

# **RADICAL VERNACULARS**

**EXPERIMENTS WITH TRADITION  
BETWEEN POLITICS AND PERFORMANCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation focuses on four collective projects that take “tradition” as a starting point for creative experiments in performance practice. All of these disparate projects are based in early 21<sup>st</sup>-century settler-colonial North America, and all of them have anachronistic, political, and playful qualities. Following a theoretical and methodological Introduction, the dissertation moves through close readings of four experiments with “traditional” practices. Chapter One looks at the Purim Extravaganza, a diasporic and queer version of the carnivalesque Jewish festival that takes place each year in New York City. Chapter Two addresses the mobile audiovisual performances of Ottawa DJ collective A Tribe Called Red, exploring Indigenous experiments with technology and tradition. Chapter Three gives an account of the Abandoned Practices Institute, a summer school in performance pedagogy based on forgotten or endangered everyday practices, run by former members of the performance collective Goat Island. Chapter Four investigates the North American revival of culinary fermentation practices, spurred in part by the writings of Sandor Katz, in order to examine the contradictions of vernacular revivals at the level of daily life.

All of these collective experiments offer insight into the fate of “tradition” as that which is abandoned (and then recuperated in frozen form) during the modernizing process, especially in settler-colonial societies. By reactivating vernacular material that has been consigned to an unchanging past, these experimental projects work through complex histories of colonization, shame, and abandonment, moving toward a space of shared capacity and collective action. Drawing on both participatory and critical research, the thesis examines various performance strategies that experiment with vernacular forms across gaps in historical and cultural continuity. In so doing, it engages with key issues in contemporary political and aesthetic thought: temporality, community, coloniality, property, and collective practice.

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## **PREFACE**

### **Four Experiments**

A warehouse in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, where costumed revellers sing in an abandoned language, celebrating a holiday of queer and profane inversion. A club in downtown Ottawa, where young people bounce to a heavy bassline, singing along with sampled voices emerging from a history of colonial suppression. A painting studio in Prague, where a group of American students play with abandoned practices and materials, creating performances out of lost fragments of the everyday. A kitchen in Tennessee, where crocks of vegetables sit by the window, fermenting in salty brine. Each of these scenes is the site of an experiment with what we moderns have named “tradition” – those collective cultural practices which have been consigned to a misty, pre-modern past. “Tradition,” in the language of modernity, refers to longstanding, customary beliefs and lifeways; depending on one’s political and intellectual orientation, tradition should be rejected as irrational, preserved as organic, or enjoyed as heritage. The four experiments explored in this dissertation reclaim the more subversive qualities of vernacular practice, by engaging in creative appropriations and translations of tradition. They activate an anachronistic energy that eludes settled categories of aesthetic and political thought. They can be described as radical vernaculars, if “radical” is understood as an active digging to the root – a root sunk into the soil of collective practice.

The four experiments I investigate here have markedly different content, and varying degrees of cultural specificity and political engagement. Following a theoretical and methodological Introduction, each of the four chapters examines one project at length, through a method that is not comparison, but rather collection – or even what Walter Benjamin called “constellation.” When considered together, a figure emerges from these four studies which at first glance might be obscured by their diversity. New York’s Purim Ball

(Chapter 1) is a one-night party, featuring live music and folk spectacle, a carnivalesque event that gathers some of that city's queer, leftist, and Yiddishist strands. The music of Ottawa-based Indigenous DJ collective A Tribe Called Red (Chapter 2) combines the sounds of powwow drum groups with the rhythms of global bass; their live shows add video montages of appropriated colonial imagery, creating a decolonizing audiovisual experience. The Abandoned Practices Institute (Chapter 3), organised in Chicago but held in Prague, is a three-week workshop that uses vanished or endangered practices – drawn from North American and European vernaculars – as prompts for the creation of installation and performance art. And the recent revival of do-it-yourself home fermentation (Chapter 4), spurred in part by the writing of Sandor Katz, draws on a wide range of traditional culinary practices, fostering a new ecological subculture of human-microbe collaborations. What can be made of these four experiments with tradition? What appears when these divergent projects are thought together?

While these projects and scenes are evidently quite heterogeneous, when brought into constellation, common figures begin to emerge. All of these experiments reframe key concepts that are much-debated in contemporary political and aesthetic thought: property, community, coloniality, and collective practice. All are based in early 21<sup>st</sup>-century North America, in what can be characterized as settler societies, colouring their appropriations of tradition in specific, contrasting ways. All of them have playful qualities, which defuse the seriousness of some politicized art. Their different forms of expression – a festival, a dance party, a workshop, a meal – are performances that blur the line between spectator and participant; they are mixed forms that are not easily housed in generic or disciplinary containers. In each of these experiments, vernacular practices are translated across a gulf of discontinuity, a break caused by suppression or neglect. They draw on varying strategies of translation, which I have distinguished in the chapter titles, using verbs in the present participle: “Profaning,” “Remixing,” “Responding,” “Fermenting.” These distinctions are more heuristic than iron-clad. All of these strategies work to unsettle static discourses of “tradition” and translate past practices into new creative life.



My investigation of these projects also belongs to a common historical moment: the years between 2011 and 2013. These years were marked by the resurgence of grassroots political movements against neoliberal austerity, economic inequality, colonial dispossession, and ecological exploitation. Globally, the “movements of the squares,” from European and Latin American *indignados* to North African revolutionaries, suggested an experimental reinvention of politics, a re-emergence of a spirit of contestation that struggled to find durable political form. In North America, the more impressive of these mobilizations – the Indigenous resurgence of Idle No More, the student-led street protests in Québec, the liberated territories of the Occupy movement – also reactivated traditions of vernacular political struggle that had seemed to lie dormant. These movements shared a faith in bottom-up, vernacular practices that were often translations of suppressed traditions – from the pots and pans of the student protests, to the round dances of Idle No More, to Occupy’s carnivalesque protest against finance capitalism and its attempted reinvention of everyday life (Sterne, “Quebec’s”; McMahon; Tancons, “Occupy”). *Commoning* was at the base of these movements, whether that took the form of defending Indigenous land, reclaiming urban and social space, or building shared practices of struggling and being-together. Some of the projects I explore here have direct ties to these movements; others are less obviously related. But whatever their links to political action, these four projects can each be understood as an expansion of the common, and as an opening to community (terms which I examine in the Introduction). By translating tradition across a gulf of discontinuity, they aim to reclaim and reinvent modes of collective practice. In this aim, they had much in common with their contemporary moment of political uprising, which also had an experimental quality, and whose consequences are still uncertain.

This dissertation deals with cultural and aesthetic performances, not with the performance of politics as such. But as in previous moments of political foment, performance offers a mode of approaching politics at a productively oblique angle. The dissertation’s focus on participatory practice – the repeated bodily activity of making and doing, not only the spectacular results – helps to illuminate a space between politics and performance, an experimental space where new modes of living and acting can be put into play. In the space

created by these various cultural experiments, the possessive individualism and “enterprise culture” (Sholette) of capitalist and colonial regimes can be suspended, at least temporarily, in favour of something more collective, more common. In the midst of “the republic of property,” as Hardt and Negri call our neoliberal societies, opening up a common space is no easy task. It requires an apprenticeship in *practices of undoing*. It is not enough simply to gather “bodies in alliance” (J. Butler): these bodies must be deliberately dislodged from their “proper” places. This constitutive “dispossession,” as Butler and Athanasiou call it, is politically and aesthetically fundamental to each of the four projects I explore below.

By reworking what might seem like anachronistic forms of vernacular practice, these diverse projects seek to undo the lived habits of possession and enclosure. Each does this in its own fashion, and with its own goals. Partying at a queer, diasporic Purim Ball hopes to dislodge xenophobic appropriations of Jewish tradition, and open up a profane mode of reparative political action. Dancing at one of A Tribe Called Red’s shows is a way to work through colonial history in the body, remixing incommensurable experiences through the vibrations of vernacular music. Responding aesthetically to the cultural debris dug up by the Abandoned Practices Institute serves to unwork the sovereignty of the individual artist, opening participants up to non-autonomous forms of creation. And the world of the fermentation revival attempts to undo the autonomy of the human, proposing an ecological politics that starts with the dirt beneath our feet. In this dissertation, I explore these projects first-hand: through bodily participation in their various practices of undoing. My accounts alternate between auto-ethnographic narrative and critical analysis. Each of these accounts stays close to the world of a given project, its specific universe of thought and action. But together, they aim to move beyond their circumscribed performance sites, and to illuminate crucial forms, at once old and new, of collective being, doing, making, thinking and acting.

## INTRODUCTION

### **Translating, Experimenting, Reclaiming**

Because of the diversity of the four projects I examine, each chapter of this dissertation is relatively self-contained – nearly a stand-alone “case study.” My aim in this theoretical and methodological Introduction is to follow the line of thought by which I have gathered these diverse projects together, and to make explicit my methods of investigation. The Introduction’s first, longer section (“Theoretical Frameworks”) is an extended essay that works through the key philosophical and critical sources for this project as a whole. It is not so much a review of the literature, as an exploration of essential terms and concepts. Its length is justified by the need to present a broadly synthetic argument, which can then carry over into each of the following chapters. The second, shorter section (“Contexts and Methods”) sketches out historical and contemporary contexts, presents my own path of engagement with this interdisciplinary research, situates it within the broad paradigm of Performance Studies, and articulates its critical and participatory methodologies. The title of this Introduction – “Translating, Experimenting, Reclaiming” – is meant to give a sense of the theoretical and methodological orientation of the dissertation as a whole.

## I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

*Love and Witchcraft – Undoing Tradition and Modernity – Practicing the Vernacular – Musica Practica – Commoning and Enclosures – Exposure to Community – Settler Disposessions – Translation, Discontinuity, Anachronism – Experimenting (Between Politics and Performance)*

### **Love and Witchcraft**

This dissertation grows out of a pragmatic investigation of four specific sites of practice, and looks closely at their various strategies and techniques. Rather than imposing an interpretive grid, it seeks to theorize immanently along with the communities of practitioners it follows: spectacle artists, musicians, performance makers, and fermenters. Each chapter thus draws on research sources that illuminate the particular concerns and reference points of each project, which are quite distinct. “Profaning,” for example, works through queer theory and Jewish mysticism, while “Remixing” takes up Indigenous and Afrofuturist texts; “Responding” dips into performance theory, while “Fermenting” engages with science studies. I have pilfered from these texts in vernacular style, cutting and mixing pragmatically as the need arose.<sup>1</sup> Yet certain themes, and certain authors drawn to those themes, have persistently cropped up. A number of theoretical and philosophical texts, encountered at various stages of research, have been crucial in clarifying the stakes of this project as a whole. To orient this theoretical discussion, I begin here by introducing three thinkers whose work cuts across the subsequent chapters: Elizabeth Povinelli, Isabelle Stengers, and Walter Benjamin. I then work through a series of key concepts that bring together the various strands of this investigation: tradition, vernacularity, commoning, community, settler colonialism, translation, anachronism, and experimental practice.

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<sup>1</sup> This opportunism is also characteristic of much work in Performance Studies, as I explore in Part II of this Introduction, “Contexts and Methods.”

Two idiosyncratic books, both published in the mid-2000s, have been particularly helpful in grounding this research conceptually and politically. Both look sympathetically at specific performative experiments that translate “tradition” into new creative life. The first is Elizabeth Povinelli’s *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*. Povinelli, an anthropologist, moves in this book between communities of Indigenous people in Australia and radical faeries (a queer rural subculture) in the United States, theorizing intimacy in these “radical worlds” at the margins of liberal settler-colonies.<sup>2</sup> Povinelli looks closely at the “awkward, uncomfortable, off-kilter experiments in life that the carnality of liberalism produces,” experiments with no obviously redemptive quality (85). She places herself as the moving centre of *The Empire of Love*’s narrative, travelling physically and intellectually between far-flung intimate scenes. Povinelli’s book has many merits, including its interweaving of lyrical auto-ethnography and critical theory, an interweaving which has inspired the methodology of this dissertation. Her linking of divergent queer and Indigenous “radical worlds” also has great relevance for my own project, which shares an interest in queer and Indigenous experimental practices.<sup>3</sup> While I focus on aesthetic projects, rather than on social formations, I follow Povinelli’s interest in the experimental activity that takes place in “the interior lining” of settler colonies, in the creative life of what are sometimes considered as marginal communities (79).

Even more crucial to my own project is Povinelli’s analysis of the liberal discourses of “the autological subject” and “the genealogical society,” discourses which, she argues, structure the relation of liberal subjects to a real or imagined “traditional” past. The “autological subject,” Povinelli writes, is the autonomous and sovereign subject of modernity, the parvenu or self-made man, who establishes his freedom through a rejection of the constraints of “tradition” (the gendered language is appropriate here). The “genealogical society,” on the other hand, is the grid of social determination, the binding traditionalism to which modernity’s others – especially Indigenous or colonized peoples – have been subjected.

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<sup>2</sup> In Chapter 4, “Fermenting,” I consider the links between radical faerie culture and the fermentation revival in the writings of Sandor Katz.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Morgensen’s work is also notable in this regard; see also A. Smith, and the *Sexuality, Nationality, Indigeneity* special issue of *GLQ* (Winter-Spring 2010).

This split creates what Povinelli calls a “discursive vise,” which dismisses those forms of intimacy that operate through more complex forms of attachment. It also limits the creative relationships that settler, diasporic, and Indigenous groups might establish with “traditional” modes of practice, their own or others. Discourses of autology and genealogy insist, Povinelli writes, that “alternative groups be culturally stillborn and indigenous groups be culturally frozen” (156). My research examines projects that seek to loosen both ends of this discursive vise. These creative projects undo discourses of autology by emphasizing attachments that are both historical and carnal, to the past and to others. And they undo discourses of genealogy by treating the past not as a frozen site of preservation, but as a space of experiment and play.

The second work that has served as a lodestar for this project is a more curious one: Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre’s *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*. This book-length manifesto was published in French in 2005, in the aftermath of the wave of antiglobalization protests that crested at the turn of the millennium. Stengers, a philosopher of science, and Pignarre, an activist and writer, seek to “relay” what they call “the event of Seattle,” the street demonstrations and direct actions that put a stop to the meeting of the World Trade Organization in that city in 1999. The authors see Seattle as a watershed moment, not so much in its immediate consequences as in its ability to put an end to a certain political “stupefaction,” a “veritable sorcerer’s spell” which had worked to paralyze political thought and action (72).

Sorcery, in fact, is Stengers and Pignarre’s basic attribute of global capitalism, which they treat as “a system of sorcery without sorcerers.” This description is pragmatic, not analytic. Giving capitalism the name of sorcery, they argue, is a way of “getting a hold” (*faire prise*); it involves admitting, as other less “modern” societies do, that we are all vulnerable to “capture” by powerful external forces. Faced with the ever-present possibility of becoming “minions” who actively contribute to this system’s functioning, even of “the risks linked, in popular parlance, to the word ‘soul’: to sell your soul, to be soulless, to have your soul eaten or sucked out, or captured,” Stengers and Pignarre argue that we must recognize our common vulnerability (40). We are all in need of protection against this system of sorcery, and effective protection cannot be achieved alone: it can only be achieved through the development of

collective techniques, “recipes,” and practices. What Stengers and Pignarre call “political creation” is less a matter of having the correct analysis, and more “a matter of techniques, of the perfecting of artifices and procedures” (130). Such techniques aim to render “those who participate in a collective capable of thinking, of taking a position, of creating together that which none of them would have been capable of by themselves” (130). These are “*pratiques de désenvoûtement*” (“practices of spell-breaking”), as the book’s French subtitle puts it, which can only develop through pragmatic, collective experimentation.

For Stengers and Pignarre, such experimental political creations must always grow out of local experiences. They are the product of “trajectories of apprenticeship,” several of which their book explores (including the collective struggles of drug users, open-source software programmers, and anti-GMO food activists). The authors’ final example of apprenticeship is their most provocative. *Capitalist Sorcery* ends with a “relay” of the practices of “neo-pagan witches,” the North American feminist groups who have melded a reinvented spiritual tradition with experimental practices of non-violent direct action. (Their presence was strongly felt in the Seattle protests, which brought the writings of Starhawk in particular to new readers.) Stengers and Pignarre use the English word *reclaim* to describe the witches’ experimental “mutation of tradition.” They write that for these feminist groups, “to call themselves witches was to *reclaim* the heritage of the defeated” (137). The name “witches” catalyzes “the memory of the last great eradication not to concern colonised peoples,” an eradication which occurred at the heart of Europe as it began its transition to capitalism (136). “Pagan,” write Stengers and Pignarre, first of all means “peasant,” and in Europe the elimination of the witches was contemporaneous with the expropriation of the peasant commons (Federici). Reclaiming the heritage of these subaltern collective practices turns the time of Enlightenment modernity upside-down; it is deeply improper, backwards and anachronistic. Yet contemporary practices of witchcraft – the practical techniques and “recipes” of neo-pagan witches, which have little to do with the supernatural – have proven to be more than just a variant of New Age spirituality. They have also been an effective apprenticeship for political creation.

Two aspects of witchcraft are of particular interest here: its anachronistic leap into the past, and its experimental or fabricated quality. To “reclaim” is to pull a set of collective practices across a temporal gulf of suppression or neglect. Stengers and Pignarre write that for those who have named themselves witches and activists, learning to resist and struggle against a system of capitalist sorcery has required “the rediscovery/reinvention of old resources, the destruction of which has probably contributed to our vulnerability” (136). This *rediscovery/reinvention* of old resources is, as the double term indicates, not particularly concerned with questions of authenticity. Indeed, the clearly made-up quality of neo-pagan witches is what makes them so difficult to pin down. “If neo-pagan witches could be identified with a ‘true,’ authentic tradition,” Stengers and Pignarre write, “the manner of their resistance could be respected, because we have the habit of tolerating the survival of traditions, indeed even of respecting the wisdom immanent to them. The test stems from the experimental, ‘fabricated’ character of their rituals and the undecidability that they confront us with” (138). Their spirituality is not even a question of a “belief,” in the conventional sense, which in a multicultural society should be “respected.” For Stengers and Pignarre, “What makes people uncomfortable, what is difficult to accept is that witches are pragmatic, radically pragmatic: truly experimental technicians, experimenting with effects and consequences” (138). These experimental techniques are cooked up collectively: what the witches call “magic” is a shared art or craft that admits our common vulnerability. Their “magic” is “a matter of relaying the old knowledge that such an art forces one to pay attention [*faire attention*], to protect oneself, that is to say in the first place and above all, not to think of oneself as sufficient unto oneself” (138). As the chapters that follow will demonstrate, this spirit of untimely, pragmatic, vulnerable, and shared experimentation is present in other contemporary political and aesthetic reclamations of tradition.

While my investigation is in dialogue with contemporary theoretical texts such as *The Empire of Love* and *Capitalist Sorcery*, it is also deeply informed by an earlier body of work: the writings of Walter Benjamin. The “reclaim” of Stengers and Pignarre echoes Benjamin’s “remembrance” (*Eingedenken*), that active casting of the nets of memory back into the sea of



the past.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, “to reclaim the heritage of the defeated” is a phrase that might have been pulled from Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History,” in which “the tradition of the oppressed” must be actively wrested away “from the conformism that is working to overpower it” (*Selected Writings* 4 392, 391).<sup>5</sup> In Benjamin’s thought, remembrance is linked to the theological concept of redemption (*Erlösen*), in which elements of the past are rescued and raised up to a higher power: through translation, allegory, or history-writing, for example. The insistence on remembrance and redemption contributes to the melancholy character of Benjamin’s writing. Yet balancing the melancholy of redemption is his concept of play (*Spiel*), the mimetic engagement with material objects and the world of childhood which threads its way through Benjamin’s work from the mid-1920s onward. The projects I discuss in this dissertation all echo Benjamin’s experimental engagement with fragments of the past – an active remembrance that operates in the mode of play.<sup>6</sup>

In this dissertation, I do not provide a sustained exegesis of Walter Benjamin’s writings, which have been subjected to extensive analysis over the past half-century.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, Benjamin is occasionally present as a direct interlocutor, especially in this Introduction, and in Chapter 1, “Profaning,” which proceeds via a reading of his “Theologico-Political Fragment.” Yet even though he is not always invoked directly, his thought provides a submerged structure for this project. Benjamin’s ambivalent engagement with tradition, and his concepts of translation, remembrance, redemption, and play, have soaked into my thinking. Benjamin described his own thought as saturated with theology, like an ink-blotter with ink: as he notes, “If one were to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain” (*Arcades*, N7a, 7). Similarly, this dissertation can be read as an extended

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<sup>4</sup> See “The Image of Proust,” “On the Concept of History” and other essays. Consciously or unconsciously, Stengers and Pignarre’s “*pratiques de désenvoûtement*” also echoes Benjamin’s *Entzauberung*, or breaking the magic spell, in “The Storyteller” and “On the Concept of History.” On Benjamin’s concepts of *Gedächtnis* (memory), *Eingedenken* (remembrance), and *Entzauberung*, see Wohlfarth, “Messianic.”

<sup>5</sup> Hereafter cited as *SW*.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin’s insistence on the unassimilated and fragmentary character of what is redeemed distinguishes his concepts of remembrance and redemption from Hegel’s *Erinnerung* and *Aufhebung*. See Comay; Wohlfarth, “Messianic.” On the concept of play in Benjamin’s thought, see Hansen, “Room-For-Play.”

<sup>7</sup> Secondary works on Benjamin which have been particularly helpful to this project include those by Hansen, Löwy, McCole, Weber and Wohlfarth.

dialogue with Benjamin's work, even when his name is not invoked. The projects I discuss here all proceed in Benjaminian fashion. They can be understood as various attempts to create a constellation between past and present, to transvalue what has been declared to be outmoded and defunct, and to rescue past practices from oblivion. And, in another crucial move, all of these projects attempt to redeem tradition from its appropriation as "heritage," which Benjamin regarded as one of the worst catastrophes that could befall the past. In the next section, I explore the complex valences of the concept of "tradition," and its connection to what we might call "the heritage operation."

### **Undoing Tradition and Modernity**

As numerous critics have noted, "tradition" is a difficult term with multiple and often conflicting senses.<sup>8</sup> Derived from the Latin *tradere*, to hand over or deliver, it is most meaningfully used to describe any practice or form handed down from one generation to another. "Tradition" serves in this broad sense to identify and establish lineages of intergenerational practice. It does not require a static content or an anchor in a distant past: family or cultural traditions, for example, can be of quite recent vintage and are altered with each new iteration. What establishes tradition is its designation as such, not any specific content that is transmitted. The folklorists Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin argue that tradition is above all a symbolic mode of relating to the past. "Tradition is not a bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts," they insist, "but a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past." Tradition is retrospective reinvention, "a process that involves continual re-creation" (287). David Graeber argues, along similar lines, that "to some degree that's what traditions are: the continual process of their own fabrication" ("On Cosmopolitan" 264). Something of this active sense of "tradition" is present in T.S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which "tradition" refers to the body of (European) writing which the poet engages, supplements, and retrospectively alters. It is also present in phrases such as "the black radical

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<sup>8</sup> Williams's *Keywords* remains a useful guide here.

tradition,” which place the speaker in a flexible, retrospective lineage (Moten). In this view, it makes little sense to distinguish between “genuine” and “spurious” tradition (Sapir), or to contrast “invented traditions” to genuine customs (Hobsbawm and Ranger). All culture can be understood as a tradition of invention, the product of a symbolic operation that transforms the past by carrying it over into the present.

Yet this more expansive and active meaning has been coloured by tradition’s role as the privileged “other” of modernity. As Raymond Williams observes, “tradition” has tended to move from an active to a passive sense: since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the word has come to acquire connotations of authority, respect, and duty, appearing as “age-old” and binding on present action (*Keywords* 319). Enlightenment rationality, with its universalist and progressive drive, has defined itself in contrast to this “age-old” tradition, which it associated with the rural, the local, the particular, the constrained, and the unreflective. The opposition between Enlightenment freedom and traditional constraint is foundational to the discourse of modernity, which values autonomy above all else. The “cultural program” of Enlightenment modernity, writes S.N. Eisenstadt, was marked by “an emphasis on the autonomy of man: his or her (in its initial formulation, certainly ‘his’) emancipation from the fetters of traditional political and cultural authority” (5). The emancipation from tradition requires an active contrast, a dramatic splitting; modern freedom only appears free when it is set against the background of binding tradition. “It is not freedom as such,” Elizabeth Povinelli writes, “but the performative break with tradition that signals to the adherents of the Western Enlightenment its own singularity, its world significance, its revolutionary advance out of custom” (*Empire* 201). In this paradigm, what Povinelli calls the “autological subject” is the subject who breaks with tradition, and “age-old” tradition is found wherever modern autonomy has not (yet) been established.

