously being inside and outside a range of different fields can expose the exclusions that may limit other forms of research. As Natalie Loveless suggests, practice-based modalities “can actively challenge the many fields they intersect with” and “produce objects that work not only across discursive fields but challenge the norms of those fields, producing boundary objects that insist on being undutiful” (2019, 37).<sup>1</sup>

This article outlines some ways that socially responsive creative technologies research might contribute to new conceptions of innovation. Accordingly, we have produced our version of a research instructable on the topic. We created this instructable by interviewing each other about the pitch, supplies, examples, and steps that we would suggest to people who might wish to use creative technologies for practice-based research. Many instructables are designed to show users how to create a specific object. We are not instructing people on how to produce one particular outcome, so our research instructable reads more like a performance score than an instruction manual. Because user feedback is an important component of instructables, we also invited a couple of our long-term collaborators to add to a comments section at the end.

Instructables are a well-established way of sharing plans online for DIY creation. For example, the Autodesk Instructables website (<https://www.instructables.com/>) was launched in 2005 by Eric Wilhelm and Saul Griffith. It hosts user created and uploaded do-it-yourself projects. Each consists of a recipe that is attempted, and often then modified, by other online users. The Autodesk Instructables site, and many others like it, are a common feature of creative technologies practice. Such online hubs encourage DIY creativity, the use of cheap and accessible components, and the constant remixing of other projects in a public format. They focus on simple instructions, and on sharing tips, problems, and solutions with a wide online community. Autodesk Instructables might help users to create electronics projects, construct Halloween costumes, bake Nutella brownies, or even remodel shipping container houses for the homeless. An instructable, or any of its component instructions, libraries, or coding suggestions, might then be taken and used in an entirely different project. We hope the slightly tongue-in-cheek, manifesto-like instructions that we share from our experience in this field (and which we have mostly borrowed from our many incredible collaborators), might similarly be stolen, remixed, and recombined into new formations by other makers and researchers. Following each step in our research instructable, we offer an expanded reflection on the ways we have incorporated this instruction into our own practice-based research projects and discuss some possibilities and tensions that have emerged. We conclude with a consideration of current performances of innovation and outline our hopes for socially responsive creative technologies research-creation (the term used in Canada for artistic research or practice-based research in the arts).

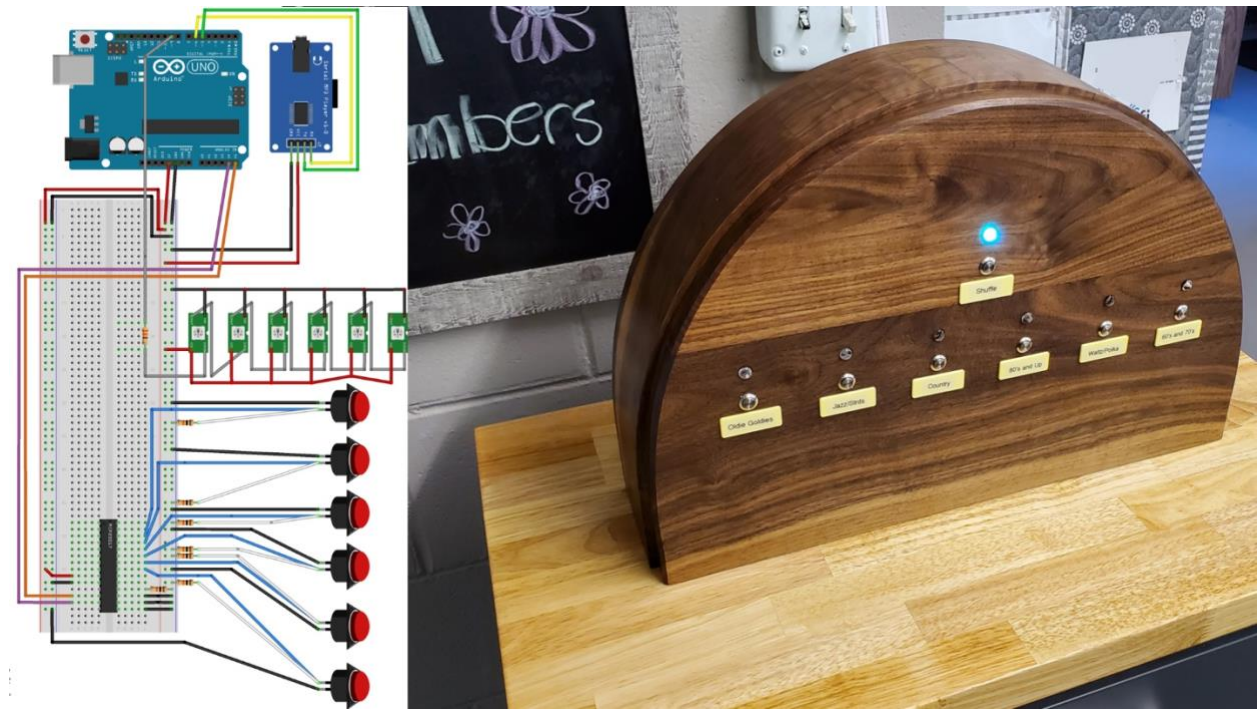
## OUR RESEARCH INSTRUCTABLE

### Instructable Title: “Performing New Kinds of Innovation with Creative Technologies”

#### Our Pitch

Innovation can look like very different things to different people, organizations, and disciplines. Creative technologies as a practice-based format allows for different ideas of innovation to coexist and challenge each other. Working across and between fields could also change what we think art, engineering, and research are.

Try our research instructable to build collaborative, socially responsive creative technologies projects that could challenge you, and the other fields you visit along the way.



The Maker Culture project “The User-Friendly Jukebox,” bringing together DIY electronics and woodworking, was made with community partners as cocreators at a lawn-bowling club (2021). Credit: Brandon Watson.



## List of Supplies You Will Need

A curious mind

A strong will

Deep reserves of imagination

Technologies, tools, and components that may not have been designed for the purpose you have in mind

Knowledge, techniques, methods, and approaches from the best place (wherever that may be; keep looking, you may be surprised)

## Collaborators (human and nonhuman)

```
Fidget_Toy_3.1
|
Fidget Toy Version: 3.1
Original Creation Date: 2020-03-17
Updated: 2020-07-26

Written by Brandon Watson

This code maps a potentiometer to a range of frequencies (31Hz to 160Hz) to be output to a speaker via a 3.5mm headphone jack.
Buttons, pressure sensors, rocker switches and joysticks have been programmed to manipulate the frequency in different ways.
The intended use is to be placed into a custom fidget toy which can output the manipulated frequency to speakers to give the
user a high level of interaction with the fidget toy.
*/

void setup() {
  // set up a way of viewing what the frequency is doing on the serial monitor
  Serial.begin(9600); // initialize serial communication at 9600 bits per second
  pinMode(2, INPUT_PULLUP); // initialize pin 2
  pinMode(1, INPUT_PULLUP); // initialize pin 1
  pinMode(4, INPUT_PULLUP); // initialize pin 4
  pinMode(7, INPUT_PULLUP); // initialize pin 7
  pinMode(6, INPUT_PULLUP); // initialize pin 6
}

void loop() {
  int button1Val = digitalRead(2); // read input of a button on pin 2
  int button2Val = digitalRead(1); // read input of a button on pin 3
  int button3Val = digitalRead(4); // read input of a button on pin 4
  int button4Val = digitalRead(7); // read input of a button on pin 5
  int button5Val = digitalRead(6); // read input of a button on pin 6
  int sensorValue = analogRead(A0); // read the input on analog pin 0 and assign it to variable
  int mappedValue = map(sensorValue, 0, 1023, 31, 160); //map the pot values to frequency range and assign to variable
  const int X_pin = analogRead(A1);
  const int Y_pin = analogRead(A2);
  int mappedX = map(X_pin, 500, 1023, 0, 80); // map x-axis to a more useful value range
  int mappedY = map(Y_pin, 500, 1023, 0, 80); // map y-axis to a more useful value range
  int freqVal = 200; // create variable for the frequency duration
  int delayVal = 100; // create a variable for the delay duration
  int joystick; // create a variable for the joystick value
  int freqButton; // create variable for button press to manipulate freqVal
  int delay1Button; // create variable for button press to manipulate delay1Val
  int delay2Button; // create variable for button press to manipulate delay1Val
  int delay3Button; // create variable for button press to manipulate delay1Val
  int delay4Button; // create variable for button press to manipulate delay1Val

  Serial.println(mappedValue); // print out the frequency that the pot is set to
  Serial.println(button1Val); // print out button 1
  Serial.println(button2Val); // print out button 2
  ...
}
```

Code for making projects with the Arduino microcontroller, inspired by many different libraries and sources (2020). Credit: Brandon Watson.



## STEP I



Creating in a hackathon at Sonic Arts Research Centre, 2016. Credit: Matilde Meireles.

### 1. Just create . . .

For this step, we recommend that you see your research as ongoing artistic and technical experimentation that may not ever have a result, may be partial, or may have endless variations. Follow the lead of your collaborators, your materials, and your ideas. Let the creative experiment be the point (but remember this is NOT a scientific experiment on other people).

Note 1: This does not preclude things being started or finished, when appropriate.

Note 2: Make plans; but they can become like a musician's graphic score, made up of prompts with multiple interpretations and iterations.

## Examples: Collaboration and Experimentation

Between 2018 and 2022, both authors were involved in the development of a piece of wearable technology that is a good example of open-ended creative experimentation with multiple versions. This creative technologies endeavour emerged from a previous research project entitled ImprovEnabled led by Rebecca and her collaborator Michelle Stewart, a researcher who addresses systemic injustices facing those with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). The ImprovEnabled project (2015–2018) investigated the possibilities for using improvised theatre and music games to learn more about the lived experiences of the disability and aimed to provide individuals and their families as well as frontline community organizations with toolkits and resources to use improvisation-based projects to combat social isolation. It also included suggestions on how to adapt games and exercises to support their own needs and goals. See <http://improvenabled.ca>.

In 2017, in collaboration with Paul Stapleton, we held a hackathon event with partners from Australia and Northern Ireland as an extension of the ImprovEnabled project. The hackathon was held at the Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC), in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where Rebecca held a visiting research scholar position. The impetus for the hackathon was a question by Michelle as to whether immersive sound experiences might provide a therapeutic sensation of pressure for individuals, similar to a weighted blanket. The hackathon explored different ways to use creative technologies, particularly audio technologies, to support strengths-based responses to FASD. Groups of SARC and visiting researchers, community leaders, artists, and graduate students collaborated with families and occupational therapists in Canada (who participated via prerecorded videos and live messages) to plan out and prototype possible sonic tools that might take advantage of the specific strengths of neurodivergent individuals (particularly around exploring different sensory profiles), and/or help design tools that might support social justice outcomes. The resulting hackathon prototypes addressed methods for advocacy in loud, overwhelming public spaces, tools to address sensory overload by helping with self-regulation, and new options for encouraging sound-based creativity.

In 2018, Rebecca successfully applied for a Canada Council for the Arts grant for a national project exploring strategies for improvised arts and community engagement, entitled multiPLAY (<https://multiplay.ca>). This was not a research project but part of the council's attempt to fund new ways to improve citizen engagement and access to the arts while increasing digital capacity (Canada Council for the Arts 2018). Rebecca and Michelle, joined by composer and improviser James Harley, led a sub project of multiPLAY under the title "Sonic Blankets." We invited some of the youth and families who were involved in the Belfast hackathon to further explore sound through open-ended studio play sessions. Several graduate students and postdoctoral research fellows also visited during the workshops and shared their own research with the team. This included sharing resonant gong sounds with postdoctoral research fellow Stacey Bliss, a workshop on therapeutic use of the voice with PhD student Carey West, and several sessions exploring fidgets (devices used for self-regulation of anxiety and improving focus). It also included improvisation with PhD student Erin Felepchuk, who then worked further with Harley at his audio lab at the University of Guelph. Felepchuk's own graduate research explores improvisation and autism spectrum disorder, so there were some common interests.

The play sessions included several different activities. There were sessions on making instruments from fidget devices and using them to create multichannel music; explorations of public spaces with

digital audio recorders, and opportunities to learn audio editing software to find and combine environmental sounds that the youth artists enjoyed or disliked. The team tested out a range of speakers to see if they produced sensations in the body; and they also experimented with live immersive multichannel sonic improvisation. The outcome was to codesign a piece of wearable technology to introduce sonic pressure to the body, that would eventually be called the Therapeutic Fidget Sweater. At this point, Brandon joined the team to help construct the wearable. Making the wearable was a collaborative, creative exploration, not a medical study (although we recruited an occupational therapist to test the sweater to ensure that there are no damaging or unwanted effects), but the team agreed that if something seemed to feel good, it might become the focus for further research. The youth artists, according to the terms of the research ethics board certificate, were not considered research participants as they were simply being trained in art workshops and consulted in the development of potential products, and no data or personal information was collected. One future hope is to design low-cost alternatives to expensive therapeutic aids for individuals and families. While the project was not part of an extended research study, Rebecca does see that similar work *could* be part of research-creation, as it engages multiple forms of practice-based knowledge which took form through art workshops, and then continued via collaborative maker culture design and development.

Brandon joined the multiPLAY project as an undergraduate student completing an independent study. What seemed like the tail end of an already established project was for him the beginning of an exciting exploration into wearable technology, sound, and fidgets. One of the main goals was to create an audio/vibration-based sensory wearable that would envelop the user in the sounds and vibrations originating from their special prerecorded audio tracks as well as their own music collection. By collaborating with the group to develop a basic concept of the wearable, Brandon contributed a new device to the project—an audio-based fidget toy that outputs a tone through a basic AUX interface. The tone can be manipulated in real time using the different switches, buttons, sliders, and joysticks commonly found on fidget toys. The combination of devices allowed for another level of interaction with vibration and audio as the user can fidget with the toy and receive both direct vibrational and tactile feedback.

Brandon's process further illustrates the evolving nature of research-creation. Prototype 1 included a series of small transducer speakers powered by a 5V DC amplifier. Keeping the wearable small, safe, and easy to use was important to the design. It was built into a hoodie and used four headphone cables to deliver power to the left and right speakers as well as power to the digitally controlled LEDs located in the hood of the sweater. It included a modular design to allow the user to wear the garment in a multitude of ways. During the initial testing of the wearable, it was determined that although modularity was a good concept, it made the device too complicated to use. It was also found that the speakers were not powerful enough to produce the desired sensation. Brandon started working on the second prototype at the start of his MFA program. He scrapped the 5V system for a much more powerful 12V system and larger transducer speakers. The complicated headphone cable system was replaced by a custom cable using 9 pin aviation connectors. Prototype 2 was a well-received improvement by the participants both in power and simplicity and was still in the testing phase in 2023.

## Reflections on Step I

Research in creative technologies takes many forms, and there is no consensus on what creative technologies scholarship or practice might be. Our research instructable is written from our own specific context and experience. Could it be useful for those with a very different understanding of what research should be? “Scholarly activity is about the discovery, exchange, interpretation, and presentation of knowledge. As such it is inquiry-driven, and the outcome of that inquiry can potentially take many forms. The challenge for Creative Technologies is to define what scholarship in this field is, the criteria of quality, and to promote the acceptance of the outcomes achieved” (Connor and Sosa 2018, 7).

The instruction above for researchers to “just create,” and to use creative exploration as a method, places creative technologies alongside other forms of professional art practice that take the form of open-ended processes. These include Fluxus-style performance events, free-improvised music, and generative or interactive new media art. Naming this kind of open-ended artistic experimentation as a legitimate research activity, however, brings this vision of creative technologies squarely into the centre of fiercely argued debates about the place of fine arts in research practice. Should art be considered an entirely separate activity from research, as it has different histories, professional standards, vocabularies, and audiences? Will legitimizing academic interpretations of art as a type of research activity interfere with artistic integrity and control? Are artists avoiding key questions that face researchers around accountability, ethics, and generalizable knowledge production by arguing for special status as artists? These questions are being increasingly posed as artists are asked to justify their work in academic settings, and as scholars ponder the possibilities of artistic research as a modality just as legitimate as scientific research, humanities research, or research in the social sciences (Biggs and Karlsson 2010).

These debates are not central to how we understand our practice, because we see our creative technologies work as a kind of research-creation that involves both artistic and scholarly activity. As Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk suggest, there are many ways of incorporating a “creative process, experimental aesthetic component, or an artistic work as an integral part of a study” (2012, 5). Their often-cited list of subcategories of research-creation includes (1) gathering research for the purposes of creation (“research-for-creation”); (2) analyzing creative objects for knowledge (“research-from-creation”); (3) presenting research outcomes using creative means (“creative presentations of research”); and (4) using creation to allow research to emerge (“creation-as-research”) (15). While creative technologists could engage in any of these practice-based modalities, the last subcategory best describes our research. As the authors define it:

“Creation-as-research” involves the elaboration of projects where creation is required in order for research to emerge. It is about investigating the relationship between technology, gathering and revealing through creation (following Franklin, 1992, and Heidegger, 1977, where “technology” connotes a mindset and practice of crafting as much as it does “equipment”), while also seeking to extract knowledge from the process. Research is more or less the end goal in this instance, although the “results” produced also include the creative production that is entailed, as both a tracing-out and culminating expression of the research process. It is about understanding the technologies/media/practices that we discuss . . . by actually deploying these phenomena, and pushing them into creative directions. It is a form

of directed exploration through creative processes that includes experimentation, but also analysis, critique, and a profound engagement with theory and questions of method (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012, 19).

We find Chapman and Sawchuk's definition of creation-as-research to be very useful as we imagine and build projects with our collaborators.

The socially responsive creative technologies projects that we make are often artistic, scientific, *and* scholarly, and their methodologies might draw from both academic and artistic ideas of successful outcomes. Our projects produce peer reviewed writing and engineering designs as well as juried festival and gallery work. We facilitate fine arts graduate studios and curate or lead workshops as professional artists. We often produce tools developed with and by the community. These community-based creative technologies outcomes sometimes slip out of established frameworks. They might be free online toolkits that are not peer reviewed (such as the toolkits that emerged from the ImprovEnabled project) or experimental products that may never be commercially released (such as the Sonic Blankets wearable). The work may appear in community research-creation showcases in non-juried spaces, such as community centres and support groups, or in health settings, gallery spaces dedicated to community work, or as part of outreach programming/curation by universities or arts institutions. New codesigned software might be used just for one group. Work may be self-published, or self-presented in open sharing sessions taking place online or in person. These projects may also have many versions, remain partial, or be ephemeral, appearing at a moment for a purpose that is never designed to be sustained. Creative technologies practice thus challenges ideas of research as always planned, controlled, and leading to specific outcomes with measurable applications in other contexts. This lack of generalizability might be problematic, after all, does creating one wearable technology sweater, for one family, matter in the wider scheme of research? But it might also open new ideas of success. For example, a playful workshop may have unintended positive effects on participants. Youth artist Keisha Mohr, working with her mother, FASD advocate Shana Mohr, created the following bio for the multiPLAY website in 2020:

Hi

My name is Keisha Rayne Mohr. I live with something called FASD. Nobody can change that. To be honest, I love living with FASD. It makes me special and different. I still do ordinary things anyone would do. I play hockey, go to school and even get in a little mischief once in a while. That is who I am 😊 My favourite part about this project is the way my body felt during the project was amazing. I felt like I was in my happy place and actually being understood. It was an incredible experience. I love it.



## STEP 2



Caines and participants performing improvised music on iPads in a public concert for the project “Improvising with iPads: A Partnered Inquiry into Technology-Based Music Therapy, Improvisation and Cultural Expression in Health Settings,” Wascana Rehabilitation Hospital, Regina, Saskatchewan, 2015. Credit: John Campbell.

2. Just keep creating . . .

Cross into places you are not sure you belong. Let artistic methods, ideas, and outcomes infect engineering constructs, and functionality encroach on artistic freedom. Let collaborators remind you that you are not in control.

Note: Be ready for critique (you need it).



## Example: Facing Critique

As mentioned, Brandon is currently working on an MFA project to increase the social and physical accessibility of a community group. He is an avid athlete and long-standing member of the lawn bowls club and is collaborating with his fellow (much older) members to explore creative technologies for use by the club. The first component of the project was the creation of the User-Friendly Jukebox, designed to allow members easily to listen to music with the press of a single button. In the eyes of Brandon, the User-Friendly Jukebox branched the areas of engineering and art through the inclusion of a people-centred design process (Norman 2013) and through an artistic critique of modern commercially available technology. He felt he was artistically engaging aesthetics in his exploration of nostalgia, familiarity, and emotion. The design of the jukebox was based on Brandon's mental picture of a classic jukebox and sculpted from wood and DIY electronics with great care to be friendly, inviting, and nostalgic. He wanted to separate it from overcomplicated, anxiety-producing commercial designs, which include intimidating panels of buttons, knobs, switches, and wires that seem extremely difficult to operate. He was also inspired by graduate classes exploring interactive sound art installations constructed from wood and electronics and was informed by his own ongoing exploration of sound art as a marker of memory and a tool for community making, which was a theme of several other sound art projects he made during this time. The electronics were drawn from maker culture projects he discovered online.

During his end-of-semester critique, Brandon almost received a failing grade from both art and engineering faculty members who were tasked with deciding if he had successfully completed the semester and could move forward in his program. From the perspective of the artists, the project was void of all artistic value, and “nothing more than the work of an engineer consulting with people.” In turn, the engineers felt that, while there were definitely engineering components, there were anomalous key artistic elements that would not normally be seen in engineering, including his focus on concept and care over functionality, and the time spent on wood carving and sculptural techniques. An engineer, he was told, would be more likely to prototype “with just a shoebox and some wires.” This was his first experience as a creative technologist in such a hostile debate, and his initial response was a loss of confidence. He began looking for ways to incorporate both art and engineering more clearly within his work. Eventually, he came to the conclusion that art has never *not* been present in his process. He decided that as a creative technologist, much of the art he incorporates within his work comes in the form of practice-based critique of the failure of commercially available technology. While the attack felt fierce at the time, he was eventually supported by other creative technologists in the room and did finally pass the review. He was also heartened by the positive reception from the lawn bowling community, and this support has helped him to further cement his idea of creative technologies and be in a better position to defend his work.

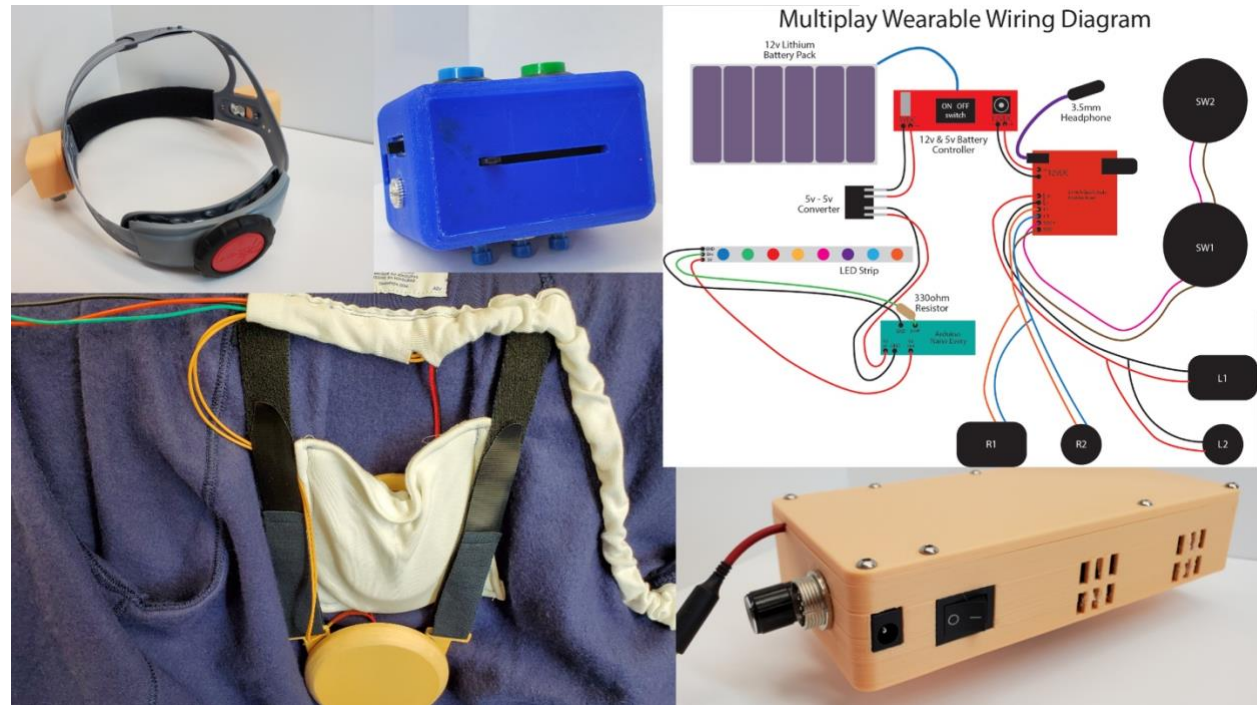
In the following semester, to connect more to his own artistic processes such as storytelling and emotional response, Brandon focused on creating a solo creative technologies work that spoke about his conflicted feelings as a human in contact with technology. One experiment was an ambisonic audio art piece exploring his personal relationship to his home aquarium and considering how technology may both save and destroy our natural environments (<https://brandochiliporfolio.weebly.com/projects.html>). This project helped Brandon to gain confidence in his own artistic and technical capabilities and see the two sides of his work as inherently connected.

## Reflections on Step 2

Connor and Sosa contend that “whilst Creative Technologists may specialize, they need to not fall into a silo of thought and practice. Collaboration with others is key to understanding and addressing complex problems and the key to successful collaboration is a shared understanding and a sense of safety to take risks and learn from each other” (Connor and Sosa 2018, 3). As a socially engaged artist whose projects are always codesigned with community members, Rebecca reflects often on the impact and ethics of cocreation. She engages with a number of other collaborative practice-based methodologies across her projects including social practice (Jackson 2011; Thompson 2012), improvisation (Caines and Heble 2015), community-based performance (Kuppers and Robertson 2007), participatory and relational art (Bishop 2006), and modified versions of participatory action research (Pant 2014). She also uses ethnographic methods from performance studies (Phelan and Lane 1998) and different forms of creative project evaluation (ASC 2022). She tends to simultaneously explore in multiple directions at once. Yung (2015) describes the work of creative “multidisciplinarians” as one of simultaneous response: “The framework is artistic *and* ecological, artistic *and* communal, artistic *and* scientific, *and* profitable, educational, academic, technological, sociological, cultural, feminist, activist, etc. Within the artistic mode, the thinking is theatre *and* folk concert *and* social practice, or sculpture *and* media arts *and* community discourse, etc.” (5).

Sharing control with others is central to these approaches, based on careful negotiation, communication, and acknowledgement of the different levels of power operating across these spaces. It is perhaps no wonder that Rebecca is drawn to creative technologies, with its core principle of collaboration. There is also something seductive about the idea of disciplines infecting other disciplines, or being in an (inter)disciplinary home that transgresses often, and about watching creative technologies expand, in the Kraussian sense, somehow moving between art and non-art, engineering and non-engineering (Krauss 1979, 31–44). Rebecca does recognize that there is something disturbingly arrogant at the heart of an approach in which researchers truly believe they can go anywhere, and try anything without the proper training, history, and context. This is where both ethics and a certain amount of gatekeeping might be needed for safety, to ensure depth of research, and avoid the harm to communities that may come when researchers assume access to all areas. Yet there is no avoiding critique when the work crosses disciplinary lines, especially when the practice sits at the crossroads of so many different opinions about what art, engineering, and research should aim to be. At the centre of our instruction to “just keep creating” is the awareness that publicly exposing your weaknesses in creative technologies projects, admitting that training is vital but could be partial or inadequate, letting others lead, or knowing that you will need to completely change direction when you get it all wrong might engender a useful kind of vulnerability and transparency (if one can only avoid defensiveness).

### STEP 3



Developing a wearable technology project in playful creative workshops (2019—ongoing). Credit: Brandon Watson.

3. Make connections you are not sure will hold and give up control.

Note 1: Connections could be working with other collaborators who may have very different ideas of success. (Connections could also be dodgy soldering points, because we are still learning how to work with electronic components.) Connections might be with experts, amateurs, anonymous online tech support, community leaders, or your boyfriend.

Note 2: Be ready for someone to turn your community tool into a Halloween costume and then into a training method for the police.

### **Example: Creating Collaborative Class Projects for Dancers**

In 2020, Brandon collaborated with another graduate student with a background in theatre design and production on a project advised by Rebecca. For Brandon, this area was miles away from the coding, woodworking, electronic, device-based work that he had been focusing on. Their idea was to create a wearable wireless device from inexpensive or recycled components. The device would read a dancer's heart rate and send the information to a computer backstage where it could directly impact many elements of the performance. For example, in this instance, the goal was to have the information change the speed and colour of the lighting as well as possibly change the tempo of the music. They thought that it could lead to some interesting elements within live performances in which a cumulative, run-off effect might take place. As the performer's heart rate increased, affecting the tempo of music and lighting effects, the cue to dance faster would further affect the performer's heart rate in a cyclical process. The students hoped the tool might become part of a theatre graduate performance project examining the possibility for engendering parasympathetic responses in audiences via bodily functions such as coughs and heart beats.

There were many challenges to the project, including obtaining an accurate and stable heart rate, transferring the information into the MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) file format that was needed for the theatrical software used, and transferring the information wirelessly through a Bluetooth connection. While each of these can be straightforward concepts and coding challenges by themselves, combining them into one package proved to be a nightmare. Brandon's collaborator, while technically trained in theatre production, was very far out of his comfort zone researching products and attempting code. The code and libraries came from a range of sources, including medical websites. The project was also hindered by COVID-19 protocols that banned the two students meeting face-to-face. The available heart rate sensors were quite erratic in their readings which required workarounds. Changing the readings into MIDI required alterations that were not ideal for the Bluetooth connection and when they thought they had all areas of the code working together, they were greatly limited by the available software on Windows and Mac PCs, which would receive the Bluetooth information in such a way that it could be imported live into theatrical software to alter scenes. Every step that they took led them two steps back and, in the end, the success or failure of the project was completely in the hands of the corporations that designed the software that they had to use. The project failed to connect properly, and they only saw flashes of possibility. While this was extremely frustrating, the progress they had made along the way proved that there could be an exciting future for the technology.

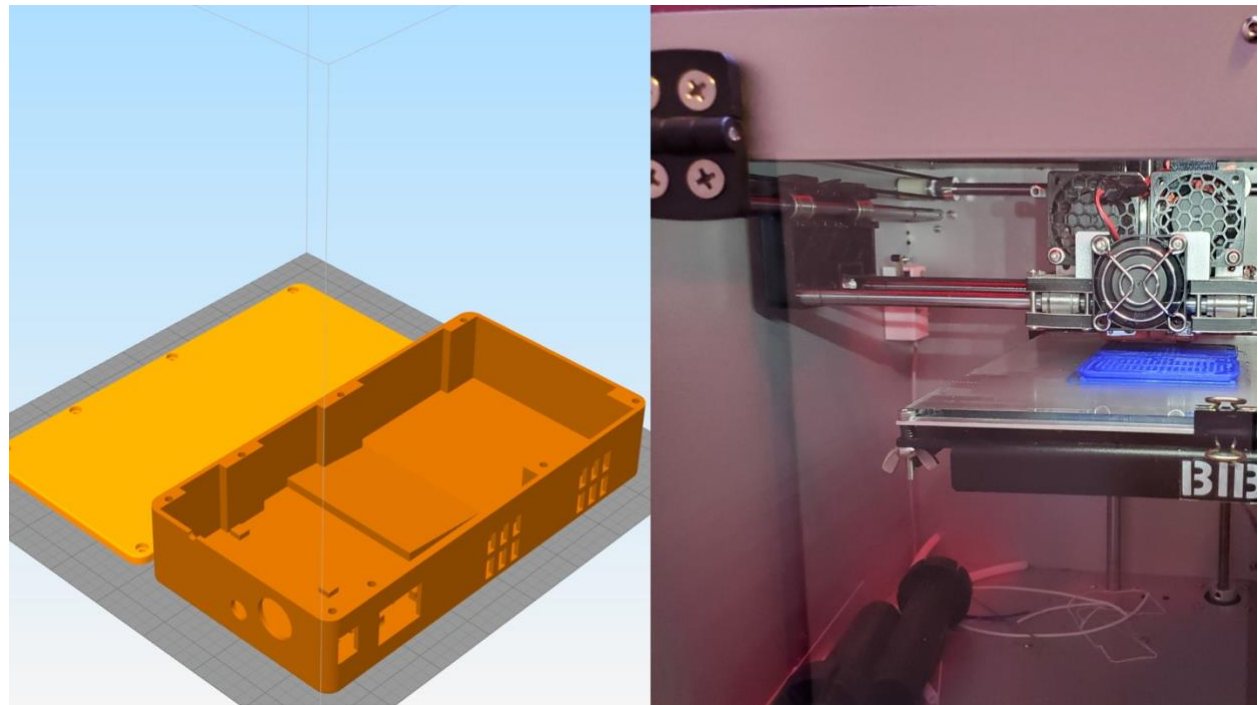
### **Reflections on Step 3**

Creative technologies builds on practice-based methods taken from computer science and engineering. These include people-centred design (Norman 2013), agile software development (a highly influential method calling for early and continuous software development that is constantly responsive to client needs; Beck et al. 2001), amateur DIY maker culture (Dougherty 2016), and hackathons, tech/game jams including serious games (computer games with a social purpose; Engage Research Labs 2020). Creative technologies practitioners are also interdisciplinary scavengers and can learn from histories of interdisciplinarity as it appears in other contexts. In a much-quoted definition, Julie Klein (1990) states, "Interdisciplinarity is a means of solving problems and answering questions that cannot be satisfactorily addressed using single methods or approaches" (196). Maura Borrego and Lynita Newswander, however, remind us that interdisciplinarity can be

differently conceived in the sciences and humanities (2010, 64). In their view, the sciences are more likely to use the term to refer to multidisciplinary teams working on a problem together, while the humanities are more likely to refer to new processes and forms that emerge from hybridizing and combining different approaches. Connor and Sosa suggest creative technologies engages in a kind of methodological bricolage as it works pragmatically, using resourcefulness and improvisation. They state: “The notion of ‘available things’ is core to the idea of effectual thinking of entrepreneurial activity. Similarly, the ability to find and use such available things across traditional disciplinary boundaries also aligns with the undisciplined nature of the field” (Connor and Sosa 2018, 3).

This pragmatism is not always focused on social justice or creative outcomes. Some of our colleagues in creative technologies, for example, are borrowing creative projects, ideas, and tools from maker culture and new media art, and using them to help defence organizations build new forms of immersive police and military training in Canada and the US (Hanson 2021). Creative technologies RND labs are also common in military contexts and the source of many new inventions. This is a tension for those opposed to the secrecy and inherent violence of paramilitary research, yet it is natural in a field where cross-disciplinary agility is standard. Our instruction to “make connections that may not hold (and be ready to let go of ownership)” is not easy, nor is it innocent, but it can produce or share new knowledges that cross between worlds, blurring who is a researcher or a participant, a teacher, or a learner, an amateur or an expert.

#### STEP 4



Learning how to 3D print. Credit: Brandon Watson.

#### 4. Start and End by Learning

Note: Do not be an expert. You better bring what you know, but you also need to learn before you start. You need to not be safe, comfortable, or know what is best.



## Example 1: The Collaborative CNC Music and Drawing Project

Connor and Sosa suggest that “curiosity naturally leads to discovery” and maintain that creative technologies is “a mechanism that facilitates discovery and self-directed learning” (2018, 5). During an undergraduate class with Rebecca, for his creative technologies program, Brandon began working on a project to explore the connections between art, engineering, technology, audio, collaboration, and improvisation. If that sounds like a lot, it is because initially it was probably too much. He was also inspired by reading Morehshin Allahyari and Daniel Rourke’s “The 3D Additivist Manifesto” (2015), which explores creative and radical 3D printing and maker culture possibilities. His vision for the project was to build a CNC machine (any machine where software and code control the movement of the production equipment, in this case a plotter machine for drawing), with a custom tool head designed to hold three marker pens. The machine would also be used to simultaneously create music. He aimed to translate music notes into the g-code instructions needed to control the motors, which would then produce the different tones, qualities, and durations he wanted as they moved. While the CNC machine was making music, three users could then stand around the machine and, using a hydraulic system, individually raise and lower the marker pens onto a piece of blank paper to create collaborative drawings over which no one person had complete control.

This accomplished a few things. First, it transferred music onto paper as a kind of drawing. Second, it allowed users to listen to the sound and change the drawing through improvisation and collaboration. Nearly every component of the project required extensive research to complete as Brandon had never built a CNC machine, programmed one, transferred music from MIDI notes to g-code, or worked with hydraulics. In fact, the only component of the project that he was familiar with was working with a 3D printer to build some custom parts for a CNC machine. He had to research if there was a way to translate music notes into g-code. This research included watching many YouTube instruction videos and scanning forums. His initial research led him to the MIDI file format, which seemed like the most efficient way of converting music. As he continued to research, he found that someone had already built a clever MIDI to g-code converter (<https://www.ultimatesolver.com/en/midi2gcode>). This resolved one of the most technical components of the project. Building the actual CNC machine involved numerous design decisions that had to be made before he could test them. One of these design choices was whether to use belts or lead screws to move the tool head. He also experimented with different music scores to convert to g-code, eventually choosing the theme song to the game *Original Super Mario Bros* as it converted well and was suited to the audience (university students in a creative technologies course). This project resulted in some interesting questions about collaboration and improvisation across disciplines that Brandon would like to explore in the future.

In Brandon’s experience, when you step outside of your comfort zone and begin a project with many unknowns, the process of learning as you go can lead to amazing and exciting works that create new possibilities for the creator. Brandon is not an expert in any of the fields that were combined in this project, but through learning, discovery, and experimentation, the project led him on new pathways. Stepping out of one’s comfort zone as a creator can help to challenge the importance of being an expert in a particular field. While Brandon was taking classes in his original engineering program, he was taught that engineers are problem solvers. In creative technologies, the more common idea is that creative technologists are not the experts, and we may not be the ones to solve any problems at all, but instead may always be involved in continual play, creativity, and experimentation.



## Example 2: Building Creative Technology Programs

Rebecca has significant experience building creative technologies programs in Canadian universities. She was employed at the University of Regina in 2011 to help build a new program in the Faculty of Media, Art, and Performance that would allow students to move between courses in each of the faculty's departments (Visual Art, Music, Theatre, Film, and Interdisciplinary Programs) *and* take courses in the Department of Computer Science in the Faculty of Science. This was a complex pedagogical initiative, and in her first semester she was asked to teach a 100-level course, open to all students at the university, entitled Introduction to Creative Technologies, before the program had even begun. This was a speculative endeavour, in which she invited lecturers from both partnering faculties, as well as from the Software Systems Engineering program in the Faculty of Engineering and Applied Sciences, to speak about their art and research. In part, her goal was simply to observe, and then build connections between, the new Creative Technologies program and research and teaching that were already taking place. At the same time, she worked with several multidisciplinary committees to learn how the university understood the field, and what it was possible to build, given the university and faculty resources and the local communities of practice around art and technology. It was difficult to build a coherent core of required learning to the program, and to connect the diversity of electives and options that were all approaching the idea of creative technologies in different ways.

The new degree options were a BA, entered via the Faculty of Media, Art, and Performance; and a BSc entered via the Computer Science Department. The team also built a minor that was open to anyone in the university. There were many moments of disconnection while attempting to balance so many different perspectives of the field. Creative technologies also needs investments in technology, technological support, and new kinds of spaces, and there was very little will to make these kinds of staffing and infrastructure investments in an uncertain funding climate, especially where existing programs were being asked to cut their budgets. This funding pressure is not unique to academia but is a feature of many new creative technologies contexts. This work can be tricky to resource as it requires both artistic and technological assets, and constant updating as conditions in the field change. There is also a fascinating conundrum for tertiary institutions, especially in the fine arts. The initial appeal of attracting both institutional buy-in and potentially increased student enrolment through naming a program something sexy like "Creative Technologies" can run into harsher realities when management are asked to actually support new kinds of pedagogy, manage interdisciplinary and cross-faculty teams with different priorities, and prioritize resource-heavy practice-based programming despite budget cuts in the humanities.

For some, a new program called Creative Technologies should just be an instrumental device to connect and feed existing fine arts classes/practice, while allowing student artists additional access to technological supports. This idea is also reflected in research, where some creative technologies artists do not learn the technology themselves and instead seek technologists as staff rather than as cocreators. For others, a creative technologies program should be an intensely technical extension of multimedia computing that requires students to take large amounts of training in coding, mathematics, and electronics (although in Rebecca's experience, no professor wants the task of teaching these at the beginner level to artists). Students and families (and the wider university administration) seemed most interested in courses that would train students in software for professional careers such as graphic design, web design, and commercial creative content. To Rebecca, those felt like technical college goals. She and her colleagues in the Interdisciplinary

Programs department felt that Creative Technologies should not simply be a service program but should be allowed to flourish as its own distinct field, taking up a commitment to critical thinking and to interdisciplinary theory and practice.

The learning for Rebecca during this period was constant. In her years at the University of Regina, she designed new classes in interactive media, wearable art and technology, sound art, locative media, mobile devices for music, and technologies for theatre, yet none of these were part of her original postgraduate or postdoctoral degrees, and all required plunging at times into unknown territories and new fields of research. Some of these attempts were unsuccessful, for example when the skillsets she attempted were too difficult to acquire or teach, or when the correct administrative, technological equipment and supports were not made available. Other courses became successful features of the new program. The university was very small, with limited available faculty to teach the classes, pressure to constantly show increasing student numbers, and a tiny regional new media art scene and limited tech industry to draw on. She did not have the luxury of helping to build a program that chose just one creative technologies specialty. Instead, she had to create something that could hold together a range of significantly different ideas of what creative technologies was and what it could achieve—and do this as a junior scholar, in shifting administrative environments with differing levels of buy-in and support. This multifaceted approach produced many tensions, arguments, and complications for faculty and students (and may have contributed to a high faculty turnover), but it also led to a very open structure where new classes were developed regularly and students were introduced to the radically diverse nature of the field.