It is important to note that this “performative break,” as Povinelli describes it, is what causes the very categories of modernity and tradition to come into being. In its sense as “age-old,” binding authority, “tradition” is a category invented by modernity, its scorned or longed-for remainder. Modernity, with its autonomy and freedom, is whatever tradition is not. These categories are, as Bruno Latour argues, fundamentally discursive: we have never

been modern, and tradition was never “traditional.” The split between tradition and modernity, like the split that Latour describes between nature and culture, is an operation that ignores the complex hybrids that link practices across these “great divides.” Yet the discursive split between pre-modern (or “traditional”) and modern has had powerful social and political effects. As Povinelli notes, “The rigid separation between pre-modern and modern Europe was projected onto the relation between Europe and its colonial subjects, the metropole and the colony, the West and East, the North and South, the Christian and Islamic.” In her view, even “scholars of the liberal and radical Enlightenments ... project a rigid form of genealogical determination onto the social organization of pre-modern Europeans and colonized peoples” (*Empire* 215-216). Indeed, even sophisticated critics of the Enlightenment can follow this logic. Theodor Adorno, in his essay “On Tradition,” describes tradition as essentially feudal, unreflective, and passive – incompatible with the principles of bourgeois society. “Tradition is opposed to rationality,” he writes, “even though the one took shape in the other. Its medium is not consciousness but the pregiven, unreflected and binding existence of social forms – the actuality of the past” (75). Even if Adorno proposes a dialectical “reactualization” of tradition, as I will later explore, he does not dispute its binding quality – what he calls its “mythical authority” (80).<sup>9</sup>

This discursive separation between the autonomous subjects of modernity and the fettered subjects of tradition has served to justify operations of dispossession, colonization and enclosure. It has also encouraged the recuperation of tradition as “authentic” national heritage. In the discourse of modernity, binding tradition is constantly being destroyed by a cultural, social and economic sea change. As Marx and Engels put it in *The Communist Manifesto*, “all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away; all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify” (38). The “great transformation” of capitalist and colonial expropriation was (and is) real enough: peoples continue to be dispossessed from their lands, and embedded social relations are forcefully submitted to economic imperatives (Karl Polanyi). But the mapping of the

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<sup>9</sup> Adorno’s fascinating essay is also weakened by an equivocation between “tradition” as binding custom and “tradition” as the tradition of literary forms. See D. Cook for an interesting (if flawed) critique.

categories of “modernity” and “tradition” onto that great transformation serves only to naturalize its violence, presenting it as the inevitable outcome of an uncontrollable process.

It was perhaps a recoiling from (or disavowing of) that violence which gave rise to the operations of “heritage” and folklore, which sought to preserve the cultural elements that had been suppressed or discarded in the rush to modernize. The concept of heritage was made possible by “the discovery of the people” in eighteenth-century Europe, which expressed itself in phenomena ranging from Romantic poetry at the core to political nationalism on the periphery (Burke 23). But it was the nineteenth century’s “consuming historical fever,” as Nietzsche called it, that gave birth to the discourse of heritage as such, as well as the associated discipline of folklore (8). In nineteenth-century Europe, “tradition” was associated with the vanishing rural world of peasant life, the traces of which existed only in the “mutilated” form of superstitions and stories – what the anthropologist Edward Tylor, in his 1871 book *Primitive Culture*, called “survivals.” The key shift was the recuperation of these “survivals,” which previous modernizers had sought to eliminate, as elements that should be valued and preserved; indeed, as the cornerstone for a revitalized national culture. The discipline of folklore took as its subject what Enlightenment rationality had described as shameful backwardness and error, the attachments and practices that capitalist modernization had supposedly left behind. Folklorists began to sift through the wreckage of modernity for scraps of lost tradition worthy of preservation. Shame and error became the subject of scholarship: “What one was too ashamed to do, one could study, collect, and display” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture* 161).

Those elements that folklore pulled from the waste-pile of modernity could then be exhibited and enjoyed as heritage. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes heritage as “a meta-cultural” operation, which “produces something new in the present that has recourse to the past” (*Destination Culture* 149). What might seem like preservation is “a mode of cultural production that gives the endangered or outmoded a second life as an exhibition of itself” (“World Heritage” 168). Ironically, the exhibition of repudiated cultural forms as heritage is another way of destroying those same forms as living practices. The heritage operation produces what Nietzsche called “an excess of history”; it seals practices off from their living

use. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes the production of heritage, in the ethnographic museum for example, as an embalming process: “Promising to bring its dead specimens ‘to life’ through the theatre of installation, museums produce the lifelike, the work of the undertaker, which is not to be confused with life force, the work of survival” (*Destination Culture* 165). Heritage domesticates, mummifies, enshrines, pacifies. More than oblivion, heritage is what most threatens tradition as a creative, dynamic relation to the past.

In a fragment of *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin remarks on the danger of heritage, and how that danger might be countered. He writes:

What are phenomena rescued from? Not only, and in the main, from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their “enshrinement as heritage.”— They are saved through the exhibition of the fissure within them.—There is a tradition that is catastrophe. (N9, 4)

As Benjamin feared, tradition’s “enshrinement as heritage” has become the dominant global mode of relating to a collective past. If the discourse of modernity first established itself by splitting with tradition, it soon moved to recuperate that remainder in frozen and pacified form. Now, ironically, “the possession of heritage” has become “a mark of modernity,” and heritage productions and performances are replicated around the globe (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture* 180). To rescue tradition from its enshrinement as heritage requires, as Benjamin writes, a more radical approach, which focuses on the fissure – the breaks and wounds of history – rather than the seamless whole. In the following chapters, I explore creative projects that reckon with this challenge. In various ways, they exhibit the fissures within the phenomena they rescue, rather than masking historical wounds with undertaker’s makeup.

If heritage represents one “tradition that is catastrophe,” then “the folk” is surely another. “The folk,” folklore’s object of study, is an 18<sup>th</sup>-century European invention. As folklorist Roger Abraham writes,

The *folk* was an invention by negation, in contrast to society dominated by the *modern* – that is, made up of urban, bourgeois, and bureaucratic state-builders. The folk,

under these conditions, was imagined as living in the condition of whole-being which had vanished from the center but was still to be found at the peripheries of the nation-state, people who carry on the old ways and resist the incursions of metropolitan authorities. Conceived as social, cultural, and technological isolates, they were reassuring in the seemingly organic quality of their communities. (6, italics in original)

The myth of the “organic” folk community is linked to Tönnies’s division between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), suggesting a bounded community that lies in the past of a divided and differentiated society. In this vision, the remnants of the folk can still be found at that society’s outskirts, or among its lower orders. “The quest for the folk” became the project of generations of modern intellectuals, who sought to recuperate “folk traditions” as a salve for the fragmentations of commercial urban life (McKay, Storey).

When linked to the myth of the lost organic community, the recuperation of tradition has had oppressive and even devastating effects. The idea of the lost folk community that could be recovered within the modern nation-state went on to inspire a succession of antimodernist movements, including the revival of medievalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lears). It expressed itself in the “invented traditions” – perhaps more accurately called reified national traditions – of modern state pageantry, iconography and rituals (Hobsbawm and Ranger). And the *Volksgemeinschaft* took on a deadly new life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the nightmare of the fascist unification of a people with its pure, “organic,” premodern essence. In contemporary liberal states, the fantasy of the organic folk community has been mostly disentangled from a violent fusion with national belonging. Yet something of the *Volksgemeinschaft* can still be found in conservative understandings of “tradition” as the “glue” which serves to “bond together social life,” without which a society would “collapse into normlessness” (D. Gross, “Rethinking Traditions” 5; see also Giddens).

Contemporary versions of a “tradition that is catastrophe,” often blending elements of “heritage” and “the folk,” are omnipresent in a globalised world. Discourses of multiculturalism, which tend to treat “communities” as organic units, carry forward the fantasy of the bounded folk community, not at the level of the nation-state but at the level of

the diasporic group. The fantasy of pure and traditional origins survives in the rhetoric of uplift of subaltern peoples, as in the “premodern African idyll” promoted by some Afrocentric writers (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 193). Enduring patriarchal structures are often justified by an appeal to tradition; after all, what could be more “traditional” than male domination? (As Gandhi wrote, referring to the oppression of women in traditional religious practices: “It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide” (247).) In *Ethnicity, Inc.*, John and Joan Comaroff describe how “tradition” is increasingly recuperated through the legal incorporation of identity and the commodification of cultural products and practices. They detail how ethnic and Indigenous groups have become “entrepreneurial subjects” selling their brand and defending their identities through “lawfare” (128). All of these appropriations of tradition, despite their appeals to a well-defined, often “pre-modern” past, are modern to the core. They take place on a playing-field where the rules are set by discourses of modernity.

Small wonder, then, that critical activists, artists, and intellectuals have sought to undo what Paul Gilroy calls “the sterile opposition between tradition and modernity” (*Black Atlantic* 202). Drawing on black intellectual lineages from W.E.B. Du Bois to Amiri Baraka, Gilroy proposes a more active understanding of tradition: not as the discarded or recuperated other of modernity, but as “the living memory of the changing same” (*Black Atlantic* 198).<sup>10</sup> Retracing tradition’s living memory means looking deep into the fissure: in the case of *The Black Atlantic*, into the colonial processes of dispossession and enslavement that have transformed Africa and its diasporas. It means viewing history, with all its violence, as the medium where living memory is transmitted between generations, where the changing same unwinds itself. As Gilroy writes, “it matters a great deal whether modern racial slavery is identified as a repository in which the consciousness of traditional culture could be secreted and condensed into ever more potent forms or seen alternatively as the site of premodern tradition’s most comprehensive erasure” (197). Gilroy’s choice is the former: what matters is not a chasing after lost mythical origins, but a reclamation of tradition in all its awful history, its profane impurity. Indeed, worldly history is where tradition is “secreted and condensed

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<sup>10</sup> “The changing same” is Baraka’s term, in his essay “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music).” See also N. Mackey, and Gilroy, “Sounds Authentic.”



into ever more potent forms.” For Gilroy, as for Stengers and Pignarre, the task is to reclaim – not so much “the heritage of the defeated,” but the heritage of the *undefeated*, the resilient and scattered “conscripts of [global] modernity,” with all their tragic history (David Scott). In the various projects I look at here, *reclaiming* is an attempt to undo the opposition between tradition and modernity, and to reject the embalmed appropriation of tradition as heritage. Instead, reclaiming sets up a filiation between past and present that foregrounds temporal fissures, allowing the “changing same” to transform into new meanings, new practices, new vernaculars.

### **Practicing the Vernacular**

One difficulty with the term “tradition” is its tendency to suggest a bounded and substantive whole, an unchanging body of cultural lore and practice that is handed down from generation to generation. This makes it easy to appropriate the term for hegemonic purposes. Raymond Williams describes the process of establishing “the *selective tradition*: that which, within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as ‘the tradition,’ ‘the significant past’” (*Culture and Materialism* 39). Dominant elites tend to use the term “tradition” to plaster over the fissures of a divided and unequal society. It is tempting to counter these hegemonic appropriations by turning to the term “vernacular,” which preserves a certain subaltern charge. “Vernacular,” as Sheldon Pollock notes, is linked to a “particular and unprivileged mode of social identity – the language of the *verna* or houseborn slave of Republican Rome” (596). As used to designate unprivileged languages, “vernacular” is articulated in a dialectic with “cosmopolitan” tongues such as Latin or Sanskrit. This dialectic is mobile: Latin and Sanskrit were once local languages, and the popular speech of one generation can become the dominant language of another. For Pollock, the term “vernacular” is “hobbled by its own particularity, since there is no reason to believe that every vernacular is the idiom of the humiliated demanding vindication” (596). Yet the advantage of “vernacular” is that it recalls a history of social divisions and, indeed, humiliations. “Like *vulgar*, *popular*, and *common*,” Roger Abraham writes, “the word carries class connotations” (12, italics in

original). Abraham sees this as a problem, and prefers to make “vernacular” into a synonym for the poetics of “everyday life.” On the contrary, the class connotations of these words should be welcomed. If “tradition” is one way to project “an ideal unity of a divided reality” back into the mists of time (Eagleton, *Ideology* 111), the terms “vernacular” or “common” can exhibit the historical and social fissures in what is handed down from the past.

“Vernacular,” however, is subject to the same danger as “tradition” and “the folk”: it tends to be used as a substantive noun, rather than as the description of an active process or practice. “Tradition,” as I have argued, should best be understood as symbolic filiation, a practice of transmission and not a bounded thing that is transmitted. “Vernacularity,” too, must be analyzed as an active practice with its own logics. This is in line with Pollock’s proposal “to think about cosmopolitanism and vernacularism as action rather than idea, as something people do rather than something they declare, as practice rather than proposition (least of all, philosophical proposition)” (593). Vernacularity should be seen as a way of practicing culture from the bottom up, starting from local attachments, just as cosmopolitanism may be seen as a way of accessing the universal – gestures which are by no means incompatible. Even “the folk,” a term that is almost pure mystification, can be made productive by turning it from a substantive noun into a description of “something people do.” In its nominal form, vernacularity appears as “the folk,” with its “talk of mother-tongue and mother’s milk – of language and blood” (Pollock 596). But in its active form, it becomes “folk practice,” the practices of copying, opportunism, borrowing and reuse that flourish in subaltern groups, industrial and pre-industrial, past and present (Boon, *In Praise*).<sup>11</sup>

“Vernacular practice” and “folk practice” are useful terms to designate “subaltern creativity” – “a making from what’s immediately available,” including the trash of the dominant culture (Henriques 161). The term “subaltern” is an odd adaptation from Gramsci, who was anything but idealistic about the beliefs and practices of oppressed groups. Gramsci saw subaltern consciousness as diffuse and disordered, made up of “a confused agglomerate of fragments of all the conceptions of life and the world that have succeeded one another in

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<sup>11</sup> Clarke Mackey’s *Random Acts of Culture* makes the basic mistake of opposing “vernacular” and “commercial” culture, as if vernacular practice could only exist in a pristine sphere, untouched by market society and mass technologies.

the course of history” (*Cultural Writings* 189). During his own impoverished Sardinian upbringing, Gramsci saw first-hand how dominant institutions, especially the Church, could push a whole class of people down into ignorance, superstition and powerlessness. He regarded the “folklore” that remained as mostly a “debased spillover” from the dominant culture (qtd. in Cirese 220). Yet even Gramsci was impressed by the tenacity and “formal solidity” of this folklore, its ability to function as a deeply-rooted conception of the world, as well as its oppositional character, its “spirit of cleavage” (qtd. in Cirese 231). What was necessary, for the Marxist revolutionary, was find a way to raise these fragmented bits of subaltern consciousness into a more compact and systematic form.<sup>12</sup>

Julian Henriques, in his book *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing*, is more interested in understanding and valuing subaltern practices – in this case, the practices developed by Jamaican dancehall sound system crews – for their own sake. He describes “subaltern creativity,” in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s terms, as “the science of the concrete,” involving a process of *bricolage* or the improvisational mixing of available elements.<sup>13</sup> In his focus on bottom-up creativity, Henriques follows a long line of cultural theorists who see the vernacular as a site of vibrant cultural and political experiment worthy of attention. To analyze the practice of the sound system crews, Henriques draws on concepts from Greek rhetoric and philosophy, including *mētis*, or “practical intelligence.” *Mētis* allows MCs, selectors, and audio engineers to engage in skilled performances without necessarily specifying the rules by which those performances are governed. This is “the logic of practice,” as Bourdieu calls it – a formulation that should be applied to all practices, not only those of “unofficial culture” or subaltern groups.<sup>14</sup> Vernacular practice is distinguished by its lack of explicit codification and formalization. Unlike, say, Western classical music,

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<sup>12</sup> For Gramsci, what was needed were “new popular beliefs, that is to say a new common sense and with it a new culture and philosophy which will be rooted in the popular consciousness with the same solidity and imperative quality as traditional beliefs” (*Prison Notebooks* 424). For an alternative to Gramsci’s understanding of popular culture as a “debased spillover,” see Ginsburg, who argues for a “circularity” between the culture of the dominant classes and that of the subordinate classes in the European Renaissance (xii).

<sup>13</sup> Henriques’s adaptations from Lévi-Strauss (*bricolage* and the “science of the concrete”) follow Dick Hebdige’s classic description of punk in *Subculture*. See also Boon, *In Praise*.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Stengers on the practices of experimental science, in “Diderot’s Egg” (examined in Chapter 3 below).

which works through notation and rules that are established and transmitted by formal institutions, the music of Jamaican sound systems is created, judged, and experienced through unofficial and informal criteria – “vibes” – that are worked out in recording studios and street parties rather than in conservatories and concert halls. This is not to suggest a hierarchy of musical worth or ability; nor is it to overlook the tacit knowledge and complex trajectories of apprenticeship that characterize the training of both classical musicians and dancehall crews. Rather, it is a social hierarchy that inflects these practices, giving them their particular methods, styles, and flavours. The opportunism, *bricolage* and abundant multiplicity of “folk practice” is made necessary by its subordinate status: you have to work with the materials that are there.<sup>15</sup>

In *Sonic Bodies*, Henriques describes the logic of sound system crews as “sound practice,” meant in a double sense: both sonic and “correct.” Music and sound should, in general, be understood not as bounded objects, but as practices. They are “something people do”: “musicking,” as Christopher Small calls it, or “sounding,” in Henriques’s formulation. The fact that Henriques is studying “a contemporary vernacular culture – the ‘vibes’ of all night dancehall sessions on the streets of downtown Kingston” – does not mean that this sonic culture is any less sophisticated, skilled or rule-governed than “official” culture (275). Instead, the “sound practice” of these sessions demonstrates a vernacular logic. As Henriques writes,

The crew’s performance techniques assemble a comprehensive range of embodied knowledge, tacit understanding, common sense, folk wisdom, ritual and many other ways of knowing, with which the crew “make sense” of what they do as and by doing it. The logic of sound practice is invariably multiple, as with the practice of musicking – assembling together everything and everyone needed for an event. (226-227)

Henriques’s summary can serve as a definition of vernacular practice, which tends to be situated, multiple, opportunistic, and embodied, and often works from a subaltern position.

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<sup>15</sup> On apprenticeship in the dancehall scene, see Henriques, especially Chapter 4, “Learning to Listen.” On tacit knowledge, see Michael Polanyi. For a philosophical examination of apprenticeship and the transmission of skilled “craft” practices, see Sennett.

This is clearly evident in vernacular music-making, in which the multiplicity of folk practice is set loose in the sonic spectrum.

### **Musica Practica**

Thinking about music is a revealing way to trace the logics of vernacular practice. Sonic affects are carried more through vibration than signification: while linguistic vernaculars tend to mark out semantic and social boundaries, musical vernaculars can function more easily as sites of encounter. Music can undo the supposedly bounded and substantive nature of the vernacular community: Steve Goodman writes of “the agency distributed around a vibrational encounter” (82), an encounter which would certainly be trans-linguistic. Musical styles and rhythms are easily absorbed and reconfigured across communities of practice, as in the polyglot musical cultures of port cities, from Salonika to New Orleans to Salvador da Bahia. Vernacular musicking, as Henriques writes, works opportunistically, “assembling anyone and everything needed for an event.” Music is also one of the more copious cultural forms, linked to the “abundant style” of folk practice: it “precipitates collective joy, is eminently portable, and resists being turned into a thing or property – which is why folk cultures love it so much” (Boon, *In Praise* 65). This is not to suggest that musicking is utopian; vernacular music is subject to intense commodification and battles over property rights, and can be appropriated by dominant groups. But as a vernacular practice – as something people do with the materials they have – musicking does carry a certain promise of abundance, experimentation and encounter.<sup>16</sup>

Stylistically, the key feature of vernacular musicking is the prevalence of what the ethnomusicologist Charlie Keil calls “participatory discrepancies.” These are the idiosyncratic rhythmic and timbral elements that push and pull against each other, the “semiconscious or unconscious slightly out of syncness” that gives music its “creative tension” (96). Drawing on examples from jazz, blues, and polka, Keil explores two basic types of musical discrepancies,

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<sup>16</sup> For a philosophical treatment of music that does focus on its utopian promise, see J. Brown, who follows Bloch.

which he calls “processual” and “textural.” Processual discrepancies are time-based: they give music its groove, swing, bounce, or pulse; they invite bodily participation, “getting into the groove,” foot-tapping, dancing. Textural discrepancies are frequency or pitch-based: these are the rough tonal qualities of individual instruments or voices, and the wonky intervals, difference tones, and “brightness” or “darkness” that results from instruments or voices vibrating against each other. Recognizing the power of these discrepancies, especially in vernacular musicking, Keil offers a maxim: “Music, to be personally involving and socially valuable, must be ‘out of time’ and ‘out of tune’” (96). As Keil observes, these processual and textural discrepancies are always specific and recognizable in a given musical-cultural context. They constitute a musical “style” that, if achieved, invites participation: listeners move into the music, body and soul.

Keil’s concept of participation is intriguing, if somewhat romantic and undertheorized.<sup>17</sup> What exactly is this “pre-logical,” “pre-mythical,” participatory state that seems to defy laws of contradiction? How easy is it to distinguish “participations that really revitalize, equalize, and decentralize” (98), from the repressive participation of mass mobilizations, such as fascist rallies? (Perhaps it depends on the presence or absence of discrepancies.)<sup>18</sup> Keil’s “participation” might be tied to *mimesis* in its expanded sense: the bodily engagement of the “mimetic faculty” which Walter Benjamin associated with play and with “becoming similar.” Perhaps *methexis* is a better term, music being not so much a matter of mimetic imitation but methexic “participation, sharing, or contagion,” which for Jean-Luc Nancy characterizes the sonorous (*Listening* 10).<sup>19</sup> At its most basic level, “participation” refers to a bodily and affective engagement that is pronounced in vernacular practice. Vernacular musicking is closely tied to social dancing and collective worshipping, both of which require the active participation of multiple bodies. Achieving this physical and spiritual participation depends on hitting the musical sweet spot, both in time and in tone. As Keil observes, “if the microtiming is not right among the *bata* players the *orishas* will not descend.

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<sup>17</sup> As intellectual sources of the concept of participation, Keil cites Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Owen Barfield.

<sup>18</sup> For a compelling theorization of “discrepant engagement,” see N. Mackey.

<sup>19</sup> For Benjamin on mimesis, see “The Mimetic Faculty,” “Doctrine of the Similar,” and the second (earlier) version of the “Work of Art” essay. On Platonic methexis, see Rosen.

If the textural brightness and processual relaxed dynamism of the paired trumpets are not there a lot of the polka dancers may sit tight” (108). The same principle applies in the age of “mechanical processual discrepancies” (107) or, presumably, digital ones. If the DJ drops the wrong track, the dance floor will clear out. The mysteries of these discrepancies are often closely guarded, Keil writes, in order to encourage participation. Knowledge must be gained through collective practice, apprenticeship, and experimentation – processes that gather their own communities of practice. This collective quality is preserved in the music itself: vernacular styles, with their “out of tune” and “out of time” elements, distil a participatory temporality. “Groove and style,” Steven Feld writes, are “crystallizations of collaborative expectancies in time” (“Aesthetics” 109).

Such crystallizations are not to be found exclusively in the realm of music. In fact, the stylistic features of vernacular musicking can be read back into vernacular speech, which also emphasizes bodily participation, processual and textural discrepancies, and “collaborative expectancies in time.” Vernacular speech is full of idioms, proverbs, jokes, slang, obscenities, puns, word games, and curses, which can all be translated through approximation into alphabetic writing. But perhaps the essence of vernacular speech lies in prosody, what Brian Rotman calls “the gestural dimension of speech,” which is difficult to capture in any symbolic language. Prosody, in Rotman’s expanded definition, is made up of “the gestures which constitute the voice itself – the tone, the rhythm, the variation of emphasis, the loudness, the changes of pitch, the mode of attack, discontinuities, repetitions, gaps and elisions, and the never absent play of musicality of utterance that makes human song possible” (3). The play of prosody can become wildly discrepant in both vernacular speech and music, from the voicings of a stand-up comic to the punctuated vocal gestures and percussive syllabics of a funk vocal performance. Like a rhythmic groove, such vocal gestures invite participation and improvisational engagement, at least among those who are open to their codes.

The vocal gestures of prosody are what Roland Barthes calls the “grain” of the voice, which he associates with the vernacular and with bodily pleasure. “The ‘grain,’” Barthes writes, is “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue” (*Image* 182). It is less concerned with signification or expression than with *signifiance*, or “meaning in its potential

voluptuousness” (184). Listening to singers of classical *lieder*, Barthes describes a certain auditory and linguistic *jouissance* – “a space of pleasure, of thrill, a site where language works for nothing, that is, in perversion” (187) – that is inextricably tied to a specific language and rooted in the parts of the body that form it. For Barthes, the “grain” is not to be found in the lungs that breathe, but in the organs that speak and vibrate: “the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose” (183). What we might call the vocal body of the singer exists in creative tension with the particular sung language, which sets up a productive “friction” or discrepancy (185).

For Barthes, the spoken or sung vernacular crystallizes a collaborative expectancy that has a certain relation to “tradition.” Barthes’s favourite singer Panzera, for example, recommended that sung consonants “be *patinated*, given the wear of a language that had been living, functioning, and working for ages past” (184, italics in original). In “The Grain of the Voice,” Barthes is describing the tradition of Western art song, which is anything but subaltern. Yet he notes that his beloved “grain” has gradually vanished with the professionalization of chamber music, as the participation of aristocratic amateurs in salons gave way to the perfection of virtuosos in conservatories. “Grain,” it seems, is not so far from “groove,” despite the social distance that seems to lie between them. Both enact a triangulation between the materiality of the body, a specific linguistic or musical vernacular, and the singers and musicians who give voice and sound to those discrepancies. Both “grain” and “groove” are found in traditions of what Barthes elsewhere calls “*musica practica*”: music as practice. Both invite participation: they touch off in us “not satisfaction but desire, the desire to *make* that music,” or to dance, or to “operate” the music in some way (*Image* 150). They are traditions, above all, of musicking, music as active practice.

This dissertation is not a work of ethnomusicology, or even primarily about music (although musical practices are a key part of Chapter 1, “Profaning,” and, especially, Chapter 2, “Remixing”). Yet its conception of the vernacular is deeply informed by various forms of *musica practica*, especially those with a vernacular inflection. In the chapters that follow, I explore projects that refuse to embrace “the vernacular” as a substantive, with its emphasis on cultural-linguistic belonging and guarded borders. Instead, in musical fashion, these projects



reclaim vernacularity as a practice, “a making from what’s immediately available,” as Henriques puts it. Rather than protecting their own specificity, they encourage encounter, bodily participation, and open-ended “collaborative expectancies in time,” even in the grain of the particular. This is the case whether the project is a festival that queers the Jewish tradition, a performance workshop that plays with abandoned practices, a food movement that revives vernacular techniques of fermentation, or, more obviously, a dance party that remixes Indigenous musical traditions. None of these projects (with the possible exception of A Tribe Called Red’s) have social locations that could be accurately described as “subaltern”; indeed, their class locations are often more comfortable, which opens them to political critique. But as aesthetic projects, they reactivate subaltern practices in creative and compelling ways. In vernacular fashion, they gather everything and everyone needed for an event. And like *musica practica*, they invite participation, touching off (as Barthes puts it) “not satisfaction, but desire.”

The desire to participate, which all these projects invoke, can easily be commodified and shunted into forms that iron out the rich discrepancies of vernacularity. But the desire for collective practice and collective experience – so evident in vernacular musicking – should not be dismissed. Part of the appeal of vernacularity lies in its potential to undo individualized regimes of property, propriety, authorship, and creation. As collective practice, this might be called *commoning*. As relational experience or ontology, it might be called *community*. The following two sections explore these complex terms, juxtaposing two very different groups of thinkers.

### **Commoning and Enclosures**

If there is a political radicality to the vernacular, it can best be seen in the diverse customary practices of *commoning*, which establish collective relationships to the land and the means of subsistence. These are modes of setting up, maintaining, regulating and defending common lands, for the purposes of collective mobility and survival. Peter Linebaugh, a contemporary historian of commons and enclosures, has tracked these vernacular rights and

customs as they appear in documents such as the Charter of the Forest, which was long regarded as an archaic appendage to the English Magna Carta. Linebaugh's book *The Magna Carta Manifesto* exhibits the historical fissures within a document that has long been embalmed as heritage – or worse, carried as part of the victory parade over the bodies of the defeated (Benjamin, *SW4* 391). In a compelling act of reclaiming, Linebaugh allows us to read the Magna Carta and the Charter of the Forest as, among other things, inscriptions of oppositional vernacular practices of commoning.

In *The Magna Carta Manifesto*, Linebaugh argues that “common rights” should be understood as a basic means of articulating human and ecological collectivities, and of reining in the power of rulers.<sup>20</sup> “Common rights differ from human rights,” Linebaugh claims, in several ways. They are embedded in a particular ecology with its local husbandry; they are embedded in a labour process, “in a particular praxis of field, upland, forest, marsh, coast”; they are collective; and they are independent of the restrictions and temporalities of law and state (45). Such practices are historic, to be sure – they regulate forms of collective existence and struggle which enslavement and serfdom, the enclosures of capital, and the armies of colonization have done their best to constrain. Yet they continue to operate around the globe: as practices of rural subsistence, but also as practices of shared production (from community gardens to the free software movement), and as practices of sociability, including the sharing of food and drink. If these activities suggest a certain communism, it is what R.H. Tawney called “practical communism” (206), rather than communism as ideology or “idea” (Douzinas and Žižek). “Practical communism” is also present in David Graeber's use of the term “communism” to describe the primary relations of trust, reciprocity and mutual aid that subtend all social life – even, despite economist ideology, within a market society. Graeber observes that the competitive individualism of the capitalist market depends on a bedrock of

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<sup>20</sup> Linebaugh points out that common rights do not exist because of their legal inscription in such documents; rather, the inscription of these rights is a result of past struggles to defend longstanding customary practices. For a comparable argument that treats charters, declarations, and constitutions as *inscriptions* of popular struggles for equality, which can then be reactivated, see Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*.

sociability and solidarity to avoid coming apart at the seams. “Capitalism,” as he likes to say, “is just a really bad way of organizing communism” (Graeber and Rockwell).<sup>21</sup>

Nouns like “communism” and “the commons” tend to obscure the complex and situated practices by which human beings establish common relations, rights, obligations, and ecologies. To emphasize the active nature of these practices, Linebaugh prefers to speak of “commoning,” using the verb in the present participle. “To turn a noun into a verb is not a little step and requires some daring,” writes Massimo de Angelis of Linebaugh’s coinage (1). In its nominal form, “the commons” suggests a static pool of resources that is always in danger of depletion, as in Garrett Hardin’s infamous parable “The Tragedy of the Commons.” Even sympathetic economists such as Elinor Olstrom view “the commons” in this substantive fashion, as a “common-pool resource” to be appropriated by rational users (Caffentzis). Linebaugh’s “commoning” follows the active use of the term in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: “Generally a man may common in a forest.”<sup>22</sup> As a verb, “to common” reminds us that “there are no commons without incessant activities of commoning, of (re)producing in common” (de Angelis 1). “The common” is not an object constructed through rational calculation, as contemporary economists would have it, but a shared practice established through custom, sentiment and affect – part of what E.P. Thompson called “the moral economy.” The verb “commoning” reminds us that, as philosophers from Agamben to Hardt and Negri have argued, “the common” is an active force that is always being produced and reproduced. Indeed, in *Commonwealth*, Hardt and Negri argue that culture, knowledge, and (especially) language are forms of the common: all are born out of collective practice, and all are vulnerable to expropriation.<sup>23</sup>

While sympathetic to Hardt and Negri’s expanded treatment of “the common,” Linebaugh’s research stays closer to the ground. It emphasizes the situated web of practices of commoning, “the messy complexities of coincident use-right”, which in their particularity can

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<sup>21</sup> Graeber follows Karl Polanyi’s analysis, in *The Great Transformation*, of the disembedding of markets from social life.

<sup>22</sup> The English jurist Edward Coke, qtd. in Linebaugh, *Magna Carta* 79.

<sup>23</sup> Hardt and Negri contrast “the common as a given element such as land or natural resources,” to “the common as a result such as networks of social relations or forms of life,” which they see as more important (117). Yet as Linebaugh and other historians of commoning have shown, the land only becomes “the common” as a result of a thick web of social relations and forms of life.

be inscrutable to the outsider (Thompson, *Whigs* 241). In the forests, meadows, marshes and highlands of the British Isles, for example, before enclosure was completed, commoning took on a bewildering array of forms and names. “Commoners had their own language,” writes Linebaugh, a vernacular that can be seen in the poetry of John Clare, who was “himself a labouring commoner” (“Enclosures” 18).<sup>24</sup> This vernacular is evident in the names of customary rights to the common, which British social historians have tended to group into four categories: pasture, estovers (gathering timber), pannage (pasturing pigs in the woods), and turbarry (the cutting of turf or peat for fuel). But these are not all: as Linebaugh notes,

there were many others (piscary, houseboat, shack, ploughbote) depending on uses or resources (gorse, bracken, chalk, gravel, clay, rushes, reeds, nuts and herbs). These customary rights might provide fuel, meat, milk, tools, housing, and medicines. Rights were matched to a comprehensive range of rules and controls designed to prevent overconsumption and to reward intricacy, ingenuity, and thrift. It was vital to the community that commons be maintained and harvested to keep resources self-renewing. (“Enclosures” 19)

Commoning, for Linebaugh, is always a situated phenomenon, both in its practice and in its relaying: “It depends on custom, memory, and oral transmission for the maintenance of its norms rather than law, police, and media” (*Stop, Thief!* 14). The complexity of commoning – its rich vernacular texture, worked out in local communities of practice – can even act as a defence against the expropriation of the commons. Why else, Linebaugh wonders, would it have taken so many centuries to subdue the English countryside? (“Enclosures” 19) And yet commoners have generally been defeated: enclosure was eventually successful, despite the efforts of the Diggers and other radical commoners from the Middle Ages to the present.

The vernacular web of commoning is precisely what must be torn apart for enclosure to take place. Enclosure is necessary for the “primitive” or “original” accumulation of capital, the history of which, as Marx wrote, is written “in letters of blood and fire” (*Capital* 875). Its

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<sup>24</sup> According to Linebaugh, Clare’s poetry demonstrated “not the genius loci but a different ecology.” He traces its topographical semantics, its balks, fallows, furlongs, furrows, eddings, and lands, over ground, close, nook, and plain. In his view, Clare’s was “an epistemology and an orientation dependent on the unenclosed” (“Enclosures” 19).

object is the privatization of the land, and the production of the worker who has nothing to sell but his labour-power. This requires the transformation of vernacular affects and practices, as well as the uprooting of subsistence communities. Perhaps overstating his case, Linebaugh describes the necessary affective shift:

The allure of commoning arises from the mutualism of shared resources. Everything is used, nothing is wasted. Reciprocity, sense of self, willingness to argue, long memory, collective celebration, and mutual aid are traits of the commoner. These were not the preferred traits of the proletarian who, apart from possessing nothing, was to be nothing but a compliant slave. (*Magna Carta* 103)

As many contemporary Marxists have noted, “accumulation by dispossession” does not belong to the “pre-history” of capitalism (Harvey, *Brief History*). Rather, it is constantly reproduced around the globe, in cities and slums and rural areas. In the 1980s, Linebaugh and his colleagues in the Midnight Notes Collective (including Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis) were among the most acute observers of “the New Enclosures” caused by the global drive for resource extraction and cheap and compliant labour, a process supported by nation-states and international financial institutions such as the IMF. Enclosure, they write, attempts “to eliminate any ‘traditional,’ ‘organic’ or institutionalized relation between proletarians themselves and the powers of the earth or of their past” (Midnight Notes 321). Both old and new enclosures seek to block the ability of commoners to form a practical relationship with the land or with their own history. Enclosure tries to break down the intricate web of vernacular practice – or “tradition” – that offers a base from which to struggle and resist.

The methods of the neoliberal New Enclosures, which continue to operate globally, are similar to the old ones: severing people from the means of subsistence, seizing land for debt, encouraging mobile and migrant labour. The need to sever labour from the commons links historical processes that might otherwise seem disconnected. “The conquest of the Americas, the enclosure movement, and the witch-hunt in Europe and the slave trade in Africa were the main vehicles to satisfy capital’s ‘lust for labour’ (in Silvia Federici’s phrase)” (Caffentzis 34). Federici’s book *Caliban and the Witch* – another scholarly act of reclaiming –

tells the story of the enclosures that expropriated the commons of the body, especially women's bodies, in Europe and its colonies, along with movements of resistance to those enclosures. Historically, the enclosing of the land and the witch-hunts were intimately connected: "a motif in the evidence against witches was association with common rights of pasturage, pannage, or estovers" (Linebaugh, *Magna Carta* 72). Enclosures sought to sever people from vernacular practices of commoning and subsistence, the "practical vernacular economy" (Harris 172); similarly, witch-hunts, which occurred both in Europe and the colonies, tried to sever women from vernacular practices of reproduction and healing, and to consign them to reproducing male wage-workers. As Federici notes, witch-hunts continue to crop up in places (such as Brazil or South Africa) where the dispossessions of enclosure are particularly brutal (11). Contemporary neo-pagan witches have certainly sensed the links between commoning and witchcraft; perhaps this is what gives their pragmatic fabrication of tradition its anachronistic force.

Federici, Linebaugh, and their colleagues in the Midnight Notes collective refuse to see the destruction of the commons as ultimately progressive, as Marx (mostly) did.<sup>25</sup> Rather, they risk anachronism in allying themselves with struggles to defend the commons, including contemporary movements of Indigenous peoples.<sup>26</sup> In "The New Enclosures," the members of the Midnight Notes collective also propose a new "jubilee" – joining their voices to an often-repeated call for freedom and the forgiveness of debt. In the face of intensifying enclosures in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the biblical call for jubilee echoed around the Atlantic world; it meant "the abolition of slavery, the cancellation of debt and a return of all land to the common" (Midnight Notes 333).<sup>27</sup> The language of jubilee might seem both utopian and archaic. But as the Midnight Notes collective proclaims, defending their translation of this subaltern tradition: "It is time at midnight for other words and spells in the magic struggle of classes" (332).

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<sup>25</sup> A notable exception is found in the drafts of Marx's late letter to Vera Zasulich, on the Russian *mir* (village commune) and other precapitalist communities. See Shanin, 95-126.

<sup>26</sup> Indigenous peoples' movements contributed to the revival of the language of commons and enclosures in the 1990s – particularly the Zapatista-led protests against the repeal of Article 27 of the Mexican constitution, which guaranteed the *ejido*, or common lands, of each village. See Linebaugh, "Enclosures."

<sup>27</sup> On jubilee, see also Linebaugh and Rediker; Graeber, *Debt*.

It has now been twenty-five years since the collective wrote these lines. The clock is still striking midnight; the commons of the air, sea and earth are subjected to ever more intense expropriation and despoliation; workers everywhere are still ground down by debt; masses of people are forced to leave the land for the growing “planet of slums” (Davis). Words like commons, enclosures, and jubilee can seem like they belong in another epoch. But if these well-worn words have a little magic left in them, it is because of their roots in collective, vernacular practice. Indeed, even in the midst of the enclosures of capital, practices of commoning are far from anachronistic; they are everywhere. “Reciprocity, sense of self, willingness to argue, long memory, collective celebration, and mutual aid are traits of the commoner,” Linebaugh writes. These traits are always available to be reactivated and reclaimed. In their various ways, the projects explored in this dissertation are new translations of that practical heritage.

### **Exposure to Community**

In the 1980s, at nearly the same moment as “the commons” was re-entering radical political thought in the Americas, a philosophical debate was occurring on the other side of the Atlantic around the term “community.” This debate took place in series of essays written in dialogue, notably Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community (La communauté désœuvrée)*, Maurice Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*, Giorgio Agamben’s *The Coming Community*, and Roberto Esposito’s *Communitas*. These essays radically deconstructed the concept of community, which had long been viewed as a certain “thing” that binds a group of people together. Prior to this debate, Esposito argues, philosophers and sociologists had manifested “a tendency – which could be defined as metaphysical – to conceive of community in a substantialist, subjective sense. Community was understood as a substance that connected certain individuals to each other through the sharing of a common identity” (“Community” 83). This was true for the German sociologists of *Gemeinschaft*, who posited a substantive community that really existed in the past. It was also true for North American communitarian philosophers, who tended to view community as the proper

identity of a given group (Bird and Short). Nancy's initial essay, written in response to the work of Heidegger, Bataille and Blanchot, shifts the ground from community as a shared substance to community as a constitutive "being-with." Community, Nancy argues, is not the "property" that unites a group – as in the community of believers, or the community of producers to be established by a communist revolution. Rather, for Nancy, community should be understood as an exposure to otherness at the heart of human being-in-the-world.

While many philosophers have followed the line of thought opened up by Nancy, the work of Roberto Esposito, in his trilogy *Communitas, Immunitas* and *Bios*, is particularly relevant to this project, in that it connects the philosophical deconstruction of community to historical commons and enclosures. Throughout his writing on community, Esposito proceeds etymologically from the Latin *communitas*, which he breaks down into its elements, *cum* and *munus*. Nancy, in Esposito's view, focuses on the *cum*, or the "with" of community. This is the constitutive relationality that precedes any shared substance or subject. Esposito embraces Nancy's "being-with" (an adaptation of Heidegger's *Mitsein*), but adds to it an emphasis on *munus*, a Latin word that means "gift," but also "debt" or "obligation." For Esposito, community is not simply being-as-relation; it also involves the exchange of a certain gift (*munus*) that obliges reciprocity. The gift of *munus*, Esposito asserts, refers to the gift that is given, never the gift that is received. This one-way gift is not a shared substance: "the *munus* that the *communitas* shares isn't a property or possession." Rather, it is "a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack" (*Communitas* 6). Following Bataille, Esposito places a lack, wound, or void at the heart of common existence. In Bataille's words, "there exists a principle of insufficiency at the root of each being," a lack that calls each of us into question (qtd. in Blanchot, *Unavowable* 5). For Esposito, too, rather than a shared substance or property, being-as-community is constituted by an ontological lack, insufficiency, or impropriety.

This lack, "defect," or "void" is precisely what substantive visions of community try to fill up, in what Esposito describes as a "mythic reversal" (*Communitas* 15). To explicate this reversal of community into its opposite, Esposito turns to the Latin term *immunitas*, or immunity, which he argues negates the *cum* or "with" of *communitas*. Esposito understands



immunity in both legal and biological senses. Legally, immunity is what excludes or releases the individual from the binding obligations of being-in-common. If *communitas* is bound to the *munus*, the constitutive gift and lack that holds together the members of a community, *immunitas* is “what unburdens from this burden, what exonerates from this responsibility” (“Community” 84). In Roman law, the one who is immune is not obliged toward any other, or any exteriority: “*Immunis* is he or she who has no obligations toward the other and can therefore conserve his or her own essence intact as a subject and owner of himself or herself” (*Terms* 39). This legal sense of immunity has had a great impact on liberal regimes of property, and on philosophical conceptions of individual freedom.

Esposito overlaps immunity’s legal sense with its biological sense, which he traces to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (*Immunitas* 7). Biologically, immunity is what protects a living organism from the dangers of the exterior. This is a necessary function: the immune system mediates between inside and outside, allowing an organism and environment to co-exist. A working immune system is necessary for *communitas* to emerge without collapsing into violent fusion (in a protective mode similar to what Nancy calls the necessary “spacing” of community). Yet Esposito tracks how biological discourses of immunity, as mapped onto the social world, have turned increasingly virulent. Rather than “relational filters,” immune systems have increasingly become “exclusionary barriers” (“Community” 88). From the militarized borders of nation-states to the gated communities of the wealthy, Esposito sees a growing hyper-immunity that seeks to block any exposure to what is perceived as a dangerous exterior.

Following Esposito, we can view immunity as defined by enclosure, and community as defined by exposure. “Whereas *communitas* opens, exposes, and turns individuals inside out, freeing them to their exteriority,” Esposito writes, “*immunitas* returns individuals to themselves, encloses them once again in their own skin” (*Terms* 49). *Immunitas* operates according to a logic of property and the proper, as opposed to the impropriety of community. Indeed, Esposito points out that the terms “common” and “proper” are in fundamental opposition. Esposito writes that “the common is not characterized by what is proper but what is improper, or even more drastically, by the other; by a voiding, be it partial or whole, of property into its negative; by a *depropriation* that invests and decenters the proprietary

subject, forcing him to take leave of himself, to alter himself” (*Communitas* 7, translation modified and emphasis added). Esposito argues that this depropriation must not be rejected, warded off through immunitary mechanisms. Nor should “the common” be turned into its opposite, in which community is understood as the property of a given group. Rather, a depropriating exposure to alterity must be welcomed, by opening to the gift, lack, or void of common being. This opening requires what Bataille calls “non-knowledge” – which for Esposito means “holding open the opening that we already are; of not blocking but displaying the wound *in and of* our existence” (*Communitas* 119). The lack that separates us from ourselves is precisely what pushes us to the outside: toward experience, ecstasy, exteriority, exposure.

Esposito’s analysis is situated at the level of ontology, not of practice. “Depropriation,” the “voiding” or exposure to alterity, is an ontological experience, while commoning is a practical activity. Yet the historical and political valences of Esposito’s argument allow conceptual links to be made between *communitas* and commoning, *immunitas* and enclosure. While Esposito is careful to maintain that “community” is not a subject or substance that exists or existed at some point in the past, he does argue that the immunitary logic of the proper has gained in strength with the enclosures of modern economic, legal and state structures. What is “common” has been progressively enclosed or expropriated into forms of property, both private and public. This process required ideological legitimation: “In reading authors like John Locke or even Hugo Grotius,” Esposito writes, “one sees how they went about theorizing the necessity to break down a world given by God to everybody – in other words, to no one in particular – into what belongs to individual owners and what belongs to the state” (“Community” 89).

Such theories of “possessive individualism” (as C.B. Macpherson calls them) are still with us, and have become the common sense of the market societies in which we live. Their vision of “the proprietary subject” (Esposito) assumes “that man is free and human by virtue of his sole proprietorship of his own person, and that human society is essentially a series of market relations” (Macpherson 270). We live in “the republic of property” (Hardt and Negri), marked by a generalized, destructive immunization. Yet our being is still traversed by the

depropriating gift of community, and practices and spaces of the common remain alive. For Esposito, what is necessary is to struggle against destructive forms of immunization, and work to expand the spaces of the common (“Community” 88). The question then becomes: are there practices that foster this expansion, as well as the opening of and to community – practices that contest the proprietary logic of immunization and enclosure? Can the exposure to community be part of a social, aesthetic, or political practice, as well as existing as an experience of being?

These questions are at the heart of the philosophical debates on “community,” and exist in tension with Jean-Luc Nancy’s position. In *La communauté désœuvrée*, Nancy warns against any “work” as an instrument of community, which in his view characterizes those political movements that try to fill in the gaps of common being with a national or ideological project. On the contrary, as he writes:

The community takes place of necessity in what Blanchot has called the unworking [*désœuvrement*]. Before or beyond the work, it is that which withdraws from the work, that which no longer has to do with production, nor with completion, but which encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension. The community is made of the interruption of the singularities, or of the suspension singular beings are. It is not their work, and it does not have them as it works, not any more than communication is a work, nor even an operation by singular beings: for it is simply their being – their being in suspension at its limit. Communication is the unworking of the social, economic, technical, institutional work. (*Inoperative* 31, translation modified)

Here, Nancy is responding to a vision of communism that, following Marx, saw relations of production as the primary determinant of social being. Rather than see “work” as the force which gathers and shapes our shared existence, Nancy argues that community can be recognized only in unworking, the interruption of or withdrawal from the “work” of social and institutional arrangements. Any attempt to hypostasize community, to turn it from a negative concept into a positive property or even a practical activity, is mythical or nostalgic, and comes dangerously close to certain gapless and violent communities that have emerged in

reaction to the fragmentations of capitalist modernity.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in Nancy's view, the word "community" is almost impossible to disentangle from the idea of a substance or work to be achieved. In seeking community, he writes, one inevitably "wants the 'spirit' of a 'people' or the 'soul' of a 'gathering of faithful,' one wants the 'identity' of a 'subject' or its 'propriety.'" This "resonance bloated with substance and interiority" eventually causes Nancy to abandon the term entirely, preferring instead "being-in-common" or "being-with" ("Confronted" 24, 31; *Being Singular Plural*).

Yet if community should not be understood as a substance or subject, it can perhaps be experienced as a force that traverses a common *project* that involves shared work. The "principle of insufficiency at the root of each being," as Bataille describes it, need not be resolved in fusion or communion, the becoming-proper of the common. As Esposito argues, the *munus* of community is what takes us outside, opening us to our own finitude and the finitude of others. Nancy calls this an "inclination" or an "inclining" of the individual-subject "outside itself, over that edge that opens up its being-in-common" (*Inoperative* 4). A lack that requires a movement towards the other; a sense of shared finitude: this movement invokes an inclination toward community and communication that can, in some cases, take the shape of a common project or action. Nancy warns against any "thinking of the essence of a community," which "yields its being-together to a being of togetherness" (*Inoperative* xxxix). Yet the community that gathers around a project is not necessarily fusional or organized around any essence. Instead, it calls up a common spirit, one that Hannah Arendt calls "the promise of politics": "the spirit of starting an enterprise and, together with others, seeing it through to its conclusion" (*Promise* 45). Indeed, I would argue that this is not only the "promise of politics." A common spirit, or a spirit of commoning, can likewise emerge in aesthetic projects such as the ones I discuss below.