#### **Reflections on Step 4**

It is often very difficult to determine the lines between planning, learning, and research in creative technologies. When is a project just pedagogical, or just research, or just administrative work? For example, one pedagogical method Rebecca utilized was coteaching, which emerged from her own interest in interdisciplinarity and from her experience working in multidisciplinary research teams. She experimented with several models for working with colleagues from other departments, including coteaching sound art with a professor in Software Systems Engineering (where half the class were fourth-year engineering students, and half fine arts and open elective students). She also built a collaboratively taught iPad Orchestra class, working with musicians (initially clarinetist and musicologist Pauline Minevich, and later improvising vocalist Helen Pridmore, and with computer scientist David Gerhard). This class became a music techniques elective for music majors, and a core project class for creative technologies majors, as well as an elective for computer science majors interested in app development and interface design. It also had a connected research component, exploring the pedagogical possibilities for utilizing iPads in music teaching and learning. Rebecca also brought her undergraduate and graduate students from these classes into her socially responsive creative technologies research. Her co-teaching experiments directly led to new practice-based research projects which then became fuel to drive even more new class production.

The iPad Orchestra class, for example, led directly to the development of a community-based research project in health settings with Indigenous residents entitled *Improvising with iPads: A Partnered Inquiry into Technology-Based Music Therapy, Improvisation and Cultural Expression in Health Settings*. It also led to the incorporation of iPad improvisation techniques into the *ImprovEnabled* project discussed above. Students from creative technologies became involved in both these projects as parts of their classes, or during special independent studies, and/or as paid

undergraduate and graduate research assistants. When they had specialized technical skills, they were often teaching the researchers or sharing their knowledge with other students. These research projects in turn fuelled the development of new classes. One example was a new course for fourth-year students entitled Interdisciplinary Improvisation where students examined current socially engaged research in improvised art and technology and then built their own projects (Brandon's CNC machine discussed above is one example). This approach was directly inspired by the practice-based case studies that Rebecca was intersecting with via her own CSI research, such as Ramshaw and Stapleton's Translating Improvisation project in Northern Ireland (2017), or Pauline Oliveros's Adaptive Use Musical Instrument project that began in the United States and continued with partners across Canada (Oliveros et al. 2011). Practice-based learning is always both the beginning and end of Rebecca's engagement with creative technologies. She now hopes to bring her intertwined learning and her practice-based research from the University of Regina context to her new position helping to build a new socially responsive creative technologies program at York University's new Markham campus that opens in 2024.

## STEP 5



Supporting First Nations teenagers to explore audio technologies and interview Elders about the changing sound in their community in the “Community Sound[e]Scapes: Northern Ontario” project (Caines 2012). Credit: Rosa Loess.

### 5. Be Mistaken

Mistakes come because you are not infallible or independent and rely on things and people (including yourself) that can fail. (P.S. nobody is ever really independent anyway—where does your tap water come from?) Your technologies might be designed by someone else (and don't necessarily work with other technologies). Also, mistakes are material and you must be accountable for them. You will make mistakes with partners (human and nonhuman). You need to own these, live inside these, build from these.

Note: Try not to be afraid.

### **Example: Jukebox Disasters**

There were many near project-ending mistakes that took place during the creation of the User-Friendly Jukebox discussed above. During the woodworking phase of the project, Brandon had a very specific technique he wanted to incorporate. This technique is called kerf-bending and is used to create smooth curves in straight panels of wood by creating a series of repeated parallel cuts across the bend. The spacing and depth of these cuts differ depending on the radius of the bend and the species of wood. Due to a small miscalculation, when he attempted to bend the wood into place for gluing, the piece cracked in multiple locations and split apart. This mistake made the entire piece completely useless and set him back many days while he determined whether to try again or attempt to work with the broken piece. He settled on continuing each cut entirely through the wood yielding about 40 small pieces. By adding a slight angle to each piece, he was able to glue them all together and form a large curve. While he wanted a clean, jointless curve, he ended up with a curve that had to embrace the massive mistake by accentuating the joints between each of the forty pieces. Later, a piece of equipment failed, completely destroying the jukebox. It gouged out large sections of wood, splintered others, and burned and scorched marks deep into the wood.

Rolling with mistakes is something that creative technologists, along with everyone else, must learn to do, but it can be overwhelming at times, especially when mistakes are completely out of your control. Quitting was very much an option in Brandon's mind because he didn't have a solution to salvage the project at that point. It took the collaborative effort of another woodworker to find a path through the failure and salvage the woodworking. While the finished User-Friendly Jukebox doesn't exactly resemble his original plan, Brandon believes it is significantly better because it showcases how collaborative experimentation strengthened the project and his conception of mistakes and failure.

### **Reflections on Step 5**

Rebecca has spent many years exploring ideas of improvisation through the framework of Critical Studies in Improvisation (CSI). This included completing a postdoctoral fellowship with the research network Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice based at the University of Guelph, and subsequent involvement in the management of the connected research initiative, the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI). In 2013, she started the Regina Improvisation Studies Centre, which acted as a partner site in IICSI, and in that role supported a range of improvisation-based research projects. Improvisation has become both a method and an outcome in much of her research and her teaching, and unpacking improvisation as a methodology has also been a recent focus of her scholarly writing (Caines 2019, 2020; Caines and Heble 2015). For her, improvisation is made up of categories that should be central to both art and research: real-time decision-making with others, surprise, supported and accountable risk taking, deep listening, and, perhaps most importantly, the reconfiguration of mistake. Improvisation requires that we engage in activities that may not be successful, or could, despite our best efforts, result in failure. While some improvisers might blithely suggest that "there is no such thing as failure," this is a simplistic summary of a more complex idea. CSI suggests instead that failure must be looked at as material. This does not mean there are no issues, errors, or things to avoid; on the contrary, we must face and own our mistakes, become wholly visible, accountable and responsible for them, and must continue to explore them in conversation with others.

There is more research to be done exploring the intersection of improvisation and creative technologies as connected practice-based research modes. Creative technologies' use of people-centred and responsive design approaches, rapid prototyping methodologies, maker collaboration, jams, and gamification all seem to connect to CSI via a shared interest in qualities of playful collaboration, responsiveness, and risk. For both Rebecca and Brandon, it has certainly felt natural to combine research-creation in creative technologies with improvised approaches drawn from theatre, music, and visual arts.

Both socially responsive creative technologies and CSI seem to offer a similar challenge to risk adverse research cultures that are focused on the anxious avoidance of possible dangers and liabilities, and ready to see a mistake as just a learning opportunity. We are encouraged to mark mistakes, and then to try desperately hard to avoid them next time, rather than see them as the genesis of work. This is intensified in creative technologies work, which is so fraught with the likelihood of technological failure at any point of a project, however expert the practitioners. If it becomes possible to admit that failure is inherent, as technologists do, perhaps it is also possible to walk the careful line between owning mistakes and learning from them, using them to make new things possible, and becoming less fearful of imperfection.<sup>2</sup>

### **Conclusions: Performing Innovation**

Innovation is a term that may produce scepticism in artists and scholars. It is a concept often wielded by bureaucrats and technocrats too ready to dump the old in favour of trends, or fads, or selling new directions that may in fact be the wrong way to go. In business, it is used to refer to both the invention of something new (sometimes called idea generation or simply creativity) and the bringing of that new product or service into “successful use” (Cumming 1998, 21–29). However, fields like social entrepreneurship acknowledge innovations that might come from outside profit-driven contexts. Geoff Mulgan suggests that “the results of social innovation—new ideas that meet unmet needs—are all around us. They include fair trade and restorative justice, hospices and kindergartens, distance learning and traffic calming” (Mulgan 2007).

Innovation in socially responsive creative technologies work is difficult to evaluate. The project may be an innovation artistically, but boring technically (or vice versa). It may be received as a failure to the disciplines it touches on and borrows from, but a success to the communities involved. It may be a technical success and a social and creative failure. How do we measure if the research has moved from idea generation or “just consultation” to successful knowledge creation? Creative technologies by its nature is performing ideas of innovation that are riskily attractive, always promising something exciting that it may not be able to deliver on. And when does innovation actually begin or end? Some creative technologies projects are short lived by necessity. Rebecca has worked on many projects that have had to nimbly find a space inside community contexts where staff are overworked, spaces are limited, people are leaving or unable to keep attending, or participants or co-creators are passing away. These projects can be momentary and ephemeral, but they can also be marked by joy. For example, when cocreating with people forced to live in a rehabilitation hospital whose lives are totally prescribed and deformed by systemic barriers to inclusion, breathing in as a group, to create a silent moment for someone who is nonverbal and unresponsive to have the time and permission to reach with shaky, slow moving hands to create their own sound on an iPad and thus be heard for the first time, that could feel like an innovation.

It could also feel like a revelation.

What kinds of performances of innovation might come into view when communities and researchers improvise their own terms for practice-based research, and take up the invitation to explore the creative potential of art and technology together with vulnerability and transparency, always ready to succeed, always ready to fail?

## INSTRUCTABLE COMMENTS FIELD

**User:** John Campbell

Comment: My first job was a software developer for a small industrial automation company where I wrote computer vision software. We had to get the most out of every element of the system. So reworking the hardware and software was a frequent occurrence. Sometimes completely scrapping the original solution for the hope that the new solution would be better performing. (Faster, more accurate, etc.) For me this was innovation, trying to push past what seemed to be the boundary of what was possible with the current system.

**User:**

Comment:



Mistakes in a project. Credit: Brandon Watson.

## Notes

1. A visual artist and theorist, Loveless also draws on a wider history of exploration of boundary objects and undutiful behaviour from feminist as well as science and technology scholars in her work.
2. For further examples see Caines, Seibel, and Kenny (2014). For reflections on the unique types of mistakes, and possibilities for acknowledging and attempting harm repair in settler-colonial contexts see Jimmy,



Andriotti, and Stein (2019), available as a free download at [https://musagetes.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Braiding\\_ReaderWeb.pdf](https://musagetes.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Braiding_ReaderWeb.pdf).

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### Creative Process and Co-Research with the Early Years through *Flight*

Robyn Ayles, Heather Fitzsimmons Frey, and Jamie Leach<sup>1</sup>

With their abundance of openness, curiosity, and imagination, children are natural researchers. They ask questions and seek answers. As theatre artists and practice-based researchers, we strive to welcome these young, sometimes preverbal inquisitors, into our research process in meaningful, democratic ways. Our practice-based research centres on questions regarding the relationships between very young children (aged eighteen months to five years), actors, and materials, with a view toward democratically creating theatre as a collective and immersive event. Through workshops, artist residencies, immersive theatre offerings, and a Cycle of Co-inquiry, we develop a loose scaffold of dramatic work that forms the skeleton of a theatrical piece, which in turn becomes an immersive theatre offering for the very young. Our process creates spaces that welcome active participation for children and actors to play, and where exploration is encouraged and planned with purpose and intention. This intention crystallizes into reciprocity and generosity of ideas between the participants. The final creative work includes very young children as co-creators in the experience. Although our current immersive theatre offering explores local urban wildlife, our process could be applied to any topic or theme.

#### **The Urban Wildlife Project, PBR, and Very Young Children**

Our current project-in-development, *The Urban Wildlife Project* (approximately an hour-long interactive experience), invites young children to join actors in co-creating an immersive theatre experience in a democratic process that recognizes children as inventive, creative, full of ideas, and as strong, capable citizens. As we discuss in “Harnessing the Power of *Flight*,” our creative team “aimed to develop democratic and playful relationships with children during the theatrical exploration” that “grounded our theatre creation and dramaturgy in respectful and agentic relationships between actors, theatrical objects, and young children” (Ayles, Fitzsimmons Frey, and Mykietyshyn 2021, 269). Children, actors, and designers develop a democratic relationship with the space and one another so that even the soundscape and lighting designs can respond to and play with participants as they choose how to engage with the production. The piece has a scaffold structure of scenarios and creative ideas that each contain a series of moments actors aim to share, yet each scenario can stretch or shrink to accommodate audience interests and engagement. Our explorations include physical theatre, dance and movement, sound and song, poetry, dramatic play, and a range of object and material business, including puppets and loose parts (i.e., everyday found objects that can be manipulated and used in various ways, such as scarves and pinecones; see Daly and Beloglovsky 2015). Child agency and comfort are both essential elements: the space includes blanket nests where audience members can sit or curl up and get cozy, but rather than be confined to that area, they are welcome to move, stand, and explore as the creative experience is taking place. In this article, we analyze how the practice-based research (PBR) process we use effectively

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challenges our creative team to devise and think beyond the adult artists in a rehearsal hall, and thus centres very young children and their educators as co-researchers.



Participating through observing.

Since 2019, we have been collaborating with very young children at our on-campus early childhood learning centre, Early Learning at MacEwan (ELM), to workshop *Urban Wildlife Project* material. The theme of this current creative work is common local urban animals: chickadees, jackrabbits, magpies, and squirrels. We chose these animals because of their local specificity, and because children in Edmonton are very familiar with them. Like many other urban children, the children of ELM have experience and relationships with urban natural spaces and animals. They visit the river valley, and they observe all four animals downtown in the ELM outdoor play space (attached to MacEwan University). Their curriculum framework highlights “sustainable futures” and envisions children as part of “environmentally and socially responsible communities,” and as children “develop a sense of wonder and appreciation for the natural world,” they are encouraged to see themselves as “a part of nature” (Makovichuk et al. 2014, 113). Educators and children at ELM work toward developing meaningful relationships with the land and the creatures with whom they share space, and as members of a downtown early learning centre, they have also worked with Indigenous Elders to develop intentional and informed connections with the land.

Notably, in our research creation process, we honour and draw attention to these inspiring but ubiquitous wildlife, and through that focus, the actors and children extend their relationships with those animals. For the purposes of our research methodology, however, it is important to note that our project’s relationship to urban wildlife is very different from the democratic relationship we aim for with children. While our processes are committed to respect, reciprocity, care, and relationship with materials and nonhuman animals both in and outside the performance space, in this article we discuss how children connect to our PBR as agentic co-researchers. While our PBR or “how we work together,” as Kimberly Richards and Davis-Fisch put it, contributes to conversations relating

to what they describe as processes that determine “the possibilities for resisting extractivism” (Richards and Davis-Fisch 2020, 8), we do not focus on developing working relationships with the nonhuman animals who inspire *The Urban Wildlife Project*. Instead, as we discuss in this article, we wonder how we can work with very young, sometimes preverbal children, as agentic co-researchers in a meaningful creative process.

### **What’s the *Flight* Plan? Working with *Flight*, PBR and Very Young Children**

To nurture the co-creating relationships between actors and children, our dramaturgical approach adapts the Cycle of Co-inquiry from *Flight: Alberta’s Early Learning and Care Framework* (Makovichuk et al. 2014; hereafter *Flight*).<sup>2</sup> *Flight* is a provincial early learning and care curriculum framework, not a dramaturgical framework. Yet the theoretical underpinnings support child-centred PBR very well. The philosophical approach to early childhood, learning, and community, and the worldviews embedded in *Flight*, were critically informed by a province-wide advisory committee that represented the diverse and local perspectives of Alberta early childhood communities in urban and rural regions, and by research with early learning educators and child care programs in Alberta. *Flight* also takes into account previous early childhood curriculum work in Canada and around the world (e.g., New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care, *Te Whāriki* from New Zealand, *The Practice of Relationships* from New South Wales Australia, and the philosophy and pedagogies of the infant-toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy). Ideal for our relationship-focused creative process, *Flight* asks educators, and in our case actors, to prioritize relationships, to be guided by core values that include play and playfulness, and to implement a rights-based, child-centred approach to interpreting how young children make meaning through play.

Our PBR process involves three main touchstones that we will analyze in this article. First, we explore and expand on *Flight*’s core values of play and playfulness. Second, we discuss how we apply *Flight*’s Cycle of Co-inquiry to understand children’s meaning-making and to inform our dramaturgy. Third, several concepts fuel our PBR journey: the ideas of “co-”, a specific conception of children and childhood, play and play-informed meaning-making, and making magic. Embracing these ideas allows us to include very young children as co-researchers in our co-creation and co-imagination practices. Prior to discussing our *Flight*-based PBR, we further illuminate why we chose to work with *Flight* and detail how the Cycle of Co-inquiry guides our reflective praxis. Following that, we will offer some examples from our PBR and the development of *The Urban Wildlife Project* to analyze how the intentions function in practice.





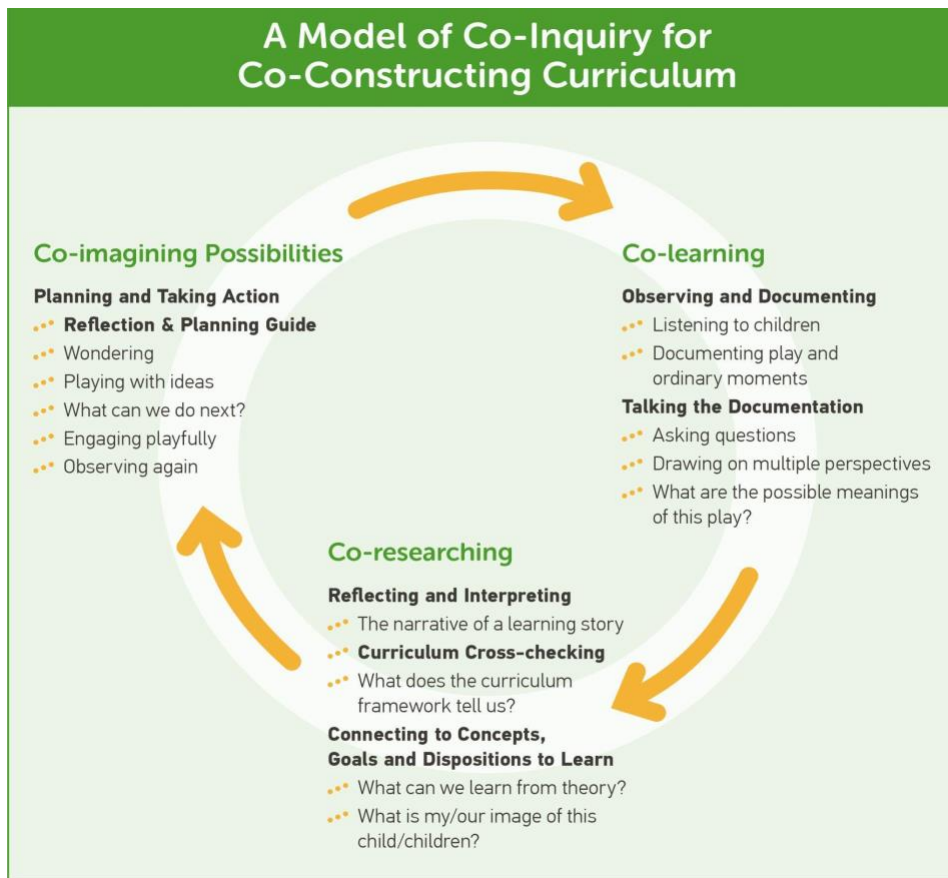
Participating through play. Actor: Aidan Spila.

We chose to adapt *Flight* to our practice-based research because local educators were familiar with it and also because it provides a common language and guides our creative team with an early childhood lens to develop meaningful collaborations with very young children so well. As theatre makers and researchers, we are familiar with a wide range of other theories related to dramaturgies for very young children (e.g., Fletcher-Watson 2013, 2015, 2016, 2018; Fletcher-Watson et. al 2014; Hovik 2015, 2019; Nagel and Hovik 2016; Patel 2020; Patel, Schnädelbach and Koleva 2018; Wartemann 2009), and a range of relevant theories and approaches related to play and playfulness.<sup>3</sup> Given our context in Alberta, however, where early childhood educators use *Flight* to develop their emerging curricula and to understand children’s meaning-making, adapting *Flight* to drive our PBR makes sense. Our collaborating educators were not only familiar with *Flight*’s core values and Cycle of Co-inquiry (which we discuss below), but their expertise in these theories also made them highly influential collaborators as they helped us to understand how to use *Flight* from their early childhood perspectives, and as we adapted it to ours.

Besides being familiar to the educators with whom we co-research, *Flight* allows us to address several key PBR study-structure challenges. Jonathan Pitches reminds researchers that one of the challenges of being a self-reflexive theatre practitioner is determining *how* to structure reflection. Pitches et. al (2011) describe a tension “central to the doubleness of the lived theatre experience” which demands a balance between “a state of *engagement* in ‘hands-on’ practices, with a state of *separation* from those very same practices . . . more appropriate for reflective thinking and expression” (138). Meanwhile, Lise Hovik, a Norwegian scholar and theatre maker for young children, observes that in their artistic creation processes, there is a “lot of reflection and thinking going on” but “we don’t use a theoretical language. We don’t even talk that much. We play, sing, and dance, we work with objects



and materials” (Hovik 2019, 38). Actors are trained to *be present*, and “in the moment” in their artistic improvisational work, and to be attuned to the space, materials, sounds, and people they share relationships with (Hovik 2019, 44). Pitches et al. (2011) urge practice-based researchers to pay attention to the “overarching design of those reflective moments” (142). To resolve the reflection-structure challenge while keeping children and children’s meaning-making central in our research, we adapted *Flight’s* Cycle of Co-inquiry, which provides a model that structures a consistent approach to a pattern of reflection and action, each phase responding to the previous phase, and each phase demanding something *next* from researchers. We have combined the idea of reflection with structure in the work of Pitches et al., and Hovik’s idea of play and messing about, by using *Flight* to guide our creative research and reflective process.



A model of co-inquiry from *Flight: Alberta’s Early Learning and Care Framework*.

The *Flight* framework provides language and concepts that mobilize how we explore creation-based research questions, especially those that enable us to focus on the audience rather than a creative product as somehow separate from an audience. In our process, we return to these key ideas both to help us interpret ways our very young co-researchers are making meaning with our creative work and to continue to re-guide and re-shape our process in meaning-rich and respectful ways.

### **Flight-Assisted Performance-Based Research**

There are several *Flight* principles that help address the challenges of conducting research in a meaningful and democratic way with very young children, and these principles guide our research

approach: the ideas of “co-”, a particular conception of childhood, and play-informed meaning-making. Language of agency, children’s rights, and in particular, understanding children as mighty learners who are citizens capable of responsible relationships and democratic citizenship are ideas we explore here and will return to throughout this article.

**Co- and Performance-Based Research (Thinking about Co-Pilots)**

The inherent power dynamics between adults and children mean that establishing an equitable, democratic co-researcher relationship between us requires intentionality. The *Flight* concepts that guide our practice-based research are included in the chart below, offering an overview of principles that inform our dramaturgy and our co-researcher relationship with our child collaborators and their educators. Following the chart, we offer a discussion of how the *Flight*-based idea of “co-” (e.g., co-inquiry, co-researchers, and co-imaginers of possibilities) shapes our research.

Co-Inquiry Descriptions			
	Co-Learner	Co-Researcher	Co-Imaginer
How <i>Flight</i> describes Co-Inquiry for educators	<p><b>Plays, Seeks, Participates, Persists, Cares</b>                      Alongside children and families, educators openly seek to learn about children and their families. This learning informs curriculum planning and is foundational for a practice of relationships. Educators use their knowledge and learning to create places of vitality with children and families.</p>	<p><b>Questions, Investigates, Reflects, Interprets, Shares</b>                      Educators actively engage children, families, and colleagues to investigate, make meaning of, and communicate about what children are doing and thinking. They engage with families to learn about how children engage in their world. Interpretations reflect an understanding that learning is socially and culturally constructed.</p>	<p><b>Wonders, Imagines, Creates, Invents, Risks in the Spirit of Learning</b>                      The role of the educator is to value the questions that can lead to possibilities created along with children, families, and colleagues, rather than have all the answers. Possibilities begin with wondering, imagining, and taking risks in the spirit of creating authentically shared places of vitality with children and families.</p>
Adapting <i>Flight</i> as theatre makers	<p>Caring, relationship-centred and play-based learning informs future theatrical offerings and helps us create vibrant and aesthetically interesting performances that captivate and enrich both parties.</p>	<p>We regard children as theatre co-creators. We engage with them, their educators and families to create a meaningful, rich, theatrical experience. We introduce concepts of theatre as a multimodal literacy, which children explore and make meaning through theatre and theatrical play.</p>	<p>We explore questions within theatrical frames and structures. We make offers and accept children's desire to contribute to the narrative. We co-construct authentically shared experiences.</p>

The prefix “co-” is essential in the ways *Flight* supports how we think about our research relationships. “Co-” intentionally represents the importance of reciprocity between children, families, and educators in creating knowledge through playing, researching, and imagining possibilities, thus reflecting a socio-cultural perspective of learning. Co- is present in the structure of

the reflection process we introduced above. *Flight* adapts the co-inquiry process first introduced by John Dewey (1933, 1938) to encourage reflecting and interpreting educator experiences in the classroom. *Flight's* model of co-inquiry is a collaborative, cyclical process of observing and documenting, reflecting and interpreting, and planning and taking action. It involves joint action and interaction to establish a *shared* understanding while stimulating *alternate* ideas, enabling collaborators to co-construct new knowledge, skills, and perspectives (Abramson 2012). As Pitches recommends in Pitches et al. (2011), a consciously held PBR reflection process is valuable. The child-centred, relationship-focused reflective process ensures that children are named as co-researchers, and that their participation in the process is agentic, meaningful, and influential. Fostering flexible, generative relationships between actors, educators, and children became a key part of our research practice. Just as the co-constructed nature of the *Flight* curriculum recognizes the uniqueness of each child, applying *Flight* to developing an immersive theatre experience offers children the opportunity to contribute on their terms and to co-create. Like early childhood educators, adults in our creative team engage in the co-inquiry process, planning in ways that notice and name what children are doing in their play; reflect and interpret children's action by using the *Flight* holistic goals and children's dispositions to learn; and then co-imagine possibilities with children, families, and colleagues to further the exploration and play (Makovichuk et al. 2014). Co- is also present in the roles we adopt in our practice-based research. Within the *Flight* framework, curriculum content begins with children's experiences and engages educators as co-learners, co-researchers, and co-imaginers of possibilities (Makovichuk et al. 2014). In our case, actors, designers, theatre technicians, and children take on these roles.



Co-imagining possibilities. Actor: Chelo Ledesma.



Some theatrical processes for early years test a fairly complete offering with audiences, or, like those using *Cycles de REPÈRE* (Houle 2023), use other actors in the room as proxy audience members until they are ready to share beyond the rehearsal hall. However, *Flight's* Cycle of Co-inquiry, and the co-roles participants take on, demand that children are central to the creative questioning and development throughout the creation process, so that children's perspectives (rather than exclusively those of the adult artists) are at the foreground of creative inquiry and decision-making. Through our PBR, we have learned to focus on relationships in the moment, which means that children are co-imagining possibilities and co-creating narratives and actions with the performers.

As adult contributors to co-relationships, we have a responsibility to provide a rich environment for actors and children to play in. Our theatrical research environment operates similarly to a *Flight*-inspired classroom. We plan the immersive experience in terms of time, materials, space, and participation through play, and we consider children's meaning-making in order to make changes. Our physical setting tries to follow a Reggio Emilia approach, where the environment is viewed as a place that is welcoming, represents the local culture and communities, is aesthetically beautiful, embraces nature, and is filled with purposeful materials. Children thrive in environments that reflect their needs and interests and the layout of the environment nurtures children's well-being by being responsive to relationship building, communication, collaboration, and exploration through play. Our designers were mindful of these environmental attributes when creating the space and atmosphere for the young audience (e.g., pillows and blankets placed purposely on the floor, natural materials as props, nature soundscapes, etc.).



Cuddling in the nests.

### **Constructions of Childhood and Practice-Based Research**

An image of the child determines everything adults do with young children: how they establish environments, forge relationships with young children, how they interpret children's actions, and how adults structure their own offerings to children for experiences. In order to work in a democratic way with children as co-researchers, as a team we needed to develop a shared understanding of very young children to guide how we engage and create with them. The idea of "co-" sits well with the way that *Flight* describes an "image of the child" as a mighty learner and citizen, one who is competent and rich in potential, and who constructs knowledge through opportunities of exploration and self-expression including art, drama, dance, music, and drawing (Makovichuk et al. 2014, viii). While "the way young children process interactions through their embodied experience [calls] for a performance where the senses are central to the design" (Patel, Schnädelbach, and Koleva 2018, 376), we do not seek to create performances that suggest obvious, or worse, "correct" interpretations. Fletcher-Watson (2015), along with Hovik (2015), describe this form of participatory theatre as "tyrannic" in that children cannot choose how they want to respond or when.

If we position children as co-researchers, co-imaginers of possibilities, and as mighty learners and citizens, we are not likely to create "tyrannic" work. Children choose how, when, and how much to participate: they may watch, they may sit or stand, they may speak or sing, or they may explore the materiality of objects. Their creative ideas and questions, their physical gestures and behaviours, all influence their experience and the experience the actors create. If children are invited to make discoveries during the production play opportunities (such as how high they can jump, how does gravity work on a scarf, what does a squirrel sound like, or what does the texture of a pinecone feel like), their own interests and passions can influence the entire show. Meanwhile, if the actors throw scarves across their shoulders as wings and swoop and soar like magpies, and in so doing, encourage children to join them, each child can fly if and how they wish. Actors avoid soliciting rote and reductive responses, and instead honour the power of each child's imagination. At the same time, the production is democratic in that there is still a collective of people in the space worthy of respect who agree to engage together safely. Adopting practices like these, and by centralizing a respectful view of very young children, the production is shared in a relationship between the actors and the audience, and it can become an experience a child desires. Each child can be an agent in their own theatrical experience.

### **Performance-Based Research, Play and Playfulness, Meaning Making and Magic**

When working with very young children as co-researchers in a democratic PBR process, adults need to pay attention to how young children are making meaning. One of the most powerful ways we have found to do that is through play. Play is central in a child's life, and through play, they acquire knowledge, skills, and abilities that become the foundation for lifelong learning and development (Dietze and Kashin 2019). In play, children both express and learn about their social, community, and cultural worlds, and when children play with others, they learn how to communicate and cooperate, thus developing socially, morally, and emotionally. They engage in theory-building and hypothesis-testing by playfully exploring and investigating the properties of objects and experimenting with action and reaction (Makovichuk et al. 2014). But Stuart Lester (2020) points out that play is not only for children. He argues that people must consider it essential to regard play as a "vital force of life (for adults and children alike)" (37), that play must be viewed as "a process rather than a product of life" (36) for both children and adults, and that it is important to consider how adults may "act responsibly and responsively with moments of children's play and playfulness" (36).

As we will demonstrate, prioritizing shared play and playfulness welcomes and invites children as co-researchers in our process.

A key PBR principle enhanced by the way we use *Flight* is the core value of the learning disposition *playing and playful* (i.e., “I/we are playing and playful” by inventing, creating, and imagining; Makovichuk et al. 2014, 60). Dispositions are enduring habits of the mind and action. There is a tendency to respond to experiences in characteristic ways (Carr 2006; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2009), and children express their disposition to play and be playful by being playful with ideas, thoughts, and materials supporting their creative and flexible thinking (Makovichuk et al. 2014). Children’s playful disposition is nurtured and strengthened through active play and exploration with others, and through materials that provoke imagination, curiosity, and diverse and unique narratives.

Adults who remember the joys of playfulness, express their playful disposition with children, and view play as both vital and as a process (Lester 2020) honour children and their playful dispositions. Adults modelling their own playful dispositions communicate that playing and playfulness are valued dispositions in the community (Makovichuk et al. 2014). Being an active co-player with/in children’s play situates the adult in a responsive relationship with children and is necessary for collaborative play between and among actors and children.

Play-based relationships are foundational for our theatrical creation and work with young children. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting* entry for “Play” begins by arguing that “a sense of playfulness lies at the heart of all vibrant acting” (Merlin 2015). Although actor theory on play meanders from Konstantin Stanislavski to Keith Johnstone and beyond, we embrace the idea that actors need to be in a “play-full” state (Ayles, Fitzsimmons Frey, and Mykietyshyn 2020) to build relationships with each other, the space, and with children, and to imbue “the actors with the true freedom of ‘living in the moment’” (Merlin 2015) with children. Korean theatre director and thinker Sun-woong Koh argues that theatre should be full of playfulness, and cautions that “play should be meaningful” for the actors and all the participants in the theatre experience (Hur 2015). In other words, there should be “something” meaningful involved in the “playing.” When we use play as a way to co-research, we seek to create meaningful experiences and also to understand how children are meaning-making through play. In our structured moments of reflection, the Cycle of Co-inquiry illuminates these moments of children’s meaning-making.





Child-led movement. Actor: Jessica Jalbert.

By paying attention to children’s play, as practice-based researchers we can gain insights from multiple modes of children’s expression that go beyond words. Children respond and make meaning in multiple ways and through their multiple languages.<sup>4</sup> Children may make meaning by observing, by exploring using their senses, by co-creating dramatic play, or by interpreting the performance with other children or their adult companions. They may also use multimodal literacies, moving from one form of literacy to another: for example, combining and moving ideas from music to movement. Regardless of how they choose to engage with any creative offering, as Manon van de Water explains, emphasis on children “*experiencing* performance transgresses notions of ‘liking’ or ‘not liking’” (Van de Water 2012, 121): instead of attending to children’s apparent preferences, the process invites children to make meaning from the offering.

Alongside applying *Flight’s* principles of co-inquiry, viewing children as mighty learners and citizens, and valuing play and playfulness, we’ve applied the idea that an immersive theatre experience should create conditions for making “magic” to our PBR. Hovik (2015) explains that “magic” happens when children participate on their own terms, collaborating with artists and resources. Most importantly, magic is “making up something wonderful together, something that was not there before, and will vanish when the play is over” (Hovik 2015, 20). In our process, this means that “magic” is central to all of the “co-” ideas related to relationships and to co-imagining, co-creating, and co-researching discussed above. The idea of “vanishing” also means that the experience is ephemeral, that children’s presence and their temporary relationship with the artists truly matters in the moment, and that while the child can apply the experience to future meaning-making

opportunities, the immersive theatrical experience is intended for each child as they are today rather than who they become in the near or distant future.<sup>5</sup>



Silk snow magic.

“Magic” can be a profound aspect of relationships between actors, arts resources, and children. The magic of those moments is possible, in part, because of relationships, and in our process, one way those relationships are developed is through play. In our PBR, both adults and children need to practise “the joys of playfulness” (Neugebauer 1993, 26). By respectfully sharing space, resources, and stories, actors and children co-create something that was not there before, and could not have happened without all the participants.

### Enjoying the *Flight* and Experiencing Turbulence

Although, as previously stated, *The Urban Wildlife Project* encompasses magpies, chickadees, jackrabbits, and squirrels, this article will refer primarily to examples from the process we followed while exploring squirrels. In particular, we imagined several ways to aestheticize and engage with ideas about squirrel behaviours and movements. Our next section offers insights into how we worked through questions we had about pinecones, which are prime squirrel food. We pay special attention to how we learned through our intentional reflective process: the Cycle of Co-inquiry. Following that, we discuss the questions we had about ribbon sticks as a resource to develop expressions of how squirrels move. We explain how the Cycle of Co-inquiry continues to guide our still-unresolved questions and practice-based research process. This section demonstrates how applying our practice-based research methodology enables us to address challenges related to

conducting meaningful co-research with young children. We emphasize what we are learning from our young co-researchers, especially about material resources, relationships, play, agency, meaningful experiences, and making magic together as co-imaginers of possibilities.

### **Pinecones: Lessons in Learning to Share**

In our research process, we learned that even though we had structured our reflection, and prioritized children's meaning-making, and playfulness, truly making "magic"—which requires actors to welcome young co-researchers as co-imaginers—was initially profoundly challenging for our creative team. We determined that treading a balance between an evocative structure that scaffolded a sensory, experiential, loose narrative journey, and relinquishing control by becoming co-imaginers with the young audience required relational skills that the actors had not yet developed. To avoid the "tyranny of participatory theatre" (Fletcher-Watson 2015), we aimed to establish opportunities for ephemeral co-created magic (Hovik 2015), and for democratic relations where children chose how to participate in the theatre experience (e.g., active engagement, participant observer, etc.; Hovik 2019; Makovichuk et al. 2014). Our creative team needed to learn how to nurture relationships with children and create an open, engaging, and responsive environment where exploration and play is purposely planned (Makovichuk et al. 2014). Establishing conditions for reciprocity during both artist residencies and immersive theatre performances is essential for us and our young research collaborators. As we will discuss next, using the Cycle of Co-inquiry to structure our reflective process helped us to understand how our creative practice needed to shift to better incorporate young participants in the work.

Our PBR, animated by children as co-researchers, is particularly well-illuminated through the introduction of one key scenic element: pinecones. Pinecones are a source of wonder, and like other natural materials used in children's play, they are "potent sources of enchantment" (Talbot and Frost 1989, 14) that invite magical thinking. Pinecones are a simple material that children can experience in their everyday lives. They are found objects (e.g., collected underneath trees, pulled off low hanging branches) and classified as "loose parts" in children's play (Daly and Beloglovsky 2014). Loose parts are alluring, beautiful found objects that children can move, manipulate, and control in their play and exploration (Daly and Beloglovsky 2014). Children tend to gravitate toward objects, like pinecones, which they can move, carry, collect, combine, design, and rearrange.



Sharing pinecones.

Just as children in ELM's program do, our creative team took a hike in Edmonton's downtown river valley (the largest urban park in Canada) to gather experiential information. The actors delighted in watching red squirrels (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) scabble through the forest leaf litter, searching for a delicious snack, and sometimes bounding off carrying pinecones that looked to be as big as they were. In our city, pinecones are ubiquitous. There are long golden sticky ones; small, soft, ovoid ones; and a variety of sizes of hard, roundish ones. Since they contain numerous seeds, each one has multiple parts; they smell like forests; they are light in weight, and most fit easily into a child's hand. Squirrels collect and hoard, guard and steal, and messily munch pinecones, creating scatterings of pinecone debris in great piles of glorious mess. We collected dry, hard, rounded cones to play with in rehearsal.



Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*).



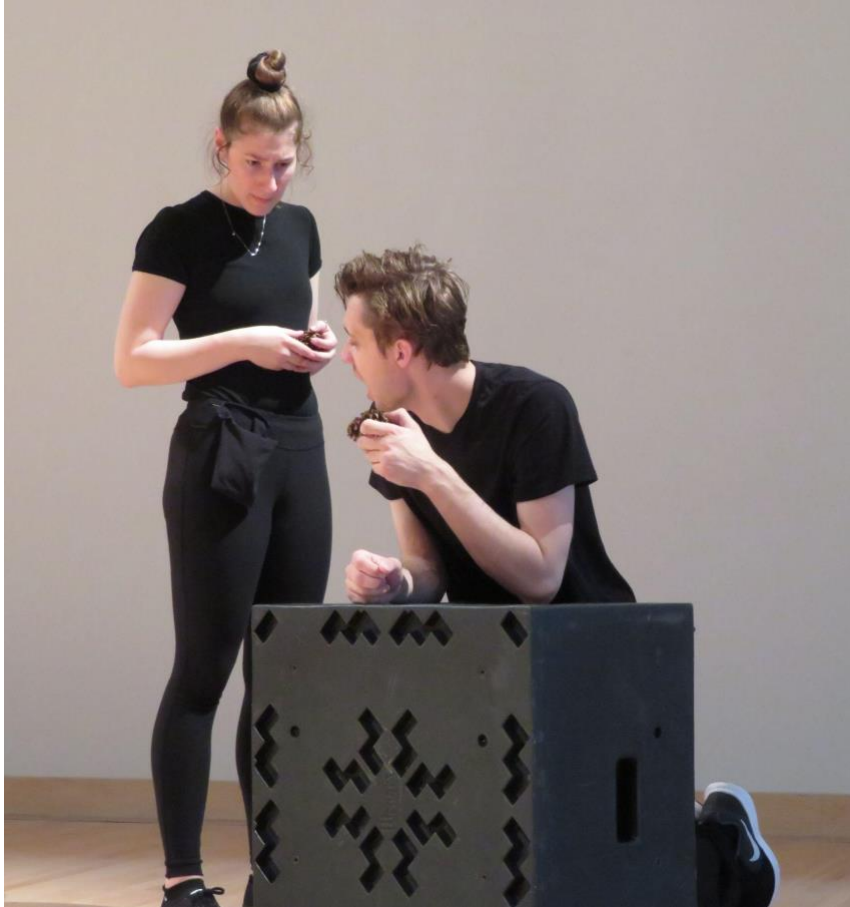
There is an everydayness to pinecones yet also a newness due to their open-endedness and infinite play possibilities. The actors enthusiastically played at all of the squirrel behaviours they observed, especially taking pleasure in stealing from one another and finding ways to messily “eat” the pinecones, frenetically tossing them aside throughout the rehearsal space. These pinecone play sessions were absolute moments of what Neugebauer (1993) describes as the joys of adult playfulness (26). The pleasure the actors took in embodying squirrel behaviour is also an example of what Stephen Rable argues is essential for successful theatre for the very young: the material must be important to the adults as well as the children (Rable, in Van de Water 2012, 135). We planned to offer pinecones to children in hopes of intriguing them, sparking their interest and curiosity, and pulling them into the theatrical experience as the actors engaged with the pinecones through their active storytelling.



Squirrel play. Actors: Emma Abbott and Ayla Gandall.

While the actors revelled in the joy of playing at squirrels with an abundance of resources, in retrospect (and in a very squirrel-like way), they wanted to maintain control of the pinecones: they were initially reluctant to share the joy and the resources with the children. As a creative team, we needed to learn how to share the space, materials, and narrative with children, and how to build and maintain relationships that nurture shared decision-making and foster the in-the-moment, co-constructed playful experiences that nurture democratic citizenship, where children have opportunities to participate and have their perspectives heard and respected. The adults needed to practice truly democratic relations and expand their playful disposition to include the audience/co-researchers.