Each of the shared projects that I explore in this dissertation emphasizes an exposure to community, to the depropriation of common being. In their practices of unworking, which

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<sup>28</sup> In some ways, this was the prewar experience of Bataille, whose attempts at forming actually existing communities around a common project – Surrealist groups, the secret society Acéphale, or the Collège de Sociologie – ended in schism or dissolution, unable to contain the sacrificial violence they summoned. See Hollier; Mitchell and Winfree.

emerge from shared work, the proprietary separations of *immunitas* are made permeable, if not dissolved. These projects move toward the time and space of *communitas*, which is not a substantive quality, but an experience of exposure. They seek to undo enclosures and establish spaces of encounter: between languages and sexualities, Jewish and non-Jewish (Chapter 1); between Indigenous and non-Indigenous political and musical worlds (Chapter 2); between artists enclosed by the propriety of their own “work” (Chapter 3); and between human and non-human species (Chapter 4). They push identity beyond itself, through what Esposito calls “a subtraction of subjectivity.” Through this process, the members of a community are “no longer identical with themselves”: instead, they are “constitutively exposed to a propensity that forces them to open their own individual boundaries in order to appear as what is ‘outside’ themselves” (*Communitas* 138). In these projects, the opening to the exteriority of community is encouraged by diverse reclamations and translations of vernacular practice. We might say that practices of commoning, with their emphasis on reciprocity and responsiveness, loosen the regimes of propriety, property, immunization, and enclosure that block the exposure to community. This process is difficult, ambivalent, and historically charged. The next section examines the historical and political field in which these efforts take place: North American settler colonialism, with its structures of dispossession.

### **Settler Disposessions**

The term “dispossession” provides a useful hinge between the preceding examinations of commoning and community, exposure and enclosure. It also helps situate this discussion in a more defined historical and political context. In their recent dialogue, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou give two overlapping meanings to the term. Understood philosophically, “dispossession” is another word for exposure to common being, what Esposito calls “depropriation.” It is the primary relationality and opening to alterity that dis-possesses us from our “proper” being, from our being as property. Yet, more concretely, dispossession also refers to forms of land theft, expulsion, and enforced precarity that are characteristic of colonial and capitalist regimes. Butler and

Athanasiou argue that this sense of “dispossession” as enforced precarity should inform any philosophical critique of “possessive individualism” or “the proper.” While “we are trying to criticize the ‘proper’ of the ‘properly human,’” Butler writes, “we are also trying to know in what way the loss of what is properly one’s own is crucial for any understanding of misappropriation (of land, of goods, of labor), or even of stealing and expulsion” (35). Butler and Athanasiou maintain that one can critique the liberal construction of the possessive individual while also denouncing the removal of people from their lands and livelihoods. People really were and continue to be dispossessed; it is important to understand dispossession not only as a relation of exposure, but also as a concrete historical process.

In Canada and the United States, where the projects discussed in this dissertation are situated, processes of dispossession have been and continue to be inflected by settler colonial histories.<sup>29</sup> Settler colonialism is distinguished from other colonial forms by the basic fact that, as Patrick Wolfe writes, “the colonizers come to stay” (*Settler 2*). Consequently, settler societies cannot be accurately described as “post”-colonial: Indigenous theory emphasizes the ongoing colonial character of white settler colonies such as Canada, the United States, and Australia (Alfred, Tuck and Yang, Tuhiwai Smith). In settler colonies, “invasion is a structure, not an event” (Wolfe, *Settler 2*), a structure of dispossession that continues to operate up to the present. This structure seeks “the elimination of the native” through varying means, from frontier violence to cultural genocide to bureaucratic management (Wolfe, “Settler”; Veracini, Lawrence). Cole Harris, discussing the settler colony of British Columbia in “How Did Colonialism Dispossest?”, emphasizes dispossession’s territorial drive: “The experienced materiality of colonialism is grounded, as many have noted, in dispossessions and repossessions of land” (167). In settler colonies, the primary object of expropriation is native land, not native labour. Settler states remove Indigenous peoples from the land by force or by threat, and then subject them to various disciplinary techniques, including the carceral geography of reserve systems. Land is parcelled out and nationalized or privatized. The spatial inscription of these enclosures continues to mark the colonial landscape.

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<sup>29</sup> While the Abandoned Practices Institute is held in Prague, its faculty and the majority of its students are based in Chicago, and most of its points of reference come from the Midwestern United States.

Harris describes the dispossessions of colonial enclosure in Marxian and Deleuzian language. “As Marx and, subsequently, others have noted,” he writes, “the spatial energy of capitalism works to deterritorialize people (that is, to detach them from prior bonds between people and place) and to reterritorialize them in relation to the requirements of capital (that is, to land conceived as resources and freed from the constraints of custom and to labor detached from land)” (172). This uprooting was experienced by white settlers, who were often fleeing enclosure in Britain, Ireland, and Continental Europe. It was the overwhelming experience of enslaved Africans, along with indentured Asians and later generations of racialized migrants. All of these new-world groups experienced different kinds of dispossession and reterritorialization, with varying degrees of violence, according to the demands of capital for labour. Yet their experience, with all its diversity, differs fundamentally from that of Indigenous peoples in settler colonies, who after the theft of their land were made expendable, a problem to be solved through their disappearance. The fact that Indigenous peoples have persisted in the face of this project of elimination testifies to the limitations of the settler-colonial project. As Audra Simpson writes, “the condition of Indigeneity in North America is to have survived this acquisitive and genocidal process and thus to have called up the failure of the project itself” (205). If invasion is a structure, it is an incomplete one, and its dispossessions continue to be contested.

Two characteristics of settler colonies are of particular relevance to this investigation: their relation to property and the land, and their relation to history and tradition. In settler colonies, property law was a crucial instrument in the expropriation of land and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Common law served as a means to replace customary ties by a legal framework that gave settlers the right to exclude, buy, sell, will, and inherit land. It was a powerful tool of dispossession. “From a native perspective,” Harris writes, “the lands they had lost were more than simply occupied by others. They had become defined by bundles of rights and values that were foreign to their ways and were defended by courts, the procedures of which were often impenetrable” (177-178). “Lawfare,” as John Comaroff terms it, was a way “of transforming the landscapes of others – typically seen as wilderness before it was invested with their gaze – into territory and real estate; a process that made spaces into

places to be possessed, ruled, improved, protected” (309). The law has since become an effective means for Indigenous people to contest colonial claims, including territorial ones (Comaroff, Borrows). But for centuries colonial legal frameworks acted as powerful instruments of dispossession.

These legal frameworks were supported by deeply-held assumptions about the value of labour, improvement, and possession – what could be called a liberal ontology of property.<sup>30</sup> John Locke’s chapter on “Property,” in his *Second Treatise of Government*, has become the classic reference here. Locke holds that while “the things of nature are given in common,” active human labour confers the right to claim land as property. “As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of,” Locke writes, “so much is his property. He by his labour does, as it were, inclose it from the common” (21). There is an element of domination in Locke’s description of this process of appropriation: “man, by being master of himself, and proprietor of his own person, and the actions or labour of it,” has the power to “subdue the earth, i.e. improve it for the benefit of life” (27, 21). For Locke, ownership starts as mastery of the self and the labour of the body; this proprietorship is then conveyed to land and the possessions that one gains through bodily labour. Thus, in his argument, appropriation and dominion are intimately linked (Sect. 35).

This Lockean ontology of property has spread throughout what Povinelli calls “the liberal diaspora” (*Empire of Love* 80), but it has a special connection to “America,” an object of fascination for Locke as for other seventeenth-century thinkers.<sup>31</sup> In his *Treatise*, Locke uses pre-settlement “America” as a model for the “state of nature,” in which all things were originally held in common. Locke writes, famously, that “in the beginning all the world was America”; the whole world existed as “a wild common of nature” (29). The “in-land, vacant places of America,” or “the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America,” were ripe for improvement through enclosure (23, 24). In Locke’s imagination, the inhabitants of these “vacant places” have already vanished, or else are disposable due to their poor and inefficient use of this “uncultivated waste.” As Cole Harris points out, even if (often illiterate) settlers had

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<sup>30</sup> See Davies’s *Property* for a thorough overview, as well as an insightful discussion of Locke.

<sup>31</sup> Locke also had extensive colonial business interests in the New World, which existed in a certain tension with his anti-feudal philosophy of property; see Tully, Davies.



never read or heard of Locke, they generally “held unsophisticated versions of these views” (171). Property is first of all the property of one’s person; labour allows one to appropriate nature as one’s own possession; commoning is wasteful, and customary use is backward. Such views are still prevalent today: in settler colonies, “improvement” serves to justify the dispossession of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and the expropriation of common resources. “Lives are lived,” Audra Simpson writes, “within an ongoing violence over territory” (207). If the globalized world has become a “republic of property,” then settler colonies present these enclosures in an extreme form.

Liberal assumptions around possession and property are linked, in settler colonies, to a particular relationship to time and history. If precolonial peoples existed in a “state of nature,” as Locke posits, then “history” is inaugurated by the act of settlement. As Lorenzo Veracini observes, “it is settlement that supersedes the state of nature ... original settler appropriation – enclosure – is an act that defines and precedes the inception of historical processes” (370). Yet because settler colonies come to exist through a “founding violence,” that history must be disavowed, and then re-presented in a more palatable form (Veracini). Hence the endless frontier stories that serve to anchor the settler historical imaginary.

The denial of pre-colonial history, along with the need to disavow the founding violence of dispossession, is what gives settler colonies their particularly amnesiac quality. The people who come to stay must invent a history that conforms to their *amour-propre*, resulting in a kind of “myopia” (Veracini). Toni Morrison captures this process precisely: “We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean. The past is absent or romanticized” (qtd. in Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 222). Perhaps this “historylessness” is common to “the founding of new societies,” in which the “past is excluded” and the “future shrinks” (Louis Hartz, qtd. in Veracini 373). But in settler colonies, Veracini argues, the settler collective tends to experience itself as “a people without history in a place without history” (367; see also Wolfe). This characterization is somewhat exaggerated, and does not account for the complex encounters between Indigenous peoples, settlers, and diasporic groups in colonial “contact zones” (Pratt), nor with their varying relationships with the lands and societies they left behind. It also misses

the complex dynamics of “playing Indian,” in which settlers re-enact a romanticized past as a way to efface both a history of genocide and the continuing presence of Indigenous peoples (Green, Deloria). In any case, the view of the land as a historyless wilderness (at once *terra nullius* and *tabula rasa*), coupled with the “disavowal of dispossession” (Audra Simpson), continues to imprint itself on settler consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

The liberal ontology of property, combined with the disavowal of dispossession, has had a powerful effect on the relationship to “tradition” in settler colonies. As I have argued above, the subject of Enlightenment modernity is predicated on an autonomy that breaks with the supposedly binding nature of tradition. In settler colonies, this break maps neatly onto the division between settler and native. The settler was “master of himself, and proprietor of his own person,” in Locke’s words; this autonomy is what gave him the right to dispossess the native, who was hopelessly enmeshed in customary bonds. This is the division between what Povinelli calls the “autological subject” and the “genealogical society,” and it is a deeply colonial one. The Enlightenment discourse of autonomy, as Povinelli points out, had a colonial orientation: “At the same time that people spread the good news of the singular world-historic value of these freedom-producing subjects and institutions, they claim this singular heritage for the North Atlantic and Western Europe.” Indeed, these claims of autonomy “may seem particularly loud in British settler colonies such as Canada, Australia, and the United States” (*Empire* 17). Discourses of autonomy are particularly potent in settler colonies, with their emphasis on self-made-men who are able to start from scratch, and pioneers in a hostile wilderness. These discourses of autonomy are matched by those of genealogy, which consign Native people to an unchanging “traditional” past, pushing them to become what Povinelli calls “melancholic subjects of tradition” (“Settler Modernity” 23). As I examine in more depth in Chapter 2, the demand that Indigenous peoples authentically perform their “traditions” becomes yet another mechanism of dispossession in liberal settler colonies. Indeed, in Canada and Australia, this demand is written into law.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> This view expresses itself most obviously in national mythologies and icons, from the American frontier (Slotkin) to Canadian national parks (M. Francis). It also encourages a tendency toward the “Adamic” in art and literature; see Nathaniel Mackey 98ff.

<sup>33</sup> In section 35 of the Canadian Constitution Act (see Lawrence, “*Real Indians*”), and in the Australian Native Title Act (see Povinelli, *Cunning*).

All of the projects explored in this dissertation struggle against the settler-colonial “discursive vise” of autonomy and genealogy. They do this by creatively reclaiming traditions of vernacular practice and performance. The three non-Indigenous projects I explore seek to undo the discourses of autonomy that cause “alternative groups,” as Povinelli writes, to be “culturally stillborn.” Their invocations of tradition – whether specific (“Profaning”), formalist (“Responding”) or more variegated (“Fermenting”) – are an effort to undo the autonomy of the Enlightenment subject, along with the “work” of possessive individualism, that is so profound in settler colonies. In practice and performance, they attempt to open their participants up to history and alterity. Their relation to their settler-colonial context is sometimes tenuous, obscured, or confused. Yet, as I explore in the individual chapters, those colonial contexts and histories seep into each project in often surprising ways. By contrast, the work of A Tribe Called Red, discussed in Chapter 2, approaches settler colonialism from the perspective of its dispossessed. The Indigenous DJ collective directly challenges settler-colonial myopia through an assertion of Native history and presence. Their work is part of a wider “Indigenous resurgence” that, as Anishnaabe writer Leanne Simpson asserts, is oriented toward “reclaiming the fluidity around our traditions, not the rigidity of colonialism” (*Dancing* 51). The artists, writers, and activists of this resurgence struggle to undo the discourses of genealogy that treat Indigenous peoples as “culturally frozen,” bound to static tradition (Povinelli, *Empire* 156). Instead, they emphasize a creative and fluid reclaiming of long-devalued and suppressed Indigenous practice.

By grouping these four projects together, I do not mean to suggest that they are commensurable. There are fundamental differences in the lived experience of settler colonialism between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. These experiences also vary tremendously depending on individual and social itineraries, and there are numerous diasporic histories and projects that would be productive to explore. This research is not designed to be synoptic, or comparative, or to provide a general theory that will smooth over incommensurable experiences.<sup>34</sup> Instead, I am interested in the productive tension that emerges from thinking through specific experiments with tradition across the settler-colonial

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<sup>34</sup> On the incommensurability of colonial experiences, see Tuck and Yang.

divide. The theoretical frameworks I develop in this Introduction are an attempt to bring out points of contact between these projects that might otherwise be obscured. All of these projects, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, work to undo the double bind of modernity and tradition, so pronounced and poisonous in settler colonies. Instead, they propose living experiments with the vernacular, new translations of tradition across gulfs of historical discontinuity. The following section considers the act of translation itself, which is central to all of these practices of reclaiming.

### Translation, Discontinuity, Anachronism

Any discussion of tradition and translation would do well to begin with a story. In a recent preface, the Cree-Métis writer Maria Campbell describes the difficulty of reclaiming Indigenous traditions in the wake of the dispossessions of colonialism. Campbell tells the story of her “first old man teacher,” Peter O’Chiese, who impressed on her the need to gather the pieces of a fragmented culture from whatever sources were available, including the writings of colonial ethnographers. As she tells it:

One day, to illustrate why it was important to do this, he picked up a jigsaw puzzle my children and I had just completed. He lifted it high and dropped it. Pieces flew all over the room. “That’s what happened to *wahkotowin* and to all our stuff,” he said. “Our kinships, our lives, and our teachings are all over the place. Those anthropologists and people who came to our elders to get stories and knowledge recorded everything and took it away. Our old people talked to them because they knew it was the only way they could save it. Maybe it is not complete, maybe pieces are missing, but if you know the language and some of the stories, then you have a big piece.” (Campbell xix)

O’Chiese’s breaking of the puzzle, in Campbell’s telling, reveals the experience of colonialism to be one of profound and violent fragmentation.<sup>35</sup> His suggestion – to sift through the archive

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<sup>35</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith agrees, calling colonialism a “process of systematic fragmentation,” reflected “in the disciplinary carve-up of the indigenous world: bones, mummies and skulls to the museums, art work to private collectors, languages to linguistics, ‘customs’ to anthropologists, beliefs and behaviours to psychologists” (28).

left by a violent history for fragments that can be reassembled – is a compelling one. Yet even more remarkable (and fortuitous) is the image of the jigsaw puzzle. A jigsaw puzzle is itself a fabrication, a set of fragmented pieces that are made to fit together snugly. Snugly, but not seamlessly: even in its completed state, a jigsaw puzzle is not a seamless whole. In fact, its seams – its “fissures” – are what give it value: they are the visible record of the work of its assembly. What is undone in the shattering of a jigsaw puzzle is not the image it depicts, but the many hours of painstaking work that went into fitting the pieces together. It is no accident that in the case of the puzzle shattered by O’Chiese, that work was done by Campbell along with her children. In the realm of culture, this work of assembly and fabrication, as it takes place across generations, could be called “tradition.”

Campbell’s image of the shattered puzzle recalls a number of similar figures from the writing of Walter Benjamin. There is the Angel of History, who, confronted with the wreckage of the historical past, is unable “to make whole what has been smashed” (SW4 392). Or the Little Hunchback in *Berlin Childhood*, the demon of forgetting: “Whoever is looked at by this man pays no attention. Either to himself or the little man. He stands dazed before a heap of fragments” (121).<sup>36</sup> In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin offers a less paralysed version of this image, which resonates with Campbell’s parable. He compares the act of translation to reassembling a broken vessel:

Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (SW1 260)

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<sup>36</sup> Wohlfarth writes that “the angel’s *Eingedenken* is motivated by the urge to re-collect the broken past, to re-member the dismembered” (“Messianic” 154). Many of these images suggest a certain paralysis when faced with the fragments of history, memory, or tradition. Yet Benjamin’s essays repeatedly suggest forms of fabricating power, latent in objects, which can be awakened by certain aesthetic and literary practices. Samuel Weber describes these “structural possibilities” in *Benjamin’s -abilities*, noting the German suffix *-barkeiten* that marks a series of Benjamin’s concepts: criticizability, impart-ability, citability, reproducibility, recognizability, and translatability (39).

Intriguingly, the reconstruction of a shattered vessel reveals that the original vessel was itself a fragment – and thus that it cannot precisely be described as “original.” Benjamin declares that the act of translating makes both the original and the translation “recognizable as fragments of a greater language,” which he describes as “pure language.” Exactly what he means by this is much debated. But his insistence on the fragmentary character of the original allows us to avoid the trap of the “authentic” original, to which all translations must pay homage. For Benjamin, the “fidelity” of a translation is not a matter of imitating the original’s “sense” (*Gemeinte*), but of incorporating, in a loving and detailed manner, its “way of meaning” (*Art des Meines*).<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps we can take the risk of translating Benjamin’s discussion from literary translation to the translation of tradition. A tradition’s “way of meaning” might be something like its “changing same” – the essence-less continuity that is secreted and condensed in forms of practice as they move through history. “Lovingly and in detail” – or ambivalently and carelessly, or irreverently and playfully – translations of a tradition incorporate and transform that changing same. Crucially, moving the concept of translation outside the realm of language alters its meaning in important ways. As Samuel Weber points out (in a reading of “The Task of the Translator”), one feature of literary translation is that the translated text cannot normally be re-translated. If the original text “survives” in the translation’s “after-life,” that afterlife is limited and finite. The literary translation, Weber writes, “proceeds or issues out of the original, but unlike Orpheus, it never looks back” (*Benjamin’s* 68). By contrast, in translations of tradition, there is no “original,” only a series of re-translations that constantly revise tradition’s “way of meaning.” Translations of tradition always look back, even if that means the death (or at least the transformation) of what they sought to rescue.

Questions of fidelity haunt tradition, as they do literary translation: both can be accused of betraying the words or practices they translate. For traditions as well as for literary works, *traduttore, traditore*, “translator, traitor.” “Etymologically,” Rey Chow writes, “the word translation is linked, among other things, to ‘tradition’ on the one hand and to ‘betrayal’

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<sup>37</sup> See Weber, *Benjamin’s* 71. Weber’s suggestion that “pure language” can be equated with the “caesura” of the “inexpressive” (from Benjamin’s essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*) is not entirely convincing.

on the other... the word tradition itself, linked in its roots to translation and betrayal, has to do with handing over. Tradition itself is nothing if it is not a transmission. How is tradition to be transmitted, to be passed on, if not through translation?" (182, 183) The "handing down" of *tradere* is made possible by the "carrying over" of *translatus*. The transmission of tradition is always a matter of translation, and necessarily runs the risk of betrayal. We could say that tradition exists only in the fraught process of its translation.

Tradition's existence as translation is especially pronounced where historical discontinuity has become more dramatic, where the assembled fragments of the past have been broken, scattered, and lost. Weber reminds us that discontinuity is built into tradition itself: "the decisive *break* did not intervene simply *between* tradition and its transformation; rather, it was already at work *within* that tradition itself" (*Benjamin's* 96, emphasis in original). The puzzle or vessel of tradition, as Campbell and Benjamin remind us, is already an assemblage of pieces. Yet certain forms of discontinuity are particularly violent and profound: the dispossessions of colonialism and the enclosures of capitalism, but also secularization, war, migration, and the transformations of urban life. The storm of history can scatter tradition's fragmentary assemblage, and disperse its pieces more profoundly and irrevocably. Peter O'Chiese articulates this painful experience, standing over the broken puzzle: "That's what happened to *wahkotowin* and to all our stuff," he says. "Our kinships, our lives, and our teachings are all over the place."

Such profound dislocations and disruptions can lead to a state that Benjamin describes as "a sickening of tradition."<sup>38</sup> Here Franz Kafka's writing is exemplary for Benjamin in revealing the decay of traditional "wisdom," or knowledge transmitted from generation to generation. In a reference to Jewish tradition, Benjamin calls traditional wisdom "truth in its haggadic consistency." For Benjamin, the religious tales and knowledge assembled by generations – the Haggadah, or biblical stories and their commentary – now lie in pieces, unable to be patched into a consistent whole. Tradition has decomposed into fragments: in Kafka's writing, "there is no longer any talk of wisdom. Only the products of its decomposition are left." Benjamin argues that some of Kafka's contemporaries came to terms

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<sup>38</sup>This striking phrase comes in a letter (written in 1938) from Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, on the subject of Max Brod's biography of Kafka (SW3 322-329).

with this decomposition by “clinging to truth, or what they believed to be truth, and, heavyhearted or not, renouncing its transmissibility.”<sup>39</sup> But Kafka’s approach to the “sickening of tradition” was radically different. “Kafka’s genius,” Benjamin writes, “lay in the fact that he tried something altogether new: he gave up truth so that he could hold on to its transmissibility, the haggadic element” (SW3 326). Transmissibility is Benjamin’s highest value: not the truth of the fragment itself, but the fragment’s ability to reveal the larger vessel, which is only revealed through translation. When confronted with the decomposition of tradition, what matters is not the “sense” or “truth” of each broken fragment, but the ability to transmit and translate “ways of meaning” across gulfs of discontinuity. Benjamin’s reading of Kafka suggests that the practice of translation can give new life to tradition, conveying it in a state that is, in Judith Butler’s words, “both ruined and vibrant” (*Parting Ways* 13).

Butler presents a particularly incisive reading of Benjamin’s writings on tradition and translation, as she considers the problem of “deriving a set of ethical principles” from the Jewish tradition. For Butler, of particular interest are “those acts of translation where the past must effectively break apart in order to be introduced into the future.” In her argument, a translation of tradition can only proceed through a necessary self-departure, which involves a “breaking apart, or scattering” (*Parting Ways* 226). Of course, as she notes, “tradition is itself established through departing from itself, again and again” (8).<sup>40</sup> But translation across a gulf of discontinuity has a qualitatively different character:

A certain chasm provides the occasion for a tradition to reemerge as new. The idiom through which a demand is conveyed is not the same as the one by which it is taken up, especially if the demand is crossing from one temporal topography to another. Something is lost in the course of arriving in the here and now, and something new is added by the form of conveyance to what is sometimes called the ‘content’ of the message. Some continuity is broken, which means that the past is not ‘applied’ to the

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<sup>39</sup> This defensive clinging could be summarized by the ending of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.”

<sup>40</sup> “Even those traditions that appear to sustain continuity do not reproduce themselves in time by remaining the same. As iterable, they are subject to deviations and unpredictable sequences” (Butler, *Parting Ways* 11).



present nor does it emerge intact after its various travels. What proves vibrant in the present is the partial ruin of what formerly was. (11).

For Butler, an effective translation must break apart tradition's continuity, what Benjamin calls its "consistency of truth." In so doing, translation makes available new resources for the present: "The destructive and illuminative dimensions of translation become whatever still is active, whatever sparks still" (13). Butler's "sparks" derive from Kabbalistic messianism, which sees myriad sparks of divine emanation scattered throughout the profane world (see Chapter 1 below). In this dissertation, I also follow the sparks that are struck by translations of tradition, as they fly through the profane realm of vernacular practice.