To demonstrate how the Cycle of Co-inquiry enabled us to learn from children’s play, meaning-making, and incorporate their ideas as co-researchers, we will examine our experience developing pinecone play. To date, we have explored three iterations of the pinecone play, and through the Cycle of Co-inquiry, we have learned a great deal from our child co-researchers through co-imagining possibilities with them.



Squirrel play quarrel. Actors: Ayla Gandall and Aidan Spila.

Our first lesson with pinecones taught us the importance of “co-” on many levels: co-inquiry, co-imagining possibilities, and creating conditions concerning materials and space that facilitate productive co-research. Alone, in the studio, the actors created an exceptionally dynamic scene in which they performed “as-if” they were squirrels. They developed all kinds of business related to stealing, hoarding, and eating pinecones.

To explore squirrels, we used recordings of squirrel vocalizations that provided a sonic landscape whenever actors performed squirrel movement, and we hoped that this would help young audiences locate the scene in the world of the squirrels. We also explored squirrel sounds in more abstract, aestheticized ways through actor voice work, noisemakers, and percussion instruments. Embodying squirrels was challenging. Human bodies are heavy, and gravity mocked many of our attempts at whole-bodied manifestations of squirrels. Actors practised moving their bodies as squirrels, and by exploring squirrel-like movements they discovered ways to move as if they were going up and down walls ([video of actor embodying squirrel](#)).



The actors were relatively inexperienced in building relationships, sharing space and materials, and co-creating narratives with young children. Based on experiences that they had earlier with the ribbons (discussed next), their exuberant play felt dangerous to them when they had the opportunity to share the space with children. Suddenly, the actors worried that the children may get in the way, interrupt the flow of the theatrical business they had planned, and get hurt.



Squirrel play with children. Actors: Emma Abbott and Ayla Gandall.

One actor was worried that there would be collisions and accidents during the performance, which might physically injure the actors and the children. They did not trust the scene they had created in rehearsal to keep the children riveted as witness-participants and they were not yet willing to accept the children as co-creating active-participants. In the moment of sharing, they actually truncated the scene, leaving out some of the dynamic business that the actors enjoyed most.

Using the Cycle of Co-inquiry, we reflected and wondered “what happened?” The Cycle invites us to think about children’s meaning-making, and in our work, we also needed to rethink how we improvised and shared the play space and play resources with children. To “Talk the Documentation,” we watched videos and examined images from the offerings and discussed the possible meanings of the children’s playful contributions and provided space for the actors to reflect on their experiences, particularly as co-creators with the children. We learned that our actors needed to understand more clearly how the children who chose to actively participate, rather than witness, were co-creating narratives in a way that was improvisational and contributing meaning to the whole experience. As trained actors know, improv offers opportunities to utilize imagination, collaborate, and spontaneously express oneself (DeBettignies and Goldstein 2019), directly challenging scripts and “ought to” adherence. Improvisation is deeply relational, requiring each person to offer and receive, resulting in a co-constructed experience (Pelo and Carter 2018). As something new is co-created, new learnings, insights, deeper self-awareness, or new questions arise. Improvisational players join attention and take flight on a new shared journey, creating the map as they go (Pelo and Carter 2018).

In spite of their improv training, our actors saw the devised research process in discrete steps that did not *really* involve co-creating with children: (a) improvise in the rehearsal hall; (b) present an offering to the children; (c) analyze the experience through the Cycle of Co-inquiry; and then (d) respond by improvising better in the rehearsal hall before sharing with a child audience again. If the actors were to adopt Hovik's (2015) encouragement to make magic as "something wonderful together" and "something that was not there before," they needed to arrive prepared but open to serendipity and ready to play with children. Instead of improvising better in the rehearsal hall, the actors needed to be ready to accept the children's offers as co-imaginers, or fellow improvisers, in the moment, allowing the immersive theatre experience to be an opportunity to co-create narratives together.



Talking the documentation. Left to right: Heather Fitzsimmons Frey, Courtney Dewar, Emma Abbott, Ayla Gandall, and Aidan Spila.

After talking the documentation (watching videos, analyzing photographs, discussing what we observed), in February of 2020, prior to the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions, we visited the ELM classroom for a mini artist residency to purposefully explore items and ideas that had left us unsatisfied as theatre makers (e.g., the work with pinecones and also the work with the ribbons, which we discuss next). The pinecones seemed to spark curiosity as the children found the stash of pinecones well before we were ready to offer them, but this time, the actors were ready to be led by the children. Children also found our squirrel puppets, and an elaborate game emerged of feeding the squirrel, who the children insisted was to be animated by one of the actors. Initially, children fed

the squirrel pinecones. Soon, inspired by the idea of feeding the actor as a squirrel, they reimagined what squirrel food might be, and they operated a pizza parlour. Before long, the only kind of pizza the actor as squirrel could order was highly poisonous scorpion pizza! Children laughed at the danger, at their own power, and at the shared silliness of play. Meanwhile, the actor allowed himself to be guided by the children's narrative: not only did he follow the improv theatre adage of "yes, let's" and "yes, and," he also became invested in the absurdity of the co-created vignette, engaging as a co-imaginer of possibilities. Neugebauer (1993) notes that the process of play exists "in a context of timelessness," that "the process is valued beyond the outcome," and that it "finds its own end, just as it found its own beginning" (26). The actor played the game as long as it interested the children, migrating to another part of the classroom only when it seemed like everyone was satisfied. We learned some valuable lessons about pinecone play: pinecones as objects are fascinating to children and adults; pinecones are highly evocative of squirrels, but also have the potential to evolve into something else; and pinecone play is most fun when it is truly shared among interested participants.



Scorpion Pizza. Actor: Aidan Spila.

The Cycle of Co-inquiry continues to circle. As we interpret how young people are making meaning with our creative offering, we must respond with more action. Our most recent exploration of pinecone play incorporated what we learned from talking the documentation of the first two interactions: we needed to share the pinecones, which means we needed an abundance of resources (Talbot and Frost 1989); we needed to be sure that the structure invited children to play *with* the actors; we needed to be sure that the actors could feel safe; and we needed to provide space for the children to be able to influence the narrative and the action.

After hours of playing with our young co-researchers, then reflecting on their meaning-making and our exploration through the Cycle of Co-inquiry, our creative team felt ready to try some things that would have seemed risky earlier on in our process but now felt like opportunities to co-imagine possibilities with the children.





Squirrel and pinecone play with two- and three-year-olds. Actors: Grace Mann and Jamie Leach.

One of the most dramatic changes was to have a basket of approximately one hundred pinecones ready to offer during the theatrical experience. When we brought the pinecones into the performance area, the first thing we did was reveal the contents of the basket to the children. For some children, that was an invitation to engage with the material and with the actors, and for others, it was an opportunity to see above the edge of a basket that they were not tall enough to see over. The actors planned a variety of squirrel business involving the pinecones: collecting and hoarding them, hiding them under blankets, stealing them from each other, chasing one another, and ultimately spilling the entire basket of pinecones so that they scattered throughout the space ([video of pinecone spill for two- and three-year-olds](#)).



Pinecone dump with four- and five-year-olds. Actors, left to right: Emily Smith, Grace Mann, Aidan Spila.

We imagined that children would want to observe the action between the actors, or that they would want to co-create the narrative—and they did! Some observed, some engaged with pinecones, some engaged with actors, and some involved the educators. We presented this vignette three times, to three different age groups of children. Each time, the story was different, but the scaffold was the same. In the case of a group of four- and five-year-olds, most of the children watched the actors perform for nearly five minutes before participating. In the case of the two- and three-year-olds, as soon as the basket was shown, some children came forward and considered taking pinecones from the basket and began to follow the actors through their story. The youngest group of one- and two-year-olds included a number of children who watched the action at first, but also some who physically engaged immediately, either taking pinecones or trying to take the entire basket.



Stealing the basket.

In all three age groups, children began engaging with actors, helping them hide or steal pinecones from each other; others chose to offer pinecones for actors to eat and chose to pretend to eat pinecones as well. Educators and children also began to play at hiding and eating pinecones. One member of the team began a game of hiding pinecones one at a time, while a child watched intently. When the last pinecone had been hidden, the child chose to run off and explore elsewhere.



Feeding pinecones to Heather.

Older children eagerly initiated narratives that encouraged actors to chase them, and even called out to the actors, taunting, “look at these acorns! I’ve got some acorns!” (In this case the children were mislabeling pinecones as acorns, something we noticed some of their educators did too).



Storing pinecones for winter. Actor: Aidan Spila.



One child tried to feed an actor so many pinecones that he told the child he could not eat all of them and they would need to store some for winter, opening up a game of hiding the pinecones. Another child invented a bowling-pinecones game with one of the educators ([bowling pinecones video](#)). When the pinecones were scattered, the youngest children enjoyed kicking through them (perhaps experiencing the sounds and textures of the cones on the floor), while the oldest children rapidly hid as many as they could until the entire room was empty.



Hiding pinecones. Actor: Aidan Spila.

Unlike during the first sharing, the actors were confident that they could play with the children safely and could co-create narratives and co-imagine possibilities with them. The general shape of the immersive theatre experience could accommodate children's initiatives while still ensuring that key moments could happen for the benefit of children and adults who preferred to be witnesses rather than active narrative influencers: if children wished, the actors could share the space and narrative in ways that enabled them to participate and construct their story in ways that interested them. The environment was designed for young children's play regardless of the age group. This invited the children to respond to the environment in ways appropriate for them. As there were so many pinecones, and as the actors were more confident, it was easy to share the resources, space, and narrative scaffold they established, while still accepting creative offers from the children.



Blanket nests.

We noted that the environment of pinecones and fabric nests functioned slightly differently for each of the age groups who visited, but we were not positive whether differences in responses and meaning-making were a result of individual personalities in the groups or because of their ages. In any case, all children were able to enjoy the same space, materials, and story structure, in their own ways. Instead of feeling *dangerous* to the actors, these decisions felt like opportunities for co-imagining and for joyfully making a little magic together.

Our cyclical PBR process brought us to the point that, by respectfully sharing space, resources, and stories, actors and children could co-create something that was not there before and could not have happened without all the participants. Using the Cycle of Co-inquiry after our first offering, we observed and documented both the actors and the children, then “Talked the Documentation” with the actors and educators. At the classroom workshop, we invited the children to be co-researchers, reflecting and making meaning with the actors and using props from the first offerings. Then, as theatre makers, we reflected on that experience and discussed the next steps required to invite the children into the narrative as co-imaginers of possibilities. Reminding ourselves of the necessity of “co-” throughout our process, we encouraged our actors to think like improvisers and be open to offers from children. We provided an abundance of pinecones and devised a flexible framework in terms of movement, theatrical action, and time that allowed the audience to engage playfully and co-create a new narrative.



Eating and sharing pinecones. Actor: Aidan Spila.

### **Flight, Ribbons, and Learning to Make Magic**

While we are satisfied with what we have learned about incorporating pinecones and pinecone play into our immersive theatre experience, we are still in the process of making decisions about squirrel movement, and here, we will share how our research looks when we are still working through some creative questions.

Squirrels are quicksilver, fast moving, aerial acrobats that challenged our actors in terms of movement. Our actors explored a wide range of ideas about how to create squirrel-ness. This exploration included thinking about how we experience squirrels through sound, sight, and gesture. Because physical whole-bodied manifestations of squirrels did not always feel particularly successful, during our creative process we put the full-bodied exploration away for a while to explore more metaphorical interpretations of squirrel-ness. We experimented with rhythmic gymnastic ribbons to evoke the gravity-defying and flowing, rippling, liquid motion of an acrobatic squirrel, as if we were drawing the movement trajectory in space with the ribbon. We teamed the ribbons with the sound recordings of squirrels chattering and remonstrating.





Rehearsing with ribbons. Left to right: Aidan Spila, Emma Abbott, and Ayla Gandall.

For our actors, the connection was clear. The ribbons danced and moved in a way their large human bodies could not, tracing the movement path of a squirrel, rather than operating like a puppet of the squirrel's body. Using the sound recording as a musical score, the actors developed a vignette in which the three ribbon-squirrels explored space and chased and scolded one another. In Van de Water's analysis, she uses the words of Norwegian theatre-for-early-years director Ivar Selmer-Olson, who argues that artists should be open to ambiguity and hard questions in theatre for the very young because "we will never be able to control the way that art will be understood,' whether by children or adults" and because, "like adults, children are able to perceive art as expressing ideas that have not yet been expressed, as well as experiencing the mystery of aesthetics" (Van de Water 2012, 124–25). We determined that whether or not children linked the ribbons with the idea of tracing squirrel movement through the air, the vignette was worth sharing, and we were excited to see how they would respond.



Performing with ribbons. Actor: Aidan Spila.

In our first workshop performance in an early learning classroom, the action did not go as planned, but not because the children reinterpreted the ribbons in unexpected ways. Although the actors began with their rehearsed motions, and the children observed, the dynamic soon shifted. Children, in the enclosed and crowded space of their classroom, *desired* the ribbons. They wanted to interact with the actors in a way that had not been foreseen, grabbing the ribbons as they went by, playing tug of war, and calling to each other. The actors, who were using the pre-recorded squirrel soundscape as a score for ribbon choreography, wanted to carry out their rehearsed structured movement, but the children demonstrated through their action that they wanted to participate, and co-create the narrative instead of just watching it. The actors had not anticipated this interaction and did not know how to respond. In the chronology of our research, this event happened very early, at a point in our research process when actors had not yet learned the significance of sharing resources, reciprocity, and co-imagining narratives. The children perceived the ribbons as an offer to play, but the actors were focused on presenting their choreography. After struggling to control the narrative, the actors responded by trying to put the ribbons away and move on to the next segment of our creative offering. However, the ribbons were so seductive and desirable that a few children retrieved them from our prop box where the actors had hidden them. Children raced around the room waving sticks, playing tug of war, wrapping ribbons around themselves, laughing, shrieking, and calling out “freeze” as if the ribbon sticks were wands ([video of ribbon difficulties](#)). We eventually managed to move on by introducing a segment that involved small rabbit puppets with gentle calming music.



Ribbon desires. Actors, left to right: Ayla Gandall, Aidan Spila, Emma Abbott.

Using *Flight*, we could interpret this experience in so many ways. In terms of practice-based research, we responded by talking the documentation through *Flight's* Cycle of Co-inquiry to help us identify

how to make changes that would support actors and children as co-imaginors of an immersive theatre experience. For example, drawing on multiple perspectives of the process, we could focus on children's meaning-making and their desire for what's called "dizzy play" (Ayles, Fitzsimmons Frey, Mykietyshyn 2020; Makovichuk 2014, 101), or we could focus on co-creation and creative possibility, or we could discuss the total pandemonium and mayhem and profound anxiety that our actors experienced when they lost control and were confronted with their assumptions about children and immersive theatre research. Early childhood educators learn to notice, name, and then nurture as they move through the Cycle. As our chart of Co-inquiry Descriptions indicates, as theatre practitioners, we explore questions within the theatrical construct, offering and accepting children's desire to contribute to the narrative and to co-construct shared experiences.

The vision of the *Flight* framework highlights how curriculum and creative decisions reflect professional values of democratic citizenship and equity and principles that children are citizens and active participants in society. Our hierarchical artistic decisions established a structure which mobilized an atmosphere that demanded children submit to adult control and rules rather than approach the creative experience on their own terms. Dalija Acin Thelander, who creates award-winning dance productions for infants, argues that creative decisions point to assumptions and to beliefs about children, power dynamics, and the values artists would like to affirm or contest. She explains that artists' answers to "why" they make an aesthetic choice reveal whether "they are interested in confirming something, or criticizing" (Acin Thelander, in Fitzsimmons Frey 2023, 112). Our process demonstrated that, like the students Thelander teaches, our creative team members were so absorbed in discourses about children, childhood, and how theatre is made, that we had not questioned our ideas or seen the political implications of our creative choices. The honest reflective Co-inquiry process meant that the creative team experienced a significant paradigm shift, drawing away from how we, as individuals, may have been treated by adults when we were children. Instead, we have begun learning to make decisions based on positioning children not only as mighty learners but also as co-researchers with whom we can co-construct meaningful experiences if we establish conditions that facilitate them. *Flight* reminds us that democratic citizenship means that children and their families have opportunities to freely participate and act upon their experiences (Makovichuk et al. 2014). When we create meaningful aesthetic experiences, we also need to embrace the idea that children might choose to freely participate in them, and possibly repurpose those experiences to suit their own interests and meaning-making. At the same time, we want to be sure that the other side of "co-" is fully actionable and create conditions that enable the adult actors to be visible, rather than invisible, and to share their creative ideas and explorations within a space that fosters democratic relations.

*Flight* argues that equity means that each person receives what they need to participate and contribute—and our dramatic structure in this early offering asked children to stay in place, to wait until the adult actors were done, until the moment when we planned that they would get their turn during after play (the play time we had prepared for). We also did not offer adequate resources (i.e., abundant ribbon sticks) for children to fully participate in the experience in the ways that they craved. At the same time, the actors did not have what they needed: they did not feel like they were able to share their best work. The actors were so overwhelmed at this point that we decided not to include the ribbons as part of the next offering. We needed to take time to reflect on the experience and learn more about our creative process through other resources first—and in fact, the resource we decided to explore was the pinecones we discussed in the previous section. We also needed to understand how to work with children and the ribbons better. Co-researching with actors and children means acknowledging that children's meaning-making through play and actors' experiences



can propel us toward a richer, more meaningful experience for both children and actors. As artists who want to create a respectful, democratic environment, we changed our approach to working when we explored the ribbons.



Ribbon envy.

As mentioned above, one of *Flight's* core values is play and playfulness and expressing a playful disposition, and one way we have reflected on our ribbons experiments is through that lens. To be playful with children requires adults to follow children's lead in their play (Makovichuk et al. 2014). Children often create disorder and reorder within playful experiences, which can feel uncomfortable for adults who focus on order, routines, and appearances (Neugebauer 1993). All of these adult concepts were present in our original un-flexible ribbon choreography, which linked each actor gesture to a squirrel sound and a fixed narrative. Our tantalizing resources (i.e., the three ribbon sticks) and inventive but predetermined choreography left no room for children to co-create—although, to be very clear, their presence, curiosities, and actions meant that they were operating as welcome and valued co-researchers in our PBR process.



Ribbon exploration. Actor: Chelo Ledsmá.

In spite of the fact that we did not include the ribbons vignette in the next iteration, we identified ribbons as an area for further exploration and growth in our February 2020 mini artist residency. Reflecting through the Cycle of Co-inquiry, we looked at children's clear desire to be part of the ribbon-squirrels and the actors' discomfort with the chaos that resulted. We believed the ribbons had aesthetic potential and offered an opportunity to introduce a theatrical language that also invited multimodal literacy explorations. How could we embrace the "dizzy play" the ribbons seemed to encourage and still create an aesthetic work that offered something meaningful to children? Working with a smaller group of children in a more "artist-residency" format, we decided to share the ribbon-squirrel prop and learn how children wanted to play with them. In this exploratory (rather than performative) research investigation, the ribbons were something that some children wanted to play with and master. One boy spent almost all of our one-hour visit practising the skill, first with a researcher and then on his own, determining the method of undulation and creating spirals in the air.





Help with ribbons. Researcher: Margaret Mykietyshyn.

As co-researchers, the actors and children played with the ribbon sticks together in their classroom, which afforded us an opportunity to think differently about the potential of the ribbon prop, and about the possibilities of co-imagining narratives that used those ribbons—without being concerned about children’s safety or creating a chaotic environment. The ELM children were contributing to our research initiative through their dedicated and self-directed play. Below, we offer an analysis of the way the boy in the picture above approached playing with the ribbon stick. Understanding his serious exploration as play is helping us to reimagine ribbons as an aspect of our immersive theatrical experience.

Aspects of Play and Child-led Practice-Based Research Examples					
Aspect of play	Intrinsically motivated	Enjoyable and pleasurable	Child-initiated	Symbolic or non-literal component	Actively engaged
Characteristic description	It is an end in itself and done only for the satisfaction of simply playing (Hughes, 2010).	Children tend to express positive affect/pleasant emotions when engaged in play.	The child must freely choose to engage in play as opposed to forced to play (Vandenberg, 1983).	Component meaning behaviors may be exaggerated in intensity or duration, or the player uses objects to represent other objects.	Whether physically, psychologically, or both, as opposed to passive or indifference to the activity.
Example	Although we offered the ribbon as a tool, the boy decided that he wanted to play with the ribbon and playing with the ribbon was an end in itself, since he was not being encouraged to achieve anything or apply these skills in the future.	The boy was focused and serious, but also smiling.	The boy drew the ribbon away from the rest of the group and worked out how to manipulate it on his own. Then he drew aside a member of our creative team and asked her to show him some techniques.	It is possible that the boy accepted the ribbon as squirrel. He repeated this play over an extended period of time.	After some time the boy moved to a different area of the classroom to practice on his own: clearly child-led play.

Ribbon-squirrels remain an area for further exploration for us. We know that children are interested in the ribbons and the ribbon sticks. As with the successful experiment with the pinecones, we believe that we need an abundance of props to share, more space for exuberant action, and more time for our child theatre audiences to explore them while also experiencing an actor-prepared scaffold of squirrel business. Stephen Rable emphasizes the importance of creating material that is important to the adults as well as the children (Rable, in Van de Water 2012, 134). We believe that shared, meaning-rich ribbon experiences that satisfy both actors and children are possible, and we will continue to investigate the ribbons as an abstraction of squirrel-movement trajectories because it appeals to us aesthetically.



Ribbon mastery.

Norwegian director Ivar Selmer-Olson maintains that relevant art for young children has to challenge them here and now: “They have the right to experience the extraordinary, to experience powerful, pleasure-giving, and challenging art” (Van De Water 2012, 124). Within theatre for early years practitioners, there is a debate about whether art for young children is primarily a communication of ideas (and, therefore, that the *audience* is central), or whether art should be

challenging, as Selmer-Olson suggests, and is in fact a confrontation in which *aesthetics* are central (Van De Water 2012, 131). In our case, since *Flight* highlights the importance of developing multimodal literacies and of children's meaning-making, we value the opportunities for theatrical communication and for confrontation. Whether or not children ultimately understand the ribbons as tracing squirrel movement through the air may not matter to our performance, but what will matter is that they feel like they and their imaginations are welcome to co-create something magical and special in that moment of the immersive experience.

As a facet of the Cycle of Co-inquiry, our classroom explorations enabled us to take a step back so that the children could choose how or if they wanted to step forward. This allowed for a more democratic interaction between the actors and their co-researchers. Our pinecone play learning, which supported exuberant, enthusiastic, child and adult co-creation, helped us see how creating an immersive theatre experience featuring the ribbons could be possible. By talking the documentation, we determined that we need to provide more opportunities for our child audience to experience using the ribbons for themselves. Time to master the skill and to experiment needs to be part of the immersive experience itself. In addition to providing more ribbons as resources and thus creating a space of abundance, we need to create a more flexible scaffold for this vignette that will, like the pinecone play, be able to accommodate multiple narratives, and adjust as our future audiences offer imaginative and unexpected possibilities. Ideally, in the spirit of co-research, adults and children will both revel in the inspiration the ribbons provide. As a result of our process, while recognizing that adults need to be engaged and interested, we found ways to centre children, to meaningfully make space for their agency and for interpreting their meaning-making on their terms: through relationship, play, and fostering magic together.

### **Fledgling PBR for the Very Young**

Children support our PBR by sharing their ways of making-meaning, and by playing with our creative team: in so doing, they act as co-researchers in a way that is reminiscent of theatrical devising (see Ayles, Fitzsimmons Frey, and Mykietyshyn 2022), challenging actors to accept their imaginative offerings during the course of the immersive theatrical experience. *Flight* explains that playing is “inventing, creating, imagining, and taking risks in the spirit of learning,” and that to be playful with children requires adults to follow children's lead in their play (Makovichuk et al. 2014, 53). To play freely and joyfully adult co-researchers must be willing to be generous with time, energy, and resources, and to embrace the potentiality of spontaneity, chaos, and unpredictability that often comes about in play. We expand *Flight's* ideas to suggest that play-based responses to experiences can not only move between “the world as it is,” and “the worlds they [children] create” (Makovichuk et al. 2014, 99), but also the world as a performance presents it.

With pinecone play, we learned that a messy and loosely structured scaffold welcomed our child co-researchers to respond and advance the narrative. As we cycled through our reflective process, we became aware of how much our creative team's previously held discourses about children, theatre, and hierarchical adult-child relations influenced the work we were creating—and we realized that we all needed to disrupt our habits and adopt an image of the child that recognizes children as inventive, creative, and capable co-researchers. Actor training is often based in relationships exclusively with other actors and creators and not necessarily with an audience. Even actors trained in improvisation are often more used to accepting offers from adult audiences rather than from child and youth audience members. After working through the Cycle of Co-inquiry, our actors were

confident and flexible enough to accept children’s ideas about pinecones. Actors were able to embrace children’s improvisational offerings and respond with “yes, and.” Rather than feeling the need to control the experiences, our actors saw the co-creation and co-imagining with our young co-researchers as opportunities for all members of the creative team—including the adults—to play and learn and share.

Ribbon play is another example of how adopting flexible thinking that accepts children as co-imaginers of the entire evolving theatrical experience will enable multiple, and potentially unexpected, co-creation possibilities. Our explorations with ribbons taught us how to be mindful of meaningful ways to work with very young children as co-researchers; how to pay attention to democratic “co-imagining” and to honour children as mighty citizens; and how to interpret their play-based and play-full meaning making in ways that served our goals to conduct PBR with children. Expanding our conception of how children may want to engage with our performance material, and ensuring that abundant resources and space are available to support their interests, are key ways that we are effectively developing *The Urban Wildlife Project*. Through our experience, we developed strategies to open up spaces for children’s co-creation of the theatrical worlds that an immersive experience can offer—to co-imagine the magical, ephemeral moments Hovik advocates for.



We jump so high! Actor: Aidan Spila.

Our research process affirms that creative practice-based research that positions very young children as co-researchers can be rich and generative, but it is essential to establish a responsive environment that honours each child as a capable mighty learner and citizen (Makovichuk et al. 2014) and to envision an immersive theatrical offering that values each co-contributor, whether child or adult. We used *Flight* to guide our play with children and *Flight*'s model of co-inquiry to structure our reflection on our theatrical experiences with young children. Furthermore, by honouring very young children’s



meaning-making through play, and by establishing conditions for playfulness, the children could be active co-researchers in our performance-based research. Democratic relationships in PBR, where child audiences are valued as co-contributors, can move us beyond a static and repetitive theatrical offering to a rich and multilayered theatre piece. By respectfully sharing space, resources, and narratives, actors and children co-create something that was not there before and could not have happened without all the participants. The possibilities are endless.



Taking flight. Actor: Aidan Spila.

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## Notes

1. Our names are presented alphabetically, to emphasize that our leadership, writing, and creative processes are non-hierarchical and collaborative, and to demonstrate equally shared authorship.
2. For more detail on the dramaturgical process, see Ayles, Fitzsimmons Frey, and Mykietyshyn (2022).
3. Theories of play and playfulness stem from a wide range of disciplines, including Reggio Emilia approach, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, and Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, not to mention more drama- and theatre-based approaches to play such as Keith Johnstone's Impro theatre theory (1979), Viola Spolin's theatre games approach (1985, 1986, 1999), and Dorothy Heathcote's inspiring concepts of Mantle of the Expert and Rolling Roll (1995).
4. Loris Malaguzzi (1981) describes multimodal literacies and the multiple languages of children in his "100 Languages" poem that became a primary Reggio Emilia principle.
5. For more information regarding ways people often emphasize children's futures rather than their presents, see the idea of "human beings vs. human becomings" in James, Jenks, and Prout (1998).

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## **Jamaican Sound Systems and Knowledge Systems: Practice-Based Research (PBR) in Popular Culture**

Julian Henriques and Brian D'Aquino

A clear bright tropical morning in Kingston, Jamaica, the air not yet hot. Through the corrugated zinc gated entrance people start to arrive in the sound system workshop yard; they are mostly elders, but some young people too. All have to sanitize, sign in, and have their temperature taken. The mood is relaxed and friendly as people chat, already knowing each other. This yard is an open space dominated by stacks of speaker boxes. A film crew is setting up in front of a semi-circle of chairs in front of a literal wall of scoops (bass speakers). This is the HQ for Jam One sound system, whose owner, Anthony Myers, is the chair of the Jamaican Sound System Federation (JSSF) and host for today's event.<sup>1</sup>

Billed as a “reasoning session,” the event is an opportunity for invited reggae sound system owners, engineers, and selectors to sit down together and discuss common issues and challenges of today's Jamaican dancehall scene. It is also a research event facilitated by the University of the West Indies' Institute of Caribbean Studies and Reggae Studies Unit for the Sonic Street Technologies (SST) research project. Today's discussion is to be filmed and transcribed as research material. What these practitioners say to each other gives access to the actual workings of a popular culture. It is within and between these participants that the knowledge, expertise, and experience on which the Jamaican sound system scene was built—and on which its future might also depend—resides.<sup>2</sup>

The session was remarkable at the very least for bringing together some of the island's leading sound system professionals for the first time. For those that know the scene, the attendee list was extremely impressive. Speakers included Anthony Meyers (Jam One Sound and JSSF board member); Clarence Cain (Kozmik Sound); Errol Campbell and DJ Tatiana (High Grade Sound); Hugh James (Jam Rock, formerly Redman Intl, and JSSF board member); Maurice Johnson, aka Jack Scorpio (Black Scorpio); James Howard, aka Jimmy Solo (Shang Hi Solo Phonics); Joshua Chamberlain (JSSF board member); Luke Davis Elliot (selector, son of Digitech Sound); Monty Blake (Merritone); O'Brien Rowe (OB Sound); Ronnie Jarrett and Norman Williams (8 Mile sound); Winston “Wee Pow” Powell (Stone Love, also representing Bass Odyssey).

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**JAMAICA SOUND SYSTEM FEDERATION**

# Sounds of the Future

**SOUND SYSTEM INDUSTRY REASONING SESSION**

**THE JAMAICA SOUND SYSTEM FEDERATION**  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE  
**SONIC STREET TECHNOLOGIES**  
**RESEARCH PROJECT**  
AND THE  
**REGGAE STUDIES UNIT**  
INVITE YOU TO  
**SHARE IDEAS AND DISCUSS**  
**PRESSING ISSUES**

**SUNDAY**  
**FEB. 20, 2022**  
REASONING SESSION  
**10:30 AM - 5 PM**  
NETWORKING SESSION  
**5 PM - 9 PM**  
VENUE: **JAMAICA SOUND SYSTEM FEDERATION HQ.**

If you are an engineer, owner, promoter, selector, MC, dancer and videographer or other practitioner from the sound system industry, then this event is for you.

*All COVID-19 Protocols Observed • Entry By Invitation Only*

*Sounds of the Future: Sound System Industry Reasoning Session poster/flyer, February 20, 2022.*

This article frames the day's event as an exercise in practice-based research (PBR), where the practice is that of sound system operations and the research is into the practitioners' ways of knowing. We discuss the theoretical as well as practical and political implications of a PBR methodology having as its subject the popular culture of the Jamaican dancehall sound system scene as an example of the kind of apparatus for playing recorded music—called in our research “sonic street technologies”—to be found across the Global South. PBR cannot tell other than an “inside story” of a particular scene or event, in marked contrast to the typical corporate consultants' report.<sup>3</sup> We argue that this is particularly important with marginalized, that is, subaltern, popular cultures whose knowledge systems are situated and largely embodied and oral.



These music scenes also generate a substantial informal archive of sessions, both in physical format such as tape cassette and digitally, online on *YouTube*, *Mixcloud*, and elsewhere (Stanley Niaah, Cork, and Howard 2022).

Describing and reflecting on one particular event, our research questions indicate the ground covered in what follows.

- How can PBR facilitate access to embodied knowledge systems in the Global South?
- What PBR conditions and relationships are required for working with marginalized communities in the Global South? And what particular responsibilities does this entail?
- What can PBR reveal about practitioners' knowledge systems, and how might these challenge conventional ideas of epistemology?

In Jamaica, the sound system dancehall session has traditionally been the very heart of the island's popular culture. Every night of the week, there are several dances on the streets of Kingston's downtown communities, in shopping malls, car parking lots, backyards, and sound system HQs. Perhaps surprisingly, on the island, the popular culture of the sound system remains quite marginal—literally a subculture—from the point of view of the authorities or any official recognition or support. This is notwithstanding their cultural and economic value for a majority of the citizenry of the country as well as those in the diaspora, not to mention its potential contribution to the Jamaican tourist industry.

The authorities often blame sound system sessions for causing violence and social unrest rather than seeing them as grassroots strategies to overcome or at least ameliorate existing social challenges (Rivera 2022). The substantial value of sound system culture was certainly one of the points raised in the reasoning discussion. Jamaican sound systems are in fact only an example of one type of street culture and technology. Columbian *picós*, Mexican *sonideros*, or Brazilian *radiolas* and *aparelhagens* make equally fertile ground for PBR investigations. Such research aims to question knowledge as it is usually understood in academic research; that is, excluding situated, embodied, collective knowledge systems and their subaltern locations.



*Sounds of the Future* event: preparing the venue to meet health and safety standards. JSSF HQ, Kingston, Jamaica, February 20, 2022.

Working with practitioners in the Global South as PBR gives researchers particular responsibilities. As researchers from the Global North, our institutional positioning is undergirded by a highly asymmetrical power dynamic that is given further emphasis by the little trust that practitioners often have for institutions that are local to them. We aim to exploit and invert this dynamic positively to give recognition, respect, and international status to practitioners' creative work. Also, researching their processes and techniques with practitioners can encourage them to articulate their understanding of what they are doing to each other and to outsiders, and contribute to their confidence in the wider cultural value of their own practice. Shared research discussions also provide a rare opportunity to help build solidarity among sound system owners.

In addition, PBR also gives researchers the responsibility to help build local strengths, as with the Jamaica Sound System Federation, for instance. Although the initial idea of organizing a reasoning session came from us as researchers, this was put to the federation as a suggestion for them to frame and organize it in a way that could benefit the local scene, as well as strengthen the federation's role, brand, and reach. As far as researchers are concerned, the performative force of PBR with practitioners situated among subaltern communities rather than an avant-garde elite fuels theoretical and methodological questions not otherwise available.

### **What We Did: Subaltern PBR**

As a result of this comparative social and economic isolation outside Jamaican mainstream society, the sound system community has had to develop its own ways and means of economic survival and technological innovation, not to mention forms of creative expression. This makes it a rich reservoir of alternative knowledge systems, or rather what we describe as *ways-of-knowing*, emphasizing the practices and processes of knowledge production, as this "knowledge" is not reified as such, not even oral, but almost entirely situated, tacit "know-how" (Henriques 2022). Embodied in sound system builders', audio engineers', and selectors' techniques and practices, it is in respect to these *ways-of-knowing* that PBR can also play a role in revealing practitioners to themselves. Remarks like "I've never thought of it like that before" provide some of the most affirming moments in PBR. The particular value for popular cultures is that the knowledge systems embodied in these creative practices express *different* ways of thinking and being in the world than those unearthed from "high culture" creative practices of the Global North. In this respect, PBR faces all the challenges that avant-garde artmakers and performers do with practice as research (PAR), with the additional hurdle of operating in a marginalized section of society.

PBR is particularly useful where creative practices are performative, as they tend to be in popular cultures, often with music and dance, not least because they invite participation.<sup>4</sup> Also, the transient nature of the auditory medium makes it highly suitable for the temporary takeover of public spaces, as mentioned above. This is especially the case when the "performance" is that of the archive, that is, recorded music, rather than a "live" artist or band. Hence the importance of the selector, MC, or DJ enlivening the recording with their chat and special sound effects. Moreover, being a phonographic medium, there is a considerable amount of audio and electronic engineering work to be done to maximize the impact, appeal, and distinctiveness of the sounding of the set of equipment. Numerous practices, techniques, and knowledges are involved in repurposing an essentially domestic device such as the record player into one capable of impacting hundreds of people in the open-air setting of a street dance.

### **Reasoning**

It is an important feature of this study that the SST team are investigating the practices of others—the sound system practitioners. This differs from the practice as research (PAR)

approach, in which artists or creative practitioners rationalize *their own* non-rational creative processes (Vear 2021). The authors are both, however, practitioners in their own right, either as sound system and record label owner, sound artist, or filmmaker. This leads to an even more crucial point. The sound system scene can be said to have its own ways of “overstanding” (the Rastafarian inflection of understanding) what it is doing as accessible only to those on the inside of the scene, even in Jamaica. The event we describe in this essay is thus valuable as an opportunity for a wider sharing than perhaps has been previously the case. For this, we have to thank the good will and trust of the practitioners themselves and our Jamaican researcher collaborators.

The *Sounds of the Future* event was dubbed as a “reasoning” session to align itself with the local Rastafarian culture. In this powerfully imaginative language (also known as “dread talk”), the term “reasoning” indicates a gathering of like-minded individuals, normally to be held in a herb yard or in a community hub (Pollard 2000). In a Jamaican reasoning session, the discussion is held in a noncompetitive fashion, and gatherings may include not only conversations but also chanting, drumming, and smoking herb (cannabis). The purpose of reasoning is to deepen each other’s spiritual awareness as well as to discuss pressing issues for the community. “Reasoning” thus stands not only as an event but also as a specific practice aimed at knowledge production and sharing. Such knowledges are marginalized, or in Jamaican lingo, “downpressed,” largely because they are from the ghetto street, that is, these knowledges are bottom-up rather than top-down knowledge.

The idea of “reasoning” is part of a wider range of linguistic strategies to align the “inner meaning” with the “outer form” of language that Jamaican Rastafarians have championed. Among these “I’n’I” as a pronoun singular and plural at once is a powerful example particularly apposite for the present discussion of collective thinking. While the noun “reason” indicates an object—a feature or quality that is possessed or achieved — “to reason” as a verb conveys the idea of a process, something that is collectively produced. It starts from the participants’ acknowledgement of the relation between each other and with the rest of the *cosmos*, as captured in the song “Reason Now” by Jamaican vocal trio The Abyssinians.<sup>5</sup> Reasoning reflects the existence of alternative *ways-of-knowing* and reveals ways of thinking otherwise, that is, *contra* the Western episteme. By evoking an ongoing kinetic activity, something that is occurring “out there” in the practices, movements, and gestures of a community rather than in an individual’s mind alone, the concept also challenges Descartes’s notion of reason as innate and preceding knowledge. It takes at least two people to reason; it is precisely in the lived space between them that the reasoning takes place. By using the term, we intend to acknowledge the genuine opportunity for researchers to learn from these alternative knowledge systems. The nonextractive SST project’s approach to research is certainly consistent with the “reasoning” spirit.

The purpose of the event was to support the local scene by helping to consolidate the work of its representative bodies and to facilitate discussion among practitioners. SST envisioned and sponsored the event, along with the trust and longstanding support of Tony Meyers and thereby the JSSF. Our collaborative approach makes our research process itself a form of practice—research *as* practice, a form of PBR as distinct from the standard PAR. This is to say, the research process aims to make a contribution to a creative scene, not only document it. In this case, the desired positive impact was to back up practitioners’ own efforts to have their culture and industry recognized in an institutionally hostile environment. In this respect, our work shares some features of the action research paradigm, though it approaches the issue by resourcing practitioners rather than as a joint problem-solving exercise (Heron and Reason [2001] 2008). This adds a further layer to the practitioners’ practices and *ways-of-knowing* that our project is



researching. Thus, practitioners should enjoy a two-fold recognition: from us as researchers and hopefully from the government authorities.

### Researcher Collaborations

Besides collaborating with practitioners, we were also collaborating with local researchers. The Jamaican sound system scene is not easily accessible to outsiders, and the successful outcome of the day was due to the solidity of pre-existing relations of mutual respect built over many years before this project began (Henriques 2011). The day benefited hugely from our SST research associates from the Institute of Caribbean Studies at the University of the West Indies, Mona. Sonjah Stanley Niaah and Dennis Howard chaired the discussions and together with Ashly Cork curated the staging of the event. It must be pointed out that without these parties' efforts, and especially the trust they were granted by the local practitioners' community, the event would not have been possible.



*Sounds of the Future* event: filming the reasoning session. JSSF HQ, Kingston, Jamaica, February 20, 2022.

### PBR Methodology

The reasoning session can be considered the second step in a three-step development process of our methodology. It builds on the first step, which was bringing sound system practitioners and researchers together in the same space to share ideas and challenges. In 2016, this research interest gained momentum as Sound System Outernational (SSO), an informal research group “dedicated to recognizing, stimulating and supporting reggae sound system culture worldwide” and responsible for a series of successful events at its base at Goldsmiths University in London, in Naples, Italy, and online in Brazil (D'Aquino, Henriques, and Vidigal 2017).<sup>6</sup> SSO events provided a necessary stage for formulating the SST research funding proposal and allowed us to reflect on the implications of operating in different social and cultural environments. Each SSO

event focused on the lived experience of selectors, engineers, and box builders as the repository of a specific and situated form of knowledge (D'Aquino and Pârvan 2021).

The second step was tested out with the present reasoning session, where practitioners discuss their work among themselves with researchers only chairing the session. Such sharing among peers, with each corroborating or disagreeing with others, yields socially shared knowledge. Ideally, this process generates a different kind of research material than that “extracted” from an informant in a conventional one-on-one interview. Such non-extractive methods are central to the present PBR approach (Christie 2013).

The third step requires re-presenting or articulating (as distinct from simply representing or documenting) back to the practitioners their own understanding of what they do. The documentary film of the session is an example of this re-presenting, where the practitioners speak “in their own words” without editorial comment. To gain wider recognition for their *ways-of-knowing* such re-presentation also has to make sense to others outside the particular scene, as with the term “reasoning.” This article is an example of that ambition. Such PBR aims to provide a model for further reasoning sessions with professionals from other types of sonic street technologies elsewhere in the world. Our project aims not only to contribute to decolonizing the relation between technology and culture but also to make good use of our international academic status and financial resources to both document and contribute to the well-being and development of the local sub-cultural scenes.