In the realm of vernacular practice, where this research is situated, the products of tradition's decomposition inevitably have the quality of *anachronisms*. As Benjamin writes, these fragments appear as a "rumour" of lost truth and consistency, "a kind of whispered theological newspaper of the disreputable and obsolete" (*SW3* 326). Indeed, the word "anachronism" implies a temporal maladjustment, a troubling belatedness. It derives "from the Greek *anachronizein*, built from *ana-*, 'again,' and the verb *chronizein*, 'to be late or belated'" (Nagel and Wood 13). An anachronism is doubly late, "belated again," lingering in a place where it has no business. Historical disruption can mean that the shattered pieces of the "wisdom" of tradition appear anachronistic: cut off from the cultural-historical world to which they were linked, existing only as whispers of "the disreputable and obsolete." Stories, songs, rituals, superstitions: Edward Tylor called these fragments "survivals," the "dwindled" or "mutilated" relics of earlier cultural forms (Hodgen). Anachronisms are the debris left in the wake of progress – or else the fruits of progress wrongly interpolated into the past. In either case, an anachronism is a mistake, an awkward and embarrassing error.<sup>41</sup>

The accusation of anachronism, as Jacques Rancière has argued, is a form of temporal policing. It declares that certain practices, ideas, objects or works do not belong (or are not "suitable") to their proper historical time. In his essay "Le concept d'anachronisme et la vérité

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<sup>41</sup> This is especially apparent for vernacular practices, which already bear the stigma of subaltern, "unofficial" culture. The judgment of anachronism adds to this stigma a temporal abjection, a sense of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Calling a tradition anachronistic traps it in a vicious circle: already disreputable practices are declared to be obsolete, which in turn makes them seem even more disreputable.

de l'historien," Rancière suggests that the concept of anachronism as "temporal error" (*erreur sur le temps*) is fundamentally anti-historical (66). History, he writes, works by disrupting settled regimes of time: "there is history insofar as humans do not 'resemble' their time, insofar as they act in rupture with 'their' time... this rupture is only possible through the possibility of connecting this line of temporality with others, by the multiple lines of temporality present in 'one' time" ("Le concept" 66). Rancière calls these temporal breaks and reconnections "anachronies," to distinguish them from the pejorative connotations of "anachronism." "There is no anachronism," he declares. "Only modes of connection that we can call anachronies: events, notions, significations that rub time against the grain, that allow meaning to circulate in a way that escapes all contemporaneity, all identity of time with 'itself.' An anachrony is a word, an event, a signifying sequence that has left 'its' time" ("Le concept" 67). Rancière responds to the policing of time by arguing that historical action proceeds via temporal disjunctures and improprieties. Consequently, he asserts that the pejorative term "anachronistic" should be replaced by the more productive term "anachronic."<sup>42</sup>

While Rancière's argument is persuasive, it tends to mirror the process he describes. Anachronisms – the belated, awkward, ungainly fragments that seem to belong to another time – are folded into the positive category of temporal rupture. What is lost is the troubling quality of the anachronisms themselves, the way they stick like burrs in the weave of progress.<sup>43</sup> We can follow Adorno here, who (in a passage of *Minima Moralia* in dialogue with Benjamin) suggests that we should not be hypnotized by history as "the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat." Rather, he argues, "knowledge ... should also address itself

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<sup>42</sup> Nagel and Wood's *Anachronic Renaissance* follows Rancière in rejecting the term anachronism: "Anachronistic ... is a judgmental term that carries with it the historicist assumption that every event and every object has its proper location within objective and linear time" (13). It would be productive to compare Rancière's comments on anachrony with Jameson's discussion of the figuration of historical time, or "making history 'appear'" ("Valences" 588).

<sup>43</sup> The art historian Georges Didi-Huberman makes a similar argument in favour of retaining the term "anachronism," with all its pejorative connotations ("*cette notion plus vulgaire, moins philosophique, moins chargée de mystères ontologiques*"). For Didi-Huberman, anachronism describes the power of works of art to reveal the fissures of history. Referring to Rancière's article, he writes, "*L'anachronisme n'est-il pas la seule façon possible de rendre compte, dans le savoir historique, des anachronies de l'histoire réelle?*" (*Devant le temps* 33) Didi-Huberman roots his analysis, which has been widely influential for art historians, in the work of Benjamin and Aby Warburg. See also his *L'image survivante* and *Confronting Images*.

to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside – what might be called the waste products and blind spots which have escaped the dialectic.” Such waste products and blind spots can “appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory.” But, as Adorno points out, “Theory must needs deal with cross-gained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic.” As examples of this derisory, unassimilated and anachronistic material, Adorno mentions children’s books (which can become “ciphers” of history), and the “pert and puerile piano pieces” of Eric Satie (which contain “flashes of experience”) (*Minima Moralia* 151). “Outwitting,” or playing a trick (*ein Schnippchen schlagen*), in Adorno’s analysis, might be a more promising approach than anachronic rupture, which risks confirming the implacable dynamic of victory and defeat. Perhaps anachronisms can, in trickster fashion, outwit the dialectic that consigns works and practices to their “proper” time.<sup>44</sup>

Adorno revives this argument in his essay “On Tradition,” arguing that what can be “reactualized” in tradition are its “idiosyncrasies”: “that which was left along the way, passed over or overpowered, that which is ‘out of date’” (80). The accusation of anachronism helps maintain the historical chasm between “tradition” and “modernity,” the result of “the fatally rectilinear progression of victory and defeat.” It suggests that certain practices have no place in the present time, or that they should only exist in an embalmed form, as museum pieces or heritage performances. The various projects I explore in the following chapters attempt to outwit this judgment. They acquire their force by translating anachronistic practices, playing with temporal improprieties, and causing abjected traditions to vibrate in present spaces. In each case, what is translated across a gulf of discontinuity are vernacular forms and practices that have been declared to be anachronistic, “out of date.”

Each of these projects translates certain anachronistic fragments left in the wake of the decomposition of tradition. The Yiddish language, essential to the Purim project, is one of these anachronisms, an eccentric tongue that seems to belong to another time and place, lingering uncomfortably in the wake of genocide, state suppression, and neglect (Chapter 1).

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<sup>44</sup> Adorno’s “outwit” anticipates Roland Barthes’ “*déjouer*,” or “outplay,” another subversion of dialectical implacability (see Chapter 3 below).

Pow wow music and culture, remixed by A Tribe Called Red, itself emerged on the far side of genocide and cultural suppression, as the translation of Indigenous traditions that colonialism declared to be anachronistic (“savage,” not “civilized”) and then scattered to the four directions (Chapter 2). The Abandoned Practices Institute takes anachronism as its formal principle, seeking to reactualize everyday practices that “fell by the wayside” or linger tenuously in the present (Chapter 3). And the current “microcultural revival” translates time-consuming culinary practices of home fermentation – long declared to be “out of date” – into new experimental life (Chapter 4).<sup>45</sup> These translations of tradition are not unqualified successes: each of them flirts with different forms of complacency – marginality, commercialism, aestheticism, gentrification – in which the power of anachronism is muted. Occasionally, they become destructive and illuminative, casting sparks that light up the fissures of tradition; sometimes their translations fail to ignite. The results of these projects are provisional and ongoing. The final section of this theoretical essay describes an approach common to these translations of tradition, a strategy of making friends with failure. Once again using a verb in the present participle, we can call this strategy *experimenting*.

### **Experimenting (Between Politics and Performance)**

Reclaiming tradition – gathering the pieces of a scattered puzzle – does not necessarily lead to cultural and political innovation, especially in the midst of cataclysmic social change. In “On National Culture,” written in 1959 at the height of the anti-colonial struggle in Africa, Franz Fanon excoriated those artists and intellectuals who would chase after the scattered fragments of a pre-colonial past. Their “burning, desperate return to anything,” as Fanon writes, led them to revive tradition in a state of decomposition – a degraded “inventory of particularisms” (*Wretched* 160). The vernacular forms that they sought to reclaim in the wake of colonialism were, according to Fanon, only a “veneer”; this frozen and reified surface did not reflect the “more fundamental substance beset with radical

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<sup>45</sup> One could say that in fermentation’s embrace of microbial decay, the decomposition of tradition allows for the revival of traditions of decomposition.

changes,” a culture undergoing the convulsions of decolonization. “Instead of seeking out this substance,” Fanon writes,

the intellectual lets himself be mesmerized by these mummified fragments which, now consolidated, signify, on the contrary, negation, obsolescence, and fabrication. ...

Seeking to stick to tradition or reviving neglected traditions is not only going against history, but against one’s people. When a people support an armed or even political struggle against a merciless colonialism, tradition changes meaning. (160)

In the context of a life and death struggle, Fanon argues, intellectuals cannot let themselves be pulled toward an imaginary past. There lies only “the detritus of social thought, external appearances, relics, and knowledge frozen in time”; those who would tarry there “can do little more than compare coins and sarcophagi” (161). Only by joining the popular struggle against colonialism can intellectuals hope to do more than chase after “mummified fragments.” In shared anti-colonial struggle, on the other hand, tradition comes alive: “the congealed, petrified forms loosen up” (175). In the throes of revolution, Fanon claims, “tradition changes meaning,” becoming an ebullient and flexible creation.

In many ways, the polemic of Fanon’s “On National Culture” is justified by its political context. There is an element of what we might call modernism in its critique: a rejection of anachronism, a suspicion of external forms, a wariness of “fabricated” traditions. Fanon underestimates the enduring pull of vernacular practices, which in their rich discrepancy are not easily subsumed into any “fundamental substance.” Yet in the Algerian struggle to liberate their land from the French, “traditions” could only be meaningful insofar as they were transformed by that struggle. This transformation apparently occurred: Fanon reports that Algerian popular storytellers adapted their tales to the context of national liberation, weaving in current battles, weapons and names. They abandoned “inert” and “dull” stories, and attracted new audiences (and were promptly jailed for their creativity) (174). In the aftermath of anti-colonial struggle, Fanon’s call for a “new humanism” and a “new humanity” went unanswered (178). But at that historical moment, he was correct in describing the revival of traditional practices, on the part of intellectual elites, as a dead end. What mattered was putting “a dying colonialism,” as Fanon called it, out of its misery.

The fragmented political landscape of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is fundamentally different from the one described by Fanon. The decolonization movements of the 1950s and 1960s did not manage to undo longstanding economic relations of dependency and exploitation. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, no unifying revolutionary project has emerged on the left. Recent grassroots mobilizations, despite their impressive power, have struggled to find enduring structures, wary of repeating the statist forms (with all their brutality) of the past century. Alain Badiou argues that this contemporary political impasse can be traced back to May '68 (also the high-water mark of third-worldism), which revealed that “the classical figure of the politics of emancipation was ineffective” (*Communist* 62). Left intellectuals have tended to diagnose the current historical moment as essentially non-revolutionary; Badiou writes of “our contemporary impotence.” Yet non-revolutionary moments can be surprisingly creative. They allow for an experimental freedom that is more difficult to sustain in polarized, life-and-death situations, such as the one described by Fanon. A moment of retreat and consolidation offers the opportunity to work through old resources from the past, and to try out new experiments in aesthetic form and political action.

In a 2008 interview, “We Need a Popular Discipline,” Badiou gives a sense of the contemporary moment’s difficulties, and its experimental promise:

The examples of popular organization we know today are ... either extremely experimental and localized (like the Zapatista movement) or theologico-political (like Hezbollah). The contemporary diversity of orientations, with all their sectarianism and particularism, was already present in Marx’s time as well, in the least revolutionary periods of the first half of the nineteenth century. And it is probably typical of periods in which it becomes necessary to open a new history, as is our own situation. All these experiences and experiments, then, including those that might seem a little strange or foreign, strong but limited as they are, must be taken into consideration. (656)

In the face of political stagnation and inertia, Badiou argues, experiments (even strange ones) are necessary in order to “open a new history.” Some of these “strong but limited” experiments, including the examples he cites (Hezbollah and the Zapatistas), have roots in

particular traditions of practice – religious or Indigenous, vernacular or customary. They may have no clearly revolutionary perspective. They may appear anachronistic. They may take positions that are uncomfortable, or even repellent. Yet such political experiments cannot be dismissed. In *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Slavoj Žižek makes a similar point: “[T]he situation is ‘completely hopeless,’” he writes, “with no clear ‘realistic’ revolutionary perspective; but does this not give us a kind of strange freedom, a *freedom to experiment?*” (361, italics in original) This freedom to experiment has been acted upon in recent years in public squares across the globe, in revolutionary and non-revolutionary contexts, with results that are far from conclusive. How are such political experiments to be evaluated? Success cannot be the only measure. Žižek tends to quote Samuel Beckett: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Should diverse experiments in political practice be guided by a regulative theory? Badiou’s philosophical writings emphasize universality, “Events,” and “Truth,” and he suggests that particular political movements must be oriented toward a larger “idea.” In support of the “idea of communism,” his writing proceeds via a series of theoretical postulates. Yet experimenting, in politics as in science, often gropes along with less than fully realized “ideas” or theories to light the way. There are many possible relationships between theory and experimental practice. “Some profound experimental work is generated entirely by theory,” writes Ian Hacking. “Some great theories spring from pre-theoretical experiment. Some theories languish for lack of mesh with the real world, while some experimental phenomena sit idle for lack of theory. There are also happy families, in which theory and experiment coming from different directions meet” (159). Badiou himself draws a parallel between political and scientific experiments, in which knowledge can reveal itself in surprising flashes: “As in science, until such time as the problem has not been resolved, you have all sorts of discoveries stimulated by the search for a solution” (*Communist* 63). Indeed, experimental science, like art and politics, is capable not only of “new discoveries,” but also of “the creation of phenomena” (Hacking 220). Experimental science teaches us how to “twist the lion’s tail” – to get nature to behave in new and surprising ways (Hacking 149, 158). In science, as in politics, at a time when theory is stagnant, experimenting can allow new life and movement to emerge.

Despite the similarities between experimental practices in science, politics, and art, there are key differences between them in their orientation toward the universal and the particular. In a reading of Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, Samuel Weber remarks on a word in the subtitle of the Danish philosopher's work: "*experimenterende*," or "experimenting." Kierkegaard's unusual use of the present participle (of a word already uncommon in Danish at that time) is echoed later in the text, in the phrase "*experimenteren en Figur*," or "experimenting in figures." Weber notes how Kierkegaard's use of "experimenting" refers to, and simultaneously disassociates itself from, the experimental methods of the natural sciences. As Weber writes, what Kierkegaard's "experimenting" shares with experimental science

is its dependence upon a certain repetition, on the one side, and its fragmentary, non-total nature on the other. However, whereas the scientific experiment still seeks to subsume the particular case under the general, and whereas it still situates itself within the confines of a system or at least with respect to systematisable knowledge, the Kierkegaardian experiment is an attempt, a 'venture,' an essay (*Førsøg*) to articulate the singular (*Enkelte*) *without* entirely dissolving its differences into the similitude of the universal. ("The Future," italics in original)

For Kierkegaard, "experimenting in figures" does not mean turning one's back on the universal; rather, it means approaching the universal from the vantage point of its suppressed particular. As his alter ego Constantin Constantius writes, at the end of *Repetition*:

Eventually one grows weary of the incessant chatter about the universal and the universal repeated to the point of the most boring insipidity. There are exceptions. If they cannot be explained, then the universal cannot be explained either. Generally the difficulty is not noticed because one thinks the universal not with passion but with comfortable superficiality. The exception, however, thinks the universal with intense passion. (227)

This passion is pronounced in experimental artistic work, which thrives on exception and discrepant particularity. But it is also present in politics, which (as Rancière and others have argued) begins from the position of the excluded, "the part of those who have no part"



(*Disagreement*). Scientific experiment can start from the exception, too, but that exception is a problem to be solved, not a wedge that can break apart a stubborn and unjust universal.

One can, of course, think the particular with insipidity and comfortable superficiality, abandoning the universal; this is more or less Žižek and Badiou's critique of contemporary left politics. Yet both Badiou and Žižek suggest (perhaps despite themselves) that in a time of political retrenchment and restoration, starting from experiment rather than from theory can allow innovative figures to emerge. This position is taken to its limit in Stengers and Pignarre's *Capitalist Sorcery*, which argues for a thoroughly experimental politics, at the risk of abandoning universal theory or "analysis" entirely. The authors maintain that they have no interest in coming up with the correct theoretical understanding of the dynamics of contemporary capitalism (or of anti-capitalist revolution). Instead, they attempt to identify experimental practices and techniques that might enable us, collectively, to "get a hold," to help us avoid becoming "minions" in thrall to capital's sorcery. Borrowing a term from American feminist activism, they call these practices "techniques of *empowerment*." They note that a technique of empowerment "does not present itself as deriving from a theory that would legitimate it. It is experimented with, and is only valid to the extent that it is efficacious" (133). Here, politics diverges from scientific practice, which claims legitimacy beyond the laboratories in which experiments take place. A political technique of empowerment, by contrast, might be translated into different situations, but it cannot be universally valid, in theory or in practice.

For Stengers and Pignarre, experimental political techniques, such as those worked out in direct action, belong to a larger "ecology of practices." All practices, from science to politics to art, have a force insofar as they "make present what causes practitioners to think and feel and act" (Stengers, "Introductory" 195). But political techniques of empowerment lack science's ability to legitimate itself through universal laws. They are more like "recipes" – a "slightly contemptuous qualification that is sometimes reserved for so-called 'pre-scientific' or 'non-scientific' techniques" (Stengers and Pignarre 133). Recipes, in cooking as in political action, cannot justify their efficacy through theory: "what recipes are usually reproached with is that they do not have the power of explaining why they 'work' in terms that transcend the

situation in which they ‘work.’” Yet recipes – a vernacular form par excellence – can be shared, transmitted, relayed, and are inevitably modified in their transmission. Stengers and Pignarre argue that “political creation” requires practitioners to share recipes, both those that succeed and those that fail. Recipes, they write, are “what a group that experiments ought to make itself able to recount, in a pragmatic mode” (133). This pragmatic sharing can enable thought and action that “correct theory” tends to shut down or dismiss in advance.<sup>46</sup>

The pragmatic mode of Kierkegaard’s “experimenting” – “an attempt, a ‘venture,’ an essay,” as Weber describes it – is closest of all to artistic experimentalism. This experimentalism should suggest not so much the militant trailblazing implied by the term “avant-garde,” but an open-ended “trying out” (*experimentere*) of figures, bodies and materials that is always limited by the situation at hand.<sup>47</sup> “Experimenting,” in the aesthetic mode, suggests a repeated tinkering, an unending and changing project with no final culmination or universally valid theory behind it. Alan Kaprow called such projects “radical prototypes,” referring to the first Happenings of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which sketched out open and shifting collective structures and processes of encounter. In *Radical Prototypes*, her study named after Kaprow’s phrase, Judith Rodenbeck finds in the early happenings “an experiential model of art” linked not to the pursuit of the sublime, “but to the everyday and to a pragmatic experimentalism as willing to embrace slapstick and even failure as it was to accept tragedy and success” (5). Indeed, failure is inevitable in every experiment, which should have a good sense of humour about its own pratfalls. “Radical prototypes” is an appropriate designation: “prototype” implies an orientation to the future that is not based on mastery, but on possibility. An experimental prototype might never see the light of day; retrospectively, it might seem ridiculous, awkward, marginal, or outdated. Yet such marginal prototypes can also endure, in Rodenbeck’s words, as “figures on a horizon of possibilities” (28).

These possibilities are preserved in the verbal form that Kierkegaard employs in the subtitle of *Repetition*: the present participle, “experimenting.” Weber points out that the

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<sup>46</sup> For more on the recipe as a vernacular form and its link with experimental aesthetics, see Chapter 4, “Fermenting.”

<sup>47</sup> For a critique of the avant-garde’s “problem of the head,” see Tiqqun.

present participle, which in English is marked by the suffix “-ing,” gives to a verb the sense of an action that is ongoing, unfinished. Weber summarizes it in this way:

the present participle involves a movement that is first of all, repetitive, second of all, never conclusive or contained, third, on-going and futural, and fourth and finally, *actual and immediate*. Whereas the model of all knowledge, including scientific and experimental knowledge, is based on the past participle, the result, the present participle moves in a quite different, more *transitional* way... It is ‘transcendent’ in never being identifiable with itself, always open, on-going, but also always taking leave of itself in the very process of coming to be. (“The Future,” italics in original)

The present participle, Weber argues, has a certain “theatricality”: its inconclusive repetitions resist any version of truth as self-identity or self-presence. It is always parting with or departing from itself: “the reiterative openness of the present participle is always both ahead of and behind itself” (*Theatricality* 15). It is thus anachronic, in Rancière’s sense, temporally out-of-joint, constantly de-parting from itself.

The present participle also implies a certain quality of participation. “Participle,” as Weber points out, comes from the Latin *participium*, “a sharing, partaking.” *Participium* in turn derives from the Greek verb *methexis*, “used by Plato to describe the manner in which entities ‘partake’ or ‘participate’ in the absolutes, the ‘ideas’ that determine their qualities” (*Theatricality* 19). The present participle shifts methexic “participation,” which in Plato’s philosophy is rather strict and one-directional, into something open, repetitive, reflexive, ongoing, and immediate. “Participation” becomes “participating”: once again, the shift from substantive to the present participle implies an opening, a loosening up of something congealed or fixed. It makes perfect sense that Kaprow, using the nominal form of the present participle, called his participatory structures “happenings.” The present participle can turn a fixed event – something that *happened* – into a radical prototype, a figure on a horizon of possibilities.

Throughout the theoretical portion of this Introduction, I have used the present participle to emphasize modes of practice (reclaiming, commoning, translating, experimenting) instead of things or substances. I also use the present participle to title the

chapters that follow, identifying a key practice, figurative or literal, for each project: “Profaning,” “Remixing,” “Responding,” and “Fermenting.” The open, immediate, repetitive, ongoing, and *theatrical* quality of the present participle is well-suited to what is, after all, a study of performances, especially those that invite an on-going bodily participation. Theatre and performance are always departing from themselves, undoing their self-identity and self-presence (which is why Plato distrusted mimesis so deeply).<sup>48</sup> By emphasizing the present participle, I also mean to convey something of the unfinished and continuing quality of the projects I discuss. All of these projects are still (at the time of writing) developing, altering and re-iterating themselves. This research catches each of them at a moment in time, during a particular iteration, but it cannot claim to be definitive. As experiments in the Kierkegaardian sense, they will never reach a definitive form or attain unassailable conclusions. They are provisional examples to follow or abandon, radical prototypes, engagements with the vernacular in experimental form.

*Experimenting*, more than any difference in political context, is what distinguishes the projects I discuss from the melancholy chasing after tradition critiqued by Fanon. Discontinuity might scatter the pieces of tradition’s puzzle, leaving a fragmentary “inventory of particularisms” (as Fanon called it) that cannot be easily transmitted. The question then becomes whether to try to put the remaining pieces back in their presumed original places and exhibit them as “authentic” heritage, or to translate them in vernacular fashion – to see what can be made with whatever is at hand. In this investigation, my sympathies are with the latter, more experimental approach.

In these and other projects, experimenting with tradition seeks to discover (to paraphrase Deleuze on Spinoza) not “what tradition *is*,” but “what can tradition *do*?”<sup>49</sup> This can be a contradictory, ambiguous, and agonistic process. “Boxing with tradition” is how the scholar, composer and trombonist George Lewis describes the black vernacular musical experiments of the AACM (504).<sup>50</sup> Yet “boxing” is too much of a winner-take-all, punch-to-

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<sup>48</sup> Certain scholars, including Weber, would draw a distinction between performance and theatre; as a practitioner and as a researcher, I would argue that the difference between these terms (and forms) is overstated. See Carlson for a thoughtful examination.

<sup>49</sup> See Deleuze, *Expressionism*, Chapter 14, “What Can a Body Do?”

<sup>50</sup> The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians; see “Scenes of Encounter,” below.

the-head proposition: “wrestling” might be a better word for what is a playful as well as agonistic relationship. Experiments with tradition grope along amidst conflicts and confusions. As aesthetic projects, these experiments are “willing to embrace slapstick and even failure” (Rodenbeck). Experiments with vernacular practice, especially in an open, participatory, and playful mode, can undo regimes of property and self-enclosure, and illuminate new figures of community. In the second, methodological portion of this Introduction, I will argue that understanding these experiments requires more than a critical-intellectual appreciation. It also calls for joining in that playful wrestling, by participating in their practices of undoing.