## What We Learned

The day was divided into two sessions, one focusing on the sound system’s specific technology and techniques and the other on the current state of the culture and industry in Jamaica. The convivial spirit of the discussion reflected a community of “colleagues” and masters of their craft, but it also indicated a pre-existing reservoir of reasoning or *ways-of-knowing* as the result of the participants’ longstanding contributions to the scene. This reservoir includes particular skills and techniques, such as those required to fine-tune a set of equipment or to entertain the crowd, as well as a shared understanding of their own activity, including aims and challenges. It must also be pointed out that this shared knowledge did not prevent them from having different views or disagreeing on a particular topic. Such “productive dissensus” (Robinson 2020) made the conversation even more rich and lively.

### Session I: Technologies and Techniques

The *Technologies and Techniques* session, chaired by Dennis Howard, focused on the ongoing shifts in equipment, music, and aesthetics in the dancehall session as a way to unpack the ever-changing relation between technology and culture. It included a passionate debate around the definition of a “real” sound system, where participants highlighted the convergence of distinct factors, such as the need for a certain type of equipment and the skills to operate it, as well as the knowledge of the music and the ability to present it. This discussion reflected the complexity of the sound system as a distinctive techno-cultural apparatus traditionally emerging from the socio-economic environment of Kingston’s most marginalized urban areas (aka ghettos). As represented in the reasoning session, we should add that there are also middle class “uptown” sound systems.

Overall, what came up was an “ongoing clash” between “the aesthetic and the heritage of sound system versus the practicality of nowadays technology,” as Howard put it. It was interesting to notice how the dispute was cutting across generations, with elders taking different sides. The “tradition vs. innovation” debate was also framed in the wider context of the global supply chain.

Historically, sound system components were custom-built, from speaker boxes to the hand-wiring of valve (tube) amplifier transformer coils. But an increasingly globalized electronics market has all but destroyed the local manufacturing base, pushing some sound system owners to have their set built abroad and shipped in—something that others criticized as “not true to sound system culture.”

The discussion on sound quality was also revealing. Participants agreed on the need for clarity for the sounding of the music, rather than sheer amplifying power, with elders such as Jack Scorpio suggesting that old school equipment sounds “warmer and better.” Nonetheless, different points of view emerged on the best techniques to employ for achieving the quality of sound for which every operator strives. Some participants such as Tony Meyers stressed the importance of a proper tuning procedure (adjusting sound levels and frequencies) as part of the soundcheck. Others insisted that tuning was nothing more than “acting,” part of the dancehall scene as “Jamaica’s premier street theatre” (Stanley Niaah 2019). Master builder Ronnie Jarrett went as far as to claim that tuning has in fact only to do with the building of speaker boxes. In his own words, “Tuning is done when I put my tape measure on that piece of plyboard!” They agreed to disagree on this.

Another critical set of skills emerging from the conversation was that related to the selector (in other scenes called the DJ). The selector is the person who chooses the music to be played, which is, of course, crucial for the success of any sound system. As Norman Williams from 8 Mile Sound noted, “Sometimes him bigger than the sound.” Participants were able to unpack the ability to entertain the crowd into a set of complementary skills such as “reading” and “building” the crowd, “feeling” the music played, and being able to deliver “the right presentation.” Overall, the selector’s activity was widely acknowledged as “an art.” Still, different views emerged about how to master this art, with some preferring to “reach out” to the crowd’s own taste, and some preferring to play “for themselves” but enlisting the crowd for their journey.

## Session 2: Politricks and Pushbacks

The challenges facing the industry was another shared concern that emerged in the session chaired by Sonjah Stanley Niaah, entitled *Politricks and Pushbacks*.<sup>7</sup> This session focused on the current state of the scene, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing relationship with the government and the police, and considerations on the status of sound systems as a legitimate productive force within the entertainment sector in Jamaica. As Stanley Niaah acknowledged in her introductory remarks, “Jamaica is the only country that has given the world seven or eight distinct genres of music in the latter half of twentieth century in a fifty-year span.” As the source of this musical abundance, she advocated for the sound system to be regarded as “Jamaica’s national instrument,” just as the steel pan drum is celebrated in Trinidad.

Unfortunately, the reality has proved to be rather different. Participants lamented how sound systems in Jamaica suffer from a lack of institutional recognition and increasingly restrictive legislation. Scarcity of licensed venues, noise regulations, police harassment, tight curfew times, and cost of permits were listed as some of the factors threatening the health of the industry, especially during the last decade. The pandemic exacerbated existing issues, with a long lockdown imposed on the entertainment sector,<sup>8</sup> which also fuelled corruption among police officers who could add COVID-related fines and charges to the highly arbitrary application of the controversial Noise Abatement Act, 1997.<sup>9</sup> As Jimmy Solo of Shang Hi Solo Phonics put it: “As you talk about police, right now police a make money out of this dance thing more than we.” As a result, several sound system owners had to scale down by selling equipment for smaller and more discrete off-the-shelf powered boxes, rather than full-scale sound systems.



It was also interesting to witness how “industry” and “culture” were conceived as inseparably linked. Sound system is an expensive business, requiring considerable investment from those living in some of the most marginalized communities in Jamaica. Without a flourishing and self-sufficient local scene, the culture has no means to sustain itself. This is indeed the reality in the Global South, where maintaining a pricey hobby is not an option, nor is receiving institutional funding. But commerce does not necessarily compromise creativity as is often thought in the Global North. From versioning to specials and dub mixes, financial pressure has always triggered innovation in Jamaican music, in a way specifically aimed at serving the local market (Howard 2016; Hitchins 2014).

Historically, sound systems have played a critical role in the development of Jamaican music, both for young artists to hone their performance skills and for safeguarding musical quality and lyrical content. More recently, the dominant global business model centred on digital platforms and streaming revenues has had a huge impact on Jamaica’s unique local music industry—a bubbling but indeed fragile ecosystem. This paradigm shift has also undermined sound system’s authority within the local scene. As Tony Meyers expressed it: “They have put sound system on the backbench,” as now the music goes straight from bedroom laptop to *YouTube* and streaming platforms. Long gone are the days when the sound system was “the voice of people” as Prince Buster’s 1960s set was named.

From a research point of view, hearing how their industry and culture is declining from some of Jamaica’s most respected professionals was one of the most unexpected findings of the event. (While this is true for Kingston, we were later able to establish it is less so in other parishes of the island.) Meanwhile, sound system culture is by contrast thriving in many other parts the world, populating commercially successful festivals such as the sound system dedicated Dub Camp in France, and even entering museums and art galleries, as with Black Obsidian sound system nominated in 2021 for the UK’s prestigious Turner Prize, or Channel One’s sound system speakers stack being displayed at the Museum of London in 2021.<sup>10</sup> While testifying to the commercial potential and cultural value of these Global South expressive cultures, sadly this discrepancy also shows how this is more likely to be appreciated—and exploited—by the established cultural industry of the Global North than in the local context, where their subaltern origin remains a stigma.

### Next Generation

Participants identified the lack of intergenerational transmission as the most dangerous threat to the future of the culture. Intergenerational dialogue was seen as a good way to generate interest in possible newcomers. Disappointingly, the reasoning session had only two young participants (one of whom was the only woman). Interestingly, they were both expressions of a family lineage, with Luke Davis-Elliot being the son of Digi Tech Sound and DJ Tatiana selecting for High Grade, owned by her father. This awareness reflected the participants’ own understanding of a way-of-knowing that is fully embodied, tacit, and mostly non-verbal. This understanding is certain to die with them if not passed on. Such generational knowledge transmission was another aspect in which the event seemed to be successful, as noted by Luke Davis-Elliot, who stated: “My father owned a sound. . . . I always looked on that sound, I was like, I don’t know if I’m going back there because of how digital I am personally. Coming here, I realize that this is what I want to do. This is the real stuff.” Luke got a round of applause from other participants when he said that.

### Sound Knowledge

Underlying the content of the conversation described above, the key point to emphasize for PBR is the broad range of *ways-of-knowing* and knowledge systems that lie within the sound system

practitioners' ken (range of understanding). As an alternative to traditional epistemic knowledge systems, this can be counted as evidence for the third step in our methodology (re-presenting the practitioners' own understanding of what they do). The practitioners' *ways-of-knowing* or what we can call a sound system (anti) epistemology can be broken down into three component parts. Very important are (a) the *evaluative judgments* that the engineer makes about sounding when tuning the set, or the selector makes about the vibes of the crowd when deciding which tune to play next. This can be described as connoisseurship, that is, the kind of refined sensibility and expertise that can only be derived from lived experience (Henriques 2011, 63–87). While the term “connoisseur” is readily applied to sommelier or perfumier, to describe sound engineers as working with this kind of knowing aims at elevating the appreciation of their skills—as is consistent with a PBR approach.

Then there are (b) the *ways-of-knowing* closely linked to *ways-of-making* such as the workshop craft skills required for electrical engineering or for speaker box design and building, as Ronnie Jarret described in the session. Traditionally in Jamaica, such tacit knowing is picked up by way of an apprenticeship in a “prento” system under the supervision of a master builder in the workshop yard. This is what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) describe as “situated learning.” Or, as sound system Ronnie Jarrett tells us, such learning can be based on trial and error. Either way, reference is seldom made to textbook electronics or even to available speaker plans. This approach is not exclusive to Jamaica, but rather the standard way through which reggae sound systems achieve success and endurance across the different countries and settings where the culture has spread. For example, Mikey Dread of London-based Channel One sound system also reported this approach.<sup>11</sup> Such practices are frequently referred to as *know-how*, but that term underestimates the creative and imaginative dimensions of the engineers' techniques and practices.

Finally, it is important not to forget the knowing that can be called (c) *operational knowledge*, which is an absolute necessity for any sound system to function in Kingston's ubiquitous informal street economy—off books, off grid, and generally outside officialdom. Trust is the lubricant that enables this informal system to run smoothly, based on longevity of friendships, business and family relationships, and the comparatively modest size of the Jamaican sound system community. In short, everyone knows everyone else, so there is what might be described as an unwritten log of favours between parties that tend to balance out over the medium to long term. This is part and parcel of what is called in Jamaica the “livity” (lifestyle or way of living) of the ghetto, akin to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as a learned repertoire of social and cultural dispositions. Another example of operations within this milieu would be the market traders, known as “higglers” (or informal commercial importers as they are officially called) that Gina Ulysse (2008) describes in *Downtown Ladies*. Overall, the livity of marginalized communities is invariably one of “making something” out of very little.

What these three systems of knowing have in common is that they are unwritten and often shared across the community of knowers and collectively owned in much the same way that a dancehall session belongs to the crowd (audience). The audience is always the ultimate arbiter of success or otherwise of a session, just as it is judge and jury on whether a new style of music or dance deserves to go out from the street dance to the wider market.

In addition, there is one key ingredient that motivates and makes possible all the above; that is, the practitioners' sheer love for the music—and the sound of the music. JSSF chair Tony Myers characterized himself as one of the “real players in the business, [because] we love sound,” in contrast with many of the younger generation who see DJing more in commercial terms. “We love sound, we don't love money,” said Myers. Talking about the street sessions, Jack Scorpio

added: “It’s a community love. It’s something where people just look forward to.” From this, it can be said that as far as practitioners are concerned, knowledge, far from being an “objective” thing, is rather infused with values and passions. In short, *ways-of-knowing* are embodied and situated as they invariably concern ontology (being) as much as epistemology (knowledge). In the practices the present research describes, the two are inseparable—despite traditional philosophy’s insistence on such a disciplinary divide.<sup>12</sup> The lived experience combining knowing and being is especially in evidence with reggae and dub music that sound systems have been designed to play. Inspired by the spiritual values of Rastafarianism as well as its Nyabinghi drumming, the scene puts great store by what it calls “conscious” attitudes and “Ital” (natural) ways of living—especially in reggae scenes outside Jamaica.

## Sharing Results

The spirit of sharing between equals embodied in the ideals of the reasoning session has very much been taken on board with the SST project’s strategies for disseminating our PBR findings. One is the conventional path of academic publication in edited volumes and journal articles. In parallel, the project has put considerable effort into sharing our findings with the practitioners involved, the Jamaican scene, and with wider sound system communities worldwide. Since the start of the SST project in January 2021, this has been done via the SST blog, which has disseminated updates on our research process on a weekly basis, as well as contributions from guest authors, reviews of events, interviews, and photo essays by the practitioners themselves.<sup>13</sup> Also central is our research practice of filming all interviews and discussions. Highlighting sections of the interview transcripts is the first stage of the film editing process, during which we also select clips for our *YouTube* and social media channels. This same interview material can equally well be used for written publications.

The *Sounds of the Future* premiere of the forty-five-minute research documentary based on the reasoning session described above took place on July 24, 2022 at the 10A West Kings House Road, in New Kingston, a well-established venue owned and run by Justine Henzil.<sup>14</sup> Coincidentally, the venue was staging an art exhibition for the fiftieth anniversary of her father Perry Henzil’s foundational *The Harder They Come*, Jamaica’s first feature film. Our screening of the documentary from the reasoning session was followed by a discussion and some music entertainment provided by Jack Scorpio and High Grade Sound with DJ Tatiana.

The screening was well received and the discussion lively. Participants shared their own memories related to the dancehall scene and were generally not aware of the declining state of the industry. This gave a sense of the potential of such documentaries for raising self-awareness in the scene and providing some unique insights for outsiders. But we must acknowledge that it did diverge somewhat from our expectations. Though there were a good number of the sound system professionals who contributed to the film, many of the audience were Kingston middle-class colleagues and friends. It was in fact a comment from one of the participants following the reasoning, who said, “I wish government people were there to hear all of that!” to suggest that, given its production values and foreign university support, the film could have backed the JSSF’s effort to establish an official dialogue with the authorities. Despite our best efforts, the invitation was not picked up by any government representatives, even though it was staged at the more uptown venue than the Jam One HQ yard where it had originally been planned.



*Sounds of the Future* documentary, premier screening. West Kings House Road, New Kingston, Jamaica, July 24, 2022.

The main weakness of the event was the lack of a JSSF spokesperson, with the federation's chair Tony Meyers only being able to join with an online message from abroad and no other JSSF board member attending. The consequent lack of clarity on the federation's activities limited the discussion and especially the chance for the JSSF to build its own status. This circumstance showed that the federation was not yet quite ready to lobby the government.<sup>15</sup> The learning point for the SST project was that—whatever our ambitions—any contribution that the research process might have can only move at the pace of our local collaborators, who alone have to carry the responsibility for any intervention in the local scene.

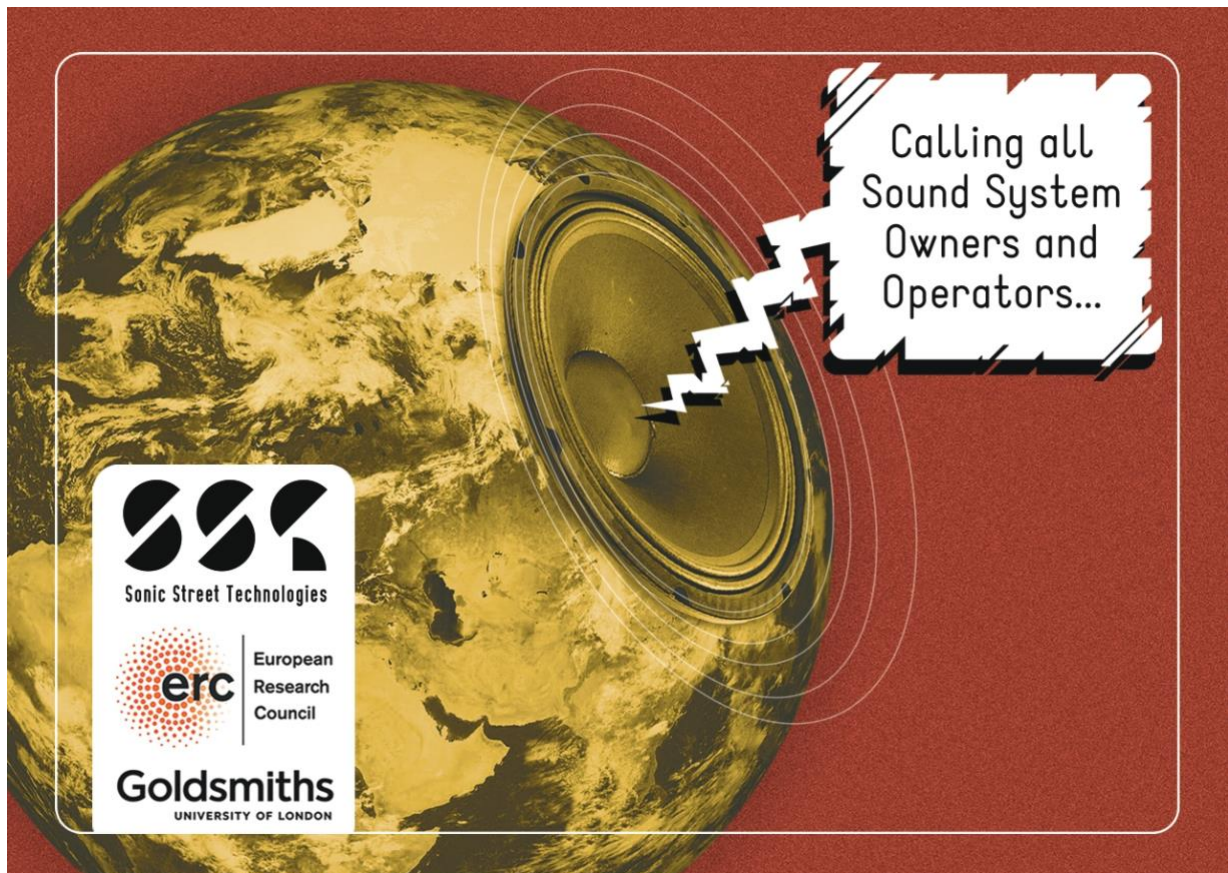
Overall, it was very encouraging to see how practitioners were prepared to talk to each other and to voice their own demands, both in the reasoning session and the discussion following the screening. This was anything but self-serving, nor was it inhibited by the secrecy and competition that are sometimes a defining feature of these grassroots music scenes. The timing of the session immediately after the pandemic and the perceived decline of sound system culture on the island no doubt stimulated the need for an open discussion. As Stone Love founder Winston “Wee Pow” Powell argued during the reasoning, “what an industry needs is two things to be named as such: aim and objective, and ethics.” The whole PBR process made it clear that the Jamaican sound system scene does not lack either of these attributes. Instead, they are the most important shared legacy that has sustained the culture and that can secure a thriving future. What could be beneficial to ensure that the culture continues is to deepen the level of discussion and widen participation: something to which we hope the reasoning and the screening contributed.

## A Planetary Network of Sound Technologies

Performing the musical archive on the streets by means of appropriately repurposed mobile sound reproduction technologies is an established practice in the Global South and—increasingly—also in sections of the Global North. The precipitating factors behind these subaltern forms of entertainment are rather trivial in the first instance: warm temperatures, lack or inaccessibility of facilities, the need for cost-effective entertainment, and the urge to generate informal revenues are the key drivers to ignite these unique—but recurrent—formations we describe as sonic street technologies. Each scene, around the *sonideros* or *radiolas*, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, defines itself by the genre of music it plays—cumbia/salsa and reggae respectively—rather than its equipment. So, they usually function as enclosed and quite self-sufficient systems, though sometimes linked across continents with those playing the same music.<sup>16</sup> Uniquely, the SST research perspective is able to consider all the varieties of sonic street technologies as a whole, as is being represented on our online global sonic map.<sup>17</sup> The know-how, or embodied knowledge related to sound technologies thus provides the common ground to reflect on these mobile music apparatuses as a research field encompassing numerous street music scenes.







Sonic Street Technologies: postcard invitation to fill in the Sonic Map questionnaire.

In describing these formations collectively as sonic street technologies, the aim is therefore to consider these mobile audio apparatuses as both a site and a tool for experimenting with new ways of sharing a community's being in the world. The diffusion and concentration of sonic street technologies unfolds a planetary network of subaltern sonic practices that challenges the top-down understanding of consumer technologies enforced by corporations and rooted in the military-entertainment complex (Goodman 2012, 31–34). The political implications of such a bottom-up approach should not be underrated. As Jonathan Sterne (2012) has pointed out, the application of international standards and protocols to consumer technology designs not only objects but also final users. By “sounding otherwise”—other than the industry standard, but also outside the designated space-time of official entertainment—these street technologies materialize alternative *ways-of-knowing* as “thinking otherwise.” This takes the form of actual sound waves, custom-built machines, gatherings of dancers, and communities of knowers. Through the steady refinement of their technological features and the increasing sophistication of their performative techniques, they gradually cross what Matt Fuller (2005, 19) describes as “the threshold into self-organization” to evolve into self-sufficient sonic media ecologies. The strategies deployed to cope with site-specific challenges slowly consolidate into style, while the continuous iteration of practices allows a specific body of knowledge to sediment and grow.

The contribution that the study of sonic street technologies such as the Jamaican reggae sound systems can make to PBR is to widen the research field to include not only types of knowledge other than normative epistemic systems, but crucially also the power relations in which the scenes operate. Their *ways-of-knowing* are distributed rather than localized, collective rather than personal, and open source rather than proprietary. Within each scene, knowledge is elaborated, preserved, and transmitted through an informal network of practices that is rhizomic rather than hierarchical. While “primary” and “secondary” epicentres or “nodes” may still exist by virtue of



geographical clustering or the kudos associated to a particular crew, the overall structure remains horizontal and open to contribution, with each node performing a threefold job of knowledge accumulation, amplification, and release.

Secrecy and exclusivity are usually cherished by individual practitioners. One example of the value of exclusive knowledge is the selectors' practice of scratching out the labels of their best vinyl records in order to prevent rivals from identifying them and therefore acquiring their own copy. This is not unique to the Jamaican scene, but a consistent feature of scenes as distinct as *sonideros* in Puebla (in Mexico) and even more with *picós* in Cartagena and Barranquilla (in Columbia), where a *picotero's* reputation has literally been built around *exclusivos* for more than five decades (Carbonell 2022, 21–25). Nonetheless, the evolution of a scene is based on the continuous borrowing of beats, styles, and tropes from others and subsequently re-elaborating them in a way that challenges the romantic image of a “lone genius” as the main agent of creative production. An individual or crew can certainly be recognized as particularly influential or creative, as with Stone Love sound system in Jamaica, or *picó* El Rey de Rocha in Colombia. But this higher status makes true sense only in relation to the multitude of those by whom they were inspired, as well as those they have inspired in turn. In addition, any node's status in a scene can swiftly change according to the intensity of the practices for which it accounts.

The reggae sound system scene has been notoriously fast moving and volatile. As the reasoning session showed, the position that Kingston has retained for over five decades as a trendsetter and primary source of knowledge is currently fading. In the meantime, other nodes—even in the Jamaican countryside, or abroad—have emerged, sometimes preserving, nourishing, and innovating a know-how that would have otherwise been lost. As one example, Kingston Dub Club founder Gabre Selassie has recounted how he had to travel from Jamaica to London in the early 2000s to purchase a specific piece of custom-built equipment that at the time was no longer in use in Jamaica, even though it was local engineers who had pioneered that design. In his own words: “The London man them kept up that tradition there when Jamaican sounds started to fade more into a phase of ready-made equipment instead of custom-built.<sup>18</sup> Based on an idea of collective and distributed creativity, sonic street technologies and the associated scenes function in a way that resembles oral cultures. In fact, both are performative and based on the ephemeral medium of sound rather than written word. PBR work can help us recognize the value of considering such knowledge systems in a global context.

### **Conclusion: Sound Systems and Knowledge Systems**

With popular street cultures, especially in the Global South, the value and force of PBR is even more profound than when the practices and performances are located in the galleries and theatres of the Global North.<sup>19</sup> This is because often the popular cultures in the Global South do not benefit from the respect and recognition that their uptown “high culture” counterparts take for granted in their comparatively well-funded spaces. Notwithstanding the immense creativity and potential earning power of sonic street technologies, across the Global South it is invariably their subaltern origins that disqualifies their knowledge from contributing to the society at large.

With PBR, popular culture can reveal ways of “thinking otherwise” as a basis for what de Sousa Santos (2014) calls “epistemologies of the South” or de Castro (2014) “cannibal metaphysics,” or what Foucault (1980) calls “subjugated knowledges.” Any power that the sound system scene can exercise in Jamaica is power from below—*puissance* (power-with) shared among members of a community. This, rather than *pouvoir* (power-over) concentrated in the hands of an elite, to make use of an important distinction unavailable in English. It is also in most cases a potential power or a power-*in-potentia*, as it might go unrecognized not only by governments, elites and

scholars, but sometimes even by those who have it “in their own hands.” Rather than acquiescing to this ancient but still relevant distinction between the *theoria* (θεωρία, sight, contemplation) of epistemic knowledge and the *poiesis* of bringing something new into the world, PBR is in a position to challenge the privileging of any one idea of knowledge to the disparagement of others.

With sonic street technologies, both in the Global South and in the Global North, “sounding otherwise” is perhaps even more of an immediate challenge to the establishment than “thinking otherwise.” The likelihood is for it to be labelled as noise, the terrible “other” of sound—and thus policed or silenced. From Kingston to Barranquilla, from Mexico City’s Tepito Market to London’s Notting Hill Carnival, sonic street technologies’ temporary sonic takeover of public space is often met by hostility from the authorities. State repression can include not only stringent sound level regulations, tight security protocols, and costly fines but also use of police and military force.<sup>20</sup> This reflects how power differentials shape the way sound is conceived, produced, and consumed, from the city soundscape to the global music industry. Along lines of race and class, the sound of sonic street technologies should be considered as *Black* noise (D’Aquino 2021). So, the knowledge systems that produce it are then to be described as *Black* (Henriques 2021). This disenfranchisement parallels that of the denizens of the marginalized communities from which it emerges. Hence the JSSF’s challenges in getting their voice heard.

As is to be expected, knowledge comes down to questions of power, which is inevitably about ownership rather than origins. To whom does knowledge belong? When knowledge is reduced to data—as is so often the case—then the answer is very clear—the aggregators, and certainly not the users, whose clicks generate it in the first place (Srnicek 2016). In respect to subcultures, issues of ownership are most often framed around ideas of authenticity and cultural appropriation (Jackson 2019). Such questions are quite acute at a time when traditional big box sound systems struggle to survive in Jamaica while sound systems and reggae and dub festivals are flourishing across Europe. In this context, PBR can undoubtedly play an important role not only in fostering recognition from the outside but also in stimulating self-acknowledgement from participants within the scene. But this has to be done in concert with the local communities, seeking the best way to support practitioners by developing non-extractive methodologies as well as shareable research outputs, such as films and videos capable of recognizing, amplifying, and redistributing existing knowledge. Also, it should be remembered that proprietary ideas of knowledge can be useful, for example where music copyright is used to help ensure that the originators receive financial reward for their work (Mann 2022). But this should not be seen as the only functioning model.

As against any monopoly of knowledge, it makes sense to reverse the Foucauldian paradigm to say *power is knowledge*. It is not the case that *know-what* is disembodied, abstract, and objective, whereas *know-how* is embodied, situated, and subjective. No, both kinds of knowledge are situated: it’s just that the situatedness of power vanquishes other kinds of knowledge. The most important contribution that PBR can make, then, is to mount a critique of epistemic knowledge itself. PBR as practised in the Global South has a particularly important role to play because these alternative *ways-of-knowing* are solely responsible for inventing and sustaining cultural and technological apparatuses such as sound systems in the absence of any of the kind of support such creativity might expect in the Global North. This gives PBR in the Global South additional strength to challenge the “tyranny of the universal,” as Angela Davis describes it.<sup>21</sup> That is the ideological belief that there is only one true knowledge system, as owned and promulgated by the white male of the Global North. Our research aims to think otherwise.

## Acknowledgement

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## Notes

1. A description of the event that provided an initial draft of this article can be found on the *SST Blog*. See D'Aquino (2021).
2. The event was part of an ongoing ERC-funded research project, Sonic Street Technologies (SST), which in part, conducts research on Jamaican audio engineers and their contributions to the lived experience of the audience in the sound system dancehall session. See the SST website, accessed September 20, 2022, <http://sonic-street-technologies.com/>.
3. See, for example, Nordicity (2021).
4. The concept of “musicking” can be very useful here. See Small (1998).
5. The Abyssinians, *Reason Time*, single, Clinch Records, Jamaica, circa 1975.
6. See also the SSO website, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://sites.gold.ac.uk/sound-system-outernational/>.
7. “Politricks” (“politics” + “tricks”) is another word originally from the Rastafarian lingo and commonly used on the island to express the shared distrust toward institutional politics.
8. When the event took place, in February 2022, Jamaica was still awaiting restrictions to be fully lifted. Apart from a short break in the summer of 2021, the entertainment sector was in total or partial lockdown for twenty-five months, from March 2020 to April 2022.
9. The full text of the Noise Abatement Act is available at <https://www.ecolex.org/details/legislation/noise-abatement-act-1997-lex-faoc053280/> (accessed September 20, 2022).
10. On Dub Camp festival, see Sevin (2023); on Black Obsidian see Arts Foundation (2021); on the Dub London Exhibition at the Museum of London, see Museum of London (n.d.).
11. Interviewed by Brian D'Aquino for the SST project in London in November 2022, Mikey Dread noted: “You have to have an apprenticeship, any job you’re doing. Sound system is like a job. When you have apprenticeship you’re going to the pitfalls, but then you don’t go into the pitfalls and just give up. You go into the pitfalls and drag your way off again and then you get going again. That’s the importance of having an apprenticeship in sound system.”
12. See, for example, Santos (2018).
13. See the *SST Blog*, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://sonic-street-technologies.com/category/blog/>.
14. Sounds of the Future will be made available in late 2023 on the SST *YouTube* channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@sonicstreettechnologies>) as part of the project’s video archive.
15. The date chosen was also not the best to serve the cause, as it immediately followed the Sum Fest festival that gathered authorities, the media, and thousands of dancehall professionals and fans on the opposite side of the island.
16. One example, the music of the Maranhão state in north Brazil is reggae. The first author of this piece was told that the most popular current reggae they play is from artists in the Solomon Islands.
17. See Sonic Map, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://sonic-street-technologies.com/sonic-map/>.
18. This is quoted from another SST research documentary entitled *Rockers Sound Station: Tales of the Kingston Dub Club* which will be available on the SST *YouTube* channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@sonicstreettechnologies>) later this year.

19. See for example Barrett and Bolt (2017) and Nelson (2022). Also, to note, the PEER Lab at UCLA have produced a very useful Database for Practice-Based Research, <https://schoolofmusic.ucla.edu/about/community-engagement/peer-lab/> (accessed September 20, 2022).
20. For example, on Kingston, Jamaica, see Lewis (2017), and on Barranquilla, Colombia, see Avendaño (2019).
21. See the report on Davis's speech to a gathering of Ferguson protesters in St. Louis in 2015 in Murawski (2017).

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## Critical Choice in “Documenting” Practice as Research

Lynette Hunter

From my particular landscape, as someone who has worked in PBR (practice-based research)/PAR (practice as research) since the 1990s as a scholar, an academic, and a practitioner, the most exciting direction has been the recent shift to Practice rather than Research, and to the growing awareness of the need for attention to the practices of communication about Practice.<sup>1</sup> I personally still use PAR, which was the common designator for a focus on practice in the UK in the 1990s, although now I also feel it insists on practice rather more than PBR. After all, all research involves some kind of practice, so for me practice as research asks us to focus on what we do as the research rather than how we articulate practice in research communication. I am aware that there are many other definitions for PBR, the distinction here is simply a gut response I have to the two designations.

Bringing PAR into the scholarly world of academic humanities, the focus has been on “research”: how to communicate what practice does, how it knows, how it values. There have been many intense studies of how to articulate in academically recognized vocabularies and grammars, the processes and products, the pedagogy of (mainly) arts-based work, artwork. In other words, how to *prove* that there is Research involved in arts practice, whether it be PBR, PAR, PbR, RbP, Artistic Research, Art in Action and so on. This work has usually meant adopting the categories and structures, and writing genres, of humanities research since people in those areas have seemed to be the most immediate with whom to have conversations, build courses, and make allies for funding and space.

PAR is in many places, and institutions, now accepted as engaged with insight, ways of being and knowing, that have not been acknowledged by society in the past. A corollary is that many of these insights have been significant for people presenting unseen, unheard, obscured, erased ways of living and valuing. Different to Art as the ideologically accepted resistance to powerful political discourse, PAR opens up the potential to consider artwork practices that generate alternatives to socio-culturally dominant epistemologies by labouring in the sociosituated (Hunter 2018). The concept of the sociosituated is developed from situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) and is an alterior running alongside both discourse and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). As PAR has become institutionally recognized, it has also spread into many disciplines outside the arts and humanities: the environmental and biological sciences, social studies, design and architecture, medicine, among others. It shows up in distinct ways in different fields of matter, and this may make it seem vague theoretically and methodologically. Yet with a growing confidence in the research contributions of PAR, there may also be a setting, a fitting in, a desire to be part of the structures of socio-cultural recognition, a compromise if not a complicity. One of the most challenging elements in current PAR is working on how to keep fluid, keep presenting the unseen.

In this light, from my necessarily particular perspective, the most exciting change in PAR is the shift of focus from Research into Practice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the practitioners

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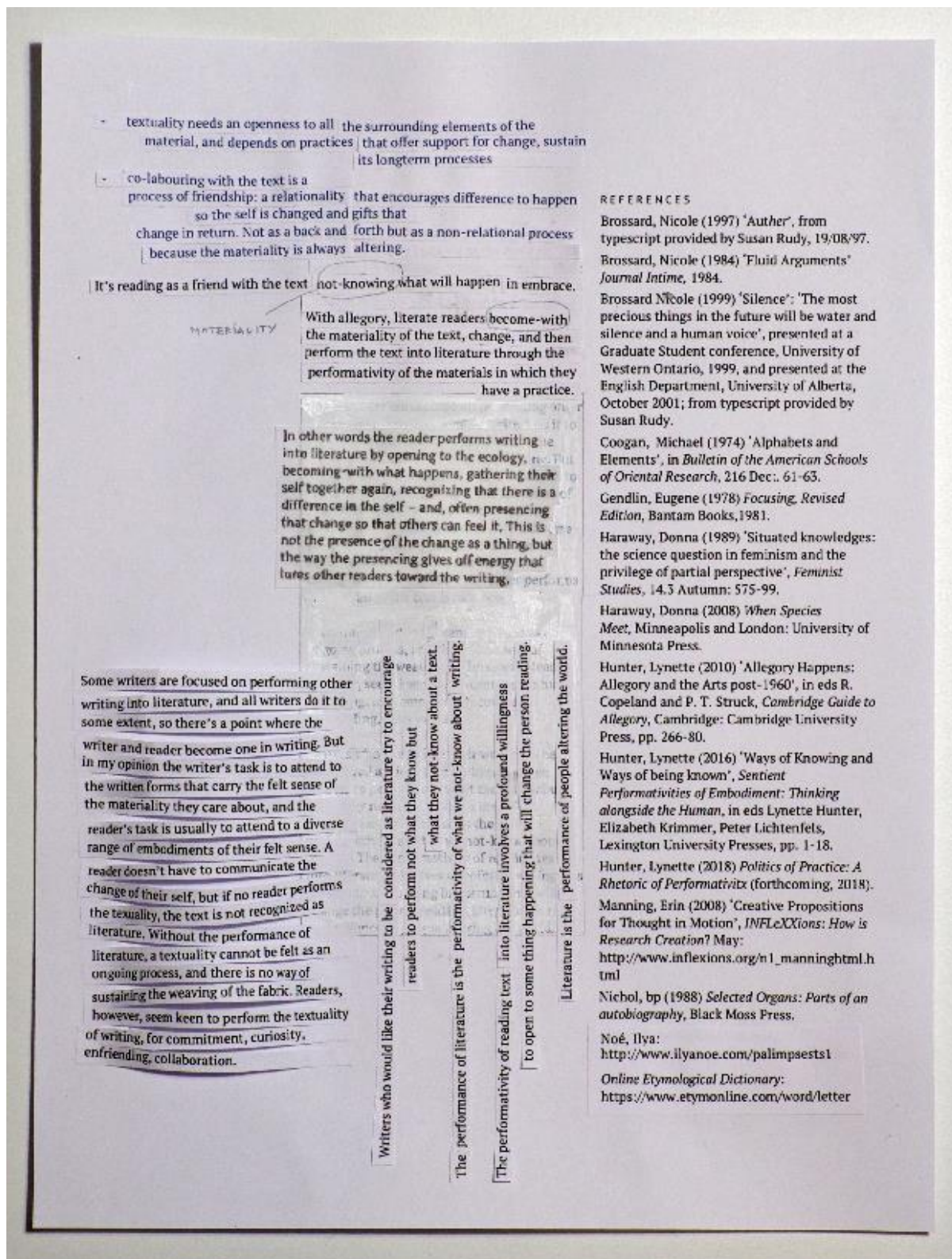
working in the field, this has brought with it an awareness of a need to attend to the practices of writing and other media—and, I would suggest, the practices of reading and engaging—that keep the research presencing.

The humanities critic conventionally articulates through writing essays, and to achieve research recognition, PAR began by focusing on articulation that delivers proof of knowledge in similar academic modes—such as a journal article. . . . Yet the focus on Practice has foregrounded that “practice” does not have a recognized academic vocabulary. The closest is possibly “critique.” In response, PAR research-practitioners have perhaps inevitably developed practices of writing that generate textuality or performativity with written words—by hand, by press, by digital tool. This has led to considerable graphic experiment, and also differently mediated audio/video methodologies. The recent coincidence of digital media with a focus on the practices of scholarly communication has also generated critical hypertexts, video essays, intermedial expression. These explorations often put PAR in a radical juxtaposition with normative humanities articulation.

To distinguish these practices of writing about Practice from the articulation of Research, I call the former kind of writing “documenting.” Documenting attempts, as any creative practice, to carry the energy of the felt change of experience as material for its audience(s). I offer now an articulation of one way of talking about Practice, and will conclude with a few observations on documenting, including, why I am not documenting in this essay.

For me, Practice is a learned way of engaging with materiality. The matter that is the soil of that materiality will be particular to each practitioner—clay, flute, word, fabric, building, aural/oral voice, tightrope, body, animal, molecule, software/hardware, and so on. Practice is also about learning how to gather the changes that happen in that materiality, feel the presencing of those changes in the body, find forms for the changes so they can be embodied in re-presencing and mediated to others, making material for their own practices (Hunter 2019, 2023). The terms in this articulation are simply there to alert us to, or make us aware of, some of the things going on in a practice. It does not matter what vocabulary is used. Inevitably, I have cast the processes of my articulation of Practice as my life has come to put them into words, and they trail veils of Daoist poetics and early Greek rhetoric. The landscape for Practice is broad, and I do not hope for it to be pinned down.

As noted above, many current writers on PAR have begun to loosen up the essay form.<sup>2</sup> My critical practice is one that takes writing as a material into which I try to loose the self (Hunter 2023, 180), have the materiality happen. In the past I have written and performed critiques,<sup>3</sup> documenting the energy of the changes to which I have been able to attend. Working collaboratively with others on documenting has, for me, opened out this practice so the critical writing becomes a dance with another. But in many cases, such as this one, I find a need to articulate rather than generate a documenting, and this is to do with audience. There is a distinction between trans/scribing as documenting in the context of anecdotal performance—performance with a sociosituated audience<sup>4</sup>—and transcribing as articulation, or performance in socio-cultural discourse. Here I am transcribing, foregrounding the compromise, narrowing the energy, to fit into this article, to offer a fitting format or structure that will resonate with the socio-cultural.<sup>5</sup>



Hunter and Noé (2018, 250); the critical text was generated through a collaboration.

If the material of academic humanities practice is writing, and in particular the critical essay, when that form frays, tears, un/ravels, it can feel confusing. Yet it is in the process of becoming a skein finding another shape. When this happens, the audience also needs to learn new scores for their own practice, and this in my experience is challenging—for a writer and for a reader. The institutions of universities, colleges, publishing, conventional composition, normative

pedagogy have difficulty recognizing their own value when air gets into the bloodstream of communication. They may try to erase, shut down, condemn, even punish. Read an ordinary scientific paper and feel how set it is, how far away from its practice it is. Working with science and scientists, PAR research-practitioners often begin with the impoverished articulation of the experiment and work on ways to value the documenting because it carries the energy of that engagement. Yet the documenting is usually difficult to read because the critical mediation is not recognized by the readers.<sup>6</sup> Just so, working with the performance materials of artwork, a general public audience is difficult to reach with documentings, despite the energy they carry and the diverse voices they sound out.

The ability to perform in a documenting what has not-yet been performed allows for the energy of that not-known to be carried to others, whereas an articulation is already speaking within the grounds of a dominant discourse that by definition cannot see or feel the energy—although it may convey its palimpsest. I'd suggest that in its pursuit of conversations about Practice, and in the context of the compromises and enervation of academically recognizable genres, PAR research-practitioners are in a good place not only to offer alternatives and alteriors to the normative practices of critical articulation but also to generate documentings, critical artwork. This is a critical choice: to articulate to a wider audience or to engage through documenting with a usually much smaller group of people who will collaborate on being with a not-known materiality. The recent focuses not only on a practice with a particular material, but also on the practices of criticism that PAR enables, are welcome.<sup>7</sup> They suggest a critique not from the socio-cultural but from the sociosituated, and are politically attuned to be helpful both to unknotting socio-cultural trauma,<sup>8</sup> and to generating long-term social awareness and change.

## Notes

1. See the biography for Lynette Hunter.
2. The journal *Performance Research* has been a leader in this area; see, for example, “On Reflection—Turning 100,” ed. Richard Gough, special issue, *Performance Research* 23, no. 4 (2018).
3. See <https://lynettehunterperformance.com/>. For more recent critical artwork, see Hunter and Noé (2018).
4. See chaps. 5 and 8 in Hunter (2019).
5. The book *Disunified Aesthetics* (Hunter 2014), in which I attempted a critical performativity through video, playtext, translation, cartoon, layout design, and typographic play, was received by one reviewer in the *American Revue of Canadian Studies* with the comment “Much of her work comes across as very esoteric and highly personal, and to many, it may even seem like the manifestation of some sort of mental instability” (Taylor 2015).
6. See Dumit and Myers’s (2011) study of the biologist who needed, for recognition, to turn dance as a research method into mathematics.
7. Among those I have worked with on performativity and writing, see Moore (n.d.), Tsimbrovsky (2022), and Noé (2012). See also Sinha (2023).
8. For a psychobiological and somatic study of social and particular trauma, see Menakem (2017).



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## Speak-to-Write from Multiple Perspectives, as Method

Nina Sun Eidsheim and Juliette Bellocq

While I (Nina Sun Eidsheim) cannot speak to what is *the* most exciting area of practice-based research (PBR), I can share what gets *me* most excited: to work with writing as a practice, and as a PBR method.

The technology of writing can be very misleading, especially when that writing is typed using a word processing program. When using this tool, writing looks the same whether it represents a stream of consciousness, a first draft, or a final proof. Because of this, I have found that I hold myself to the standard of the final version, which, of course, completely freezes me up. If we are always aiming for the final version, there is not much room for thinking, making errors, going sideways and backward and forward again. There is only the guaranteed feeling of failure.

One simple shift is to return to pen and paper. A piece of paper without lines offers a different invitation than a computer program that places characters on a predetermined grid. It is even a different invitation than paper with lines, a grid, or a music staff. The proverbial napkin or back of an envelope—a “throwaway”—often provides the most open-feeling space.

I sometimes compare the back of a napkin with an easy-flowing conversation with a friend who will let me meander, repeat, or contradict myself before I find my way. There is alchemy in the knowledge that somebody gives me time in conversation. In that trust, ideas can be spoken that I didn't know existed within.

The tendency to want to be correct, to be good, to be publishable has also held me within ways of thinking gained through hard-earned study. However, my field's perspective markers are also limiting.

Graphic designer Juliette Bellocq and I have developed a set of writing exercises that address these two limitations, as I have come to know writing from my training as an academic.

Our exercise, *1,000 Ways Home*, describes a nonlinear process of thinking and writing. It also offers the alchemy of communicating in the presence of another person who pays close attention. We call our process *speaking-to-write*. We formulated a number of questions that are meant to position the

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speaker-writer within new and different relationships and perspectives in relation to an object of study, a scene, or a question they have on their mind—something they wish to get to know from more perspectives than they can see at the moment. For example, what does your object of study look like if you're inside it? Or if you see it from above? The writer simply listens to the questions posed and responds by speaking. The writer's friend asks the questions and transcribes the writer's response. It is lovely when two people can assist each other. That is, Anne serves as the asking and transcribing friend for Arnvid—and then they change roles: Arnvid serves as the person asking Anne the questions, and transcribes for her.

We offer the exercise here and encourage you not only to experiment with it but also to formulate your own questions and, most importantly, to form community, trust, and alchemy around writing.

Nina Sun Eidsheim  
Juliette Bellocq

P  
E  
R  
L  
A  
B

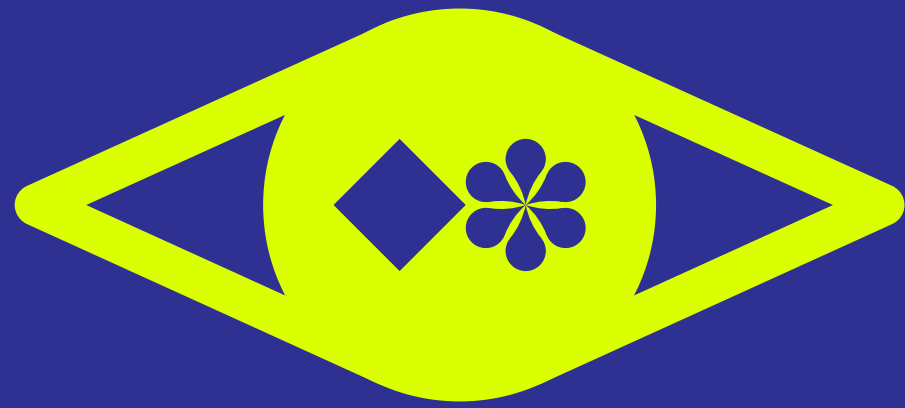
1000

*WAYS HOME*

Nina Sun Eidsheim  
Juliette Bellocq

P  
E  
R  
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*Man is a creature  
who makes pictures of himself  
and then comes to resemble  
the picture.*

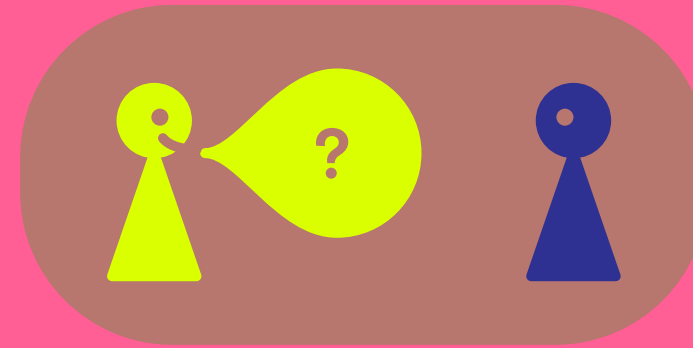
— **Iris Murdoch**

*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*  
(London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), 75.

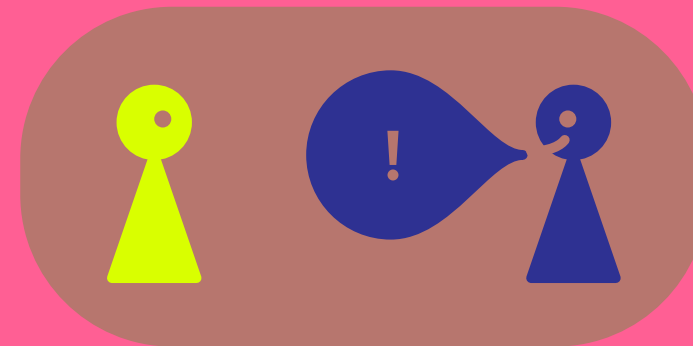
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# Interviewer Interviewee

**1** Interviewer reads the question



**2** Interviewee answers



**3** Interviewer records the answer



---

Repeat

**Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home**

**Describe where,  
in your body,  
you feel it first?**

**Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home**

**What part  
is closest to you?**

**Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home**

**What does it sound like,  
right in front of you?**

**Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home**

**What part feels  
dirtiest?**



**Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home**

**Is it camouflaging  
against anything?**

**Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home**

**What do you see  
when you block out  
the big parts?**

**Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home**

**What part  
do you want to kiss?**

**Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home**

**Follow the silence.  
Where does it lead you?**

**Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home**

**Feel it upside down.  
What does it make you  
think of?**

**Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home**

**What are  
the rough parts?**



# Within—The belly of the beast

**What does  
the cellular structure  
feel like?**

# Within—The belly of the beast

**What are  
the fragile parts?**

# Within—The belly of the beast

**What are the smallest  
construction blocks?**

# Within—The belly of the beast

**How crowded does it feel?**

**Within—The belly of the beast**

**Where does it hold tension?**

**Within—The belly of the beast**

**Describe its internal flow.**



# Within—The belly of the beast

**What does it retain?**

**Within—The belly of the beast**

**What does it evacuate?**

# Within—The belly of the beast

**What kind of light  
makes it through?**

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**What does it feel like  
sitting on it?**

P  
E  
R  
L  
A  
B

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**What's the first thing  
you see  
when you look at it  
from above?**

P  
H  
E  
R  
L  
A  
B

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**How firmly planted  
are you in it?**

PERILLAB



On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**How deeply  
can you establish roots?**

PERILLA

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**What part are you  
carrying yourself?**

PERILLA

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**What parts will fall apart?**

P  
E  
R  
L  
A  
B

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**How do you know  
where the top is?**

P  
H  
E  
R  
I  
L  
A  
B

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**What imprint  
does it create?**

P  
E  
R  
L  
A  
B

**Away from—Bird's eye view**

**What color is it,  
viewed from the sky?**



**Away from—Bird's eye view**

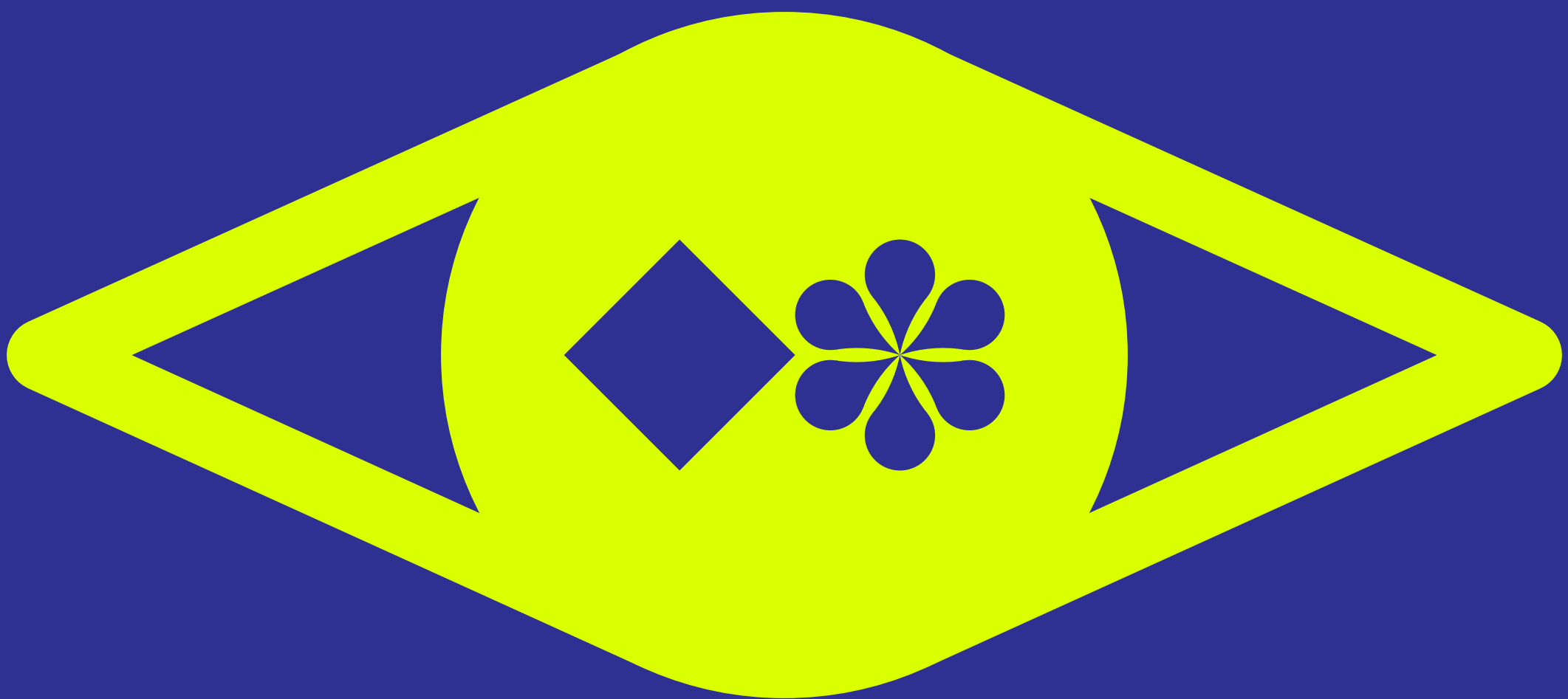
**From really far,  
what is its shape?**

**Away from—Bird's eye view**

**How far away  
do you need to be  
to not sense its pulse  
anymore?**

**Away from—Bird's eye view**

**What smell lingers  
when you are away  
from it?**



PERLAB



## Faire Œuvre

Erin Manning

### 1. Make it a practice

Orient from the pull of a tendency. Don't worry about the initial materiality, or the form it seems to take. Let the force of its potential lead. It can be a line in a text, a poem, a philosophical concept. It can be a textile, a quality of smell, a movement, a handful of earth.

Move into the singularity of its directionality. Try not to overfeed it. It doesn't have to be everything. Push up against it. Let curiosity lead.

To practise is to engage with a set of conditions. To practise is to explore how tendencies are produced. To practise is to follow those tendencies in a process of repetition. To practise is to develop an attunement to the differential of repetition.

### 2. Follow the practice where it leads

A practice is nothing more than a commitment to an unfolding. Return to it. Don't worry too much about encompassing it. Be wary of globalizing tendencies. If it's a concept, play around with it. Bounce it against other concepts. See what shape it takes. If it's a movement, enter it from all its openings. Follow its verve.

A practice always teaches. It teaches how to enter. It demonstrates a limit. It fosters a threshold. Be in the curiosity of that teaching. Let yourself be pulled into it, by it.

### 3. Don't set up unnecessary frames

Try not to value practice from the outside-in. Practice produces its own valuation. To produce a valuation is to sidestep the paranoia of what already needs to count, to be counted in. Try to resist the impulse to include, to add, just for the sake of having met criteria. Try to resist the impulse to look smart, or to make *like an artist*.

If artfulness leads—if what moves the practice is its own aesthetic yield—you will be moved by the practice and its own modalities of valuation. Allow yourself to become interested in those valuations even if they don't conform to dominant tendencies. Be curious about how they deviate from existing frameworks but don't dwell here.

### 4. Live outside genre

It is tempting to organize within genre. To make it a method. To call it “practice-based research” or “art-based research” or “research-creation,” thereby setting it apart from whatever it was it wasn't supposed to be. Deviate that tendency.

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Work that does its work, *faire œuvre*, resists predetermined categories. How could any research not be practice-orienting? How is thought *not* a practice?

The problem is here: thought has been dissociated from practice, and art has been dissociated from thought.

Instead of beginning in category, instead of justifying with method, trust the practice to move thought. Let the thought shape you. Recognize that you were never other to the thinking, that the practice was always making you (think). Be curious about what emerges as thought when it is not excised from practice. Find, in practice, the vulnerability of enunciation and write or speak or move from there. Include what is ineffable. Make the in-between of its uneasy iteration palpable.

#### 5. Call it research

Research is practice's yield. This yield is aesthetic. It carries the sensibility of a process. Attune to how best to articulate, to move that sensibility. Be sensitive to its leaky edges. Find languages to prolong it. Be wary of capture.

Capture happens in many ways. We capture process every time we begin with critique. To critique is to stand outside and delimit the potential from the outside-in. Nothing is easier than critique. Where the stakes are more potent is in the midst. Work there, in the quality of mutual inclusion, of approximation of proximity.

Approximation of proximity resists cause-effect, in-out. It builds bridges, produces adjacencies. Difference without separability.

Immanent critique lives here. Immanent critique—feeling-out a process from within its emergent problematics—fosters capaciousness. How does a practice open up thought? If a practice is not touching thought's limit, if thought isn't producing the conditions for emergent process, schizz the practice. Move into, move with, the cut.

Schizz is anathema to critique. Where critique finds fault from an exterior vantage point, the schizz is a propulsing tendency from within that shifts the geology of an environment. In the act of the cleave, the schizz not only redirects: it produces new forces.

To schizz is to compose with the condensation of a tendency to redirect it.

Research happens in the redirection. Research is the granular excavation of what shifted in the schizz. What new orientations revealed themselves? What new problems foregrounded themselves?

#### 6. Don't make it about you

It's tempting to call it "my" research. But practice takes us with it: it is not ours. To follow practice where it leads is not only to learn from practice how to better attune to the immanent valuations of emergent processes, it is also to foster modes of encounter with thought that refute the capture of whiteness, of neurotypicality.

Neurotypicality is the systemic operation of centring whiteness as the beacon of knowledge-formation. Neurotypicality is the dominant method of any institutionalized environment. Not only is neurotypicality the enforcer of knowledge, it is the shape knowledge takes.

Any enforced separation between practice and thought is neurotypical. Whiteness breeds here, defending the stakes of what counts, and who counts.

Every time you say that you know better, every time you impose a territory for thought, every time you make it about you, the performance is one of colonialism. This is white, and neurotypical.

#### 7. Be in thought's movement

There is a risk. It's possible that the practice won't yield writing. In academia, a hard line continues to be drawn between what counts as knowledge and what doesn't. There isn't a ready solution for this problem. Practice-based research unfortunately does not yet extend beyond language, outside words.

One way to foster an adjacency is to resist the formatting of language as denouncing. Make language propositional. Allow language to open itself to the rhythms of its own ineffability. Don't worry too much about genre. It's not *about* poetry, or *against* academic writing. It's *with* the practice of language's own immanent detours. Some of these detours may need a citational architectonics. This can yield a beautiful shorthand—all those minor socialities co-composing!

#### 8. Edit!

Practice is a commitment to editing. To practise is to be in the attunement of the daily difference of what practice yields. That is to say, practice is never the same. To enter into it is to enter into its minor differentiations, and to become attuned to what they can do.

Make language practice. Allow language to form its own orienting tendencies. Invent words! Don't be afraid of concepts! Excavate from the concept where it can lead. Don't dwell in refutation. You can get stuck there.

Once the work begins to do its work, engage with how it edits itself. Build attunement to what is in excess, to what clouds the singularity of its orientation. Be interested in what subtraction can do. Think "practice-based" at each layer of the process. Allow things to fall out. Be aware of what "you" are adding and wonder about whether you are inserting yourself. Is this some kind of insurance policy to keep you safe? See if you can let it go. Let the work do its work.

#### 9. Faire Œuvre

When a work does its work, it is practising. This is as true of an artwork as it is of a poem or a story or an academic paper. To be too focused on genre is to seek to control the process from the outside-in. Let the work take you with it.

Like any architecture, a work produces a surround, and is produced by it. Trust that the work will find modes of engaging with the ecologies it provokes, and convokes. This might mean delving into a conceptual arena that lies adjacent to what the work's working is unfolding. It might mean a

## Manning

footnote taking us on a parallel path. Try, when gathering the architectonics of the surround, not to impose a paranoid frame onto the work. Don't write an artist statement that is defensively marking a territory. Refrain from producing an enclosure for yourself, and your work.

Faire œuvre is not “making” work. It is being made by the work's working. This is practice-based research. Any other kind of research is not alive with thought, is not teeming with tendency. Practice-based is simply how thought moves into the materiality of its activity. To think, to be in the movement of thought, is to hone practice, and to let practice lead the way.

## What Can Music Learning Do? Audiovision as Research-Creation in Undergraduate Music Studies

Michael B. MacDonald

In *Research-Creation in Music and the Arts* (2018), Sophie Stévanca and Serge Lacasse describe a fault line between musicology and music performance, a tension between university music and music conservatory modes of knowing. Research-creation they suggest, has a role in investigating this in-between space, a “practical musicology” (Zsgorsky-Thomas 2022) to help rethink musicology education. Artist-researchers working in Canadian undergraduate music programs are also inquiring after ways to respond to Dylan Robinson’s (2019) observation that “decolonizing music programs involves challenging the received values of such programs” (138). This is an encouragement to think pedagogy as more than the replication of the university’s valued *modes of knowing*, what Gilles Deleuze called an *image of thought*, some of which have been shown to be exclusionary, inward-looking, disciplinary, and disciplining (Harney and Moten 2013). In *CineWorlding* (MacDonald 2023), the distinction between recognized modes of knowing and a new machinic image of thought was described this way:

I can describe in words an experience of cinema-thinking, in the event that produced a refrain that acts as a germ of an idea that stretches out and calls together a variety of forces, linking to other events, moving the force of perception across the curves and undulations of the world, but it will never simulate cinema-thinking. Cinema-thinking will only happen as machine-thinking, whether you are operating a camera, working with an editing software, or watching blocs of sensations in duration as you become entangled in audio-vision. (20)

Cinema-thinking/machine-thinking emerged from the hyphen between research-creation and can operate as a proposition for practice-based research. It invites artist-researchers to inquire after alternative ways of thinking music, to ask, “what can research do?” beyond replicating existing methods and methodologies. It can also do the same for music pedagogy by asking, “what can music learning do?” Music research and music pedagogy can work through each other, *transversally* operating on each term in ways that leave neither unchanged. To embrace research-creation may be to engage in the cultivating of an image of thought for music studies that is both research and pedagogy, musicology and performance.

In Erin Manning’s “Ten Propositions for Research-Creation” (2016b), proposition 1 states: “Create New Forms of Knowledge (Embrace the Non-Linguistic).” In this proposition, Manning writes: “Research-creation generates new forms of experiences; . . . it hesitantly acknowledges that normative modes of inquiry and containment often are incapable of assessing its value; it generates

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forms of knowledge that are extra-linguistic; . . . it proposes *concrete assemblages* for rethinking the very question of what is at stake in pedagogy, in practice, and in collective experimentation” (133; italics added). The space of innovation that Manning suggests is intoxicating in its research and pedagogical possibilities. But as Stévanice and Lacasse have noted, any path toward this way of thinking has to deal with the practical realities of a cramped student schedule so oriented to immediate issues in performance practice that abstract thinking like this too often feels alien and alienating to students (and understandably so). Livestreaming graduation recitals became a *concrete assemblage* that at first presented itself as a unique opportunity to learn a practical emergent technology for music performance. But it soon became a laboratory for an extralinguistic research-creation practice in music studies that may transform our understanding of what research and teaching can do.

### **The Emerging Concrete Assemblage of Audiovision**

As the first (ethno)musicologist in a new BA in jazz and popular music, pedagogical innovation has been central to my practice and with mixed results. I joined the faculty with the intention to work against replicating the division between musicology and performance practice that I had experienced at other universities while at the same time refusing the notion that musicology is the vegetable in a dominantly performance-oriented program: good for you and necessary for academic credentials, but not very much fun nor of much practical value. Critical thinking, I kept telling myself, was my value and contribution. But I could feel (and read in my student evaluations) that I was not getting through. Over the years, my courses in music studies became informally known as the “Michael courses.” The disciplinary perspectives that I was attempting to share (popular music studies, cultural studies, musicology, ethnomusicology) were reterritorialized by students as *my* interests and perspectives. It was not until I began working with students to produce livestreams of graduate recitals that the research-creation concepts that we had been reading became living thinking-feeling.

The path to livestreaming as research-pedagogy was indirect. At the beginning of COVID-19 closures, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada put out a special call for COVID response grants. The *Choral Music Video* was a project that had livestreaming and choral music videos as components. The project investigated the interface of research-creation, audiovision (Chion 2019), and emerging audiovisual livestreaming technology in the context of mandatory home viewing. The grant provided an opportunity to purchase livestreaming equipment to utilize the cameras that I had been using for music video production in my cine-ethnomusicology course. At the beginning, student research assistants worked with me to livestream choral music workshops with an Edmonton-based professional choir, Pro Coro Canada. At the conclusion of the grant, the department hired a student to supervise the livestreaming of graduate recitals that were closed to the public. It provided an opportunity for family and friends to watch the recitals. With university life coming back to normal and special funding to support livestreams coming to an end, I began to think about Erin Manning’s suggestion of extralinguistic musicology. Central to *CineWorlding* (MacDonald 2023) is an interest in what Margaret Langer calls the musical matrix. The musical matrix is a refrain that grabs extra-musical resources to itself and makes them musical. I utilize Michel Chion’s idea of audiovision as that which emerges with/from the musical matrix. I recognize that the experience of this matrix is what occurs when perception and affect become territorialized in audiovision’s mobility. This provided a starting place for thinking research-creation as pedagogy, to collectively feel forward toward concepts that entangle with audiovisual percepts and affects in musical duration.

Students were put into groups and over the semester we read a collection of research-creation essays and Michel Chion's "Three Modes of Listening" chapter from *Audio-Vision*. In the preparation for the recital livestreams, students contacted recitalists and asked for charts/scores of the performance. My intention was for the research-creation students to study these charts/scores and begin to think about realizing the performance as audiovision. This aspect failed: "What is this audiovision that Michael keeps talking about?" More work needed to be done before students could begin to imagine a process of moving a chart/score into audiovision. Which is another way to say: to develop the skills of a music producer.

### **Audiovision's Percepts, Affects, and Concepts**

On recital day, cameras were set up and switching gear was hooked up. Students were given a tour of the process that was going to unfold. I provided as much information as I could about what livestreaming means: that we would not be reproducing a live performance but instead composing in audiovision, mobilizing the musical matrix through this technology. I could tell students were doing their best to understand. Five minutes before the stream went live, everyone in the group could feel the nervous energy. This was different somehow.

I announce over the headsets—"we are live, one minute till showtime"—and students begin to express how nervous they are. I explain that at the beginning I will be very bossy about what needs to happen, that I will be calling shots and modelling how live audiovision works. Then slowly students will take over as they are comfortable, bit by bit. As the livestream develops, I keep referencing our readings as I call shots. I remind them about Chion's *causal listening* (2019, 25–28) and explain that in audiovision what viewers see is what they hear. As a psychoacoustic consequence, an instrument seen is an instrument heard more loudly. So audiovision impacts the audio mix. It is essential to show viewers the musical development of the score being realized. It is also necessary to consider the affects of musical production. The intensity of music production both physically and emotionally mobilized through audiovisual percepts that entangle affects, this is the composition of musicalized audiovision.

As I slowly introduce techniques of camera operation (panning, tilting, focus, and zoom), students begin to get comfortable with these basic techniques. Then comes the introduction of more advanced switching techniques of fading-in a moving or a focusing camera. With each of these introductions students respond excitedly. I point out that these responses are affects emerging from the experience of artfulness (Manning 2016a, 46). After these advanced techniques we begin thinking-feeling duration and movement. The tempo of any camera movement, cut, or fade either resonates with the musical matrix or it does not. There is no way of knowing in advance what is correct because it happens in the event of the camera movement, cut, or fade that is always already inside the audiovisual-performance compositional coupling. This is the in-act of musical experience where one *knows* immediately. And it is *this* knowing, a knowing within the processual in-act of the musical event taking form that *opens within* the space between musicology and performance, research, and creation. This *space opening within* is an extralinguistic image of thought replete with felt virtualities of *time's durational folds*. This is the extralinguistic contribution of livestreaming pedagogy.



## Thinking-Feeling Time's Durational Folds

Imagine musical pulses layered over space. Moving visually through this space with a camera requires aligning visual motion with music's moving, and when aligned it is felt to be correct, and by correct we mean artful. There is no way to actually depict this, and it is difficult to describe; it has to be felt and is artful only when it *feels* artful. This requires intuition; it is: "the art—the manner—in which the very conditions of experience are felt. Intuition both gets a process on its way and acts as the decisive turn within experience that activates a productive opening within time's durational folds. Intuition crafts the operative problem" (Manning 2016a, 47). The students begin to experiment with these techniques, and I physically back off, complimenting and correcting as the recital develops. The students suggest angles, movements, cuts: they begin to follow their intuition and when it is artful, everyone cheers over the headphones. When it does not work, it is not wrong; instead, it is unrealized, since it does not quite actualize in audiovision the felt virtualities. I point out that this cheering is a collective affective response to their audiovision composition. These complex concepts that point to so much virtuality become actualized in the in-act of livestreaming. In the flow of experience, many students begin to rethink the value of chart/score analysis, that they could know in advance what may be coming, that is, in a Deleuzian sense, to be alive to its virtuality. Time folds again. And in this fold intuition is primed for a future chart/score reading session.

## Conclusion

Livestreaming introduced music students to research-creation, to process philosophy, and the felt experience of extralinguistic concepts. As a way of rethinking the divide between musicology and music performance, research-creation in audiovision creates a laboratory for extralinguistic musicology. The project created a research-creation space for students to be inspired to develop chart/score reading, research-creation concepts, audiation, intuition, and artfulness. Beyond this there were extrinsic rewards: it provided them a product for their research-creation portfolios, an experience to write about; it provided the recitalist with a professional document of their performance, an audiovisual archival document; it was mobilized using YouTube, which increased the visibility of the MacEwan music program in ways that we hope will increase the accessibility of our program to those who cannot yet see themselves in university. Finally, it helped students see how Michael works as an artist-researcher, that there need not be a division between thinking music and making art. That it is possible to invent methods, to find intellectual value in the work that they are already doing, and most importantly, to not know. That university can be an exciting space for both individual and collective creation and transformative experience. It also provides a critical piece. Students had direct experience in thinking-feeling audiovision as music. Even if the complexity of the musical matrix that guided our actions was still blurry, they felt it moving through them. My hope is that this direct experience of extralinguistic thinking-feeling required for the composition of musicalized audiovision will provide a seed for their own investigations. By working on a machinic image of thought with students, research-creation can *open within* the space between conservatory and university in a technologically complex music world. If pedagogy is planting seeds for future thinking-feeling, research-creation in audiovision may be an excellent approach for those undergraduate music programs trying to reimagine themselves.

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### A Short Report from the Core of Practice-Based Research

Teresa Connors

My experience obtaining my PhD with a creative component at the University of Waikato (2013–2017), one of the leading Mātauranga Māori centres in the Aotearoa (New Zealand), has dramatically shaped my perspective on practice-based research. The university consciously supports the creative and imaginative potential of education, embedding Mātauranga Māori across the curriculum.

Along with my postgraduate studies, I taught in the creative technology and practice stream for three years. My teaching experience was embedded in a practice-based learning environment that incorporates and recognizes knowledge and values foundational in Māori and Pacific cultures, where students have a strong sense of place, tūrangawaewae, and mana.

When I returned to Canada in 2017 for a postdoctoral research fellowship at Memorial University of Newfoundland, I was intensely aware of the differences in Canadian relationships with the Indigenous peoples of this country compared to the Māori and Pakeha (white people) relations in Aotearoa, New Zealand. I also became more aware of the difference in Canadian university approaches to practice-based research compared to Aotearoa, New Zealand. I believe that practice-based research (research-creation in Canada) has the capacity to support situated practices of diversity, forwarding postdualistic forms of research (Janssens and Steyaert 2019, 518). Having taught and studied in New Zealand, where the relations between Māori and Pakeha have evolved differently than the narrative of Indigenous-settler relations in Canada, I have felt the deep worth of cultivating a more pluralistic society.

These experiences have greatly influenced my teaching approach and understanding of the pathways for different thinker-maker-doers. As a nonlinear and reflective thinker, I am sensitive to the challenges in academia and to those with alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. Since joining Concordia University in Montreal as a part-time lecturer in the Department of Communications and the Department of Music in 2020, I have engaged in many conversations to rethink and recontextualize how practice-based research methodology can help (1) broaden research practices that are agile enough to include diverse thinking-in-the-making processes; (2) broaden the capacity for decolonizing pedagogical practices; and (3) expand diversity and engage different socio-economic, ethnic, and gender groups to create a broader pool of thought processes and worldviews.

The following list of four newer research hubs in Canada stands out to me for asking tough questions in the best way possible while actively challenging long-standing belief systems that exclude members of society and others (nonhumans).

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## The List:

1. Located at Memorial University of Newfoundland, CLEAR, the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research, “is a feminist, anti-colonial laboratory, which means our methods foreground values of humility, equity, and good land relations” (CLEAR, n.d.a). Founder and director of CLEAR, Max Liboiron writes: “Methodology is a way of being in the world. An ethic, if you like that word better. There are colonial ways to be in the world, whether intentionally or otherwise, and there are less colonial and anti-colonial ways to be in the world” (Liboiron 2021, 36). The CLEAR Lab Book has been an influence for practice-based research projects around the globe that work toward creating anti-colonial teaching spaces, methods, and pedagogies (CLEAR, n.d.b).
2. Access in the Making (AIM) Lab. AIM is founded by Arseli Dokumaci, assistant professor of communication studies at Concordia University and Canada Research Chair in Critical Disability Studies and Media Technologies. AIM’s manifesto states that it is a “lab committed to disability justice and feminist citational practices, we are especially concerned that the intellectual labour of marginalized folks (including BIPOC, disabled artists, activists, scholars) and those occupying precarious positions in academia (graduate students, adjuncts, emerging scholars) are not properly (sometimes never) recognized” (AIM Lab 2022). AIM’s most recent practice-based projects include Body Bags; The Paradise Project; and Life of Fire: An Ethnography of Smoke, Flame, Ash, and Earth (AIM Lab, n.d.).
3. The Feminist Media Studio, located at Concordia University Loyola Campus, is a practice-based lab that “supports and critically engages the complexity of mediations of gendered and queer social life in the context of the unfinished histories of European and American empire, enslavement, and colonization. It supports collective and collaborative study, as well as activist, curatorial, and artistic engagements which draw from the political potency and aesthetic experimentation of feminist media practice. Such creative and critical aesthetic engagements are firmly located in the intersectional feminist politics of the contemporary moment, an age marked by the proliferation of new media that have radically reconstituted not only the character of visual culture but also its channels of transmission and circulation” (Feminist Media Studio, n.d.).
4. The Indigenous Decolonization Hub (Centre for Teaching and Learning, n.d.) and the Píkiskwétân “let’s talk” series (Indigenous Directions, n.d.) at Concordia University. These series of talks enable faculty members to reflect and move forward on “how [to] decolonize curriculum and pedagogical practices in meaningful and respectful ways” (Centre for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). A recent discussion opened the conversation on how practice-based research, as currently configured in Canada, does not afford space for postgraduate research that includes Indigenous community ways. To this effect, the Indigenous Futures Research Centre at Concordia University “is an environment where Indigenous methods for knowledge recovery, discovery, and transmission are respected, and where faculty can learn different Indigenous research frameworks from one another while educating students in those methods” (Indigenous Futures Research Centre, n.d.).

Being involved with these hubs as an active member, or taking workshops, or implementing into my course syllabus aspects of a manifesto, mission statements, or guideline protocols has improved my

capacity as a research-creation lecturer and practitioner to engage with the challenges we face in our time.

For me, then, it is only through creative research that I have the ability to be *in* the world on a level that feels connected and truthful to the things I care about—a sentiment shared by other creative practitioners (Pite 2017). Operating in such entangled configurations from the core of practice-based research, “the nature/culture dualism implodes and we’re all repositioned as participants in lively ecologies of meaning and value, entangled within rich patterns of cultural and historical diversity that shape who we are and the ways in which we are able to ‘become with’ others” (Van Dooren 2014, 8).

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## Artistic Research: A Vibrant and Ever-Changing Field

Vanessa Tomlinson

The line between artistic research and artistic practice can be difficult to delineate, even while we agree that in artistic research “knowledge is produced in the doing” (Stover 2022, 42). If I were to ask if the projects mentioned below would have happened with or without the term *artistic research* (or *creative research*, *practice-led research*, etc.), I would probably say *yes*. If I were to ask if the projects benefited from being called artistic research, I would probably say, *yes-ish*. But if I were to ask if the researcher benefited from framing them as artistic research, I would say, *definitely*.

Does using the term *artistic research* change the way in which we design the result, change the terms by which we engage with the art, or change who has access to the work? This article will look at artistic research from an Australian perspective, with an emphasis on the role professional doctorates have played in developing this field. Following are three examples of artistic research from the discipline of music, the artistic area with which I am most intimately connected.

1. Cat Hope’s *Speechless* (2019) is a massive coming together of research threads—an arrival point for multiple layers of experimentation from digital graphic notation, networked performance, use of text and voice, theatricality, bass sound, collaboration, interdisciplinary practice, gender and music. She describes it as “a 70-minute opera for 4 soloists, community choir and bass orchestra. It is a wordless, animated notation opera intended as a personal response to the 2014 Human Rights Commission report *The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention*” (Hope 2019).
2. My work *Beacons* (2022) with Lawrence English draws upon research into site-specific performance, choreo-spatial sound and performance, non-notated composition, co-compositional practice, free improvisation, and sonic stratification. It is “a new 45-minute site-specific work for acoustic instruments, electronics and ocean, with the musicians . . . offering a sensorial experience of little Burleigh Heads” (Tomlinson and English 2022).
3. Neal Peres Da Costa is reinvigorating nineteenth-century performance practice through an investigation into “new and alternative ways of interpreting the repertoire” (Sydney Conservatorium of Music, n.d.). Focused within a large Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant, keyboard player Da Costa uses his work with the Ironwood String Quartet and the Australia Romantic and Classical Orchestra (ARCO) as well as his own solo projects to think through interpretive scope.

As I consider these works from a university perspective, I am tempted to ask, Does framing these works as research improve the artistic outcome of these projects? I have never really thought this through in considering my colleagues’ work, but in the cases above, I would err on the positive. Each of these works represents the culmination of a body of research, incorporating new tools, ways of knowing, technologies, and theories, all contributing to the larger-scale final project. Each project represents a notable shift in the field, a clear contribution to knowledge, which is the result of many years of investigation. The projects represent “the quest for

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knowledge [that] extends beyond the making of music as a creative act toward a sharing of experience: deep transformative understandings that while based on sometimes singular activities, are in reality, culminations of engaged artistic lives” (Tomlinson and Wren 2017, 6). The building blocks of these projects have been articulated through a combination of journal articles, conference presentations and performances. Each project is addressing and/or revealing larger research questions: How do these projects organize sound? How do the researchers make decisions? What is negotiable in the way musicians, audiences, and collaborators relate to the underlying concerns? How is the knowledge transferred?

These questions will be familiar to anyone engaging in a creative doctoral thesis where there is provision for the researcher to mount a creative project and to reflect on this work through exegetical writing. I have called this process “twice constructed” in the past—of obtaining two views of the same body of work (Tomlinson and Wren 2017, 8). The slowed-down, focused exegetical writing provides context for the creative output, information about process, and extracts of particular findings for the reader. The creative work, like all art, provides a doorway through which those in attendance can be immersed in a multisensorial relationship to the artwork. In this form, the expression is not bounded by the exegetical writing or the research question, but instead is led by an artistic provocation.

Some recent doctoral projects that I have found particularly exciting in this regard include Charulatha Mani’s dissertation “Hybridising Karnatik Music and Early Opera” (2019), which was her entry point into artistic research, unleashing a whole new area of research on the cultural well-being of migrant mothers. Nathan Thomson’s dissertation, “Resonance: Re(forming) the Artistic Identity through Intercultural Dialogue and Collaboration” (2022), unpacks the role of listening and performers when interconnected between different musical practices. Some use the doctorate as a way to understand their practice (Green 2018; Wren 2015), while others use it to change directions and take a deep dive down a new path (Knight 2011; Penny 2009).

In 2017, I co-wrote “Two Decades of Artistic Research: The Antipodal Experience” (Schipper, Tomlinson, and Draper) examining the state of artistic research in Australia at that time. Six years later, revisiting this body of work, I am reminded of how difficult forward steps in this field are. It is like being in a rip current—your feet seem firmly planted, yet suddenly you find yourself moving sideways. This is how I often feel about artistic research. How many articles do we read *about* the field of research, that propose new processes, tools, ways of thinking and reflecting on our practice? How rarely do we experience artistic research in action? Are we aiming for artistic research to speak for itself, without the translation of text? Does the methodology guide the practice, or vice versa? What evidence is required for artistic practice to be viewed as artistic research?

In the Australian context, creative research outputs have been standardized for some time through a national benchmarking exercise called Excellence in Research Australia (ERA). Using a peer review evaluation system and ordered by Fields of Reference codes (i.e., music performance, visual art, screen media, etc.), universities submit their nontraditional research outputs (NTROs) as media files, accompanied by an explanatory research statement. The 250-word statement incorporates research background, research contribution and research excellence. This format of assessing creative research over the past fifteen years has begun to guide the way we think about doing creative research.

At my university, researchers submit their completed research—inclusive of supporting documentation that provides evidence of new knowledge, public distribution, and peer review—into a database called [Creative Works](#), for review by an internal discipline expert. If it meets the

internally agreed-upon criteria for research, it is then published with a digital object identifier (DOI) for tracking impact. Endless questions around excellence, peer review and parity arise as each researcher grapples with the benchmark of creative research. What is the threshold for a work or a body of work to be accepted as a creative research output? Who is qualified to endorse this decision? And how do we deal with parity across artistic disciplines with very different working methods and timelines (for example, a feature film may take longer than a poem, an exhibition of works is different to an improvised music performance)? Other resistances lie around the uncomfortable interface between the research output and the research statement. Can a good research statement elevate a mediocre artwork? Or can a great contribution to artistic knowledge be let down by a substandard research statement?

Within my context as director of the Creative Arts Research Institute at Griffith University, and as deputy chair of the Deans and Directors of Creative Arts (DDCA), a peak body for creative arts in the Australian tertiary sector, we have made some inroads in how we work with creative research outputs and how we approach parity and equity in research outputs. The aforementioned ERA national benchmarking exercise is currently on hold, giving us space to work out if there are other ways to report our research contributions. But there is no doubt the visibility gained through clearly articulating our work as research means that, at least in my context, it is now valued as research.

A recent edition of *NiTRO* (2019), an Australian publication that focuses on creative arts matters in the tertiary sector, asks of artistic research, “Are we there yet?” We are certainly in a position to join the dots between academic creative research and doctoral level research. When I started in the Australian university system in 2003, having a creative doctorate was extremely rare. After completing a doctorate of musical arts in the United States and returning to Australia, I had to work out doctoral expectations, methodological norms, and terminology in what was then an emerging field. Having now taken fifteen doctorates through to completion with another six on the way, I can see how a strong research question guides the creative process—even if the question retrospectively changes. I understand the need for articulating *how* the project will be done, the process, or methodology. Clarity on process moves the conversation away from the artist as originator of knowledge, to the artist as *contributor to* knowledge. It forces each individual to look deeply into context, literature, theories, and myths; actively researching new applications and relationships.

The world is changing and so too is artistic research. It is both reactivate and proactive, always opening up new territory to consider. In 2023, one hopes it is the norm for all academic practitioners to have a doctorate and to understand how artistic research can help drive practice. As one doctoral graduate stated, “You suddenly realise that you have all these things going on, that you have *always* had all these things going on, and that you finally have all these wonderful ways to unpack them!” (NiTRO 2019).