## II. CONTEXTS AND METHODS

*Scenes of Encounter – An Apprenticeship in the Old Arts – Performance, Participation, Practice*

### Scenes of Encounter

The collective projects that I explore in the chapters that follow belong to a complex and ongoing history of aesthetic experiments with the vernacular. This history, which I will only gesture toward here, has enormous temporal and global variations. It could be described as a series of encounters between “folk” and “avant-garde,” although (as I have argued above) these terms are limited, overdetermined and imprecise. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett characterizes this history in terms of aesthetic rebellion. “A history remains to be written,” she writes, “of the sources to which the historical avant-garde, midcentury experimentalists, and more recent postmodern performance artists have turned for their critique of the very art world within which they rebelled – the European peasantry, rural America, the tribal, the industrial, the quotidian” (*Destination Culture* 224). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s sketch of an unwritten history could be traced further back, at least as far as the eighteenth-century “discovery of the people” (Burke 23). It gives too much emphasis to Euro-American rebellion against the “art world,” which is not the orientation of many aesthetic experiments with the vernacular. Finally, it is too one-sided, missing out on the circularity of cultural poaching, the multi-directional borrowing between vernacular and avant-garde experimenters that can cut across class and racial lines. Still, her sketch does capture some of the variety of aesthetic experiments with tradition, at least in Europe and North America, over the past century.

To fill in this missing history by tracing a chronological outline would risk conflating divergent projects and contexts. But I will lay down a few markers here. Jacques Rancière has observed that since the eighteenth century “art” has been increasingly understood within the wider category of “the aesthetic.” What he calls “the aesthetic regime of the arts” – a “regime of perception, affection, and thought” – has come to embrace objects, social groups, genres,

forms, and modes of perception that were previously relegated to a lower status in the classical hierarchy of the fine arts, or else disregarded entirely (*Aisthesis* xii). In the still-unfolding “aesthetic age,” inspiration and innovation have emerged from social orders that were previously excluded from consideration, or else represented in frozen forms such as the pastoral. These include the rural “folk,” notably, but also the urban poor, migrants, and other subaltern groups. The European and New World political revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries encouraged a turn to “the people” in its various guises – as a subject for artists, or as the supposed wellspring of art and culture (as in Herder’s *Volkslied*).<sup>51</sup> Rancière’s work tracks this surge of aesthetic interest in the culture of “the people,” with all the ambiguities that this involves. Instead of writing a synoptic history, he offers episodes or “scenes,” historical moments of encounter. Many of these take the form of “short voyages to the land of the people,” a phrase that captures the fantastical or fable-like quality of these meetings (*Short Voyages*, *Aisthesis* xiv). I follow Rancière in proposing “scenes” – travelogues or voyages through contemporary vernacular landscapes – rather than offering a comprehensive history.<sup>52</sup>

Of all the historical characters that pass through these scenes of encounter, appropriation, and experiment between folk and avant-garde, I would like to linger briefly on just two: *the collector* and *the collective*. The collector – often the collector/composer – sets out in search of what the poet Lorine Niedecker called, with perfect ambiguity, “the folk from whom all poetry flows / and dreadfully much else” (7-8). We find the collector wandering the highlands, at sea, in taverns, cottages, shantytowns, libraries and second-hand shops. Here we see Wordsworth and Coleridge, concocting the *Lyrical Ballads* out of a half-imagined folk tradition; William Morris reclaiming medieval craft practices for the socialist revolution; composers, including Bartok and Komitas, transcribing and adapting the sounds of the peasantry at the margins of Empire; compilers of vernacular recordings, such as Alan Lomax,

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<sup>51</sup> On the *Volkslied*, “Herder’s fantasy of song,” see Head (132ff). For a compelling reevaluation of political populism and the question of “the people,” see Laclau, as well as Rancière’s *On the Shores of Politics*.

<sup>52</sup> “Each one of these scenes,” writes Rancière, “presents a singular event, and explores the interpretive network that gives it meaning around an emblematic text. ... The scene is not the illustration of an idea. It is a little optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names and ideas, constituting the sensible community that these links create, and the intellectual community that makes such weaving thinkable” (*Aisthesis* xi).

lugging a tape recorder from mountain to seashore, mapping a global mosaic of untutored song. There is W.E.B. Du Bois, collaging transcripts of “sorrow songs” into *The Souls of Black Folk*. We see the émigré architect Bernard Rudofsky, gathering monuments of the vernacular imagination into *Architecture Without Architects* and *The Prodigious Builders*, and Christopher Alexander turning this vernacular architecture into the open-source toolbox of *A Pattern Language*. Here is the painter/filmmaker/collector Harry Smith, assembling 78 rpm records into that alchemical and mysterious hieroglyph, the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, which would go on to tip a whole counterculture into vibrant anachronism. And then Smith’s progeny in “ethnographic modernism” (Singh), compilers of global musical vernaculars – including the irreverent collectors of the Sublime Frequencies record label, the Sun City Girls (also a collective), with their project of “carnival folklore resurrection.”<sup>53</sup>

These collectors, in all their diversity, do not simply identify, label, archive, and exhibit. They share Walter Benjamin’s critique of a “cultural history” that is obsessed with preservation, labelling, and exegesis (what Nietzsche called “antiquarian history”). Instead, their collections are experiments that seek to resurrect entombed folklore into new creative life. “Cultural history,” Benjamin writes, “may well increase the burden of the treasures that are piled up on humanity’s back. But it does not give mankind the strength to shake them off, so as to get its hands on them” (*One-Way Street* 361). Similarly, these collectors are not interested in simply cataloguing and interpreting the weighty treasures of human achievement. Instead, they use their tactile powers – of assembly, collage and montage – to serve those who would shake off that burden and reclaim the common past.

If the collector is the one who gathers, collectives are the ones who gather. Sometimes a collective springs from the same popular strata which the collector mines for vernacular gold. The figure of the collective dominates a historical moment in which experiments with the vernacular were widespread, fertile, and contradictory: the (long) global 1960s.<sup>54</sup> Among the collectives of the postwar European avant-garde, the Situationists – especially Raoul

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<sup>53</sup> On Morris, see E.P. Thompson’s biography, and Peter Linebaugh’s Foreword to the PM Press edition (reprinted in *Stop, Thief!*). On Lomax, see Szwed. On Du Bois as a collage artist, see Weheliye. On Rudofsky, see Architekturzentrum Wien. On Smith, see Cantwell, Chapter 6, “Smith’s Memory Theater”; Marcus; Perchuk and Singh. On Sublime Frequencies and the Sun City Girls, see Boon, “Carnival.”

<sup>54</sup> On the global 1960s, see Dubinsky; see also Jameson’s “Periodizing the 60s.”



Vaneigem and Asger Jorn – followed Georges Bataille in looking to the vernacular as a source of opposition to spectacular capitalism, in such figures as the gift, the festival, and the ornament. A range of North American and European experimental theatre companies (The Bread and Puppet Theater, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino, Welfare State International, Dario Fo’s revival of the *giuliere*) energetically reinvented vernacular and popular forms, extending the popular interests of pre-war collaborations such as those of Brecht and Weill, but without any strict attachment to the proletarian masses. This resonated with global experiments with tradition in the performing arts, from the Japanese “ritual school” of performance collectives, to musical groups and movements that blended pop, rock, and psychedelia with vernacular and avant-garde influences, from Germany to Brazil to Zimbabwe. In this period, artistic experiments with tradition also spilled over into daily life, occasionally taking the form of collectives, communes, and intentional communities, some of which still survive, including the Farm, site of the 1970s feminist revival of midwifery. Publications that emerged from that era testify to a spirit of restless, collective vernacular experimentation – from the rough spirit of *RFD: A Country Journal for Gay Men Everywhere*, to the do-it-yourself techno-utopianism of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, a kind of physical precursor of the Internet.<sup>55</sup>

One compelling and still-enduring musical collective born in that era was the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). Founded in 1965, the AACM gathered together Chicago’s black, working-class musical experimentalists (including Muhal Richard Abrams, Phil Cohran, the Art Ensemble of Chicago and many other musicians and groups). The AACM’s “Great Black Music” grew out of experiments with modern jazz, but increasingly embraced other experimental and global vernacular sounds. George Lewis, a member and author of a recent “autobiography” of the collective, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, writes of the AACM’s “mobility of practice,” its willingness to go

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<sup>55</sup> On this aspect of Situationist writing and practice, see Wark. On Bread and Puppet, see Brecht, Bell. On 1960s theatre and activism, see Martin. On Fo’s “folkloric imagination,” see Scuderi. On the Japanese “ritual school,” see KuroDalaiJee. On the politics of ’60s music and the avant-garde, see Adlington. On midwifery and the search for “right livelihoods” at the Farm, see Farber. On *RFD*, see Herring. For a powerful critique of the links between *The Whole Earth Catalog* and contemporary “digital utopianism,” see F. Turner.

“beyond the purview of genre or method” (xl). Its collective “boxing with tradition” is a touchstone for my understanding of vernacular experimentation in the chapters that follow.

The contemporary landscape of aesthetic experiments with the vernacular, which provides a more immediate context for this investigation, is fluid and difficult to map. In North America, there has been an experimental revival of vernacular arts and crafts – from knitting to pickling – at the level of daily life. Yet as I discuss in Chapter 4 (“Fermenting”), even the more radical of these revival movements are politically and aesthetically ambiguous – imbricated in regimes of authorship, commodification, copyright, and property, and always threatening to collapse into innocuous lifestyle adjustments (see Robertson, “Embroidery Pirates”). Contemporary “enterprise culture” channels and shapes the impulse to experiment with tradition, shunting it into heavily commodified forms, often trapping its “mobility of practice” in the property of a bounded ethnic group (Comaroff and Comaroff). “Instant traditions” circulate via the Internet, encouraged by corporate interests, as in the 2013 phenomenon of the “Harlem Shake” (Ashton). Certain critics have argued that the Internet’s universal electronic archive has promoted a generalized “retromania,” in which present innovation is sacrificed in favour of digging up past traditions. We seem to be deep into “a phase of anything-goes, guiltless appropriation, a free-for-all of asset-stripping that ranges all over the globe and all across the span of human history” (Reynolds 426). At the same time, new forms of media have encouraged new vernaculars – including the contemporary explosion of amateur music-making ushered in by the accessibility of home recording and social networks (Powers, Wilson, and Carr).

In the realm of the art world, “social practice” and “the social turn” of participatory art have emerged since the 1990s as yet another “short voyage to the land of the people.” The use of social life as an artistic medium, which the art historian Claire Bishop traces back to the early twentieth-century avant-gardes, can be understood as yet another permutation of the aesthetic age. Its historical and current incarnations tend to draw on everyday vernacular practices: gardening and street parades, to take just two examples from the recent work of Fritz Haeg and Jeremy Deller. Contemporary participatory art projects are sometimes banal, and can be critiqued for emphasizing “ethical” improvement to the detriment of aesthetic

form (Bishop, *Artificial Hells*). Yet certain projects, such as those mounted by the Chicago collective Temporary Services, use a keen aesthetic intelligence to curate and reshape “the inventiveness of the everyday, the commonplace, and the nondescript multitude” (Sholette 99). Indeed, Temporary Services and their related project Public Collectors present a promising fusion of *collector* and *collective*. They gather vernacular creations into exhibits and publications, such as *Prisoners’ Inventions*, while working collaboratively through horizontal structures to find aesthetically potent frameworks of presentation. Other contemporary art collectives share this experimental interest in the vernacular, as both source material and mode of operation.<sup>56</sup>

The four experiments that I examine in this dissertation are not situated in the art world, but in parallel aesthetic milieux.<sup>57</sup> Respectively, they are experiments in activist spectacle, popular music, art education, and everyday life. All of them wind their way through the landscape of contemporary enterprise culture. They accept the terms of survival – commodification, professionalization, institutionalization – while sometimes clinging to a more precarious marginality. All have a collective dimension in both process and performance. More specifically, each project grows out of an explicitly defined collective structure: the Aftselokhes Spectacle Committee (Chapter 1), the three DJs of A Tribe Called Red (Chapter 2), the experimental performance group Goat Island (Chapter 3), and the queer commune at Short Mountain (Chapter 4). The horizontality of these collectives aligns with the vernacular practices they draw upon or reinvent. Vernacular practice, as I have argued in my theoretical discussion, tends to operate on the horizontal rather than the vertical plane, giving it an affinity with collective structures and processes.

Each of the projects I discuss below also involves a certain kind of collecting. This includes the collecting of diverse vernacular scraps, along with fragments of Jewish liturgy and ritual, in the work of the Purim Ball; pow wow songs in the music of A Tribe Called Red, and

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<sup>56</sup> Contemporary art collectives with a strong interest in vernacular practices include YNKB (Copenhagen) and Futurefarmers (California); see Sholette for an overview. For a historical perspective on “collectivism after modernism,” see Stimson. On participation and “social practice” in contemporary art more generally, see also Jackson, Kester.

<sup>57</sup> The Abandoned Practices Institute, which is run out of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, might seem like an exception. But the Institute has its roots in experimental theatre rather than visual art; it is also a workshop, rather than an art project per se, which calls for different criteria of evaluation.

images of “the Indian” in the videos of Bear Witness; the “abandoned practice cards,” an archive of the everyday which acts as a point of departure for the Abandoned Practices Institute; and numerous recipes and techniques of home fermentation in the writing of Sandor Katz. These examples should demonstrate that collecting is not always a top-down affair. In fact, vernacular practice can itself be understood as a kind of collecting, “assembling together everything and everyone needed for an event” (Henriques 227). Even this dissertation, with its assembling of divergent case studies, could be seen as a collection, if an idiosyncratic and unfinished one. It gathers together projects based not on their shared content, but on their common approach – their experimental, collective and participatory translations of “tradition.”

### **An Apprenticeship in the Old Arts**

This dissertation, in both its subject-matter and its methodology, is not a purely scholarly endeavour. It also grows out of a specific “trajectory of apprenticeship” (Stengers and Pignarre): my own practical history in the performing arts. Over the past two decades, I have created and participated in a series of music and performance projects, stirred by a passion for vernacular forms as filtered through an experimental sensibility. As a musician, I have been deeply affected by movements and projects that play with vernacular or “traditional” forms and sounds. These include the more innovative strands of the American and British folk revivals, especially those inspired by Harry Smith’s *Anthology*; the opportunistic free-for-all of Música Popular Brasileira in the 1960s and after, rooted in heterogeneous vernacular material; and the rediscovery of pre-war Jewish instrumental music from Eastern Europe, the Balkans and North America (the “klezmer revival”), which began in the 1970s. My musical activity has shaped itself in response to these and other currents, resulting in projects and recordings that have attempted to translate traditional musical practices into contemporary contexts. In my work as a songwriter and composer over a half-dozen albums, I have freely borrowed and recombined diverse vernacular sounds and rhythms, proceeding intuitively and compositionally. I have also founded collective projects

(including the avant-Yiddish band Black Ox Orkestar) that mine a more concentrated vein of vernacular sonic and cultural history. All of this work has proceeded both respectfully and irreverently, unearthing musical lineages and reshaping them without submitting to discourses of ownership or authenticity. Indeed, as I have argued in the theoretical portion of this Introduction, “tradition” can only thrive through such experiments and translations.

Intersecting with this musical work has been a parallel apprenticeship in theatre and performance, also with a vernacular and anachronistic inflection. I spent two formative years in the late 1990s, in Northeastern Vermont, as a puppeteer with The Bread and Puppet Theater. Working on the large-scale pageants of *Our Domestic Resurrection Circus* (performed yearly from 1974 to 1998) and on smaller touring shows, I was initiated into director Peter Schumann’s singular reimagining of puppetry and folk theatrical forms. Those years left their mark on my own music and performance work, pushing me toward projects that carried forward some of Bread and Puppet’s roughness, folk modernism, energetic anachronism, and collective spirit. It also spurred me, along with two collaborators, to start our own company in Montreal, Le Petit Théâtre de l’Absolu. This collective lasted only five years, but the experience was profound. Our “toy theatre” or “paper theatre” productions (a 19<sup>th</sup>-century parlour form) told stories of revolutionary struggle and defeat, from the Paris Commune to the Haymarket martyrs.<sup>58</sup> We took those miniature shows on tour, traveling light and playing alternative venues in North America and Europe. We also made an anarchic hand-puppet show for children, *The Rooster and the King*, which we brought to East Jerusalem and the Palestinian refugee camps of the occupied West Bank. Puppet theatre is a quintessentially vernacular form: abjected, often the butt of jokes, rarely treated with respect. As Schumann and other practitioners have argued, this abjection is one of the powers of the “old art of puppetry,” giving it the ability to show things and go places that would otherwise be off-limits (Schumann, *Old Art*; K. Gross). This was certainly the case in my experience with that rough tradition.

My apprenticeship in the “old arts” gave me an intimate experience with many of the themes that wind their way through this investigation. It helped me understand the

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<sup>58</sup> On the toy theatre and its revival, spurred by the New York collective Great Small Works, see Alan Powers, Orenstein. On Le Petit Théâtre de l’Absolu, see Tembeck, Levine.

opportunism of vernacular practice: its eagerness to borrow, steal, copy, and recombine; its lack of respect for formal pieties and generic strictures; its willingness to use whatever materials are at hand. It also revealed a certain power latent in these old musical and performance forms. This power lies partly in their untimely or anachronistic quality: the sense that when playing with these old arts, one is pulled out of one's proper time. It also lies in their anchor in collective practice, in the sense that they are the product of generations of popular invention and reinvention. Working with the songs from Harry Smith's *Anthology*, for example, one feels pulled into a world that has not been fully staked out by discourses of property and authorship – even if the voices on those pre-war commercial recordings are highly distinctive and individualized. Making a puppet or object-theatre show, too, is a process of vernacular fabrication and assembly, in which tricks, *lazzi*, gags, phrases, and set pieces are pulled from an ever-shifting repertoire; the objects themselves often call the tune, suggesting undreamt-of uses. This is not to imply that the performance projects that emerge from these engagements with the vernacular are somehow authorless. Rather, their authorship works differently from the bourgeois imaginary: not the authentic or proper creation of a person, but the result of collective tinkering, experiment, and invention.

My apprenticeship also led me toward some of the contradictions of these collective experiments with the vernacular. In the large-scale pageants of The Bread and Puppet Theater, as in the smaller-scale shows of my own music and theatre projects, I experienced what the anthropologist Victor Turner famously called *communitas*: a sense of being pulled out of my individualized identity and social location into a larger space of encounter. In rehearsal and performance, there was often a shared “flow,” a feeling of contributing to something greater than myself, yet without collapsing into fusion or the erasure of subjectivity. This experience – which might be the site of a certain “exposure to community” (Nancy) – was both powerful and destabilizing. It called into question my sense of boundaries, my own propriety and individuality. It made me hungry for more of these experiences, and also a little wary of them.

The collective projects I worked on in those years were fleeting and fragile, and eventually came to an end, to be replaced by new and different collaborations. In the long run, continuing with Bread and Puppet would have required more or less giving up my own

trajectory and submitting to another's vision, which I was unwilling to do. Black Ox Orkestar and Le Petit Théâtre de l'Absolu ultimately collapsed: my collaborators and I were unable to put the shared work ahead of our own conflicting and competitive desires. Collective projects are time-bound: there is something like "the time of the project," a temporality in suspension aware of its own duration (Dupuy; Gratton and Sheringham). A sense of necessary failure suffuses the time of the project; it is part of what makes that time so sweet. This dissertation is, in some ways, a reckoning with the fragile community I experienced in those anachronistic collective projects – a community which, as Roberto Esposito writes, is both necessary and impossible, impossible and necessary (*Terms* 15). In part, my writing here is a way of taking stock, of reflecting back on that artistic work, of seeking to understand it better, and of gathering new ideas for the future. Yet this research project, which investigates contrasting experiments with the vernacular, focuses outward more than inward. In this outward movement – an "inclining" to alterity (Nancy) – it is part of a trajectory that is still unfolding.

### **Performance, Participation, Practice**

In its methods and subjects, this dissertation is interdisciplinary: it draws on philosophical and critical thought to address aesthetic work that might otherwise be separated into academic specializations (including Jewish Studies, Indigenous Studies, Ethnomusicology, Art Education, and Folklore). This interdisciplinary orientation aims to gather diverse projects that would not generally be considered together, follow them as they explore highly specific worlds of collective experience, and step back to offer a more synthetic and reflective perspective. Yet while this research might be broadly interdisciplinary, it owes a great debt to work in Performance Studies. As a discipline or inter-discipline, Performance Studies has long engaged with participatory aesthetic forms and practices, including festivals, dance parties, workshops, and meals, which I examine here. These participatory forms shuttle between the categories of "art" and "cultural performance," and often slip between the cracks of more established fields. In its subject-matter, its aesthetico-political orientation, and its methodology, my own investigation follows in Performance Studies' liminal lineage.

Performance Studies, as Jon McKenzie points out, grew out of a series of liminal paradigms: between theatre and anthropology in the 1970s, and, later, between continental theory and performance art. Slipping between the cracks, or in-between-ness, is a point of pride for many of scholars in the field. Performance Studies tends to see itself as a liminal discipline, and if it has a primary subject, it might be the liminal itself – the edges of culture where social structure loosens up and is then reinforced or reformulated.<sup>59</sup> A faith in the transformative power of the liminal gives Performance Studies its political flavour, leading to an affinity for subjects such as “demonstrations, political theater, drag, public memorials, performance art, and everyday gestures of social resistance” (McKenzie 9). Indeed, McKenzie argues that Performance Studies has developed something like a “liminal norm.” It tends to gravitate toward the marginal and transgressive, turning a blind eye to the more conservative and normative functions of cultural performance.<sup>60</sup>

In a sense, the aesthetic projects that I explore here share Performance Studies’ predilection for the liminal as a site of research. They stage “liminoid” performances, which perhaps could be distinguished from more properly liminal social rites (Turner, “Liminal to Liminoid”). However, my focus is not on the transgression of social norms, or on their reinforcement – a paradigm that has tended to dominate the study of performance over the past few decades. Instead of the dialectic of transgression and normativity, I focus on *experimentation*: the playful trying-out and reinvention of cultural practices in performance. The experiments I examine have, on occasion, a transgressive veneer. They tend to occur at the margins or in the interstices of the wider culture, sometimes taking the form of “subcultural practices” or “willfully eccentric modes of being” (Halberstam 1). But on closer examination, these experiments are most compelling for the inventive modes of practice they discover, and the figures of collectivity they illuminate. If I look to the margins, it is not out of any great love of transgression, or aversion to normativity. Rather, it is because the margins are where the interesting experiments take place.

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<sup>59</sup> See McKenzie 35ff; Turner, *From Ritual*.

<sup>60</sup> McKenzie notes that, before *Perform or Else*, Performance Studies had paid little attention to the normative dimensions of Judith Butler’s concept of performativity (elaborated from Austin and Derrida). And Herbert Marcuse’s theorization of the “performance principle,” in *Eros and Civilization*, had been entirely ignored.



Performance Studies has long had a keen interest in “tradition” and vernacularity, the central themes of this project.<sup>61</sup> In choosing its objects of research, Performance Studies has often gravitated toward oral culture and knowledge transmitted through practice, in addition to written forms of transmission. Its political leanings make it sympathetic to what Foucault called “subjugated knowledges”: “the local, regional, vernacular, naïve knowledges at the bottom of the hierarchy” (Conquergood 146). Performance Studies is not anti-textual, but it does embrace knowledge that moves through “the repertoire” as well as “the archive,” to use performance scholar Diana Taylor’s language – through bodily practice as well as textual, visual and sonic media. This dissertation follows previous work in Performance Studies in exploring both archival and repertorial modes of transmission. These modes often intertwine: the projects that I examine draw on both documentary and bodily knowledge. Their experimental performances of tradition move through the archive and the repertoire in turn. They gather “traditional” or vernacular material in the form of textual or media artefacts, which they assemble into archives or collections. And, working collectively, they translate those archives into a repertoire of experimental gestures in the present.

The emphasis on practice and process in Performance Studies gives it methodological advantages for a research project of this kind. In an overview of the field, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” Dwight Conquergood praises situated and practical knowledge as both subject and method of research. Conquergood argues that much scholarly work tends to produce knowledge in the form of empirical observation or critical analysis from a distanced perspective; he describes this as “knowing that” and “knowing about.” Yet the “view from above,” he argues, does not tell the whole story:

This propositional knowledge is shadowed by another way of knowing that is grounded in active, intimate hands-on participation and personal connection: ‘knowing-how’ and ‘knowing-who.’ This is a view from ground level, in the thick of things. This is knowledge that is anchored in practice and circulated in a performance community, but is ephemeral. (146)

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<sup>61</sup> This is likely due to Performance Studies’ strong disciplinary links with Folklore and Anthropology.

Methods in Performance Studies, including performance ethnography and performative writing, set themselves up at ground level, “in the thick of things.” The Performance Studies researcher is often imbricated in the performance community she writes about. This entanglement is not necessarily a weakness; with phenomenological sensitivity, the participatory researcher can articulate forms of knowledge and experience that would be inaccessible to more critically distanced methods. This is especially the case for performance communities that operate in a vernacular fashion, where “knowing how” and “knowing who” are paramount. When researching these communities, there is no real choice but to get into the thick of things; without this prerequisite entanglement, it would be impossible to understand or appreciate what is going on.

The researcher’s entangled, participatory experience must then be shaped into textual or otherwise mediated form, in what can be described as another process of translation. As with other forms of translation, the carrying-over from experience to text brings both loss and transformation, involving a necessary betrayal. The written text alters the experience (which already has textual elements) and gives it an after-life, a subsequent existence in a more transmissible form.<sup>62</sup> Translations from cultural performance to textual artefact are uneasy and fraught, “inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power” (Asad, “Concept” 163). Indeed, Conquergood argues that academic research should resist its textual bias or “scriptocentrism,” which tends to look down on or assimilate non-textual forms of knowledge (147; see de Certeau). Yet any attempt to right the scales – to tip the balance from textual representation back to embodied practice – misses the point that even the most embodied and participatory research makes a translation from experience to text. The participatory researcher’s “mise-en-scène of feeling-understanding-knowing,” as Conquergood describes it (149), is, indeed, a *staging* of experience in textual form. More than necessary, the translation from experience to text can be productive, opening up new horizons for both researcher and subject. In these cases, “Translation becomes the condition of a transformative encounter, a way of establishing alterity at the core of transmission” (Butler, *Parting Ways* 17). As I have argued, in my earlier discussion of translations of tradition, this process is uneasy and complex. The

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<sup>62</sup> See my discussion of Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” above.

chapters that follow gesture toward translation's ability to strike new sparks, while "carrying over" a particular and localized experience into a more transmissible state.

The participatory research methods of Performance Studies, and its emphasis on the bringing-into-text of experience, are well-suited for research into participatory performance. In this it has much to offer other scholarly disciplines, which are sometimes wary of these methods as they engage with participatory forms. The art historian Claire Bishop notes that contemporary participatory art "tends to value what is invisible: a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy, a raised consciousness. As a result, it is an art dependent on first-hand experience, and preferably over a long duration (days, months, or even years)" (*Artificial* 6). Bishop is impatient with this participatory work's emphasis on process and long experience, which often makes it difficult to appreciate or even see. As she notes, few observers are in a position to take in a participatory project in its entirety; this means that the evaluation and framing of such projects is often in the hands of curators and the artists themselves. She is also rightly suspicious of the moralizing tone of much participatory art, and its pretensions to "activate" the spectator. Yet she recognizes that to engage productively with participatory artworks or performances requires the researcher to put aside her habits of "objectivity" and critical distance, and open herself up to relational experience. The "hidden narrative" of her own research, she confesses, "is therefore a journey from sceptical distance to imbrication: as relationships with producers were consolidated, my comfortable outsider status (impotent but secure in my critical superiority) had to be recalibrated along more constructive lines" (6). As an art historian and critic, Bishop still hopes to focus on the aesthetic (or even *visual*) character of the work she discusses, its "result" as well as its process. But she also admits, a little grudgingly, that one must meet the work on its own terms. Participatory art, to be understood at all, requires the engaged participation of the researcher or critic.<sup>63</sup>

The participatory projects and practices that I discuss below do not pose the same methodological difficulties as those discussed by Bishop. Festivals, dance parties, workshops and meals are thoroughly participatory forms. They are not "social practice" or "participatory

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<sup>63</sup> For a less polemical treatment of participatory art, see Kester. See also the exchange between Kester and Bishop in *Artforum*.

art,” but cultural performances which require participation if they are to exist at all. The would-be researcher of these experiences has no choice but to position himself at ground level, in the thick of things. The only way to access the three-week Abandoned Practices Institute, for instance, is as a participant in the workshop. It might be possible to play the “fly on the wall” and watch its activities from across the room. But if (as I argue in Chapter 3) the medium of the Institute is relational experience, little would be gained by placing oneself outside that medium. The same goes for the other projects I discuss. How could one understand carnival without celebrating, dance music without dancing, or fermented foods without eating? Sometimes, in certain forms, the experience *is* the result.

This is not to suggest that these participatory experiences are self-contained: while a given experience may be finite, it leaves remainders and echoes that can be relayed into new contexts. Nor do I mean to suggest that participatory forms are ethically or aesthetically superior to other, more contemplative forms of spectatorship. Rancière has argued convincingly that spectatorship is always active, even when the body of the spectator remains stationary (*Emancipated*). My aim in this research is not to privilege participatory performance over other kinds of artistic and cultural performance. I do not wish to moralize, praise, or blame. Rather, I attempt to understand these participatory projects and experiences, with their ties to vernacular practice, on their own terms.

The effort to understand also means stepping outside of the moment of engagement and reflecting critically on one’s own experience. This is most obvious when it comes to research involving Indigenous peoples in settler societies, which requires a highly reflexive self-positioning.<sup>64</sup> I carry this reflexivity into the other chapters, which raise equally complex issues of belonging, appropriation, efficacy, and engagement. In each chapter, I alternate between relatively distanced and imbricated positions, setting up a dialogue between thought and action. Some of these studies – on the Purim Ball (Chapter 1) and the Abandoned Practices Institute (Chapter 3) – are more immersive. In these two chapters, I slip into a narrative mode, reflecting the sequential and cumulative nature of the events, each of which builds to a kind of climactic performance. Narration, in these chapters, attempts to translate

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<sup>64</sup> As in Chapter 2, “Remixing”; see Tuhiwai Smith, Kovach.

the texture of a specific experience to the reader. (Narration, or even storytelling, is also an appropriate mode of presentation for an investigation of vernacular practice.) The remaining two chapters – on A Tribe Called Red (Chapter 2) and the fermentation revival (Chapter 4) – are more reflective. Here, I work thematically, addressing critical issues central to each of these subjects. A more episodic structure suits the iterative and non-cumulative nature of these projects, which take the form of repeated performances. But in these chapters, too, I attempt to translate the experiential texture of these aesthetic performances into text, while sticking close to the ground of practice.

This back-and-forth between engagement and reflection is in many ways a product of my position as an artist-researcher. This is not an unusual position for research in Performance Studies, which often sets itself up at the “crossroads” of theory and practice (Conquergood 154). In what follows, I have chosen to put my artistic work to one side, and to engage with aesthetic projects to which I have only a loose personal connection, or none at all.<sup>65</sup> Yet I am conscious of approaching these projects as test cases, examples to follow or abandon, and not simply as objects to be critically understood. I have chosen to write about projects that speak to my own history of engagement in music and performance, projects that I feel close to in many ways. This might lead to a relative lack of critique in my discussion of their work (although my Conclusion does examine the dangers and forms of complacency they court). Even if I am not always convinced by the performances they produce, I am generally sympathetic to their goals and approaches. Any lack of a hard critical edge is offset, hopefully, by an intimate and practical understanding of the work that I discuss. My research aims at an intimate engagement with four experiments with tradition, based in participatory and practical experience. From there, it opens onto wider aesthetic and political questions of pressing interest and importance. It is to these four practical experiments that I now turn.

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<sup>65</sup> Before beginning this research, I knew Aftselokhes Spectacle Committee member Jenny Romaine from working at the Bread and Puppet Theater, as well as from my friendship with Great Small Works, a notable object-theatre collective of which she is a member. Otherwise, I had no direct personal connection with any of these projects or their members.



## CHAPTER ONE

### **Profaning: A Queer Purim Ball**

*Purim's Borders – Sacred Separations – The Order of the Profane – Queer Anachronisms  
– A Profane Tongue – Sparks in the Laboratory – Bodies in Trouble – It Only Has to Last One  
Night – A Party in Heaven – After the Carnival*

Between glittering party and agit-prop spectacle, between intoxicated ritual and queer masquerade, New York's Purim Ball (or Purim Extravaganza) has become a political-carnival institution since its beginnings in 2002. Organized and staged by a shifting group of theatre artists, activists, performers and musicians, originally led by singer Adrienne Cooper and spectacle-maker Jenny Romaine, the event takes place each year over one long night in early spring. It's a tricked-up and queered-out version of the Jewish holiday, which commemorates the Biblical story of Esther: a tale of subterfuge, dressing-up, mockery of the powerful, and escape from pressing danger. Traditionally, in Jewish communities both observant and secular, Purim is marked by a reading of the scroll of Esther, also called the Megillah – a reading often half drowned out by jeers and shouts, in contrast to the usual ritual decorum. The holiday also has a long history of practices that feature carnival inversions and transgressions: cross-dressing, masquerades, reversals of hierarchy, feasting, drinking, parodies of sacred texts, and ribald folk plays or *Purimspiels*. The Purim Ball takes its inspiration from these folk plays, which have been popular in Ashkenazi Jewish communities since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and which are often cited as the beginnings of Yiddish theatre. This particular Purimspiel is both a retelling and a *midrash* or commentary on the story of Esther, adapted to meet the political urgencies of the metropolis – with its non-status workers, outrageous inequality, cops and homeless, racialized inhabitants, and straining and

inadequate health-care system. For a certain artist-activist milieu, it's also an occasion for one of the more transporting parties of the year, featuring bands and DJs with more general affinities to the project. The Purim Ball is, by its own admission, at once "very ancient yet totally contemporary," a self-conscious translation or queering of a longstanding Jewish tradition (Aftselokhes, "Purim").

The party itself grows out of a nexus of overlapping scenes, groups, and organizations. It is sponsored by the advocacy group Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), and until 2010 was housed in Manhattan's old *Arbeiter Ring* (Yiddish Workmen's Circle) building. The event is part of a larger context of Jewish performance committed to diasporism and social justice, overlapping with the Yiddish cultural revival underway in North America since the 1970s (Mattson, RJPA). That revival movement is markedly queer, with a large number of gay, lesbian and transgender artists whose immediate cultural disembedding might incline them to experiment with non-normative alliances and intergenerational forms of kinship. The event is also created in partnership with allies from non-Jewish activist, labour and cultural organizations: some of these, like the largely Caribbean and Latina women of Domestic Workers United (DWU), bring their own carnival skills and traditions to the party.

The Purimspiel draws its "cheap art" methodology and some of its spectacle-making techniques from the tradition of radical puppetry propagated since the 1960s by the Bread and Puppet Theater.<sup>66</sup> The New York collective Great Small Works, which grew out of post-Bread and Puppet activist object theatre, might be the most crucial ingredient in this mixture. The Spiel's embrace of transgressive drag, pop-culture camp and fabulousness can also be traced through another New York theatrical lineage, via the work of Charles Ludlam's Theater of the Ridiculous and other queer performance artists.<sup>67</sup> Then there is the younger DIY queer scene, which comes with its own performative codes and code-breaking strategies. All of these somewhat heterogeneous elements are tied together and set loose by the work of a central collective, which calls itself the Aftselokhes Spectacle Committee.<sup>68</sup> If this event sometimes

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<sup>66</sup> See Bread and Puppet, "Cheap Art Manifesto," and Schumann, *Radicality, Old Art*.

<sup>67</sup> See Marranca et al.

<sup>68</sup> The Yiddish word *aftselokhes* means "in order to provoke anger" – or more generally, to do things because someone else doesn't want you to, to act out of spite or to exasperate (Wex 2).



seems like it might collapse under the weight of its various political and aesthetic commitments, the collective finds a kind of buoyancy, the bounce and glitter that makes the righteousness feel effervescent. Its members weave text, music, and visual spectacle into a carnival whole, an “extraordinary temporary creative art” that is both transient and transporting.<sup>69</sup>

The 2012 Purimspiel – which I worked on as a participant researcher – was focused on the fragility of the body and the politics of care, themes rooted in both personal experience and political commitment. Adrienne Cooper, the beloved singer who mentored a generation of Yiddish-cultural workers, had passed away in December after having been diagnosed with cancer only a few months earlier. Her death, and the recent death of other close friends of the collective, gave the work process a sadness that sometimes seeped through the bright joy of the festival. The event took place amidst what is generally seen as a crisis of care in the United States, with its private, for-profit health-care system that systematically excludes the working poor and non-status people, as well as those with HIV and other chronic illnesses. The body, in the form of bodies in the street, was also front and centre that winter in New York, birthplace of the Occupy movement. The final invitation announced a Purim Ball dedicated to “the body: its fragility, its care, its resilience, its bounce” (Aftselokhes, “Purim”; see Figure 1). The event called its participants back to the interdependence of bodies, their common vulnerability, their need to give and receive care, and their capacity for resistance (and dancing). In a political season of Lent, under the sign of neoliberal austerity, the party honoured carnival abundance – the fragility of bodies but also their collective ability to rebound, their regenerative erotic and political bounce. It did this by re-translating Jewish folk and ritual traditions, but also by omnivorously poaching other sources: vernaculars like New Orleans sissy bounce and Korean sauna culture, or high and popular culture figures from Pina Bausch to Whitney Houston. Sometimes schlocky, occasionally didactic, and purposefully amateurish, the 2012 Spiel nevertheless enacted a powerful vision of common vulnerability, resourcefulness and abundance in a social world of privatized inequality, excess and privation.

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<sup>69</sup> On “extraordinary temporary creative art,” see Chief Victor Harris, cited in Tancons, “Greatest” 49.



Figure 1: Cover art for the program for 2012 Purim Ball (illustration by Ethan Heitner)

To do justice to this event requires working through a few of its constitutive threads. The first, more theoretical half of the chapter begins by looking at the Jewish tradition of Purim, and explores some of the holiday's festive peculiarities and rituals. I examine the contradictions of this holiday, shared by other carnivals and festivals, which both weaken and sometimes violently shore up ritual separations. To see how these potentially violent separations are shared by other ritual structures, and how they might be undermined, I turn to Agamben's essay "In Praise of Profanation," which explores "play" as a set of techniques for loosening or profaning ritual separations. I continue this line of reasoning through a close reading of Benjamin's "Theological-Political Fragment," which sketches an intriguing relationship between Jewish messianism and the happiness belonging to the "order of the profane." Building on the concepts of the profane and the act of profanation, I read the

carnavalesque elements of Purim through the lens of queer theory, looking for shared and divergent profanations of the normative. Lastly, I turn to the New York Purimspiel in the context of the Yiddish revival, looking at this revival movement as a diasporic, queer, and anachronistic profaning of tradition.

In the second half of the chapter, I shift into a narrative mode, and turn to the texture of the event itself: its history, its preparation, its composition, and its celebration. In the making of words, worlds, and objects, from workaday preparations to resplendent festivity, the Purimspiel offers an avenue for what historian and Aftselokhes member Rachel Mattson calls “queer political desire.”<sup>70</sup> This desire gives the event a utopian shimmer, recalling Bakhtin’s description of carnival as the “bodily participation in the potentiality of another world” (48). But in this case, desire is above all focused on transforming the here and now. At this party, queer anachronisms and remixed traditions become a lever to pry open the solidity of the present, not to escape into a utopian elsewhere, but to work on this world: to profane the social separations of gender, economy, race and religion; to repair and reinvent a shared reality; and to make that reality more collective, more funky, and more festive than we had thought possible. To this end, it seizes on political possibilities that are latent in the stories and practices of the holiday itself.

### **Purim’s Borders**

Of all the books of the Old Testament, the book of Esther distinguishes itself as the only one where the name of God is never mentioned. It is also the only Biblical story to take place entirely in diaspora, outside the Holy Land. The exilic and profane qualities of the story spill over into the holiday itself, which commemorates the deliverance of the Jews of Persia from King Ahasuerus and his plotting vizier Haman, through the subterfuge of Esther and her relative Mordechai. The story itself has rightly been called a fairy tale, honouring human cunning and reversals of fortune, not divine miracles (Doniach). Its origins remain unclear, though scholars generally see it as growing out of Near Eastern sources – the names Esther

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<sup>70</sup> Mattson traces the spirit of this phrase to the performance artist Sharon Hayes.

and Mordechai are clear cognates of the Babylonian gods Ishtar and Marduk, and many Purim traditions echo Babylonian and Persian spring-tide festivals, with their “kings for a day” and rituals of death and rebirth that celebrate spring’s victory over winter. Over its long history, the tale did what fairy tales do, gathering popular stories in vernacular fashion into a syncretic whole. And the holiday soaked up festive customs from peoples among whom diaspora Jews came to reside. So the “Purim rabbi,” who parodies the seriousness of the community’s religious leader, may have been an adaptation of the Italian Carnival Pope; cross-dressing, animal costumes, gambling and status inversion echo Roman festivals; the burning of Haman in effigy finds parallels in Near Eastern and European traditions; and Purimspiels probably grow out of medieval Christian folk plays (Epstein, Doniach). This osmosis of tales and rites, along with the story’s not obviously religious character, are likely why the Book of Esther was only included in official scripture after much debate, until popular protest finally overwhelmed rabbinical scepticism.

The holiday itself is marked by a blurring of the border between sacred and profane, and a general loosening of the strict separations that otherwise characterize Jewish ritual life. Diaspora Jews were (and in some cases still are), as the Book of Esther puts it, a “people scattered and dispersed among the other peoples... whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws” (3:8). They maintained cohesion through a kind of “punctilious observance” (Fisch 55), supported by the tendency of Jewish tradition “to classify, divide, distinguish, and keep categories apart” (Rubenstein 260). In this tradition the ultimate distinction is the separation of Jew from gentile, a separation that is carefully maintained by a wide range of practices from circumcision to burial rites. But ritual also separates men from women, adults from children, clean from unclean, and virtuous from sinful.<sup>71</sup> The traditional morning prayers, including the punctilious ritual of strapping on the *tefillin* or phylacteries, give thanks to God “who did not make me a gentile” – or a woman. Most Jewish holidays share the scrupulousness and exclusivity of these intimate ritual performances, and strict rules govern the handling and reading of the holy scriptures.

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<sup>71</sup> See Douglas for a more general treatment of the ritual separation of clean from unclean.

Yet as Harold Fisch points out, the instructions contained in the *Tractate Megillah*, the Talmudic prescriptions for the reading of the Scroll of Esther, are notable for their laxness. The scroll can be damaged, illegible words can be filled in from memory, and one can read the scroll standing, sitting, or even half-asleep; most remarkably, both men and women (and even minors according to some rabbis) are permitted to read from the scroll. A recurrent term in the *Tractate* is *yasa*, or “he has fulfilled his duty”; as Fisch puts it, in the case of Purim, “a minimum performance is always sufficient” (62). This loosening of ritual punctiliousness in the reading of the scroll extends into the carnivalesque customs of Purim festivity. The reading of the scroll is accompanied by noise, shouting and jeers at each mention of the name of Haman. The holiday has a physical quality, a *communitas* encouraged by feasting, drinking and dancing, which tends to loosen ritual separations if not dissolve them.<sup>72</sup> Wearing masks, cross-dressing, and dressing-up in gentile costume is encouraged. Much has been made of the holiday’s official invocation to drunkenness: “Raba said: It is the duty of a man to mellow himself [with wine] on Purim until he cannot tell the difference between ‘cursed be Haman’ and ‘blessed be Mordechai’” (cited in Fisch 59). The word *mishte* (“feasting”) appears twenty times in the Book of Esther, as many as the rest of the Bible put together (Epstein 137). A drunken blurring of distinctions is complemented by a series of status inversions, where the low becomes high and the high becomes low. A central phrase in the Book of Esther is *venahafokh hu* (“and it was reversed,” “the opposite happened”), and this theme of reversals of fortune shows up in all the carnivalesque inversions, parodies and degradations that Purim has absorbed in its vernacular, diasporic itinerary.

There is nothing particularly radical about this festive inversion, which is open to the same accusations of conservatism as other carnival forms. In fact, as a holiday celebrating group survival, Purim may be vulnerable to even more serious charges. Purim, like other carnivals, is “licensed” – it takes place within a larger symbolic structure, in which the temporary transgression of norms by no means implies their overturning (see Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin* 143-156; Stallybrass and White). Fisch notes that Purim’s one-day binge is

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<sup>72</sup> Religious authorities still do not permit adultery or the eating of nonkosher foods, and in Hassidic synagogues women may only peer over, but not cross, the curtain that divides them from the male worshippers. See Rubenstein, Epstein.

more a “symbolic carnival” than a real one; it lacks the duration and immersion that helps Christian (and Afro-Diasporic) carnival create a world in itself. (This may be less true for the New York Purimspielers, festive performers and spectacle-makers, as we will see.) The holiday’s brief jumbling of ritual separations tends to reinforce them in the long run: as in many liminal performances, “by temporarily ‘playing’ the extraordinary, the ordinary is strengthened” (Rubenstein 251). During the holiday, the core separations of Jewish ritual between clean and unclean are never even really challenged. Like other carnivals, the Purim tradition is ambiguous: it plays with ritual divisions for a short while, but at the same time shores them up even more strongly.

Nowhere is this more true than in the holiday’s treatment of the separation between Jew and gentile. Dressing up for a day in gentile costume is a mockery that only reinforces group cohesion, as does the entire ritual performance that memorializes Jewish triumph over gentile hostility. The reversal of fortune in the Book of Esther – where Haman’s edict calling for the extermination of the Jews is turned back on its author – includes the description of a wholesale slaughter of Jewish enemies, not only Haman but also his ten sons and some 75,500 other Persians. Elliott Horowitz has powerfully argued that Purim, a holiday celebrating Jewish diasporic survival, is a blend of “reckless hostility and joyful festivity” (“Rite to be Reckless” 28). Its ritual hostility is directed towards “Amalek,” the enemy Other to whom Haman is genealogically linked. Historically it has been the occasion for symbolic anti-Christian violence – and more recently for real anti-Arab violence. In 1994, the Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein opened fire on worshippers at the Ibrahimi Mosque, or Tomb of the Patriarchs, in Hebron, killing twenty-nine Palestinians and injuring a hundred more. Goldstein purposefully committed his massacre on the first day of Purim. He has since become a hero and martyr for a portion of the settler movement, and at least one rabbi has suggested setting up a “local Purim” in his honour (Horowitz, *Reckless Rites* 315). Carnival and violence have often been intimately related, a fact that Bakhtin underplayed in his utopian description (Emerson). But in the case of Purim, such brutal appropriations of tradition threaten to overwhelm any saving power it might have. To paraphrase Benjamin: in this particular moment of danger, can anything in this festive tradition be redeemed?

## Sacred Separations

Purim is evidently open to various reclamation projects, including those of religious-nationalist groups. Yet this potential for violent appropriation, it could be argued, exists in any ritual form – perhaps even within the structure of ritual itself. Jewish ritual may be founded on a set of especially punctilious separations, especially the demarcation of the ritual community from outsiders, but it is hardly alone in this feature. Sociologists of religion from Durkheim to Eliade to Douglas have noted that such separations are inherent to the symbolic structure of religion, which is built on the primary division of sacred from profane. As Durkheim generalizes, “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (44).<sup>73</sup> A community bound around a certain division of sacred and profane tends to bind itself off from those who do not share its particular set of separations. This border might be a peaceable one, but as Bataille, Girard and others have argued, sacrifice, the violent act of making-sacred, can also be directed toward those designated as internal or external enemies of the group.

As Giorgio Agamben argues in his essay “In Praise of Profanation,” the mutually reinforcing link between sacred separation and communal binding is easily transposed into political and economic life. This transposition takes place through what he calls the “secularization” of religious structures, with state sovereignty as a prime example.<sup>74</sup> Agamben

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<sup>73</sup> Durkheim’s definition of “religion” combines the two contested etymologies of the term: the Latin word *religio* was first said to derive from *relegere*, to repeat scrupulously (and hence to stick to the rules governing the separation of sacred and profane), while a later etymology popularized by Augustine claims that it comes from *religare*, to bind (and so to bind the community of the faithful) (see Hoyt 126-129).

<sup>74</sup> This is not a new argument: Durkheim long ago pointed out that the sacred objects of religion find a secular analogue in charged nationalist symbols like “blood,” “flag,” and “soil” (228-231). Expanding on this claim, Benjamin’s fragment “Capitalism as Religion” makes the case for industrial capitalism as a kind of ceaseless cult, a set of “religious” practices of production and consumption that perversely require no theology or set beliefs. And Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* takes this claim to its apotheosis, suggesting that ritual “separation” is the main technique by which an all-encompassing capitalist “spectacle” maintains

argues that secularization tends to move cultish forces of authority and power “from one place to another,” while leaving their structures of separation intact (*Profanations* 77). Agamben claims that this kind of secular religion, whether in the form of the nation-state or capitalist spectacle, tries to erect impenetrable barriers between sacred and profane, between objects and their use, and between one set of beings and another. Through this lens, territorial nationalism (even if “justified” by religious ideology) can be viewed as translating the ritual separations of religion into the secular-political sphere. Whether motivated by religion or by nationalism or some combination of the two, “mythic” violence like Goldstein’s effectively seeks permanent separation through annihilation.<sup>75</sup> It takes the porous border between sacred and profane across which carnival plays, and tries to seal it off once and for all.