In answering the question, “What is the most exciting direction in practice-based research today?” it is that in my university context, artists *are* researchers, and our ways of knowing and doing are understood as contributing to new knowledge. I am also excited that more arts-based academics have completed practice-based doctorates and are able to articulate their contribution to the field and construct projects with intent. Academics are making creative work that acknowledges historical context, while generating new ideas, and revealing how these ideas interact in the world. These intersections always remind me of what Kathleen Coessens (2014) calls the *web of practice*—a practice that is always in flux but distilled into a particular form, from a particular perspective in each research output. Intergenerational knowledge transfer through supervision of creative doctoral students becomes vital to renewal in the field, with each bespoke

and curious project reinvigorating the field. As the percentage of creative research knowledge bearers within each institution expands, so too does the number of advocates for this way of knowing, and we continue to move the conversation from *how* to do artistic research to *what* amazing research we are doing.

To finish, there are many research outputs being produced in the field of music and sound that I find inspiring: Erik Griswold (2017) writing about twenty years of prepared piano process; John Ferguson et al. (2019) making a new sound installation that exhibits new knowledge within its interactivity; and Leah Barclay, Lyndon Davis, and Tricia King (2022) working on sharing knowledge of the red-tailed black cockatoo in *Beeyali*. The nonlinear messiness of artistic research is part and parcel of our process, and I am indebted to many colleagues internationally who continue to make this a vibrant and ever-changing field.

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## Up and Down: The Queer and Affective Potential of (the) Transition (from the Perspectives of a Director, Sound Designer, and Lighting Designer)

Alyson Campbell, Meta Cohen, and Emma Lockhart-Wilson

We are writing this short piece collaboratively as practitioners working from different perspectives: director Alyson Campbell (AC), sound designer Meta Cohen (MC) and lighting designer Emma Lockhart-Wilson (ELW). We have teased out how our specific specialist thinking on the nexus of queerness, affect, and performance interweave and inform each other, and have landed on the example of the transition—a common component of any theatre work—as a way to interrogate how this dialogue works. We refer to our recent collaborative work on the Australian premiere production of Lachlan Philpott's *promiscuous/cities*.<sup>1</sup>

**I. AC: What is exciting each of us in practice-based research (PBR)? For all of us, affect and queer theories—and particularly how they speak to each other and how they are in dialogue with our practice—are driving our individual, and now collaborative, enquiry.**

ELW: A key element of PBR for me is integrating the lighting design into performance development. By bringing light into the process of making earlier, we can expand the palette we have to work with so that a beam of light might have as much impact on what happens in the final performance as a piece of spoken text or choreography. I'm really influenced by Katherine Graham's work on scenographic light and the power of light as an affective dramaturgical element (2016, 2018), so that's one of the things I'm trying to push my practice toward within my research: to consider how this use of lighting in the development of performance might resonate in the affective experiences of audiences.

MC: What excites me about PBR is the opportunity to explore interdisciplinary thinking in my theatre practice. As a sound designer and dramaturg, I am interested in how I can use musical frameworks to understand the ways in which performance can move us. I am particularly influenced by the work of Matthias Rebstock and David Roesner on what they call “composed theatre” (2012), which applies musical language and techniques to theatre. My PBR work has explored how musical methods can give us an added layer of specificity in theatre-making; a vocabulary to fine-tune the rhythm of a performance; and a way of creating nonnarrative climactic points through builds in density, texture, or dynamic. I am currently exploring the queer(ing) potential of these techniques, and my explorations are underscored, punctuated, and driven by my sound design work.

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AC: What excites me, or maybe what exercises me, currently, is trying to figure out more precisely how to articulate this relationship between affect and queerness in performance. I've spent a lot of time working on ways to articulate what I'm doing on the floor when I make a particular choice about the rhythm of a scene or the way bodies are arranged or how they move. Concepts from Eugenio Barba such as "organic dramaturgy" (2000), or François Lyotard's "energetic theatre" (Lyotard, Knap, and Benamou 1976) have helped, along with the vocabulary we get from Viewpoints. In theatre fields, the latter is derived most often from Anne Bogart (Bogart and Landau 2005), but the genesis of Viewpoints in dance from Mary Overlie (n.d.) speaks closely to why it has been so helpful to thinking about the affective, rather than semiotic, value of a choice to have a performer move in a certain direction at a certain time with a certain energy and pace, etc.<sup>2</sup> Addressing this alongside a queering impetus is what I am really exploring in practice—including this collaborative process we're starting to find together.

## II. AC: How do we each understand affect's relationship with queerness?

ELW: I think the affective experience is key to a lot of the queer performances I've seen. Whether it's the movement of an ensemble of bodies in a theatre space or the interaction of people coming together to dance in a communal space, there is something in the act of doing, the act of making an experience with and for a queer community, that fits with the theoretical underpinnings of a lot of queer projects. Sara Ahmed's concept of being oriented or disoriented by interactions with objects speaks to the importance of queer experiences of the world (2006). Following the ideas of queer phenomenology, I think that in crafting experiences through practice-based research, we can learn about queer ways of existing in and resisting our political and social environments.

MC: Perhaps this lies in the intersection between the specificity of the artistic choices we make and the flexible potential of each moment in performance. In creating pieces that are not solely driven by narrative structure or meaning-making, there is an impulse to avoid pinning down a singular interpretation or normative subjectivity, which we might understand as queer (see Alyson's work building on Elizabeth Freeman's ideas of queer hybridity: Campbell 2016). By focusing on the affective ability of performance to move us, we are talking about the potential for a particular intensity of experience that might lead us to theorizing around queer utopia, influenced particularly by the work of José Esteban Muñoz, who writes on queerness as a potentiality that has not yet been reached (2009). This desire to create performance moments in which we might feel queerness as "the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (Muñoz 2009, 23) requires a precise series of choices to create work that is fixed-yet-open, specific-yet-flexible.

AC: That helps me think about the work I started in my PBR thesis, which was focused on working toward an affective dramaturgy, based on resisting what Brian Massumi (1995) and some strands of affect theory would see as modes of representation that rely on producing conventionalized sets of feelings that an audience can recognize *as* an emotion. I am interested instead in focusing on the "intensity" of an image, which could work at a different rate, and in different modes, for each person. We may—and we almost certainly will—reach emotion/s, but what they might be is not prescribed. There is something queering in the refusal, or an attempt to refuse, to determine how any individual spectator might respond to a moment of performance.

I know other strands of affect theory, notably Ahmed (2015), sit more happily with the idea of emotion. That is something I'm working my way through currently. Another concept is one of "viral dramaturgies" (Campbell and Gindt 2018), which can work in any audience or any



“assembly” (Butler 2015) of people, but can do something particular when there is a resonance between stage and audience that is to do with queer people in a space together and how energies flow between and build to be something bigger than the sum of individual parts.

**III. To take this idea of fluidity and openness further, we consider the transition in work we’ve made together. In particular, we ask, what does the state of transition do for each of us when we make or see a piece of work, and how can we apply affect and queer thinking to it?**

ELW: From the point of design integration and flow, there is something very important about the starting point of a transition. If it’s one state moving to another, that starting point and the timing of the up and down fades really set *when* the transition will land. So, it’s vital that that starting cue point draws us into the action of the transition but also that it allows us to move to a point of completion that fits with the movement or performers. I think it’s an interesting experiment to think of the transition less as a crossfade in intensities and more as an experience of the past and future pushing against each other in a moment of instability. Watching the change from one lighting state to another, you don’t necessarily know *where* you’re going to land until it’s complete and that future state becomes the present. I think that kind of temporal meshing of visual and spatial arrangements really speaks to a queer affective potential. In *promiscuous/cities*, there are lots of visually interesting arrangements of people, but the transition is where you don’t know what the next arrangement will be; it’s a moment in which bodies and design elements are in flux, and I think that often gives us a sense of possibility, a moment of “maybe.”

MC: Sometimes this moment of “maybe” also contains allusions to moments we’ve already experienced, or suggestions of a world that might eventually emerge, which leads me back to Muñoz in terms of a queer gesture that looks both backward and forward (2009, 26). It’s interesting what you were saying the other week, Emma, about the transition sometimes being the movement between two things and sometimes existing in its own world: that a transition can have different modes. From my perspective, it can also be an opportunity for a rhythmic shift: a musical movement into a new state, or an opportunity to break up the fatigue of rhythmic monotony. Importantly, this shift can also be a gesture of crescendo/build/*Steigerung*, or the opposite; in *promiscuous/cities*, sometimes transitions take place between scenes with wildly different stakes.

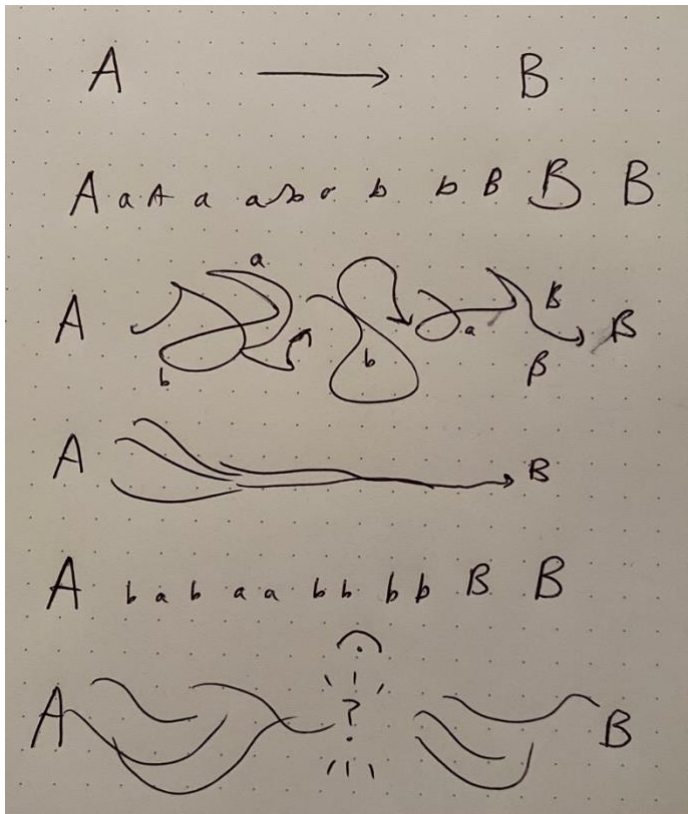
AC: Transitions are so often underestimated as a state in performance! I suspect we’re lingering on the transition because we feel it’s full of (queer) potential. By its very nature, it moves us from one thing (a mood, a physical arrangement, a lighting state, etc.) to another. Scenes have a certain feel and rhythm, of course, but the transition is a particular mode where the (ever-new) dynamics and energy and scene-setting happens. Em, your response leads me to wonder if we need a new term—not a crossfade, but a blur, or queer mess, or. . .

ELW: Collision?

AC: Oh, I like that! We might ponder that. In this case, are we thinking of the transition as a coming together of things from two directions: a gentle (or not so gentle) crash? Em, you also used the words “mesh” and “smush” in our chat, which I enjoyed a lot!

MC: Absolutely—there’s definitely something in the setting-up; the movement from A to B is only part of the point. It’s the question of whether you keep the energy from the scene before, or go with the scene coming up, and this can be different in each instance. Musically, the transition

might reframe things we've heard in A and suggest fragments of B, or drive us swiftly into the tempo of B, or hold on to the last remnants of A while B crashes toward us. . .



Meta illustrates some potentials for transitions or movements between A and B. This method is part of Meta's dramaturgical graphic scoring practice, which they use to process and articulate work through a musical lens. This method is currently in development (see Murray, Campbell, and Cohen 2021).

ELW: I think part of the interesting thing about light in terms of transition/s is that it's always in relation to the objects and people—i.e., light hits something and allows you to see it. It's in relation to the physical, but there's something intangible, maybe? You don't see the beam of light until it hits something like a body or haze or the floor, so its visual presence is always relational. It makes me want to think more about the relationship between sound and objects/bodies.

MC: I think in performance, sound shares this relational quality with light: for me, it is about regarding performing bodies or inanimate objects as innately musical things, so they are able to relate to each other musically (and to music or sound that you might put against them). This might be about the rhythm of a gesture, or the tempo and dynamics of a lighting shift. In music, we talk about sparseness and density of texture, and we could think about this in terms of the density in the space. So, when I'm balancing the type of sound I will put against a movement or a light, this is also about whether the sound is in harmony with or in opposition to the action of the stage.

AC: I suppose this ties in with my aims toward a dramaturgy of punctuation.<sup>3</sup> I will see a head turn as punctuation. . .

MC: For me, that's a great example of musical thinking in action: although you can't hear it, that head turn has a visual rhythm that relates rhythmically to all the other movement.

AC: There is something about space and time—the transition as a particularly heightened moment of temporal and spatial organization.

MC: To return to Barba's frameworks, the transition might put us more in tune with the organic or dynamic dramaturgy, rather than the narrative; we are freed from the signifying function of scenes, and the moment is instead driven by “the rhythms and dynamisms affecting the spectators on a nervous, sensorial and sensual level” (2000, 60).

AC: Yeah, 90 percent of those transitions were about energetic shift, 10 percent about getting somewhere else to make the new physical arrangement required for a “scene.” That does point me back to Lyotard, too.

## Conclusion

We are just at the start of this conversation, really, but thinking about the transition has fired the three of us up and provided an avenue for us to put our individual but interrelated queer slants (Ahmed 2006) and practices together in collaborative thinking built on our collaborative making. That is something really exciting emerging from PBR in the field of live performance for us.

## Notes

1. Lachlan Philpott, *promiscuous/cities*. Australian premiere production, Woof Theatre at Theatre Works, Melbourne/Naarm, January 19–24, 2023. Dir. Alyson Campbell, Sound design Meta Cohen, Lighting Design Emma Lockhart-Wilson, Set Design Leon Salom, and Costume Design Casey Harper-Wood. See <https://www.alyson-campbell.com/>.
2. Mary Overlie's Six Viewpoints Study offers a vocabulary to dancers and other artists. The six viewpoints are Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement, and Story. Bogart expands on these for theatre to nine viewpoints (or more, including more recent additions of pitch, dynamic and timbre to do with voice). The most well-known nine address elements of time (tempo, duration, repetition, kinaesthetic response) and space (architecture, topography, spatial relationships, gesture and shape).
3. I thank my former colleague Paul Monaghan for this description of my work as a director.

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## Listening Otherwise: Relationalities of the Othered

Mark V. Campbell

Listening is one of the directions in which I find practice-based research offering some stimulating scholarly directions; this has me both excited and cautious. The recent collection of essays *Remixing Music Studies: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Cook* (Aguilar et al. 2020) is an interesting intervention, bringing a concept from popular music (the remix) into conversation with fields such as musicology. As the title of this book makes clear, its essays all engage with the scholarly works and legacy of Nicholas Cook; unfortunately, it is not at all engaged with remix studies. The editors state their desire to “attempt to address all musics on an equal basis, without splitting ourselves in advance into subgroups of ‘musicologists,’ ‘theorists’ and ‘ethnomusicologists’” (i). The use of Laudan Nooshin’s term *music studies* in the title of the book signals the possibility of a less divisive scholarly practice of studying music (Nooshin 2008). As a practising DJ, and as a scholar within the field of remix studies, I find the desire to break down the rigid subgroups and their active policing of boundaries a welcome breath of fresh air. Although the citing of remix studies scholars is sparse in *Remixing Music Studies* and there is an absence of some of the key thinkers in the field, such as Eduardo Navas or Owen Gallagher, I remain hopeful that the desire to break down disciplinary rigidities leads to a robust engagement with the field of remix studies. My hope is practice-based research can contribute to this much-needed effort.

From where I am positioned in the Global North, as a child of the AfroCaribbean diaspora, much of the quibbling within music fields has done little to stimulate or attract new scholars and ideas to the urgent issues of our disciplines, nor to address the multiple crises of our contemporary moment. Areas of interest in my research trajectory are remix music cultures and hip-hop studies, but my overall commitment is to the field of Black studies. This means my ideas and concerns are always intimately tied to justice, antiracism, and the flourishing of Black life. When practice-based research yields nothing generalizable, as is sometimes the charge, the desire for generalizable knowledge should be under the same scrutiny as the work of practice-based scholarship. In this short piece, I locate myself to both signal the communities to whom I am accountable and to make unequivocally clear my rejection of the continual valorization of neutrality littered across academic disciplines.

The exciting work of Dylan Robinson (2020), Georgina Born (2010), and John Rink (2017) stimulates my desire to explore practices of listening, both in preceding creation, but also in audience consumption of sample-based hip-hop. For DJs, a significant portion of our creative practice is listening, both otherwise and relationally. This means listening to music to select for an audience, listening to a track’s tempo in order to mix songs and, in the realm of music production, also listening to music to sample. Listening otherwise is a practice of imagining an alternative sonic representation, an envisioning of how a track might be remixed or sampled. Such an act of listening is part of the sonic, as a “constellation of acts,” also involving critical listening, an act that can decolonize our listening habits, as Robinson (2020) urges. My excitement is piqued when we begin to spend time exploring the various ways acts of listening diverge from the seemingly natural and

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linear way we are trained to listen in conservatory settings. DJ cultures, including the act of remixing, exemplify a kind of listening that is more than just “otherwise,” but is also relational, particularly during live performances. In a move that might interest reception studies scholars, DJs always remain attuned to live audience feedback, which in turn influences the textures, shape, and duration of songs, mixes, and remixes. The concerns of those interested in relational musicology then can easily see the importance of the social as an intrinsic participant in the performative possibilities of DJs.

An effective remix captures nostalgia, balances the new with the old, and commits itself to sonic innovation in relation with an audience. The kinds of relational musicological practices called for by Nicholas Cook (2013) and Georgina Born (2010) appear plausible paths for beginning to bridge the vast valley between fields in music studies, and especially the embracing of remix studies. DJ mixes, especially the practice of remixing, require a kind of contrapuntal listening that is always attuned to audience and musical genre. Dancing audiences burst forth with whistles of appreciation, soul claps double timed to the DJ’s beat and, in some scenarios, lighters flickering and hands slapping walls. These activities of appreciation are listened to and observed by the DJ as a kind of participant observation while in the midst of a performance. The listening practice of the DJ then exists in a set of plural relations, intimately intertwined within one moment of time and space with the live audience. This is a sociality that cannot be separated from the playing of the music, the DJ’s own selectivity, and their mixing techniques. A move toward understanding the performative strategies of remixers and DJs helps us move past a desire for musical meaning and toward a deciphering of what music does (Wynter 1992). The interiority and intimacy of the DJ’s own listening practice, laid bare for audiences to enjoy, is an exciting direction for practice-based research to explore. In fact, there is a pre-performance act of listening, when selecting which tracks to play, that can nicely contrast to the improvisatory and relational aspects of live performance.

If we extend these concerns of listening otherwise, both relationally and contrapuntally, to the hip-hop producer, whose disregard for copyright laws at times parallels the remixer, the practice of sampling is a potentially ripe arena to gather insights about listening as a practice. Since the landmark 1991 legal case of *Grand Upright Music vs. Warner Brothers Music*, in which hip-hop artist Biz Markie’s sample-heavy album lost its case for the creative use of music by Gilbert O’Sullivan, sampling has experienced increased levels of scrutiny and prohibitive levels of licensing fees. Prior to 1991, few music scholars, not even those in popular music studies, were interested in how producers such as the Bomb Squad or Marley Marl listened to the music they sampled. A practice-based research inquiry opens up the sociological, musicological, and ethnomusicological imagination to hip-hop’s subcultural music creation practices. Works such as Anthony Kwame Harrison’s “What Happens in the Cabin. . .? An Arts-Based Autoethnography of Underground Hip Hop Song Making” (2014) are promising avenues by which to advance a practice-based research discussion in hip-hop studies.

In John Rink’s 2020 keynote address at the Helsinki Music Centre, “Between Practice and Theory: Performance Studies and/as Artistic Research,” what became clear to me is that many of my existing concerns around the interiority of Afrosonic life and the indivisibility of researcher and performer are potentially in conversation with those outside of Black studies. Rink argues for an “equality, diversity and inclusivity agenda within performance studies,” which if not reproducing the pitfalls of the diversity, equity and inclusion industry, might provide interesting pathways beyond the rigid disciplinary boundaries and the policing of music fields (2020). If indeed a desire for the artists’ own intimacy with their creation process can fuel new research questions, reconsider discourses, or



interrupt colonially inherited and harmful ideas, then the possibilities to find ethical and justice focused research trajectories in music studies appears promising. With the human at the centre, the human in all of its multiple formations, beyond “Western Man,” practice-based research offers a sustainable pathway to continue to keep the human and human agency at the centre of our scholarly efforts. With a focus on introspection, reflection, and interiority, one can imagine a future of robust, inclusive, and impactful studies of music.

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## Practice-Based Research in Three Personal Turns

Sherrie Tucker

### I. Telling Performances

My middle-aged but much younger self interviews older jazzwomen (about the age I am now). I write about, but don't play, jazz. Somehow, I get the idea that I need to break out my old flute and jam with musicians before I know the right questions. I think, "This needs to be part of my practice."

- I can't believe Professor Spencer let me into Combos.
- I am terrible. *Because I don't do this. Dub. . .*
- So why am I doing this? I will never know the right questions.
- I love my combo. Sometimes we "click."
- No, no, no—no one told me there was a recital.
- I hire a hypnotist who tries to curb my vibrato.
- I will never know the right questions.
- There are days when I still miss my combo.

Flooded with doubt, euphoria, frustration, flow, embarrassment, joy . . . leads me—not to the right questions (perhaps to different ones?), but more importantly—to a practice of "telling performances." Most interviewees played in big bands that never recorded. Except in their bodies. I notice when they describe a very particular memory of playing, something changes in the telling. Tell me more! Tell me everything you remember about that arrangement, that night, that performance. Call the play-by-play from where you sit or stand. Rhythm section. Trumpets. Bones. Reeds. What happened? Who came in when? What did you do?

So much gets told in these telling performances! All oral history is always performance. But in these moments of particularity, it turns, somehow, kinesthetic! I hear it. I feel it. I try to figure out what is exchanged and to write in such a way that some of the performance reaches you, too.

### II. Torquing Back

*Egad.* How did I write an entire book on *swing bands* without so much as *glancing at* the dance floor? I thought I was in my body. I thought I was in the music. Let's listen to the telling performances of social dancers this time. Same generation as the *Swing Shift* women, all of us ten years older. Yet, déjà vu, somehow, I think I need to learn to swing dance to ask the right questions.

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Sherrie Tucker is professor of American Studies at the University of Kansas. She is the author of *Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen* (Duke, 2014) and *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Duke, 2000), and co-editor, with Nichole T. Rustin, of *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Duke, 2008).

- Plus: I love to dance. Minus: I hail from the free-form acid dancing generation that considered couple dancing oppressive. We danced with the wind and groups and mostly ourselves.
- Hello energizer bunny students in vintage outfits. Can you help an old professor?
- Hello again. Remember me? I drop in from time to time, perpetually at square one. . .
- The body remembers what the body remembers.
- I ask a question at a conference. Dance scholar Christi Jay Wells takes my hand. A lesson in space, weight, velocity, lean, crouch, skeleton, torque.
- I never get good at swing dance. But I learn to feel when I am pulled off balance, or feel nothing back, or find myself turned in a new direction. I learn that torque is not a metaphor but an important concept for democratic practice.

Dance floor democracy is practice-based research grounded in the inevitability and necessity of weight-sharing and the different ways this plays out. Ways that harm bodies. Ways that aspire to, and sometimes achieve, mutual benefit that allow us to do together what we cannot do alone. Flying. Turning. I get better at understanding that I cannot see everyone, and that tomorrow night is different—the palpable, fleeting, incomplete. A practice. Because if it isn't, I fall into the habit of imagining I dance alone and analyze correctly.

Trying to write from many partial perspectives.

I write the book at least three times.

It takes fucking forever. I finally let it go.

### III. Improvising Across Abilities

No more so-called sole-authored books. Besides, not many World War II-generation interviewees left. I'm fourteen years older, with a new ADHD diagnosis, and a memory less able to support delusions of expertise, at least in public. I want to play and talk about it later. I want to share weight among others and learn something new. Saying yes to collaborative research opportunities through Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP). Tempted to say "Yes" to Pauline Oliveros and her new project, Adaptive Use Musical Instruments (AUMI)—instruments that are free of charge, and playable by everyone. You move how you move—and you are a musician! All abilities. All bodies. All ages. No experience necessary.

- But I don't do this! *This is not my practice*. I don't do technology. I don't do disability studies. I am not a musician. I don't do the present. AUMI is cool, but it isn't me.
- Pauline: "What do you do when you do your work?"
- Ask for and listen to stories. Learn from musicians and dancers about bodies, difference, democracy. Everything I say leads back to AUMI research as something I already do (or want to do).
- Shocks of recognition: the absence of bodies from my field of vision. Where did children with disabilities go to school in my town? Which bodies (of any race or gender) are disqualified from today's definitions of jazz virtuosity, as defined by high school bands, university performance programs, and jazz careers?

- *What if* AUMI invites the inclusive practice and sounds of surprise that I love in the parts of jazz I love? *What if* its intended practice of weight-sharing is more inclusive, and *what if* it genuinely proceeds from the assumption that improvising across abilities generates new knowledge, new music, and transforms consciousness?
- I'm in. I still think I'm signing up to observe and write.
- Yes! Says Pauline. Welcome to the project. Start an AUMI improvisation group where you live.
- Improvising across abilities is not a metaphor. It is not a topic. It is a practice.

Starts and stops and awkward pauses. Humility. Finding people who want to play. Facing my own ableism. Learning tactics for accepting my ADHD as part of who I am. Explaining AUMI again and again: “it uses camera tracking”—eyes glazing over—until we play. And we do! Doing it in Kansas since 2011.

No way to write about it without doing it. Writing anyway. Playing anyway. Even if I don't write. Playing with others and writing with others. Writing because we want to share what we have done and learned. Inviting submissions because we want to learn what others have done and learned.

Our collectively edited book about what people do with AUMI is coming out soon!

Download AUMI at <https://aumiapp.com>.

### The Triadic Contours of Ethics in Practice-Based and Interdisciplinary Research

Pil Hansen

As I launch a new research program, titled “Strengths-Based Dramaturgies of Accessibility in the Performing Arts,” questions about ethics are at the forefront of my mind.<sup>1</sup>

The thoughts on ethics I share here contribute to what I understand as a large and complex topic, much of which remains beyond my reach. My aim here is, nevertheless, to begin contouring the triad of partly overlapping ethical spheres that I operate within and suggest a few approaches that may help me and others navigate them. These spheres are (1) situational and relational ethics; (2) equity, diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility (EDIA); and (3) institutional ethics procedures. Yes, it is a lot; that feeling partakes in the possibilities and complications I wish to consider.

I am implicated as a physically disabled dance dramaturg, a female professor with English as my second language, and a white settler in Canada. My research is in the interdisciplinary field of performing arts psychology and tends to articulate, develop, and examine strategies of creation, learning, and community engagement within the performing arts through practice-based and empirical research. The new research program named above aims to do so with a focus on the strengths of access-deserving groups that face creation methods, industry norms, and educational systems that are not built for or with us. The ethics of this research program are therefore further complicated by differences (or barriers) between intersecting abilities (cross-disability) and between artistic and empirical research methodology.

The broad field of practice-based research (PBR), which this journal issue spotlights, can be more adaptable and responsive to socio-environmental changes than fields with standardized methodologies or dominating theoretical paradigms. The changes encountered at this time<sup>2</sup> motivate PBR researchers to reconsider research ethics. Recent publications on ethics in artistic research, applied theatre, research-based theatre, and dance research methodologies indicate that overlapping communities of knowledge are responding to this call (e.g., Candelero and Henley 2023; Cox et al. 2023; Laukkannen et al. 2022; Sadeghi-Yekta and Prendergast 2022; MacNeill and Bolt 2019). A synthesizing voice has not yet emerged from this rich exchange, but some repeated themes are raised across multiple sources. These themes lean toward participatory research parameters, particularly as advanced through Indigenous research, where Indigenous epistemologies and agency are reflected in research designs, often as forms of listening and responsiveness to community, spirituality, and land (Ruby et al. 2022, 25).

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**Pil Hansen** is professor of performing arts at the University of Calgary, president of PSi, founding editor of the Routledge book series *Expanded Dramaturgy*, founding member of Vertical City Performance, and a dance/devising dramaturg. Her empirical and PaR experiments examine dynamics of memory, learning, and socio-environmental relations in creative processes, most recently with a focus on accessibility. Hansen has dramaturged more than thirty works, and her research is widely published. She authored the monograph *Performance Generating Systems in Dance* (Intellect, 2022) and edited the books *Performing the Remembered Present* (Methuen, 2017) and *Dance Dramaturgy* (Palgrave, 2015).

## Relational and Situational Ethics

Informed by the iterative and emergent characteristics of PBR, the themes mentioned above guide researchers when making choices and responding to discovered insights on their feet. They can be summarized as principles about relating to consenting human and more-than-human participants in situations that emerge during the research with reflexivity about power dynamics and flexibility about how the work is done. The themes are of *caring* for and *being of service* to the people and more-than-people who participate in the research, of *listening* to them and *noticing when to slow down or change path*, of *reciprocal reflection* and *self-reflection*, and of *sharing agency and authorship*. Practice-based researchers are learning more about how our implicit bias (know how) and knowledge claims (know what) are manifested in our research designs (see MacNeill and Bolt 2019, 6) and how they may disadvantage the people and more-than-people we engage. We are becoming more aware that our tendency to draw on subjective experiences, push boundaries and deconstruct norms, or intervene in socio-cultural practices as we develop and apply creative methods have unintended consequences.

This awareness is essential when collaborating with mixed abilities researchers, artists, and community partners to articulate and develop strengths-based dramaturgies of accessibility in the performing arts. It raises questions about how we can design collaborative research processes with space to listen, reflect, and revise our path.

## Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDIA)

Relational and situational awareness is strengthened by a parallel increase in EDIA training and measures within artistic and scholarly organizations. We are becoming better at recognizing excluding norms and hierarchies at the foundation of systems of creation, education, knowledge, and validation in the performing arts.

In some contexts, this development is dependent on shifting socio-political actions; in others, legal equity foundations provide a somewhat more stable foundation. Commitments to Indigenous reconciliation, decolonization, anti-racism, and—to a lesser extent—accessibility and gender equity are being made by organizations. When this work extends beyond positionality, EDIA committees consult representatives from equity-deserving, marginalized groups while working to establish procedures for, for example, bias screening, anti-racist training, disability accommodations, and more equitable distribution of opportunity.

The ethics practices of the primary disciplines that are combined in my research program, performing arts studies and psychology, have been affected by increased EDIA awareness. This is reflected in research instruments, advisory committees, and research teams that have become more inclusive and representative. However, a (sometimes ideological) sense of necessity to research EDIA topics is higher in performing arts disciplines that operate within associated theoretical paradigms such as feminist and gender theory, critical race theory, and critical disability theory.

In Canada, the population group that benefits from existing norms is smaller than the sum of marginalized groups. In addition to facing the large problem of systemic discrimination and barriers, marginalized groups also struggle to form a majority where we have agency because we cannot be



included under a single set of norms. If our agency remains parked in the crowded lot of EDIA all at once, conflicting barrier-reducing needs and priorities can undermine efforts.

The intention of “Strengths-Based Dramaturgies of Accessibility” is to shift from *accommodating* disabled artists within ableist norms to instead design methods that *take point of departure in the strengths* of the disabled artists. To be of *service* to someone, I envision the program of research as a constellation of spaces, each placing a different group of disabled artists with similar strengths at its centre, and then identifying secondary and tertiary outer circles of the cross-disability and intersectional experiences in the room. The centre of each space will be strengths-based, whereas the outer concentric circles will be “accommodated” on the terms of this centre when possible.

EDIA is being mobilized to decentre research in the performing arts from its historically privileged (white, colonial, male, abled, etc.) points of reference. Perhaps this EDIA work makes it possible to regroup around a multiplicity of differently inclusive centres, while drawing on networked connections for collaborative agency?

### **Institutional Ethics Procedures**

Institutional ethics protocols are often seen as a poor fit for relational ethics and EDIA (e.g., Hibberd 2020; Bolt and Vincs 2015). Many PBR researchers have struggled through ethics board application forms and reviews that require every step of a research process to be predefined, cast researchers and participants in a hierarchy, and understand anonymity as the standard for managing risks of harm.

Although I share these frustrations, I also recognize that two decades ago it was an ethics protocol form that first asked me to consider all degrees of discomfort, loss of agency, or negative exposure as a risk of harm in need of mitigation. It was also an ethics form that first required me to account for who benefits and commit to delivering such benefits. I am, in part, grateful that we are forced to push past our frustration to answer these questions. Over the years, my answers have no doubt been equally frustrating for ethics boards. Like others, my response to “who benefits” has been to hand ownership of co-developed interventions over to community partners and to co-author with participants (e.g., Hibberd 2020). My method of risk reduction has involved partners in designing study objectives and methods over iterative cycles, resulting in multiple updates of our ethics protocol.

Models of co-authorship are becoming more widespread, and ethics protocols are becoming more responsive to PBR and participatory research models. Perhaps PBR researchers’ service on EDIA committees and ethics boards, and our engagement with the push and pull of ethics reviews, have contributed to this development.

My research program crosses practice-based development with empirical experiments. The latter requires preplanned steps with systematic methods, elimination of threats to validity, transparent repeatability, and clarity about the limitations of results. The former requires an iterative process of emergent, situated, and often subjective development with space for co-creation, listening, reflexivity, and flexible objectives. Although some of this work takes place in overlapping spaces and with overlapping collaborators, there is methodological separation between development and experimentation.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, each research activity is differently positioned on the overlapping

spheres of the ethics triad. In my case, PBR enables greater relational ethics through participatory and generative principles, whereas empirical research provides stronger procedural ethics through transparent and systematic methods. This difference, including the EDIA strengths and limitations of each position, provides me with a map to help me navigate ethics with greater awareness.

Although preliminary, perhaps this approach to considering and navigating ethical complexities can be of use to others who bring PBR into interdisciplinary projects with equity deserving groups.

## Notes

1. I would like to recognize that the thoughts shared here are informed by in-depth exchanges with my collaborator Bruce Barton.
2. Shortly after the MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements raised awareness of systemic sexism and racism, after COVID-19 made visible how expendable older adults and disabled people are to the majority, and as we begin to experience the effects of climate change more directly.
3. This design follows the interdisciplinary “Research-Based Practice” model (Hansen 2017).

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## FORUM

### New Directions in Site Performance Practice: Intersecting Methodologies in an Era of Climate Coloniality

Melanie Kloetzel

As a researcher, I am fascinated by the relationship between humans and place. From examining the smallest details of a place to considering how these details connect to larger global concerns, I adore how a single place can convey the complexity of the planet, with all its beauty and challenges.

But when I talk about “place,” I am not talking about a geographical site that may be classified and rationalized using data and statistics, or, alternatively, an abstract or symbolic place that is used to wax poetic about some theoretical trope. Rather, I understand place as a tangible, sensible partner, a corporeal conversationalist with whom I actively collaborate. We dialogue by engaging in a mutual physical practice, a practice that, although associated with a single place, ranges across time and space due to its inevitable integration with larger systems (Heddon 2007; Kloetzel 2019, forthcoming). Place, in other words, works with me to reveal ideas about the world, ideas that would never have come to the fore without the keen dialogic of “attending to place” (Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009, 6-7).

Some of you may be assuming, “Oh, she’s talking about site-specific performance,” or maybe even (due to the current timing), “Site performance was useful during the pandemic, but thank god we can go back to the theatre now.”

Yet, is this what we’re talking about? Some “field of research” that has been (always) already defined, delimited, demarcated? Or is it time to take a second look at that “field”?

I am a white settler woman living on the “ceded” lands of Treaty 7, traditional territories for the Blackfoot Confederacy, as well as the Tsuut’ina and Îyâxe Nakoda peoples. I was not born on Treaty 7 lands; I did not grow up here. I have transplanted myself from one white supremacist colonialist nation to another for a job in an institution also based on colonialist ideas and practices.

What I now know is that the labels, limitations, and experiences that are associated with me have unfortunately meant that my own long-term practice-based research in the “site performance field” has often been, at best, incomplete, and, at worst, corroborating of colonialist realities. In other words, while I have certainly investigated, dialogued with, and then presented some “form” of the sites I have researched via performance, due to my own position of privilege and the blinders that I have failed to remove as part of that privilege, such presentations have too often been inadequate, particularly in terms of exposing or challenging the white supremacist and colonialist realities that characterize each of these places.

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But that has only become evident as the realities of climate change and coloniality have taken up more and more of my consciousness. Unlike others—who do not have the privilege of having climate and coloniality as a “backseat” in their consciousness for decades of their lives—for many white, settler, and/or economically privileged individuals around the world, these realities are finally coming to the fore via the increase in experiences and/or reporting of extreme weather events, forest fires, flooding, migration, and the painfully regular and state-sanctioned murders of Black people in the United States (to name a few).

For many in the academy, these realities are transforming “established fields” and, naturally, the practice-based research within those fields. For instance, in the field of what is often called “site-specific performance”—one constructed and defined almost solely by white practitioners educated in Global North institutions dedicated to maintaining the stories, ideologies, and practices of modernity/coloniality (Machado de Oliveira 2021)—discussions and practice are starting to shift to address these realities.

In a recent Hub session concerning “place-based praxis” at the Dance Studies Association conference in Vancouver in 2022, such a shift or, really, a reshuffling of assumptions, helped pave the way for an illuminating discussion that, while not directly addressing “site performance,” had direct implications for it. Led by the Indigenous practitioners in the room, “place” became much more than something to investigate and perform. Rather, place was revealed as a crucible for all existence, all knowledge, all relationships—and individual places and the search for “true” stories that grew out of these places (with particular attention to more-than-human relations) offered an altered view of what place-based praxis could become, a view that was, at times, quite different from established tropes around “site” or “site-specificity.”

Such experiences are helping to chart new directions for practice-based research (PBR) that link place and performance.

One of these new directions can be seen in a recent project I have been involved in called VINES. The VINES project—which developed from a collaboration between me and Brandy Leary—draws from workshop-based practices that have been developing in the field for many years. Less focused on end results (i.e., a set performance), the PBR that occurs in these workshops aims to encourage participants to explore what it might mean to dialogue with place through specific embodied activities.<sup>1</sup>

A key attribute linking many of these PBR workshops is their link to posthumanism. Taking cues from more-than-human beings<sup>2</sup>—whether biotic or abiotic—these workshops may try to change human perspectives and/or lessen anthropocentric tendencies by focusing on what *else*—other than humans—exists in a given place. In *BIRD BRAIN* (2000–2008), for example, Jennifer Monson encouraged participants in urban spaces in the United States to tune into and emulate the sensory capacities of migratory birds (see <https://birdbraindance.org>); similarly, for *The Abbot Dances* (2014), Vicky Hunter asked participants, who were part of a project taking place in a 400-year-old Almshouse in England, to dialogue with building materials, like stone, that have both shaped and witnessed the world around them in meaningful ways (Hunter 2019).

But what happens when these posthumanist PBR workshops take into account the effects of coloniality that indelibly mark *each place* where they occur? Does anything shift through such

acknowledgement? Or, in more flippant terms, if we are examining bird migration, do we *really* need to pay attention to coloniality?

I could answer these queries a number of ways. Without question, coloniality—which cannot be separated from extractive capitalism (Sheller 2023; Figueroa Helland and Lindgren 2016; Sultana 2022)—has impacted every species and material on this planet. From this perspective, then, we must answer that, yes, coloniality enters into posthumanist workshops that explore bird migration (for example, via noting how migration patterns are changing due to colonially induced climate change) or stone (whose quarrying and construction, in this case, was funded by the slave trade).<sup>3</sup>

But the question can also be answered in other ways, as I am learning from various Indigenous artists and knowledge keepers on Turtle Island with whom I've been lucky enough to share certain research endeavours.<sup>4</sup>

For instance, in the project I mentioned, VINES, we have been delving into the world of plant morphology, propagation, and growth patterns to consider what it might mean for humans to embody the physical language of vining plants. Specifically, through meticulous research into the movement sensibilities of certain vine species, we have been developing an iterative, improvisational, and adaptable movement vocabulary that stems from the dialogues we have observed between these species and the places where they live. While exploring the more-than-human time scales of these plant-place dialogues, we have also contemplated how this movement vocabulary can become viable for human interpretation (and observation), in part through the lens of time-lapse videography.<sup>5</sup>



VINES in process, immersing ourselves into more-than-human movement. Direction by Melanie Kloetzel, dramaturgy by Brandy Leary, participants pictured include Cindy Ansah, Kaili Che, Natalie Fullerton, Hannah Isbister, Stephanie Jurkova, Taylor McLeod, and Reese Wilson. Photos by author.

This sounds familiar enough. Yet the research methodology for VINES has taken some turns that have been both unexpected and destabilizing. Some of these turns have been due to COVID delays and procedures (preventing touch, for example, for years). But others have arisen due to the knowledge bases and perspectives of the participants. For instance, one participant, Hannah Isbister, a dance artist of Métis heritage concurrently enrolled in a long-term course on Métis plant knowledge, deeply affected the research process when she decided to share with us Métis protocols for cross-species introductions and relationships.

As we considered her offering and tentatively explored what this might mean for a mixed group of settler and non-settler participants in the context of VINES, a very pressing concern developed over these protocols in terms of reciprocity and accountability. As Isbister clarified, cross-species relationships in many Indigenous cultures are predicated on the notion of *giving back*. If the vine is offering knowledge to us so freely, how can we be both reciprocal and accountable to that relationship? This was a radical notion to many of us in the group. What could we possibly give back to a vine growing along a railway fence? What would it want or need? Could we honour the knowledge it has offered by extending the learning to our relations with other species? Could sharing this knowledge with others via performance be one form of giving back, or is that just another colonial/extractive instinct?<sup>6</sup>

These were questions raised by a settler (me), as well as by other settler participants. But I would venture that these questions are critical as we consider the intersection of posthumanism and coloniality and how (or whether) this intersection is important theoretically, but also corporeally and cross-culturally.

Without question, we need to keep in mind the extractivist impacts of coloniality on all species. But this PBR indicates a further need, or perhaps an altered perspective. In other words, beyond demanding a condemnation of coloniality/extractivism in all its manifestations, this perspective also requires honouring the wisdom of Indigenous groups (and, in this particular situation due to Isbister's knowledge base, Métis peoples) who emphasize the need to approach any place-based praxis or cross-species communication with reciprocity, accountability and relationality (McGregor, Restoule, and Johnston 2018).

Yet, interestingly, while clear gaps of knowledge and understanding exist around the frameworks of accountability and reciprocity within our process, the potential for instilling a sense of *relationality* has appeared as a real contribution. In short, posthumanist PBR projects like VINES, which have a deep investment in honouring and embodying knowledge from the more-than-human community, may offer a generative and impactful means for fostering cross-species connections.

For instance, in VINES, participants rigorously embody the growth patterns of vining species, performing highly detailed, iterative movements *in dialogue with* the environment in which they exist. The work demands that participants enter an altered state—slowing down, moving with a hyperfocused persistence and intentionality, pulling back on vision as a priority, and keenly attending to the smallest details of the ground or wall surface (and their fellow vines) via the sense of touch. In doing so, the participants remark on the deep sense of empathy, respect, and, importantly, *kinship* they feel for the vine in question. Indeed, this is precisely what Isbister found. In her words, “I’ve never understood so deeply the intense perseverance of plants. . . . This is a helpful experience for people to see plants as kin.”<sup>7</sup>





VINES in process, exploring the perseverance of vines via the human body in multiple, disparate sites. Direction by Melanie Kloetzel, dramaturgy by Brandy Leary, participants pictured include Cindy Ansah, Kaili Che, Natalie Fullerton, Hannah Isbister, Stephanie Jurkova, Taylor McLeod, and Reese Wilson. Photos by author.

As we continue this process, and others like it, I am excited to see how respectful and empathetic immersion into more-than-human knowledge systems *in conjunction with* the demands of reciprocity and accountability can impact practice-based research. For, while the aforementioned “attending to place” might still act as an effective means for ethically grounding the site performance field (Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009; Smith 2018), as we learn from and/or uncover multiple methodologies—particularly from Indigenous practitioners who address extractive coloniality, but with a keen eye on accountability, relationality, and reciprocity—we may find more holistic and effectual ways to address the dire circumstances we find ourselves in. In the end, here is my hope: that in the generations to come, there may be individuals telling “true stories” about how we deepened our understanding of and *care for* our more-than-human kin through embodied practices that prioritized accountability and reciprocity among all species.

## Notes

1. Many practitioners in the site performance field engage in workshop-based practices. Some of these include Sandra Reeve, Nigel Stewart, Sondra Fraleigh, Karen Barbour, Rachel Sweeney, Victoria Hunter, and many others. These workshops can take place with those inside or outside the “professional arts community,” or with some combination of these groups.
2. While popularized by David Abram in 1996, *more-than-human* is a term that rests on Indigenous philosophies that have existed since time immemorial. The term is intended to point to the larger systems and beings that share this planet.
3. Likewise, questions about how or whether settler/imperial academics have *extracted* posthuman concepts from Indigenous peoples without acknowledgement demonstrate that posthumanism is inextricably linked to coloniality (Bignall and Rigney 2019).
4. I would like to offer my deep appreciation to Chantal Stormsong Chagnon, Sandra Lamouche, Starr Muranko, Cole Alvis and Jacob Crane for supporting this learning. <https://caw-wac.com/about-caw/>.
5. For more on VINES, see <https://www.kloetzelandco.com/portfolio/vines/>.
6. In truth, this conversation gets more complicated by the fact that the vine species we were in specific dialogue with—the yellow clematis or *clematis tangutica* (which hails from high mountain areas in India and China)—has been labelled a noxious weed by the Alberta Invasive Species Council.

7. Hannah Isbister, research process documentation, August 24, 2022. Another participant, Camille Mori, voiced a similar thought: “One thing that stuck with me about this project was a comment made on one of the days regarding how embodying plant life in the human body can work towards creating a relationship with more-than-human life around us, and can create some kind of empathic connection. I certainly felt that in myself throughout this process and it makes me think about how that can be translated in the sharing of this work.” Email communication from Mori, August 29, 2022.

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## Practice-Based Research as Reciprocal Protocol: Constellations of Care in *The Seventh Fire*

Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen

*Constellation 1: The sounds of a warm fire crackle, voices laugh, drawing the audience—who we acknowledge as visitors—in from the foyer into the 4D sound system of the Lobe presentation space for *The Seventh Fire*,<sup>1</sup> an eighty-minute immersive audio performance inspired by ceremony, serving as a portal to dreams and the story of sisters Daanis and Nimise, and their grandmother Nokomis. As we enter the space, we walk under cedar boughs and the studio transforms into a lodge. Lighting suggests early dawn. More cedar, some boughs resting in a circle in the centre—a nest disguised as a fire. Dark mats spin out from the centre like petals. Some chairs hold the outer area of the lodge. A “Lodge Keeper” hands out blankets and smaller cushions as visitors settle in. They are invited to lie down, stand, or sit for the duration of the piece; their comfort is their prerogative. The fire sparks and the lodge darkens, a feeling of shadow.*

This place. This lodge. . . is made for dreams.

As a theatre maker, I am learning that my research practice comes from within. It comes from a practice of beingness that we as Indigenous people have carried for millennia; it’s a practice that we’re remembering and it’s a practice of reclaiming and it’s a practice of ongoing defiance and peacekeeping. We keep the peace because we understand what it is to lose access to our privilege: forced onto small plots of land, waiting in the silence until our children return to us season after season, to not know how to enter a lodge or hold a pipe or speak a greeting that our great-grandmothers can understand.

*The Seventh Fire* is a new theatre form, and it was a long journey to realize it, birthed through many women’s hands, particularly with sound designer Mishelle Cuttler and a matriarchal creative team. Could we create a show that would allow our visitors to experience feeling how I feel after I’ve done ceremony? How could we invite visitors to connect to the medicine that lives within them in order to co-create a future we all need? Our deep collaboration involved myself and our associate sound designer/technical director as Anishinaabekwe artists; the rest were settler and racialized artists: all questions were always welcomed and always considered. And as is frequently the case with theatre, questions often centred around whether or not settler audiences would understand, whether they needed more or less (insert blank here). Eventually, I realized I wasn’t making this for them, I was making it for us—for my Anishinabek and Cree and prairie cousins, and also for my Coast Salish relations on whose territory I have been visiting for over thirty years.

*Constellation 2: Land acknowledgements are actually a very old protocol. The ones that have become common pre-show speeches are only a part of a longer and much more enmeshed practice. The protocol acknowledges the way that the land meets itself and our relationship to that meeting. We speak our names as a way to acknowledge our lineage of responsibility—who we are representing and who we are responsible to. We speak our intentions so that the circle holds*

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**Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen** is a tawny mix of Ojibwe/Swampy Cree and English/Irish. She is a mother, multi-hyphenate theatre artist, and scholar working across Turtle Island as a performer, playmaker, director, writer, dramaturge, curator, space-holder, and teacher. Lisa is an Associate Artist with Full Circle: First Nations Performance and Advisor for Indigenous Futures at the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival.

*us accountable. We often bring gifts. For The Seventh Fire, we acknowledged that we have come from the four directions, arriving to this land between ocean, river, and mountains. Sometimes we mentioned all the things that happened in our many-year journey and how the land has held us and our growing relationships to one another through it. We also mentioned the cost of our presence to the host nations and we sometimes presented the other communities close by (Chinatown, Hogan's Alley, Downtown Eastside) and the communities affected by the colonial project called "Canada." This was our reciprocal action. This show is our gift.*

### **What's the point in carrying something for people who don't even care?**

I have heard theatre teachers and leaders speak of theatre spaces as sacred when, in fact, theatre spaces are the opposite for some of us; in particular, they dispossess Indigenous bodies. Alongside this, the story lineage of "Canadian" theatre replicates the oppressive supremacist systems that birthed them. What is sacred is our first relation: the first fire. Star people. Animal and plant nations who kept (and keep) us alive. The embodied treaty of Indigenous theatre practice activates the sacred relationship between story and spirit through reciprocity. We can't assume ownership when we are only carriers and keepers, when our modes of research enact things like ancient protocol, lineage, ancestorship, and stewardship. Our research becomes a constellative assertion of story sovereignty, privileging what's been lost or forgotten. There is no new land to discover; there are only new relationships to honour so that each show is an act of recovery and remembrance. And each time we enter a theatre or a rehearsal hall is a moment to recognize that we do not activate spaces; rather, we meet what has pre-existed our arrival.

*Constellation 3: The lights slowly shift and the lodge brightens enough for the Lodge Keeper to ceremonially walk clockwise around the room. They hand each visitor a small bundle of seven raisins (because eight hundred blueberries would never last the run). Each palm holds their small red cloth, tied with red yarn. A prayer is spoken in the language Anishinaabemowin, and together, they are invited to pause, to see one another and eat together. We feast our ancestors. Those who chose to, do.*

### **Biskaabiiyang. We return to ourselves . . . to the light that lives inside us.**

Research as reciprocal action reminds us that before we are storytellers, we must first practice being better story keepers. After all, we do this culturally each time we ask our Elders who we've been, who we are, and how to become an ancestor the future needs. With or without theatre, the lineage of our sacred stories occupies our bloodlines and speaks through us. When we aren't busy monopolizing and extracting, we practice honouring the story bundles of our flesh. Some of us in Ndn Country are starting from scratch, thanks to the legacy of political dispossession (of land and language and lived ancestral knowing). Colonization has taught us that harm is a cultural right. We take our losses out on each other: we stop inviting, we stop allowing, we compete and grapple with the extractivism of our practice with every grant and invoice and award. We forget that long before Aristotle, Shakespeare, or Beckett, each gathering invited us to be in relationship with the sacred.

Can theatre create softer spaces where an ethos of care is equally necessary for a braver, more embodied theatre experience? Artistic Indigenous sovereignty has the potential to reject and disrupt predominant practice-based research systems so that a collective practice that honours feelings, protocols, colonial and decolonial needs, and lateral power dynamics can be legitimized in both the academic and the artist practitioner. Rather than separate the practice from the research, ancient protocols can guide us toward more fulsome contemporary relationality so that with each story, with

each teaching, with each exchange, we unlearn in order to do the undoing. Even the simplest of protocols—meeting the sunrise or asking Elders for guidance—is a circular venture that honours these notions: seek/receive/enact. Repeat. Perhaps, if we do this, political notions like “land back” might evolve theatre spaces to activate somatic care for body, mind, and spirit. Carrying such notions, practice-based research begins to invite and enable new and necessary care structures through reciprocal financial, hierarchical, and political actions of care, all while reclaiming and gathering sacred stories that assert Indigenous artistic sovereignty.

*Constellation 4: At the end of the piece, final words of thanks are spoken. Then the Lodge Keeper closes the circle by completing one final clockwise walk around the space, raising their hands to all their relations, to thank them for journeying with us, to honour the light in each visitor and the ancestors who have shared in this telling with us. This is the ceremonial way; it is our responsibility to seal this shared experience in the time and place it occurred. There is no applause, only the collective experience. Natural light spills in as the door opens. Visitors depart in their own time. It is more often quiet than not after each show. The cloth and ties are returned to a traditionally woven basket that sits beside tokens of the four elements: fire, water, earth, and air. Freshly made cedar tea awaits.*

**I am grateful for what I carry inside, for the medicine I am. Aho.**

### **Note**

1. Drawing from Anishinaabe stories and oral traditions, artist Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen invokes sound and story as the somatic link to ancestral realms. This new creation blurs time and space, bringing emotional and ancestral connection into being through deep collaboration. *The Seventh Fire* takes place in past, present, and future, above and below the earth. It is the realm of the spirit, where a better future can be co-conceived.

## Reorienting Intimacies: Felix Gonzalez-Torres's First Canadian Solo Exhibition

### A Conversation with Rui Mateus Amaral

Laura M. Coby

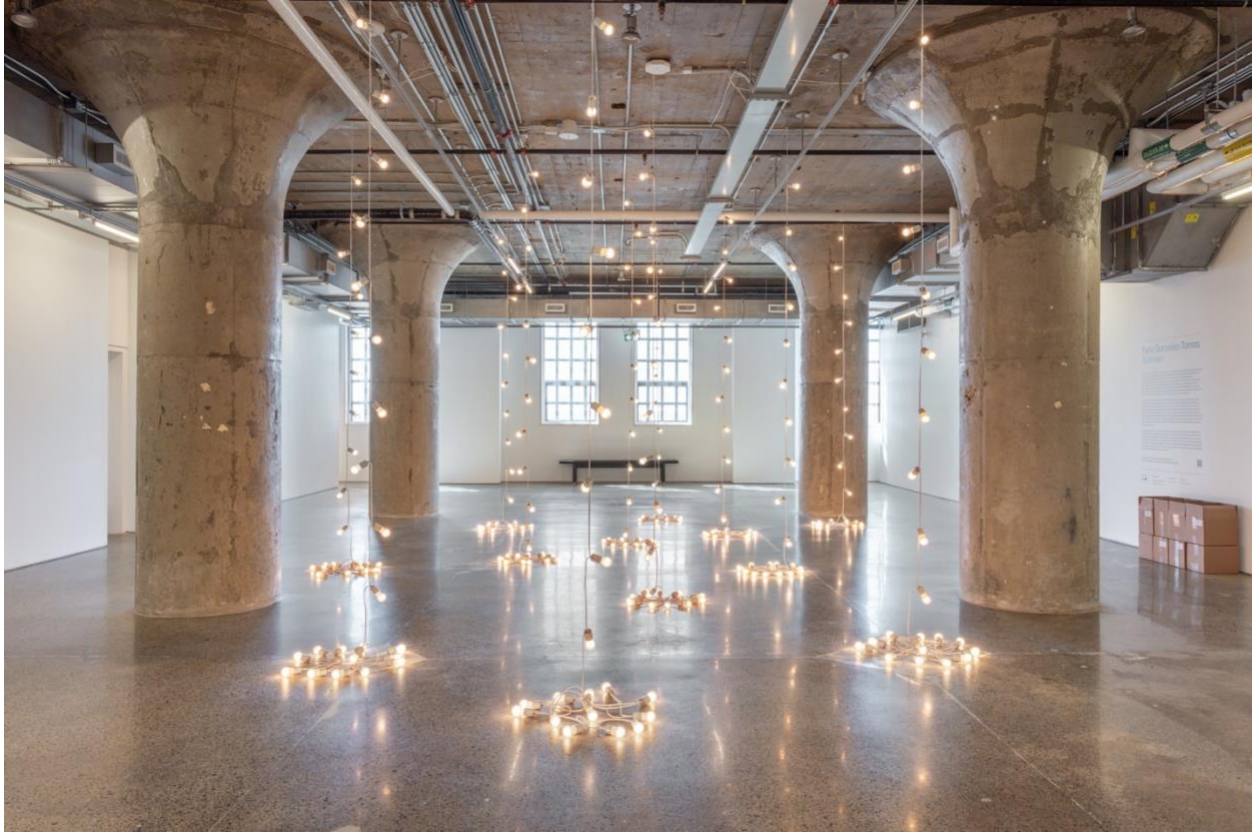
“All bodies are vulnerable to the affect of others,” writes José Esteban Muñoz (2020) in *The Sense of Brown* (51). The work of queer, contemporary artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres facilitates affectual encounters that privilege relational connections. His minimalist sculptural objects carry affect with them that may transfer onto the spectator. This is not to say these transmissions of feeling are received or interpreted monolithically by all who encounter them. Instead, Gonzalez-Torres offers affective constructs as an analytic for the spectator to relate to the works and the world around them. Perhaps the spectator might find kinship with the affective structures embedded in the work, or they might feel a solidarity between the current political moment's alignment with the feelings Gonzalez-Torres's pieces evoke. The possibilities of feeling are variable and endless. Gonzalez-Torres's works often straddle the line between public and private emotions. Specifically, he interrogates: What happens when typically private feelings of desire or mourning are made public? What does it mean to expose the most profound and intimate parts of oneself to another, and what might we risk, conjure, or attain in such an exchange? With widespread global lockdowns in our recent collective memory, we know what it is like to be isolated from one another and what it might mean for shared touch or breath to be forbidden. As we enter new phases of pandemic life, we might (re)consider what intimacy can look like. In this piece, I turn to *Summer/Winter*, the first solo exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres's work in Canada, curated by Rui Mateus Amaral, to explore Gonzalez-Torres's artworks as affectual objects that counter current systemic injustices with divergent ways of thinking, feeling, sensing, and relating.

*Summer/Winter* engages with mortality in a way that addresses life and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic and the AIDS epidemic, as well as creating space to contemplate broader ideas of intimacy, grief, pleasure, and longing. Amaral, adjunct curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto, presented *Summer/Winter* in twofold, creating a state of constant tension and transition. From March 10 to May 30, 2022, the works took on the form of *Summer*, but as the cool spring melted into summer heat, the works shifted into *Winter*, transforming the gallery space by altering several of the artworks' formations. Carefully attending to mass loss, death, and grief, this timely exhibition imagines how to persevere and find alternative means of connection and survival. Speaking to physical and emotional care work, *Summer/Winter* considers how we relate to one another and dwells in the hope of possibility and beauty. By looking to Gonzalez-Torres's work, we might adopt a Muñozian “critical methodology” of hope as a “backward glance that enacts a future vision” (Muñoz 2009, 4). In attending to the past, we might better understand and critique the present with the hope of enacting kinder, more pleasurable, communal futures.

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Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (North), 1993, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

*Summer/Winter* was staged in the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto (MOCA), an industrial block-like tower situated next to a Nestlé candy factory in the heart of the city. Scaling the industrial south-facing staircase to reach the Gonzalez-Torres exhibition on the third floor, the spectator encounters ambient sound, deep with a soothing buzz and boom. Debashis Sinha’s soundscape *in the house’s endeepended wide gracious flow* swells as one ascends the steps to *Summer*. This sonic meditation sets the scene for collective imagining alongside internal introspection through its soothing and stimulating sounds. Turning the corner into the exhibition, the first piece the spectator encounters is “Untitled” (North), one of the artist’s light strings. Cantina lights dangle from the ceiling in twelve distinct strands. The bulbs emit a warm glow that travels from the top of the light string down to the puddles of light formed on the floor. Their rigging blends into the industrial ceiling; their linearity mirrors the architectural cement columns that frame them. Once the strands reach the ground, the lights splay out into circles, mimicking the spokes of a tire or tentacles of an octopus. The light strings stagger backward, floating into the depth of the room. Showcased along the corridor are a candy pile beyond the lights, a golden curtain to the right, a suggestion of a puzzle, and a textual portrait lining the left and back walls. Directly beyond “Untitled” (North), “Untitled” (Public Opinion), a candy work, lies on the speckled concrete floor. Black rods of hard licorice carpet the floor in an organic, squoval shape. The bare patches and particularly sparse corners come from the spectator’s interaction with the piece. Though the candy can be replaced endlessly by the institution, the curator has the choice to replace the pieces or not. Amaral enlisted his colleagues at MOCA to decide how often to replace the licorice. After speaking with visitor experience guides Felicia Daisy and Charren Cheung in July 2022, I learned that for *Summer*, MOCA chose to not replace the candy. The candies sink into the ground—shimmering like broken glass, heavy like a corpse. This candy piece glistens as

the light from the windows, the other pieces, and the above fluorescent fixtures reflect off the cellophane wrappers.

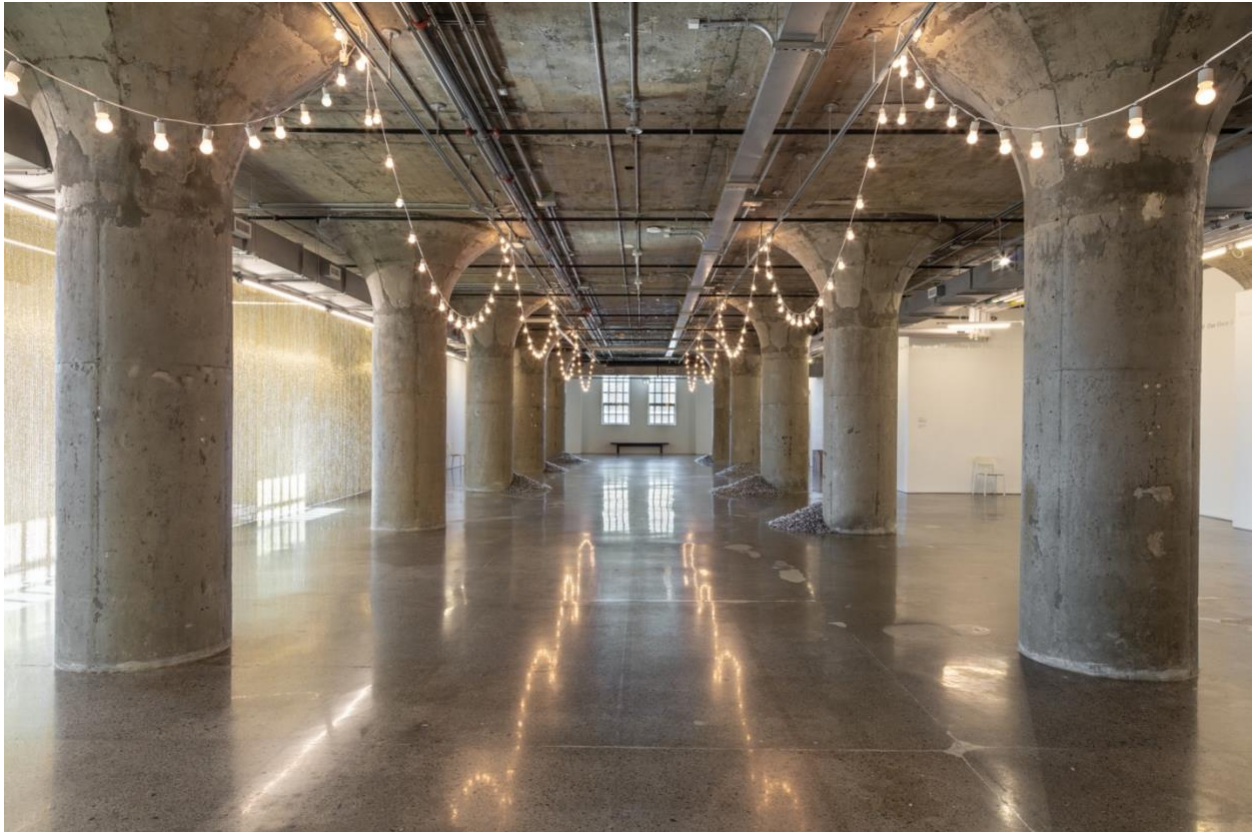


Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Summer*, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

Beyond “*Untitled*” (*Public Opinion*)’s mass that covers the ground, “*Untitled*,” the textual portrait from 1989, reflects its silver letters bordering the top of the room. Travelling around the left side and back half of the room, this textual representation of Gonzalez-Torres’s life—including monumental events from history and seemingly banal extractions from everyday life—guides the spectator’s eye up and around the gallery space. Phrases like “Harry the Dog 1983,” “CDC 1981,” and “*Loverboys* 1990” punctuate the space. On either side of “*Untitled*” (*Public Opinion*), the viewer is confronted with the remainder of *Summer*’s spoils. On the right side, the magnitude of the curtain “*Untitled*” (*Golden*) spans across a long threshold in the space. Golden beads fall from the ceiling, spilling onto the space right above the floor. Spectators touch, caress, and walk through the gilded strands like a baptism of light; this movement leaves the curtain undulating like a wave. The glittering gold curtain shrouds a portion of “*Untitled*” lining the ceiling, two simple benches, and gridded windows depicting an idyllic cityscape of Toronto. The natural light dances across the opulent disco ball-shaped beads almost completely masquerading the exhibition on the other side. Opposite “*Untitled*” (*Golden*), “*Untitled*” (*Shield*), an 7 ½ x 9 ½ inch puzzle wrapped in a plastic bag, is situated on the wall. An image of Ross Laycock, Gonzalez-Torres’s partner, is depicted across the assembled puzzle pieces. He clutches a



teddy bear and holds it in front of his face; this pose reveals a bruise on his left arm and ring on his finger. The piece is wrapped in a somewhat dingy plastic bag—all pieces perfectly aligned. Held up by small metal pins, this work's humble, delicate stature acts in contrast to the grandeur of *“Untitled” (Golden)* across the way. While the majority of the pieces are a feat of grand spatiality, even the 8 x 10 inch *“Untitled” (Shield)* brings a large-scale gravity to it. *“Untitled” (Shield)* does not have to fight for attention against the larger pieces: its coloration sits in stark contrast with the vast whiteness of the wall surrounding it, and its affective resonance envelops the spectator in tenderness.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Winter*, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

As the show shifts from *Summer* into *Winter*, several of the works morph into new shapes, new semantics. Moving from centralized pieces, *“Untitled” (Public Opinion)*, *“Untitled” (North)*, and *“Untitled” 1989* infiltrate the span of the gallery space. As the exhibition moves forward into a new season, *“Untitled” 1989* expands temporally by adding dates, events, and moments to its memory and spatially by adding length to its sprawl lining the room. The text that wraps around the exhibition now extends onto the wall by the elevators—prompting a new beginning, an extension from the start, a rewriting, a recollection. The spectator is invited to move with the piece across the room, guiding them to new encounters not only with this diary piece but the updated placements of the other works in *Winter*. The reflection of light off of the pieces seems to make some of the phrases disappear depending on one's distance from them, only coming back into view as the viewer navigates their way to or from the writing. The evolution from *Summer* to *Winter* can, of course, be seen, but it can also be smelled. The room takes on a decidedly more pungent scent of licorice in *Winter* than it did in *Summer*; the candy work is now sitting in numerous hefty mounds lining the bottoms of the industrial pillars of the room. Unlike *Summer*, the museum replaces the black rod

licorice during *Winter*. Where once one could see sparsity of “*Untitled*” (*Public Opinion*) or visualize the change one was able to make by altering the mass over time, now the multiple piles of candy are replenished regularly, multiplying in abundance. Despite the potential for there to be more pieces of candy during this iteration of the exhibition, the individual piles of candy appear humble compared to the massive licorice carpet in *Summer*. The individual pockets of candy are not the only piece of Gonzalez-Torres’s that line the architecture of the room; the shine of “*Untitled*” (*North*)’s light strings swoops across the industrial columns, forming reverse arches. Where once the spectator had to navigate around or through the lights, they now gather directly underneath their glow. This inviting, celebratory canopy signals some sort of gathering or party. With these pieces dispersed along the sides of the space, *Winter* clears the centre of the room and suggests a runway.

Despite *Winter*’s celebratory composition, arriving to the museum before fellow visitors fill the gallery space leaves the exhibition feeling haunted yet charged with a sense of potentiality, like a party where everyone had to leave too soon. This buzzing sense of emptiness does not indicate finality, nor does it foreclose or limit possibility within the space. Through the recognition that something is missing, the uninhabited space acknowledges the presence of the past, attuning to the vibrations of what was once there and the promise of what is to come: “That the party falls apart, then, is not its negation, but its condition of possibility. It is, paradoxically, its principle of hope” (Chambers-Letson 2018, 239).

*Winter*’s vacant electricity does not signal an end but, instead, a remembrance of past gatherings and an invitation to commune with the works. The lights are still on, and candy is strewn everywhere, lining the pillars and waiting for a private encounter with the spectator. As the day progresses and more people fill the room, the exhibition shifts from the anticipatory feeling of being vacated and is brought to life. This spatial awareness further exemplifies how the spectator’s engagement with the work enlivens Gonzalez-Torres’s art. Through sensorial encounters with these art objects, the spectator is confronted with the materiality of the pieces—considering not only what they mean but what they are: glass light bulbs strung together with white, plastic cords; silvery vinyl letters and numbers plastered onto the wall; golden plastic beads held together by thin string with bald patches from the wear and tear of shipping or from the constant touching and walking through; a cardboard puzzle wrapped in a plastic bag that is not quite transparent due to years of handling and display; sugary candies made in a factory, each individual piece wrapped in small square of clear plastic. Gonzalez-Torres’s use of quotidian objects paired with Amaral’s curation of these five artworks invites the spectator to be in conversation with the pieces—to touch, taste, smell, listen, and view in ways that might be contradictory to how they usually do.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Winter*, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

Attending to the caring curation of *Summer/Winter* by Amaral, this piece explores what it means to be in communion within the contexts of these specific artworks. During the span of the exhibition, I had the privilege of meeting with Amaral to get valuable insight on the craft of his curation, tap into his wealth of knowledge about Gonzalez-Torres, and deliberate the interpretive possibilities of *Summer/Winter*. Throughout our conversation, Amaral sheds light on his curatorial practices, delineating the material intricacies and theoretical intentions for the exhibition. We explore the sensorial valences, political implications, and life-affirming choreography of the show as well as interrogate the significance of this being the first solo exhibition of the artist's work in Canada. In theoretical conversation with queer theorists and performance scholars, I contend that Amaral's curation of *Summer/Winter* taps into the breath and breadth of Gonzalez-Torres's practice, negotiating loss and imagining new futures.

### **Curatorial Choreography: Negotiating the Object & the Body**

While there are several entrances to the exhibition, Amaral expertly draws the body through and around the pieces in a way that, regardless of the viewer's starting point, they will encounter each of the works intimately. All the pieces are arranged in a manner that feels undeniable; they command presence and attention in their placement. Negotiating spatial and psychological flow between the works plays a large role in how Amaral maps out spectatorial movement. In our conversations, Amaral revealed some of the process behind his practice, noting that his "first response to everything is purely physical." Having engaged with many types of artistic endeavours in his life, Amaral brings the physicality of his extended training in dance to his curation: "Much like a

choreographer or a theatre director, you're setting up a path or an arc for the viewer with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Points of crescendo, rise and fall." Amaral sets the spectator up for a sort of improvisational dance across the space in which the spectator has agency over how they choose to engage with the works. In *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, Danielle Goldman (2013) defines this type of movement as "a vital technology of the self—an ongoing, critical, physical, and anticipatory readiness that, while grounded in the individual, is necessary for a vibrant sociality and vital civil society" (22). Across his exhibitions, Amaral meets the work at a place of critical individual and communal engagement, creating visually and emotionally striking displays that usher in a visceral reaction. While individual experience inevitably varies from person to person, Amaral's curation of his shows demands an affectual response from the spectator through their spatial orientation.

Often including minimalist and deceptively ordinary objects in his shows, Amaral extracts the beautiful, devastating, and transcendent from these pieces—demonstrating how objects have a life and breath of their own. This drive to engage deeply with objects intensified while Amaral was pursuing a career in dance and simultaneously working in merchandising: "I had become super interested in window display and shop presentation, the strategies used to produce desire and tell a story." Throughout Amaral's curation, there is a distinct sense of how objects interact with one another and produce an effect on the viewer. Not only do these carefully compiled art objects communicate with each other, but their proximity to one another compels the spectator to move their body and open their minds in diverse ways. In *Formless Formation: Vignettes for the End of this World*, Sandra Ruiz and Hypatia Vourloumis (2021) imagine how disparate objects, bodies, and entities might band together in an act of anticolonial resistance to create something generative: "To orchestrate is to score the rearrangement, planning with the elements of the world to produce a desired effect that will land us in the *future of the future* still imagined" (70). By entertaining all the varied perceptions one might have of the show, Amaral crafts an experience that generously offers guidance but does not dictate a strict interpretation, allowing the spectator to bring themselves and their personal experience into the world of the show and dwell in the generative hope of possible futures.

In "Between Intervention and Utopia: Dance Politics," Randy Martin (2011) contemplates the socialist politics of possibility embedded into dance. He offers, "Yet dance also makes its own politics, crafts its own pathways and agency in the world, moves us toward what we imagine to be possible and desirable" (Martin 2011, 29). Martin entertains the utopic potentiality of dance and how the corporeal body and social body intermingle. In dance, bodies are in immediate conversation with one another, taking up space and navigating around others with care, a set of sequences agreed upon by the choreographer and the dancers. Dancers can consent or defy the movement set out for them. In *Summer/Winter*, Amaral creates a constant conversation between the artwork and the spectator where there is not one strict choreography but multiple avenues of engaging, refusing, gathering, and sequestering. By twisting and turning around Gonzalez-Torres's works, spectators attune themselves to the artist's tempo. This performance varies from person to person based upon their attunement with the artist's affective alignment and the choreography of those around them. This commingling of the senses, psyche, and space allows for communal and individual movement through the work and its meanings. Through this relational exchange between objects and objects, objects and space, and objects and spectators, Amaral's curation of Gonzalez-Torres's spatial presence performs a type of world-making that exists within and goes beyond the walls of the gallery space.





Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (Golden), 1995, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

**Laura M. Coby.** I was recently thinking about your piece in *Artforum* that I read. You’re such a beautiful writer. As you would describe the events of the London Frieze, I felt, as a reader, that I was right there with you in these buzzing crowds—moving from venue to venue, trying to catch a cab, seeing RuPaul. Your writing has such a keen sensibility of movement that can also be seen in your curation. As you’ve said, constructing art shows requires the curator to think about how the spectator moves through a space. When thinking about the exhibition here at MOCA, how have you imagined the spectator moving through the pieces?

**Rui Mateus Amaral.** Sequencing is critical to me. There’s a reason why you jump from one artwork to another. What comes before and after it is intentional—this sense of “order” is designed to produce new feelings, insights, and questions. Admittedly, it’s also activated to emphasize aspects of the artworks I see as moving, intellectually stimulating, and resonant at a particular time and place. I can’t get away from the idea that exhibition-making is a form of communication. There is always a desired path I have for the viewer, but it’s loose enough that the public can come to their own judgments. I trust the viewer after all. I mean, if you’ve made it to an exhibition, chances are you’re open to what it has to offer. I want to meet the viewer there.

**LMC.** You guide the viewer through without the expectation they’ll stick to a certain path, if there even is one “ideal” path. You leave room in the spectatorship for improv and exploration, harmony and discontinuity in the way the works are experienced. You’re meeting the viewer at this place of openness.

**RMA.** You're meeting them there because they've made the journey and paid the price of admission. You're also meeting them in the twenty-first century, where people are a click away from instantly discovering more about an artist and artwork. So, one must think, is this exhibition producing new information? And when it comes to text panels in the show, how much is enough? Where do we handhold, and where do we let go? Part of the beauty of art is that it precludes language. The mystery of art should be preserved.

Sorry, that's a long way of saying I try to accomplish a lot in my exhibitions, and each one is an opportunity to work out what we've just discussed. I'm grateful that MOCA's artistic and executive director trusted me. They were open to having no wall-based descriptions, just one opening thought. I tend to keep my exhibitions precise and visually spare, consolidating supporting literature to one source so the artworks can exist on their own spatial terms. They were also open to me contradicting myself by producing a free "guidebook" with expanded descriptions of the artworks that viewers could take with them. I try to give the viewer multiple ways to experience the show. One could not read anything, and the experience could still be meaningful. Or they can take the book with them and move studiously from artwork to artwork. They might take a quick spin at the exhibition and have a completely different experience while reading the booklet weeks later. I enjoy those different experiences myself and try to extend this to the viewer—the possibility of having all or two or one or none of them.

**LMC.** It's evident that you've heavily considered sequencing, not just with regard to the artworks themselves but also within the accompanying literature. How might the accompanying guidebook have its own sort of ordering, and how might these varied ways of experiencing spectatorial compositions expand the works themselves? When you're thinking about the sequencing of the works in a guidebook or traditional text, how do you imagine the spatiality of works on the page?

**RMA.** The first thing I ever curated was a publication. I had no money to put a show together myself, but I had money to put together this humble publication. It was called "Proposal for a Magazine." There are three works by Felix in it. He has always been part of my thoughts, among other figures. The publication opens with "Untitled" (*Passport*), and halfway through is "Untitled" 1989/1990, which reads "somewhere better than this place" on one poster and "nowhere better than this place" on the other. The project closes with a two-page spread: on the left side is an image of Felix's two-clocks "Untitled" (*Perfect Lovers*), and on the right, documentation of the performance *Relation in Time*, by a couple, Marina Abramović and Ulay, who sit back-to-back for sixteen hours, their hair bound together in a single twist. To compare these artworks is why I love the book format. By being a two-page spread, the book (at least in a traditional sense) affords the kind of affect these two images produce by sitting next to one another. Also, turning the page is not unlike turning a corner in architecture and encountering a new sightline or relationship.

I tend to sequence exhibitions similarly—the result is always a confluence of the work's physical, historical, and conceptual depths, as well as the architecture, light and my intuition about how these all hold together in a way that is authentic and compelling.

### **Shifting Seasons: The Intimacy of Sensorial Engagement**

Gonzalez-Torres's work is entrenched in the complexity of intimacy in pandemic times, as his own life and artistry were deeply affected by the AIDS crisis. I do not intend to conflate the COVID-19

and AIDS epidemics but to instead allow Felix's practice to help us negotiate loss and attune our senses to the power of aesthetic relational exchange. In *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*, Eliza Steinbock (2019) considers "shimmering" as a quality of affectual oscillation between internal and external worlds. Shimmering disrupts epistemological binaries and boundaries and allows for alternative ways of knowing that privilege the personal. Gonzalez-Torres's works blur lines between "subject/object, thinking/feeling, and sight/touch," making a case for their interconnectedness (Steinbock 2019, 9). Through multisensorial encounters, spectators are given the opportunity to unlearn strict notions of how to engage—encouraging them to think alongside feeling, look but also touch, and reckon with how intertwined the shifting subject and object are. In *Summer/Winter*, the spectator moves alongside and beyond the visual to consider otherwise forms of sensory engagement. In this transitory period, a time of global political unrest, how do we turn to otherwise forms of intimacy, and what might this alternative engagement afford?

In *Blackpentacostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, Ashon T. Crawley (2017) establishes the otherwise as an epistemology and a practice: "Otherwise possibilities exist alongside that which we can detect with our finite sensual capacities" (2). By inhabiting otherwise possibilities, one might tap into alternative modes of existence and strategies for how to navigate "current configurations of power and inequity" (Crawley 2017, 3). As Gonzalez-Torres's works are meant to be touched, taken, smelled, listened to, and consumed by the spectator, one must consider how the materiality of his aesthetic and affectual knowledges serve as a guiding light in the current political moment. Gonzalez-Torres offers multiple ways of engaging with his works: based upon the spectator's encounter with the work, the pieces can take on different meanings. Each brush with the senses might spark something new within the spectator and allow them to unearth the multiplicitous layers of the work as they relate to the self and the world in which they live. In most traditional gallery spaces, the museum goer is urged to keep distance from the artwork; the spectator must navigate their body in ways that are permissible to the institution. Gonzalez-Torres invites the spectator to call these protocols into question by crossing these institutional boundaries with his own works, including specific instructions to allow guests to touch, taste, and take a portion of his work. *Summer/Winter* complicates the sensorial nature of Gonzalez-Torres's works through the added layer of Toronto lifting mandatory face mask mandates in the summer of 2022, for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began. This exhibition urges its viewers to listen to their intuition and the bodies around them as they encounter these pieces. How might the effects the pandemic continues to have on our world influence how we interact with artwork and each other, and how might we care for one another? With works that engage so deeply with the sensorial, spectators might reflect upon how intimacy has changed and what new ways of sharing physical and emotional closeness have arisen out of this period of isolation. To be immersed in the senses is to engage in an otherwise plane of thinking, feeling, and relationality.





Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (*Public Opinion*), 1991, detail view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

**LMC.** I'm so fascinated by the tension that might lie within the works. For example, what might it mean by having "Untitled" (*North*) and "Untitled" (*Public Opinion*) in the same sightline or having both *Summer* and *Winter* as iterations of the exhibition. When I was visiting here in May, I also noticed a theme or maybe a tension between light and dark in the show. I'm thinking about how "Untitled" (*Golden*) refracts natural light and has its own metallic glimmer or how "Untitled" (*North*) harnesses electricity and emits light itself. Even "Untitled" 1989 has a reflective sheen to it. Then, you pair that luminosity with "Untitled" (*Public Opinion*) and "Untitled" (*Shield*). While these pieces have a sparkling quality due to their plastic wrap, they are the two pieces that aren't inherently metallic or luminescent—"Untitled" (*Public Opinion*)'s onyx-like candy base and "Untitled" (*Shield*)'s matte finish, where even the beige background appears a bit more dull in contrast with the stark white museum walls. Perhaps, in contrast with the other pieces, these two pieces are a bit darker in hue and maybe even in affective tonality.

**RMA.** They're a bit more sombre.

**LMC.** Exactly, so then, how might you find these variances in hue or emotional tonality working together or potentially in tension with each other in the show?

**RMA.** Something I couldn't anticipate about the exhibition, and therefore did not explore in the guidebook, is its shimmering qualities. Although I decided to manifest "Untitled" 1989 with a "brushed silver metallic" vinyl, until I saw it installed, I couldn't foresee its capacity to be arguably the most physical work in the space. To observe the work in its entirety, one must look up and

move along the perimeter of the space. That's the paradox of anything that shines: it draws you to and from it. No one sightline is entirely satisfying either. You must travel the space and negotiate the embracing and harsh qualities drawn from the artworks.

Playing light against dark was conscious on my part, for sure. Sometimes that's possible to do both between artworks and within a single artwork. For example, "*Untitled*" (*North*) can be shown with the lights completely off or on. It's hard to replace the light bulbs, especially in *Winter*, because the strings are suspended from the ceiling. It's stipulated that once a light bulb burns out, it should be replaced immediately with another. Our procedure here at the museum is, if a light bulb burns out, we turn the piece off entirely while it's being changed. Some people have experienced "*Untitled*" (*North*) with the lights completely off, which alters the work. One colleague noticed that it feels more like a sculpture and less like light strings. When it was unlit, people began asking the visitor experience team, "What is the sculpture made of? Is it cast?" The instant the light strings seemed to "no longer function" as people know them too, they were confounded. It's as if, because they're not on, they aren't "real" or something. Funny what that switch does. Literally, ha!

**LMC.** That stipulation about fully turning off the light strings is fascinating! It makes total sense that this would be the maintenance practice for the piece, but it also becomes a curatorial practice that gives a whole other life to this piece in the exhibition. Especially in *Winter*, I'm prompted to consider what would it mean to have the lights off at a celebration: Is it too early for guests to arrive? Has the gathering ended? Was it a choice, or were the lights turned off by someone else? The shift between *Summer* and *Winter* in titling and rearrangement, of course, brings new life and interpretations, too.

**RMA.** Even with the candy, the team had noticed that people are taking more now that it's in separate piles than when it was a single large formation. I feel it's because "*Untitled*" (*Public Opinion*) in *Summer* was so public. I had essentially composed an arena of candy—a very public arena where people were aware of each other's actions, whether you chose to take candy or not. How much were you going to pick? Were you going to eat the candy right there? Were you going to put it in your pocket? Were you going to gift it to someone else? I wanted to produce the opposite in *Winter* and offer a more intimate experience with the candy, which is why some of the piles are tucked behind a column and why there are multiple piles. This idea of abundance, for me, feels more exemplified. You encounter an outpour of material. You come off the elevators, and they're offering themselves to you. Go on, take me, take from me. And people did as a result. In this composition, the candies shift in weight more clearly. Because it's a pile, taking from one area causes a ripple effect: what's above trickles down.

**LMC.** Totally. The candy work so clearly exemplifies ideas of public/private in the exhibition. It seems to me that "*Untitled*" (*Public Opinion*) unsettles what partaking in the public opinion means in many socio-political contexts. I've been playing around in my head with all these different ways of engaging: of refusing to partake in public opinion, of taking and removing from the public opinion and not consuming, of consuming and ingesting. I think, especially with *Winter*, it says so much about what people do and say in public versus private. I'm thinking about what you were saying about the change between this public arena of candy to these more private, intimate moments. The evolution of this piece prompts a lot of questions about collective thought and how it affects us. Who is "the public"—and *whose public* are they—and when do people feel inclined to engage in the popular public opinion, you know?

**RMA.** Although I find the candy feels more prevalent in this iteration, it's also a very individual matter. But yeah, I'm still learning from the work and figuring it out.

**LMC.** In thinking about “*Untitled*” (*Public Opinion*), Felix’s work engages with the spectator through both affect and the senses, and I think what lingers after that kind of intimate exchange follows the spectator into their everyday lives. Do you think the spectator’s relationship with the work changes based on the level of interaction they have with the work, whether that means just looking at it, walking through it, tasting it, touching it? How might their experience vary based upon how open, reserved, or intentional they are while interacting with the work? What might this collectivity of engaging with the senses mean during a global pandemic, where isolation has been the state of being for so many for so long, especially in a place like Toronto which is finally opening up after about two years of a sort of quarantine?

**RMA.** There was certainly a dialogue around some of the works and pandemic protocols, but ensuring the integrity of the artwork remained a priority. The freedom to choose, to cross, or take is already embedded in the work, so we agreed to emphasize that choice while also making sanitizing solutions accessible but visually discreet. These conversations, while productive, turned out to be somewhat irrelevant. “*Untitled*” (*Golden*) became a phenomenon on Instagram, and people, learning that they could take a piece of art home with them, encouraged others to experience “*Untitled*” (*Public Opinion*) for themselves. That’s the thing about Felix’s work: the possibility.

Observing members of the public experience the work for the first time was so energizing. You could see the concept of art shift in their minds: “Oh, I can move through art! I can take and taste it! With “*Untitled*” (*Golden*), the beaded curtain spans almost sixty feet across the space, which means that multiple people can experience it simultaneously. From the perspective of an observer, I’ve witnessed a very melancholy interaction with the work on one end and a purely high-energy and mind-blown approach on the other. Both ways are valid and in keeping with Felix’s intentions. The spectrum of engagement as the work continues to be exhibited and written about is boundless.

**LMC.** That’s beautiful. To me, “*Untitled*” (*Golden*) speaks to that spectrum by offering this sort of hope, pleasure, and beauty amid deeply felt loss. I feel like, as someone crosses that threshold, they undergo a sort of transformation, whatever that may look like for them. It feels like passing through to another side or *the* other side, whatever that other side might be. I’m also interested in how what side of the curtain a person is on literally alters their point of view, as one side is more opaque than the other due to the natural light. As you said in your curatorial booklet, it offers a sort of visual filter for the spectator. In thinking about the stipulation that the beadworks must be placed in a threshold that is commonly walked through, I appreciate the choice to place “*Untitled*” (*Golden*) on the side of the gallery space, setting it apart in a way. It offers, even in the staging with the benches behind the curtain, a moment of solitude for the viewer.

**RMA.** Right, I also love the intimacy of that. By not placing it in the centre of the space or in a doorway where people don’t have a choice but to walk through it, you have a different realm of possibility.

Once you cross “*Untitled*” (*Golden*), you enter a spacious corridor or lookout. There you meet the natural light and the city. You can peer out the windows and see all the construction around the museum. The neighbourhood is transforming. Toronto is fast-changing. You might disappear behind the curtain. Based on the shifting light, someone on the other side may not realize you’re



there. There are two benches by the windows, that side of the curtain evokes solitude and respite. The rest of the entries in “*Untitled*” 1989 can also be seen from this point.

When you look at the curtain from this proximity, you clock the beads’ different qualities—some are in excellent shape, and others have chipped, faded, or broken off entirely, leaving a gap. That’s why it was essential for me that “*Untitled*” (*Public Opinion*) and “*Untitled*” (*Golden*) share a sightline. Is all that glitters gold? Does gold mean the same thing to everyone? A sense of illusion comes forward. Not only because of the light or the way it might abstract what’s on each side, but architecturally it creates the illusion of a boundary in the space, and until you learn you can pass through it, it might appear as a barrier.

**LMC.** The last time we spoke, I think you said that someone had entered up the stairwell behind the curtain, turned around, and exited because they thought they weren’t allowed to come in that way.

**RMA.** Two people apparently did this when they entered the exhibition from the north stairwell, which is another way of entering the show, though less common. From that entry point, the first work in the exhibition is “*Untitled*” (*Golden*), but when they saw it, they thought, “Oh, we must have gone through the back way of the show.” So, they headed back down that stairwell to the south and entered the show there. They could have crossed, but the scale and placement of that work created the image of a boundary. Gold can also be alienating because of its associations with the sacred, wealth, prestige, and awards. It can deter people who feel unworthy, feel gold is reserved for a particular class, or don’t have access. I didn’t want to shy away from all the possible meanings of gold in this exhibition.

### Locating a True North: Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s Aesthetics of Reorientation

My first visit to experience *Summer* at MOCA was just two days after a mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, where nineteen children and two adults were killed. When I visited *Winter*, it was mere days after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, which stripped roughly half of the United States’ population of their bodily autonomy. When dealing with such violence, vitriol, and life-threatening hatred encroaching from all directions, engaging with public opinion becomes a dire situation. How, then, might we change public opinion by consuming it? What might it mean to ingest and metabolize public opinion? What if we were to refuse it and engage otherwise? With Gonzalez-Torres’s art, the private becomes public, and just as the personal is always political, the spectator must reckon with the notions of mass loss that run throughout the artist’s work and our current political sphere. Regarding one of the artist’s works, “*Untitled*” (1991)—a billboard depicting a photograph of an unmade bed with white sheets, head imprints carved into the pillows, devoid of bodies—José Esteban Muñoz (1999) suggests that the spectator cannot identify with the images shown as there are no figures present to identify with. However, he offers, “What is evoked is a ‘structure of feeling’ that cuts through certain Latino and queer communities but is no way exclusive to *any* identitarian group” (170). Further, the artist’s work disidentifies with certain identificatory conventions that work to define and confine minoritarian aesthetic practices. By bringing private, intimate loss into the public sphere, viewers are affronted with the emotional charge of grief.

Reorienting the spectator outside of cultural norms and traditional institutional perimeters, Gonzalez-Torres breaks down arbitrary boundaries between the spectator by literally closing in on the space between the viewer and his work. Amaral embraces the public sensorial engagement with

the pieces by having “*Untitled (Public Opinion)*” and “*Untitled (North)*” centre stage in *Summer*. While the other three pieces are undeniable in their effect, having this *particular* candy work and light string piece spread across the middle of the room draws out the semantic links between these pieces. In thinking of Canada’s northward orientation, the museum goer must reckon with the socio-political implications of this pairing. By situating these particular works in Toronto, Amaral meets the spectator where they are geographically in order to open up resonances that dwell between the work and the viewer. In *Winter*, he crafts more intimate moments for the spectator. He moves “*Untitled (Public Opinion)*” and “*Untitled (North)*” along the sides of the space—offering the viewer more room within the gallery to experience the works a bit more privately and perhaps providing even more of an opportunity for personal reflection within the exhibition space. In *Summer/Winter*, some of the objects appear banal in their singularity—a light bulb, a piece of candy, a string of beads. However, when put on display and multiplied en masse, they become defamiliarized and take on new emotional resonances. By inviting the spectator to engage intimately and publicly with the works, the spectator enlists their senses to help them navigate this act of meaning-making and relearning. This reorientation prompts the viewer to examine what the world might look like if we were to recontextualize the care we take when interacting with it, with each other.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “*Untitled (Golden)*”, 1995, detail view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Laura Findlay.

**LMC.** In these pieces that blur the public and the private, communal and individual feeling, I wonder what belongs just to Felix and what belongs to the spectator, and as a curator, in organizing and curating the show, what might you want from the spectator for Felix?

**RMA.** During a workshop with the visitor experience team, I expressed that the most important thing we can do for the viewer is to empower them to come to their own understanding. Provide them with enough information (whatever that means at that moment) but keep it open-ended. Also, do not be afraid of discrepancies because there are several! I can access visitor feedback in our end-of-day reports, and I've read multiple times now that visitors have noted or complained that the wall label for "*Untitled*" 1989 says "paint on wall," but the piece is obviously vinyl. Firstly, who has time to complain about this? Kidding! I love that people have picked up on this detail. Contractually, we're obligated to both. On the one hand, we can make certain decisions about the work, like its materiality, which we did. On the other hand, we are also responsible for reproducing the wall label as it appears in a loan agreement, and we did that too. I'm into this because it enforces that not one, but two choices have been made: to manifest the work one way and not to alter the wall label accordingly. Another discrepancy: in the text for the show, licorice is spelled by American and Canadian standards. They're spelled differently, but we're talking about the same thing. All those contradictions are either built-in, or I made space for them to be part of the work because it's essential to question the storyteller too.

Viewers might also come across the word "watercolour" in "*Untitled*" 1989; it's spelled the Canadian way with an "ou" instead of an "o." The choices I made are particular to being here in Canada. The writing for the exhibition contains several nuances like the ones I mentioned. That's how, Felix might say, you create new information. The viewer/reader decides what is right and wrong or that two things can be accurate simultaneously.

**LMC.** Yet again, we're seeing the possibility and openness of the artist's work. I appreciate the curatorial choice of having some of the writing use the Canadian spelling of the words, especially because this is the first solo exhibition of his works in Canada, which is huge. As someone who is Toronto-based, I want to ask you why you think it's important that this show is here, in Toronto, right now?

**RMA.** When everything felt like it had stopped, I reflected on how art was generated under challenging circumstances. My thoughts brought me to the art of the 1960s and '70s: actions, performances, paintings, and drawings produced by instruction. I was thinking a lot about artists in South America or Eastern Europe who, under severe social restrictions, found ways to exhibit art abroad. They turned to mail and telegrams to broadcast their ideas. In doing that research, I was reminded of Felix, an artist whose works are shaped by the interpretation of instructions and suggested ideals. Even within his terms, there's space for interpretation. It might say "black licorice," but does that mean hard or soft? Which brand? What hue of black? You have to determine what course to take. Each time an artwork is manifested, you're presenting it for the first time. It's not the same candy as elsewhere or the same site or composition. The socio-political climate is different. Everything is new.

The Toronto connection I see as expanding Felix's biography. Some people understand that he was in a long-distance relationship with Ross in Toronto, had an apartment here, and spent summers in parts of Canada. Several people don't know that, especially in Toronto. Not that any of this holds up the work, but it locates Felix somewhere other than Cuba, Puerto Rico, Madrid, New York, and Miami, where he is so often associated. As such, it expands the reference points for his work, and that's positive and surprising to some.



I wouldn't have been able to do the show had I not had access to *"Untitled" (North)* or *"Untitled" (Toronto)*. *Summer/Winter* was initially conceived with the local public in mind, acknowledging the pandemic conditions that pressed each of us to decide where to isolate and with whom to ride this out. No one was sure when travel would resume and if this show would only be experienced by people who live here. Is there somewhere or nowhere better than this place? I wondered. By including *"Untitled" (North)* and placing *"Untitled" (Public Opinion)* just after it, I could pose that question more succinctly. And what is north anyway? A place, a people, a direction, a myth, a belief, a brand, and a state of mind. "We the north" and the "true north strong and free" came to my thoughts, as well as all the people who migrate north for something better. What about that promise of the north? It's a delicate and complex thing. *"Untitled" (North)* was positioned at the south end of the gallery intentionally. As I conceptualized the exhibition, I was aware of directions, geographies, and their cultural significance. The artist Joaquin Torres Garcia's notion that the "North is Our South" when speaking from a perspective on Latin American art was a reference point.

Admittedly, I wanted to experiment with sentimentality. I suspected *"Untitled" (North)* or *"Untitled" (Toronto)* would never mean what they mean here, somewhere else. Sentimentality is part of the risk in Felix's work, I think. Within his era's art historical and socio-political conditions, he risked imbuing his work—the candies, posters, and portraits—with personal weights, names, dates, and events. At the same time, those works were conceived to be taken and rearranged constantly, giving his sentiments away.

**LMC.** I think one of the things I appreciate most about your work is your willingness to risk sentimentality, eschewing isolated presentations of the pieces and entertaining how the works communicate with each other and where geographically, socio-politically, and affectually they locate themselves. Place feels inextricable to Felix's works, especially in the exhibition you've so carefully crafted. Not only is space playing a role in locating Felix within his biography, it locates the spectator within his biographical cartography. Even within the spatiality of the show—how some works precede and succeed one another, how they situate themselves in the cardinal directions of the city—these works make an argument for their place here. You're really giving the spectator the space to entertain all these different emotional and intellectual valences and come to their own questions or conclusions.

In thinking about this emotional, conceptual, and physical arc you've created for the viewer, I'm interested in why you've chosen these specific five works together?

**RMA.** I wanted to present the breadth of Felix's practice and produce a gorgeous exhibition. I felt this arrangement of artworks had a particular dynamism, aesthetically and conceptually. They were counterpoints to one another. The puzzle, *"Untitled" (Shield)*, appears to be the most fragile and humble work in the exhibition. Still, it's the closest to being monumental because its pieces remain intact, and it's preserved as a single image. The other works, though larger in scale, are in constant flux.

**LMC.** I think that says a lot about ephemerality and permanence of Felix's work. There's a distinct tension when considering something like a puzzle piece that's meant to be touched or played with, but instead, it's one of the few things you can't touch in the show. It's also a work that seems to be a little more reserved when it comes to how a curator can interpret or display it. There's a sort of refusal amid invitation.

In further thinking about the sensorial engagement of the works, “*Untitled*” 1989 is another type of portrait that denies touch because the spectator is unable to alter that piece, because, well, who could reach it?

**RMA.** Exactly. But while the viewer may not be able to interact with “*Untitled*” 1989, the work has transformed. It’s passed through many people, particularly in this iteration. This portrait reflects the architecture and decisions made by myself and Uros Jelic, the exhibition designer. There were as many conceptual considerations as there were practical ones. I wonder, after so many previous iterations and the manifestations to come, whose portrait is this?

**LMC.** Right! His work is so generous in its reproducibility, replenishment, and rearrangement. The possibilities of how one chooses to display his works allow for innumerable experiences, not just visually but semantically, too. While his works are conceptual and often appear quite sleek, he engages deeply with ideas of abundance.

**RMA.** Absolutely. Felix’s work is maximal. I say minimal, but by minimal, I also mean maximal.

### **Speculative Endings: The Life-Affirming Power of Being-With and Quotidian Relationality**

Though the weight of loss runs throughout Gonzalez-Torres’s work, the artist invites us to rethink strict perimeters of what constitutes life. One becomes more aware of the precarity of life in the face of death and also the potentiality for pleasure, vibrancy, and desire—all of which can act as survival strategies. Transitory in “*Untitled*” (*Golden*)’s composition, the beaded curtain leaves space in between the glittering strings to allow for a blurry perception of what is on the other side. Energy and affect might slip through and around the strings, allowing for multiple engagement with either side of the curtain. Because of its porous and malleable composition, the piece invites movement. The slightest brush of the shoulder or brisk passing-by will alter the state of the piece, putting stationary strands into motion. This curation of the piece, off to the side of the gallery space with benches for contemplation, beckons a moment of solitude for the viewer. Perhaps, in these moments, the spectator will be prompted to remember those they have lost or intimately feel the possibility of what it means to be alive. What might it mean for another museum visitor to sit down on the bench next to them, and how can we dwell in those deeply charged emotional moments together? “*Untitled*” (*Shield*) also invites a similar quiet contemplation of how we take care of one another. In the image printed onto the puzzle pieces, Ross Laycock holds up a teddy bear to shield his face. In Amaral’s curatorial note for the piece (2022), he notes that Gonzalez-Torres collected “figurines, plush animals, trinkets” that filled the artist and Laycock’s Toronto home. Thinking in material terms, one might question how a stuffed bear would provide any sort of protection as a shield. Here, Laycock safeguards himself with gentleness that comes through orienting oneself toward love and acts of care and intimacy.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *“Untitled” (Shield)*, 1990, installation view, MOCA Toronto. Copyright Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of MOCA Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkensheid.

**LMC.** Something you said during our first meeting really stuck with me: that death and grief can be life-affirming. Not only do I understand that personally, but that’s so touching with regard to Felix’s work. How might the phrase that death and grief can be life-affirming help us negotiate the presence of such deep loss in his work?

**RMA.** I’m not sure you can know what happiness or sadness is, truly, if you haven’t experienced both. To understand something, I do believe it must be contrasted with something else. Eventually, the loss of someone reinforces that they were alive. By contending with their death, you’re also called to meditate on their life. And what will you do with what remains of yours? There’s still time and decisions to be made. You go on. Perhaps that’s where “endless supply” comes in in Felix’s work. There is always more. This civilization won’t go on forever, but whatever comes after it will emerge from its death.

**LMC.** I’m also thinking about the power that the artist has to transform a sort of energy. Loss is obviously deeply charged, but it’s a limited, white, Western Christian point of view to think that energy simply leaves when the physical form does, right? Seeing life transformed through Felix’s



work and giving it that new life and new breath brings out the beauty of these relationships and the transformative power of loss.

**RMA.** Yeah, in thinking about the idea of afterlife, of reincarnation, of transformation of energies like you said, there are so many cultural references in there, but what it comes down to is meaning making and trying to grapple with the reality that one minute we're here and the next we're not. In my notes I believe I referred to this as, "In one moment everything can be taken away. In another, everything can be restored."

**LMC.** Yeah. Phew.

**RMA.** Heavy and light stuff.

**LMC.** I have one last question, but it's kind of a speculative one.

**RMA.** Good. You should always end in speculation.

**LMC.** Maybe it's a bit wistful, but if you could encounter Felix for one day, what would you want to ask him?

**RMA.** Hmm... I'd like to go out dancing with him. You can learn a lot when you're not speaking, taking part in a different kind of experience. This might be because I imagine he'd somehow turn my questions, the ones about his work anyway, on me, hah! But of course, if we had a full day, I'd like to go for a walk, have lunch, do very pedestrian, everyday things to learn more about how he sees the world and how it could be improved.

**LMC.** That's beautiful. I think the quotidian or the mundane is perhaps the most intimate form of sociality. Seeing how someone moves throughout the world and moving through it alongside them, even for just a moment, is sacred in a way. I feel like Felix's work lends itself to the utopic beauty of the mundane, in all its simplicity and complexity. Joshua Chambers-Letson talks in their book about how people who deeply encounter Felix's work seem to get a sense of him and feel a personal connection, despite likely having never gotten the chance to meet him. They write about how so many who feel this closeness with his work call him—

**LMC & RMA, in unison.** Felix.

In *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, Chambers-Letson (2018) shares that "the name 'Felix' has become something of a queer of color commons" (123) where "from time to time, we stitch ourselves loosely together and gather under a name like 'Felix,' where we 'make a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough'" (125). The shared affects that Gonzalez-Torres's works inspire help us reckon with the incommensurable, the unimaginable, and the inarticulable. Queer of color commons do not suggest essentialized experience or existence but, instead, shared affectual resonances and ways of navigating the oppressive present. Queer of color commons incite acts of "being-with" or "being-in-common"—moments of togetherness and survival in the face of loss, grief, and isolation (Muñoz 2020, 2). Drawing upon communal feeling, one might imagine how to exist and form new modes of being, new forms of togetherness. Through Amaral's curation of *Summer/Winter*, he prompts us to reorient ourselves to the abundant possibility within the artist's work, and perhaps, to reorient ourselves toward one another. *Summer/Winter* calls

our attention to the present and asks us to take stock of who is around us—both inside of the exhibition and outside—and who no longer is. Alongside the changing landscapes of our personal lives, we might also consider the instability of the political spheres in which we live and even the ever-evolving physical landscapes of our cities, towns, and countries. In its uncertainty and disarray, this state of flux offers a catalyst for reimagining what we owe one another. By grounding ourselves in the present, we might envision what new forms of socialities are possible on the horizon. As a means of grieving and collective imagining, *Summer/Winter* creates moments of queer futurity through the affective and sensorial exchange that enlivens the work, inspiring alternative avenues of engaging with the everyday, with each other.

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## REVIEWS

### ***CineWorlding: Scenes of Cinematic Research-Creation.* By Michael B. MacDonald. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 283 pp.**

Reviewed by Matt Horrigan

Michael B. MacDonald's *CineWorlding* speaks to research practitioners in cinema, recording, music, ethnography, and any of their neighbour practices, but most directly to those who self-identify as musicological filmmakers. The book blends process theory after Erin Manning, Brian Massumi, and Gilles Deleuze with practical exercises for students experimenting in cinematography. Intricate philosophy appears here in an affable style, and the book goes to significant lengths to encourage creative multiplicity. It was evidently written with movies in mind, and readers should intersperse encounters with the book and encounters with the "posthumanographies" it references—more about the neologism below.

MacDonald presents himself as a subversive intellectual "in but not of" academe (Harney and Moten 2013; MacDonald 2023, 76), and proves his "not of" credentials with stories of tense encounters with disciplinary peers seeking to enforce colonial anthropological paradigms. "When I leave documentary film festivals, I often feel like I have compiled a list of enemies and enemy practices" (265), he says, polemically describing his embattled nexus of cinema and music studies. MacDonald expresses suspicion of the othering "ethno" in ethnography, challenges the exoticizing frames that still striate that venerated field, and connects with people closer to home in developing documentaries, often musicological, always constructed with a musical sense of pace. Nowhere does he appeal to the mysterious etic power, epistemically privileged cultural distance, sometimes used to generate feelings of objectivity around social research. Unconvinced by "audiovisual aesthetics of truth" that claim scientific authority through disciplinary distinction (45), MacDonald seeks better filmmaker-filmed relations, and in so doing, makes his and his crew's presence obvious throughout his films, regularly reminding viewers that what his recorders capture are mediated ecologies affected by moviemaking as a process. The conservatism of conservatories is as frustrating for MacDonald as the corporatism of industry, so he negotiates a unique path that reconciles a kitschy "dirtbag artistry" with the apparatus of a world that prizes monographs and peer review (32).

*CineWorlding* unfolds as a phenomenological autoexegesis, aggregating narrative descriptions of MacDonald's own moviemaking, parables through which he grapples with colonialism, capitalism, and the peculiar, elusive mandate of research-creation, "not only to work in cinema," but "to invent new cinematic forms" (263). MacDonald has no illusions about where his keyword comes from: research-creation is a "funding-category" (193), a strategic label in an artform that has convened research and creation throughout its history. Moviemakers from the Lumière brothers to Thomas Edison to Lois Weber, Oscar Micheaux, Dziga Vertov, and Nabwana I.G.G., to name a few of various canonicity, all made cinema through what can be considered research practices, and Hollywood films today usually leverage not just technology but technicity, as producers martial their employees' creative energies to face moviemaking's parades of challenges. Consider, for example, Jordon Peele's *Nope* and its novel infrared-captured day-for-night chase scenes (Insider 2023).

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Research-creation, the funding term, is a subset of research-creation, the widespread assumption in filmmaking. Nevertheless, research-creation as MacDonald figures it carries a specific ethos separate from Hollywood arts of money-getting, and the “local and creative” audio-vision that he seeks to inspire yields artful gestures that bigger budgets cannot afford (MacDonald 2023, 260).

The monograph’s introduction sets up a textbook-like pattern, through a sequence of passages that each begin with a reading and end with practical exercises that could be deployed in a media production class. The exercises are good, showing keen practical attention to process in their balance between openness and direction. At one point, they prescribe randomness using quasi-astrological means, asking practitioners to use their birth date to choose a popular song for a short movie’s soundtrack (17). However, *CineWorlding* abandons the textbook genre after the first chapter and begins a much longer discussion that takes form as a creative memoir. Here, MacDonald struggles with his settler status, trying to figure out how to act as a decolonizing force despite the spectre of the hungry, ghastly “wintigo” with which he sometimes identifies himself and generally identifies capitalist machinery (241). The figure of the wintigo comes in response to Dylan Robinson’s book *Hungry Listening*, which issued a salient critique of extractive epistemic practices in music studies particularly and Canadian arts generally as colonial institutions have developed what was already an insatiable hunger for resources into a specific lust for Indigenous cultural capital (Robinson 2020). In response, MacDonald says, “through cineworlding, I am attempting to develop a practice that will help me become something other than Dylan Robinson’s *Hungry Listener*” (MacDonald 2023, 258).

Whether MacDonald is succeeding depends on more than this book, and readers should look to the films it references, most available on Vimeo (e.g., MacDonald 2017). With that said, streaming services are antagonists in MacDonald’s narrative, as he identifies them along with other elements of platform economics as part of a broad late capitalist project he links with the “transhuman,” “characterized by cryogenics, private space exploration, the metaverse, robot dogs on the US-Mexican border, university education made to serve industries . . .” (MacDonald 2023, 212). Against the “project of the transhuman,” MacDonald thinks after Rosi Braidotti in developing what he calls a “posthumanography,” a play on words that challenges ethnography’s prefix “ethno,” “human” (37). Although I am doubtful about the philosophical future of a transhuman/posthuman agonism—the morpheme “trans” is occupied with other work—posthumanography seems more promising. It is an adventurous, grammatically mixed neologism reflecting a notion of posthumanities, a vein of scholarship that abandons the traditional humanities’ investments in colonial great chains of being that model what is human after bodies that hegemonic powers privilege as normative—White, male, adult, heterosexual, cis, et cetera. MacDonald’s posthumanography has in actuality broken away from some such majoritarianisms, but the bodies of interest in MacDonald’s documentary practice remain distinctly human. A future posthumanography depending less on slippery arguments about what has historically counted as human, and framed more in the sensor of a camera, is currently virtual.

I have a more salient criticism for *CineWorlding*, however, and it concerns the order of sense in MacDonald’s notion of movies as “audio-vision” (5). While audio-vision can be understood as a musician-filmmaker’s challenge to visual dominance in what scholars have often territorialized as a visual medium, it could go further. At first blush, audiovisual primacy may not seem problematic for a practice of audiovisual recording. But students and workers of cinema think haptically in manipulating delicate and heavy equipment, proprioceptively in navigating the influx of novel environments that are film sets, and chemosensitively in managing exposure to drugs and toxins. Chemosensation forms a purview for cinema’s immaterialized material workers who labour around

paints, fuel, and the materials of the “honey wagon,” developing compulsory familiarities with whatever the staff of large productions consign to cinema’s undercommons. And fatigue on film sets has ways of expressing new hallucinatory senses, as workers explore psychedelic lines of flight between consciousness and its lacunae. My comments here about minoritized senses may seem symptomatic of cinema industrialized, products of experiences that should not be, whether because incommensurate with artistic concerns or invested in traditional exploits of factory-like worlds too alienated from artistry to be called cineworlding. But research about movie production cultures strongly suggests that what happens in industry influences the “indie,” and vice versa (Caldwell 2023)—students learn in the smallest units of even the most progressive art schools distinctions relevant to cinema’s largest industrialized hierarchies, whether those distinctions become tacitly naturalized or critically deliberated about. Further, production cultures have not only classed but gendered camera centrism, producing and reproducing technomasculinist norms that place men close to devices and assign women a disproportionate amount of relational and bureaucratic labour such as occurs in tents, trailers, offices, or informal meeting places away from the specially sanctified cameras called cinema cameras. To fully comprehend the minoritarian standpoint MacDonald points toward will require a supplementary challenge to the colonial politics of the senses, a challenge to normalized categories of what is audio, what is vision, and even what is touch (see Culhane 2016).

*CineWorlding* is a progressive instalment in moviemaking literature, a book that does not reduce the practice of filmmaking to a topic-agnostic figure portable from ground to ground in a capitalist industrial process, but rather treats moviemaking as something that must emerge from its practitioners’ relationships with people. Although MacDonald emphasizes the special nexus he has cultivated between movies and musicians, left implicit in his argument is the idea that, say, a food-documentarian might cineworld a very different practice, a different world, and a wildlife filmmaker might develop a unique cineworlding with the animals on the other side of her lens. Students seeking best results from *CineWorlding* should bring their own creativity and cultural backgrounds to their encounter with the book—bring their whole selves, to take after bell hooks (hooks 2014, 29–32)—and read between the lines of MacDonald’s autotheory to express what their own cineworlding will entail.

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## Love: A Research Practice

Megan V. Nicely



Saharla Vetsch in Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Walter Kitundu, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

Outside San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, to the right of the entryway and embedded in the pavement, is a large labyrinth, beautifully modelled in subtly contrasting textured stone. The ancient archetypal choreography of its spiral pathway leads the walker on a journey to the circle's centre and out again as a metaphor for psychological and spiritual transformation. Labyrinths are tools for embodied research and personal contemplation. The simplicity of the task they invite—walking to the centre and out again—supports a far less goal-oriented endeavour: opening to what is simultaneously outside and also inside of each of us. Many spiritual and religious traditions speak to practice as an opening to love, and this might ultimately be the labyrinth's intended contemplation. As my companion and I take in the view atop Nob Hill, we are soon motioned toward the cathedral door for the performance we are about to attend: *Zaccho Dance Theatre's Love, A State of Grace*. We step forward and enter.

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Helen Wicks in Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Joanna Haigood, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

Zaccho's thirty-minute site-specific aerial dance piece, created by artistic director Joanna Haigood in collaboration with composer Walter Kitundu, scenic designers Wayne Campbell and Sean Riley, and others, provides a model for how to remain in practice. The work includes three movement scenes, presented as a recurring loop over the course of three hours. Audience members can wander in the space and stay or leave as they wish within this timeframe. The printed program offers a series of guided meditations and small rituals that audiences can follow as they walk in the space, designed by artist-theologians Yuhana Junker and Cláudio Carvalhaes. These contemplations reflect on "how to intimate and love our places, our bodies, our communities, our land and otherwise." Community conversations that met outside the actual performance were also part of the overall event.



Helen Wicks, Veronica Blair, and Saharla Vetsch (L to R) in Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Bryan Gibel, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

Once inside, grounded on the tiles in the cool alcove, we find ourselves on the edges of a second labyrinth. Our attention is drawn to the nave at the far end, which houses a stunning stained glass window and the altar. The pull of our trajectory toward the altar is paused by three dancers immediately in front of us. They embrace, then one, tethered to a climbing harness, begins to ascend a crooked ladder that extends from floor to ceiling, roughly 156 feet above. We head further inside, keeping to the periphery and clear of the central pathway, and look up to see a figure on a large swing attached to the ceiling, suspended at an angle. Poised, my companion and I watch and in an instant, the strings are cut. The adrenaline rush is enormous. We see—and feel—the swing’s massive arc. The dancer is propelled into a fall and recovery motion. As the massive swing continues to glide back and forth, the dancer rides the momentum, standing, reaching, balancing, letting go, and catching, time and again. The feeling of letting go, and of suspension, is what I as an audience member practice throughout the evening—the swinging figure serving as an anchor.

We make our way down to the altar and join other audience members, finding a place to settle and take in the spectacle. The swinging figure glides overhead and out before us (performed alternately by Suzanne Gallo/Helen Wicks), and the dancer ascending the ladder can be seen at the far end, slowly making their way toward the ceiling high above (performed by Ciarra D’Onofrio/Saharla Vetsch). Having adjusted to the scene before us, we soon notice, to our left in the north transept, a third dancer. This scene is serene. The dancer is suspended from the ceiling over an hourglass-shaped metal sculpture, and their trajectory is rotational as they circle above, mirroring the sculpture’s curved edge (performed by Veronica Blair/Nina Sawant). At times the dancer is lowered by the rigging and uses the structure’s top surface to guide their footsteps and cartwheels along its edge. At others, this dancer creates forms like a seated lotus position, which circles in the space.

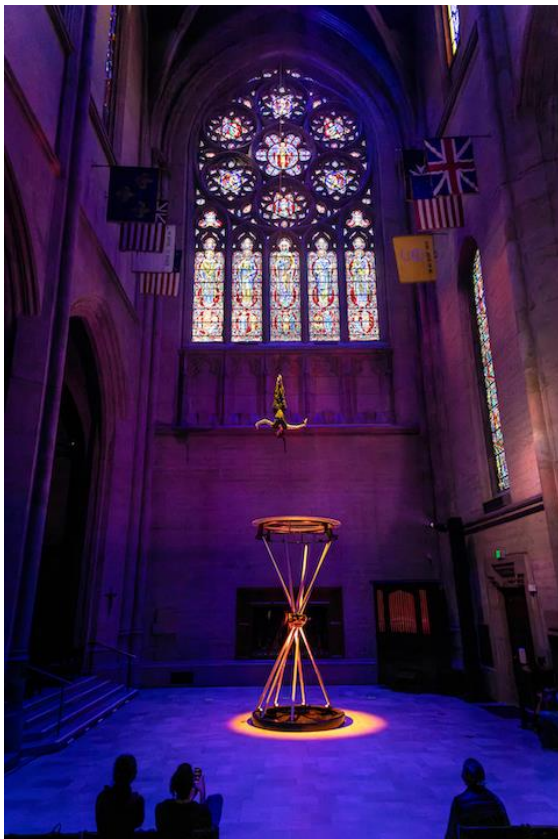


Helen Wicks and Ciarra D’Onofrio (L to R) in Zaccho Dance Theatre’s *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Bryan Gibel, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

Each of these three moving image scenes captures a different kinesthetic—and emotional—sentiment. The ladder ascension (titled *The Striving*) is aspirational; the swing (titled *Surrender*) is liberating; and the rotational path (titled *The Quieting*) is calming. Each scene’s repeated movement trajectory provides an opportunity to notice subtle gestural variations, and I am called to consider

how daily tasks are similarly repeated with slight differences. Repetition provides familiarity and an opportunity to take risks, backed by constant support. Risk is a key feature in this performance as well, and it is not undertaken alone. The dancers are attached to harnesses, and the coordination between a dancer and a rigger is a critical part of this performance collaboration. Designed by rigger David Freitag and performed by a crew who remain largely unseen, the risk of the unknown is palpable for the audience. A dancer and rigger communicate through the tension of the rope, a choreography that relies on the slight delay and degree of tension and slack that connects them. Audiences hold a similar tension, tethered to others in the space, albeit less literally.

Haigood is known for the kind of risk and connection that large-scale, site-specific aerial work demands. Locations such as Fort Point, the Ferry Building Bell Tower, and the San Francisco International Airport inspire awe in their beauty and scale. Her choreography adds to the overall picture, allowing a viewer to pause to take in the larger field of vision. However, these are not just pretty pictures or tricks to keep one on the edge of their seat. Haigood's works are social and political, bringing past historical moments of racial oppression and resilience into current conversations around these ongoing themes. *Invisible Wings* (1998), inspired by the Underground Railroad, was presented at a location that once served as a station for those fleeing to Canada during the mid-nineteenth century, while *Dying while Black and Brown* (2011), presented in a structure that serves as both a prison and a home, speaks to mass incarceration and its impact on the lives of Black and brown bodies. Haigood's studio is located in the Bayview Hunters Point area of San Francisco, a historically Black neighbourhood, and community conversations with its residents have influenced many of her pieces, including *Love, A State of Grace*.

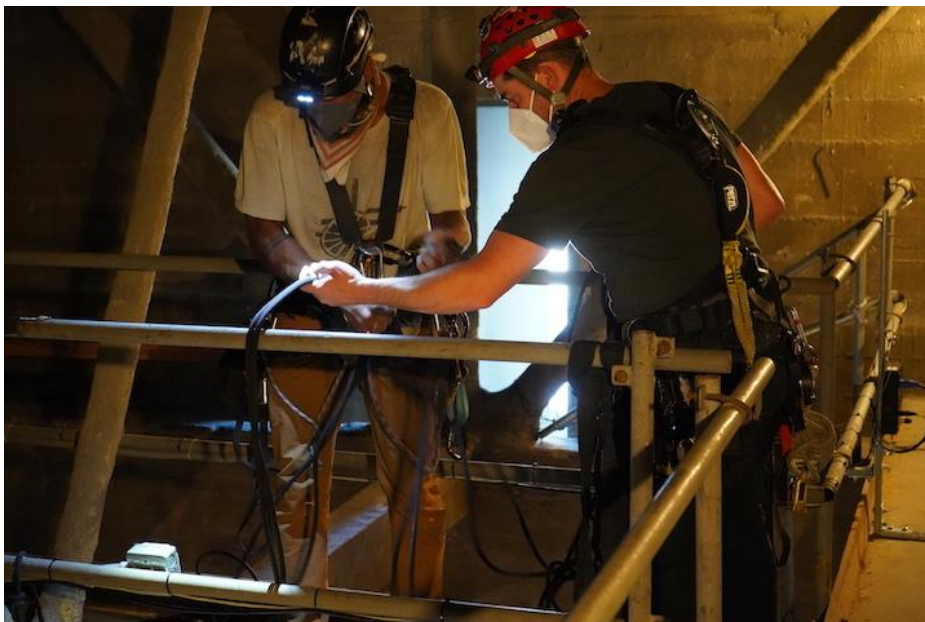


Nina Sawant in Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Walter Kitundu, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.



Haigood's pieces do more than represent a theme. They convey living histories through kinesthetic and emotional feeling that in my audience experience lingers in the body long after the performance has ended, demanding response. As the late bell hooks, known for her critical thinking on race and pedagogy, writes: "The practice of love offers no place of safety. We risk loss, hurt, pain. We risk being acted upon by forces outside our control" (2018, 153). *Love, A State of Grace* asks audiences to take a risk to open to a state in which gravitational and social forces beyond our control act upon us, yet we are not helpless in finding ways to navigate these forces. The dancers show us what is possible through acts of surrender and uplift. Haigood realizes these sensations choreographically by limiting the number of forms and gestures so that *motion* is what resonates. In *Love, A State of Grace*, the movements are in many ways simple. The dancers reach out, turn, and suspend their bodies in beautifully executed forms, yet it is the momentum of their particular movement trajectory that guides them, and we as audiences might practise following a moving trajectory as well. I am most struck by the dancers' attention to take-offs and landings. As Haigood describes, technique in her work serves to create a feeling: "What does it actually mean to climb and how much weight are you actually taking, and where's the balance between the struggle and the support? What is that moment of take-off and how do you integrate that feeling of the reach of the leg to that landing back onto the swing?" (2022)

For Haigood, creating this work at the current moment of pandemic lockdown and racial reckoning has been life-changing. Initially incited in response to violence at sacred sites in the US, and as a way to understand the nature of religious wars when faith practices are anchored in love, the recent uprisings and outpouring of ancestral grief in the US took the project into broader territory. While Haigood is inspired by boldness and adventure, she found making this work demanded a quieter approach "in order to experience more fully where we are and who we are in relationship with and to. . . . We experience [union] with the breeze or in that moment of contact with an animal in the forest or with each other. . . . That magic, that's something that comes through love. Love is an expansive experience, it's something that cracks you open and facilitates that union" (interview with author, February 25, 2022).



Sean Cotton and Dave Freitag in Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Thomas Konicke, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

As a practice, love requires cultivation, attention, care, curiosity, and acceptance. Finding ways to enter into, remain, and deepen this practice—which is at times awe-inspiring and at others painful or difficult—is an ongoing act of collaboration and ethical consideration needed more than ever in our current world. And as lawyer, filmmaker, and educator Valarie Kaur puts it, “If love is sweet labor, love can be taught, modeled, and practiced” (2020, xv), and on this evening, my companion and I engage a practice of attention that gestures toward Kaur’s words. We stay for three rotations of the piece’s three scenes, and a week later, I return to stay for four. As the piece winds down, the swinging figure dismounts gently and, as the live organ music crescendos, the dancer on the ladder reaches the top and disappears into the rafters. Yet this is not the end. We are left with the quietude of the figure in the nave, circling. The piece concludes here, with a return to this figure, and to ourselves. Not wanting to leave, I linger with other members of the Bay Area dance community I know, and others I do not. I carry a state of exhilaration, tenderness, and connectivity with me as I depart. As Haigood says of the experience performing aerial work: “You don’t take anything for granted. You have a very deep focus and attention to every possible detail. You’re feeling everything, you’re feeling the wind on the hairs of your arm, you’re very hyper aware, and that’s a wonderful state to be in. And it can be found anywhere, it’s just simple things, like the little fish in your pond.” Or walking a labyrinth. Or embodying daily tasks that we repeat, and engaging with others, as a way to practise opening to love.



Altar in Zaccho Dance Theatre’s *Love, A State of Grace*. Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, 2022. Photo by Saami Bloom, courtesy of Zaccho Dance Theatre.

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