Agamben (following Durkheim and Benjamin) posits that the binding force of religion depends not primarily on belief, but on ritual practices that reinforce the separations between sacred and profane. The most foundational of these is the act of sacrifice, which makes its victim “sacred” while at the same time excluding that victim from the community. But Agamben holds up the possibility of undermining this kind of irrevocable separation between sacred and profane, through what he terms “profanation.” For Agamben, if “religion” is less a matter of belief than one of “scrupulous separation” (*relegere*), then what is opposed to religion is not unbelief but a certain kind of “negligence” when faced with those separations. As he writes, “negligence” is “a behaviour that is free and ‘distracted’ (that is to say, free from the *religio* of norms) before things and their use, before forms of separation and their meaning. To profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, puts it to a particular use” (*Profanations* 75; see also De la Durantye). To describe this “special form of negligence,” Agamben uses the term “play.” Play, in his view, is the exemplary form of profanation, of negligence in the face of sacred thresholds. It restores sacred things to the sphere of human use, the realm of the common. In his words, “play frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it” (76). Agamben’s description resonates with carnival holidays such as Purim,

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itself. See Asad, *Formations* for a contemporary argument for the endurance of religious structures in supposedly secular form.

<sup>75</sup> On “mythic” violence, see Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence.”



which indeed play with sacred separations without abolishing them. He also alerts us to the politics of profane “negligence,” which have the potential to undo the separations of sacred violence, rework the “*religio* of norms” and return sacralised traditions to festive use.

In his essay, Agamben is elaborating (as he so often does) on the work of Benjamin, who sees religious or cult-like practices at work in several areas of twentieth-century capitalist society. These practices are active in the sphere of the economy, which depends on the ceaseless repetition of consumption and the accumulation of debt/guilt (*Schuld*) (“Capitalism as Religion,” SW1 288-91).<sup>76</sup> They are equally active in the work of art, which historically has a “cult value” that keeps it protected, hidden, and out of reach. For Benjamin, strategies of mimetic play provide a counterweight to the cultish force of ritual. His “Work of Art” essay, especially in its earlier version, portrays play and ritual as aesthetic and technological polarities (SW3 101-33). Benjamin links the “room for play” (*Spielraum*) opened up by the technological reproducibility of film to a kind of “distraction” that could prove politically useful (Hansen, “Room-for-Play”). Agamben’s concept of play as a profaning negligence before the “*religio* of norms” is clearly indebted to Benjamin’s incisive work.

Similarly, “the profane” is also an important and difficult concept in Benjamin’s writings. In his “Theologico-Political Fragment,” Benjamin connects the “order of the profane” to the tradition of Jewish messianic thought – a tradition which holds the holiday of Purim in particular esteem. Rabbis going back to Maimonides have stated that Purim happiness, the happiness of festive negligence, explicitly prefigures the happiness of the messianic era. Early commentaries claim that even after the coming of the Messiah, when all other holidays have become obsolete, Purim will still be celebrated (see *Midrash Mishlei* 9:9, cited in Epstein). Purim is a minor festival in the Jewish calendar with little religious significance or even any clear connection to the divine, but for this tradition, it is the one holiday that will still be marked in the days of fulfillment. This messianic embrace of Purim, at once mystical and deeply diasporic, can profane the holiday in theory, just as the New York Purimspiel profanes it in practice. Viewing Purim through the messianic tradition, as filtered

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<sup>76</sup> See Weber, *Benjamin’s* 250-80.

through Benjamin's idiosyncratic analysis, can help wrest the holiday back from its xenophobic ritual appropriation.

### The Order of the Profane

The sacrificial and sacralising violence of territorial nationalism is not only an example of the "secular sacred," which as Agamben writes moves ritual separations into the secular sphere. Political violence – or in this case, religiously-justified settler-colonial violence – can also be seen as a kind of warped messianism, which tries to build a Kingdom of God in the secular realm. Such a secularized messianism claims a transcendent right for violence that is politically, racially and territorially motivated. It is diametrically opposed to the mystical stream of the messianic tradition. Rather than engaging in the patient work of redemption, which according to the Kabbalists operates through acts of *tikkun* or "mending" and the patient gathering of divine sparks, this settler-colonial nationalism proposes a political short-circuit, a forced entry of the Messiah in a murderous form. And it denies the basic condition of plural being-in-the-world: the fact that, as Hannah Arendt wrote, "we have no choice with whom to cohabit the earth." Instead, it asserts an exclusive "chosenness" which is perhaps the most dangerous tenet of any political messianism, Jewish or otherwise.<sup>77</sup>

In his brief and complex "Theologico-Political Fragment," Walter Benjamin argues powerfully against this kind of "theocratic" interpretation of the messianic strain in the Jewish tradition.<sup>78</sup> For Benjamin, there is no direct link between the theological idea of the messianic era and what he calls the "order of the profane," which must be set up in this world. As he puts it: "the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning." Worldly, political life should not submit to the rule of religious structures of thought and action. (Benjamin gives credit to Ernst Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* for repudiating "with utmost vehemence the political

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<sup>77</sup> Arendt's statement is part of her rhetorical condemnation of Eichmann. See Butler's *Parting Ways* for an extended treatment of Arendt's concept of plurality, as well as a discussion of Benjamin's work, in the context of debates over Jewishness and Zionism.

<sup>78</sup> All citations are from the translation by Jephcott in *Reflections* 312-13.

significance of theocracy.”) Instead, he argues that “The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness.” For Benjamin, happiness is this-worldly, not in the world to come; it is only meaningful based on our past and present collective experience.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Benjamin claims that messianism is not a political category but an individual one, and it is marked by sadness, not happiness: “the immediate Messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner man in isolation, passes through misfortune, as suffering.”

Yet for Benjamin the separation between profane happiness and messianic fulfillment is not absolute. There is a strange, inverse relationship between the “order of the profane” and “Messianic intensity,” which work in opposite directions yet complement each other:

the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. The profane, therefore, although not itself a category of this kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietest approach.

Benjamin implies that the happiness of a “free humanity” should be our goal, not the setting up of a divine kingdom. Yet the quest for the one somehow intimates the coming of the other. This inverse relation of forces, combined with an emphasis on worldly happiness, might recall the “redemption through sin” famously proposed by heretical Jewish messianic figures like Sabbatai Zevi. But for Benjamin, “happiness” is less a libidinous breaking of religious commandments, and more a quiet pursuit of worldly transience. As he puts it, in a dense passage:

For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it. ... To the spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of Messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.

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<sup>79</sup> See also Benjamin’s comments on happiness in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” SW4 313-55.

For Benjamin, transience and passing-away are paradoxically the “rhythm of Messianic nature.” This transient rhythm must be embraced in its worldliness, not warded off through dreams of establishing a Kingdom of God on earth. To spiritual immortality corresponds a temporary, mortal restitution – and though that restitution is temporal and transient, even “eternally transient,” marked by downfall and decay, it nonetheless is profane happiness itself.

In Benjamin’s view, embracing this rhythm of passing-away is an urgent political task. He concludes: “To strive after such passing, even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.” The fragment ends here, leaving the definition of this nihilism open. One scholar has argued that Benjamin’s “nihilism” indicates a “retreat from worldly participation” in favour of “an abstract and categorical realm of messianic reflection” (Jacobson 50). But such a “retreat” seems inconsistent with the fragment’s political imperatives. Rather than a retreat from worldly participation, “nihilism” should instead be seen as a negative politics, related to the “negligence” and “distraction” that Agamben portrays as essential to the act of profanation. Nihilism, here, would imply an anarchistic refusal of structures of “natural” domination – especially those structures, religious or secular, that transpose theological categories into the political realm. Rather than trying to establish a Kingdom of God on earth, for which the militarized nation-state is one secular stand-in, we need to work on the order of the profane, with its fragile and pleasure-seeking bodies, its sickness and need for care, its flux, decay and becoming – all of which still move to the “rhythm of Messianic nature” which “is happiness.”<sup>80</sup>

Benjamin’s messianism here echoes that of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Kabbalists. Through the concept of *tikkun*, or the mending of the world, the Kabbalah left a place for collective human activity to prepare the coming of the Messiah. Yet this preparation happens only indirectly. For the main vein of the Kabbalistic tradition, only the Messiah himself can perform the final gathering of the divine sparks which will announce the era of redemption. “Nihilism” and

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<sup>80</sup> Nihilism, in this reading, would not rule out acts of remembrance (*Eingedenken*), the activation of the past. Nor would it contradict the possibility of redemption, which Benjamin in his theses on history describes as a “*weak* messianic power” latent in every moment (“For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter”) (SW4, 397)

*tikkun* may at first seem like contrasting concepts, but they are both committed to this-worldly ethical practice, rejecting any pretensions to political theocracy, whether in religious or secular form. The most common translation of *tikkun* is “redemption” – which in the Jewish tradition is a “worldly restitution” (as Benjamin puts it), an event that takes place at a collective level “on the stage of history and within the community” (Scholem, *Messianic Idea* 1). It is a profane redemption, tied to action in the present. Benjamin’s emphasis on redemption through reactivating the past also finds a parallel in the Jewish tradition more broadly, with its central idea of *zakhor* (remembrance), which “does not denote the preservation in memory of events of the past but their reactualization in the present experience” (Mosès, qtd. in Bouretz 109; see also Yerushalmi). What is particular in Benjamin is the political and universal inflection of both remembrance and redemption. They underlie not only the collective ethical or ritual practice of a given group, but of political action in general – as Benjamin puts it, “world politics.” What is at stake is not group identity and survival, but the reversal and redemption of an unjust social order.

If the holiday of Purim is to be reactualized for present use – and reclaimed from its politico-theocratic appropriation – we need to pay attention to its profanely messianic qualities. These are palpable in the texture of the holiday, in its loosening of ritual separations and its emphasis on bodily participation, on play, on feasting, drinking, and dancing. Purim exhales a kind of happiness that is entirely this-worldly. Even the book of Esther is a kind of fairy tale, which Benjamin (in “The Storyteller”) claims is a worldly and profaning form: “The fairy tale tells us of the earliest agreements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which myth had placed upon its chest.” Fairy tales are devices for “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*, “spell-breaking”), full of “liberating magic” (SW3, 157-158). As the Book of Esther likes to repeat: “the opposite happened.” The happiness of this liberation from the weight of myth shows itself in the carnivalesque practices of Purim, in its laxity and air of negligence, its call for intoxication, its loosening of “the *religio* of norms.” If this bodily experience of a world-to-come is to have any political force in the present, the holiday’s profane qualities need to be embraced and pushed further than the rabbis ever intended. Purim’s loosening of sacred separations needs to be extended beyond the ritual community,

and the myths of race and nation need to be definitively shaken off. Only then will playful disenchantment meet messianic fulfillment – even just for one night.

### **Queer Anachronisms**

Beyond their role in the Messianic tradition, the Book of Esther and the holiday of Purim have been a rich source of feminist and queer readings, which have proliferated in recent years. The Biblical story features not one but two proto-feminist heroines. First there is the King's wife Vashti, who refuses her husband's command to dance naked at a royal banquet. Then there is Esther herself, who wins a beauty contest to replace Vashti, gains the King's confidence, and eventually reveals her Jewish origins in order to save her people. The book also features the story of the palace eunuchs plotting to kill the King, marginal figures who have become queer heroes in contemporary Purim plays. On top of these textual elements, the Purim custom of cross-dressing makes the holiday available for gender-queer appropriations. Since the early 2000s, Purim has increasingly been appropriated by North American queer artists for events such as the 2003 "Suck My Treyf Gender" party in Philadelphia, and for New York's radical Purimspiels. These queer Purims use the holiday as a way to undermine what Ezra Nepon (aka performance artist Killer Sideburns) calls the "false separations" that structure not only Jewish ritual but heteronormative society in general.

It is worth pausing for a moment to look at these "false separations" through the lens of queer theory, which can illuminate the curiously "religious" constitutive structure of gender. As Judith Butler has argued, there is a ritual quality to the regime of gender differences that props up compulsory heterosexuality. For Butler, the norms and "grammars of bodily action and speech" that produce the gendered subject are "'rituals' in the Althusserian sense" ("Agencies of Style" 34). They are not imposed from outside on a subject that is already completed, but work as performatives through a kind of careful repetition, a set of enforced habits that construct "women" and "men." As she writes:

Gender is performative insofar as it is the effect of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized under constraint. Social

constraints, taboos, prohibitions, threats of punishment operate in the *ritualized repetition of norms*, and this repetition constitutes the temporalized scene of gender construction and destabilization. There is no subject who precedes or enacts this repetition of norms. (“Critically Queer” 21, italics added)

This regulatory regime of norms that separates and hierarchizes, with its taboos, its prohibitions, and its threats of punishment, is indeed highly ritualistic. Like religious ritual, heteronormativity binds and divides through the scrupulous repetition of separations, and punishes (often violently) any transgression of those borders. Sexual taboos are enforced religiously, as Butler writes, “through the policing and shaming of gender” (“Critically Queer” 27). In this sense, compulsory heterosexuality could be seen as another form of the “secular sacred” – the transposing of religious forms into the secular sphere while leaving their structure intact.

The “*religio* of norms” that structures compulsory heterosexuality, however, is not invulnerable. As Butler points out, “norms are compulsory,” which means they are “haunted by their own inefficacy.” Heteronormative separations are scrupulously maintained – and thus vulnerable to a kind of conscious or unconscious negligence. The ritual separations of gender can be *profaned*, through what Butler calls “working the weakness in the norm” (“Critically Queer” 26). For Butler (following Derrida’s *Limited Inc.*), repetitions are never repetitions of the same; the citation of a norm is always a scene of contestation. Citation also has the potential to be frankly oppositional or subversive. In some cases – as in the political theatricality of queer activism and performance – the heteronormative “law” itself is carnivalized, made hyperbolic, inverted or degraded. These carnivalesque techniques of inversion and degradation have a history in queer activism going back at least four decades (with AIDS activist “die-ins” as one spectacular example) (Gould). Unlike religiously sanctioned festivity, this queer carnivalesque is not necessarily “licensed” – it can spill over its ritual boundaries and profane the political and symbolic separations of the culture at large.

The scene of gender construction and destabilization is also “temporalized,” as Butler notes: it exists not only as a grammar of norms, but as a certain regime of time. Compulsory heterosexuality operates in what Jack Halberstam calls “straight time” – a life scripted by

conventions of social and sexual reproduction. This “chrononormativity” (Freeman) works above all through “reproductive futurity” (Edelman), or the imperative to continue the sequence of generations through sexual reproduction. “Straight time” is linear and cumulative: the time of youth, with its experimentation and loosening of structures, gives way to the normative time of the family and of work, and to an inheritance handed down along kinship lines. Of course, this future-oriented regime of sexual reproduction fits neatly with the organization of time according to capitalist accumulation, which depends on the reproduction of pliable bodies as workers and consumers.

Against this vision of “straight time,” Halberstam and other theorists explore “queer temporalities,” from the anti-futurity championed by Edelman and Bersani to the anachronistic reclamation projects of Freeman, Dinshaw and Muñoz. Being queer can mean being somehow “out of time,” out of step with the supposed forward movement of history. Queer theory is particularly interested in the anachronisms that history abandons – “those things which fell by the wayside,” things declared “irrelevant, eccentric, derisory” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 151). In straight hierarchies, queer often holds the place of the abject, that which (like the victim of sacrifice) has been cast out of the domain of the liveable. Queer bodies are marked, and mark themselves, with asynchronous signs that do not fit the temporal *religio* of norms (with drag as only the most obvious example). “Queer time” could be the project of reclaiming these abjected temporalities and returning them to use. For some theorists, this means making a commitment to “the felt experience of asynchrony,” asking the question, “how does it feel to be an anachronism?” (Dinshaw 190) Or as Halberstam writes, it means taking seriously “subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and forms of reproduction dedicated to capturing those willfully eccentric modes of being” (1). Seemingly marginal performance traditions, like the New York Purim Ball, should indeed be taken seriously as wilfully eccentric stagings of “queer time.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Of course, “queer time” is a proposition to be enacted, not a necessary consequence of sexual orientation. As Lisa Duggan points out, “homonormativity” is alive and well in the “gay pragmatism” that asks for inclusion in larger normative structures (especially marriage and sexual reproduction). See also Muñoz.



The queer investment in anachronism is also a way to invent new, profane modes of cultural transmission between generations. Instead of an Oedipalized, hierarchical structure of transmission, which implies either anxious conflict or forced continuity, queer experience is often shared in what Halberstam calls a “netherworld,” in which the legacies of older generations can be reworked or played with (185, 159). Sometimes this netherworld is a literal one, as in queer sex cultures such as the porn theatres so eloquently described by Samuel R. Delany in *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*. Delany sees this now-vanished world above all as a place for cross-class sexual encounter, a zone of contact that profanes the sterile separations of gentrified urban space. Like queer club cultures, these theatres were an “invisible institution” that allowed room for abjected bodies, for the marginalized and the outcast to meet and find pleasure together (Halberstam 14). Such netherworlds, invisible institutions or queer “intimate publics” (Berlant, *Queen*; Cvetkovich) are spaces where cultural knowledge is shared and alternative forms of kinship are explored. And those alternative forms of kinship extend beyond sexual pleasures into relations of care, especially in the wake of the AIDS epidemic, and into collaborative art-making and activism. Without the support of conventional kinship structures or dominant-cultural institutions, these “intimate publics” need to be sustained through active forms of remembrance, including the archiving of queer traditions of mourning, struggle and invention.

### **A Profane Tongue**

This emphasis on anachronism and the abject, as well as on innovative intergenerational linkages, can give insight into the overlap between queer cultures and the Yiddish revival. The overlap is immediately apparent on both sociological and aesthetic levels. As Aftselokhes member Daniel Lang/Levitsky asks, seeking to explain the prominence of gay, lesbian and transgendered artists in the North American revival of Yiddish culture:

Who's in this weird relationship to tradition? Why is the "klezmer revival" so damn queer? Who's in the structural relationship that makes it such an easy thing to do to the tradition (and to not-the-tradition)?<sup>82</sup>

Lang/Levitsky implies that for gay, lesbian, and transgendered subjects, tradition and its transmission are always in question. This is in part, indeed, a "structural relationship," a consequence of being shifted out of conventional kinship structures and lines of descent. Necessarily at a distance from heteronormative social reproduction, queer and trans people are in a good position to mess with existing traditions or invent new ones. The "klezmer revival" is one of these impressively reinvented, hybridized and messed-with traditions – and even the most casual observer would notice that it is markedly queer.<sup>83</sup>

Beyond this explanation, which Lang/Levitsky admits is somewhat "deterministic," there are other elective affinities between queer and Yiddish cultural practices. Both queer and Yiddish cultures have developed at a distance from the state and dominant-cultural institutions. Yiddish is a diasporic language that has never had state institutions to support it, and thus was treated as a dialect, a mishmash of other tongues – German, Hebrew, but also Russian, Polish, and others.<sup>84</sup> As the self-conscious resurrection of a language that has mostly passed out of daily speech, the Yiddish revival is what Jeffrey Shandler calls "postvernacular": it tends to privilege the affective qualities of the language over its meaning, often straddling the modes of heritage and camp ("Queer Yiddishkeit" 109). Like a certain strain of queer temporality, the Yiddish revival is defiantly anachronistic, a reclamation of a whole culture cast by the wayside. Sidestepping Oedipal conflicts, it creates innovative affective links between generations: between children and grandparents, or between youngsters and elders from different families and parts of the world.<sup>85</sup> This cultural transmission takes place across

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<sup>82</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations by Fox-Rosen, Lang/Levitsky, Miller, and Romaine are from a personal interview with those members of the Aftselokhes Spectacle Committee, 22 May 2012.

<sup>83</sup> Geography likely plays a role here: the klezmer revival coalesced in large North American cultural centres with significant Jewish and LGBTQ populations, such as San Francisco, Boston, Toronto, Philadelphia and New York. See Svigals, who articulates and celebrates this "Queer Yiddishist" movement.

<sup>84</sup> Stateless tongues are often called dialects; as Alice Becker-Ho points out in reference to the Romani language, the only definitive difference between a language and a dialect is that a language has an army behind it.

<sup>85</sup> As Romaine says of the Yiddish revival: "What's queer is also people who are supposed to be cool wanting to talk to their grandparents."

intergenerational lines of communication severed by both European genocide and North American assimilation, leaving room for play and cultural reinvention. The Yiddish revival has also created its own institutions, both visible (such as KlezKamp and the YIVO summer language program) and invisible, intimate publics where that abjected culture can be experimented and played with. And these institutions are rooted in the North American metropolises that offer a home to both queer counterpublics and Jewish diasporas: Toronto, Montreal, San Francisco, New York.

If the Yiddish revival is a queering of tradition, it also the reclamation of a profane tradition, the revival of a profane tongue. The ritual separations between sacred and profane that mark Jewish religious life also extend to the linguistic realm. Yiddish is a profane language *par excellence*: it is one of a number of Jewish vernaculars that exist solely for the purpose of worldly communication. (This is in contrast to Hebrew, which from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was a sacred and literary language that Jews used mostly for religious purposes.) The worldly nature of Yiddish, its engagement with the transient rather than the eternal, is perhaps what allowed it to flourish in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a medium for impressive literary experimentation. Paradoxically, in a way that Benjamin would no doubt appreciate, this abjected language came to be a rich repository for everyday speech, theatre and art song, literal profanity (its collection of curses is exceptional) and spiritual-political yearnings. As a profane vernacular, Yiddish is negligent before sacred and secular thresholds: it jumbles the mystical and the mundane, and borrows omnivorously from (as well as seeping into) the languages and cultures that it encounters. According to Régine Robin, who draws on Bakhtin's concepts, there is a polyphonic "multivoicedness" to Yiddish; she argues that the whole language tends toward the carnivalesque, with a preference for inversions, degradations, and profaning laughter.

The Yiddish revival taps into this profane heritage, a heritage nearly obliterated by the genocide of the Holocaust, but also weakened by assimilation in North America and by cultural suppression both in the Soviet Union and the state of Israel (Shandler, "Queer Yiddishkeit," *Adventures*). In Romaine's words, "part of what we're trying to do is have a queer relationship to a language that was genocided and assimilated and Zionized out of

existence. Part of our queer political desire is to use Yiddish.”<sup>86</sup> The re-adaptation of Hebrew into a spoken language by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Zionist movement is instructive in this regard. Among the intellectuals and settlers in Palestine, Yiddish, the profane vernacular of the Ashkenazi Jewish world, was pushed aside as a shameful hybrid (ironically, German was considered more seriously as a possible national language for the future state).<sup>87</sup> Yiddish culture was also linked with pan-national socialist movements such as the Eastern-European Jewish Labour Bund, an internationalism that did not fit with a certain nineteenth-century vision of the racially based nation-state (Shandler, *Adventures*). Along with its literary history, Yiddish’s history of internationalism is ripe for revival. The queer political desire to use Yiddish is anachronistic here as well, a refusal to abide by the “straight time” of progress, which consigns that literary and political history to the dustbin of history or at best to academic study. Today, the revival seems to offer a (perhaps utopian) chance to *reclaim* what has been cast aside: a pan-national, diasporic Jewish culture, which lived at a distance from both state and religious authorities.

The queer political desire to use Yiddish is also profane in a directly political sense. It opposes national and linguistic purity, the fear of contamination that ritualistically seals off the borders of states, communities, and forms of speech. Romaine describes the “desire for huge inclusiveness” that animates the Purim project, a desire that plays across the borders between religious and secular, and between Jew and non-Jew. This inclusiveness embraces the condition of diaspora, not as a tragic exile, but as a resource or power (Boyarin and Boyarin). The condition of diaspora implies an irremediable plurality, a constitutive co-existence that cannot be wished away by exclusionary territorial claims. This plurality, which Arendt has argued exists at the level of social ontology, is betrayed by any state that declares itself the exclusive property of one nation or people (Butler, *Parting Ways*).

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<sup>86</sup> This is not, of course, to draw any kind of ethical equivalence between these causes of the decline of Yiddish. It is important to note that the communities in which Yiddish is still spoken widely are those of Hassidic Jews, whose insularity ensures the language’s basic survival. See Shandler, *Adventures*.

<sup>87</sup> The same scorn was manifest among non-Yiddish-speaking Jews in Western and Central Europe. In 1899, the philologist Leo Weiner observed that “there is probably no other language in existence on which so much opprobrium has been heaped” (qtd. in Shandler, *Adventures* 13).

Indeed, one could see the creation of an exclusively Jewish state in Palestine, and the repurposing of Hebrew as an exclusive national language, as both enacting versions of the “secular sacred.” The theocratic politics of exclusionary nationalism, Jewish or otherwise, construct a series of linguistic and political separations: between acceptable and shameful, pure and impure, speech and noise, citizen and noncitizen, self and other. The separation walls, exclusive roads and checkpoints are only the most glaring example of the drive to seal off Israel’s political and symbolic borders. Far from this state-supported “*religio* of norms,” the Yiddish revival has tended towards profanation and play, a celebration of worldly flux, and an inclusive and hybridizing diasporism. No wonder, then, that the “queer time” of the Yiddish revival has found Purim to be an especially fruitful holiday, ripe for reclamation.

### **Sparks in the Laboratory**

The New York Purimspiel can trace its roots back through at least a hundred years of left-wing Jewish performance projects – from turn-of-the-century Bundist workers’ Passover seders, to political Yiddish theatre in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to more recent cultural experimentation in the wake of the 1970s revival movement. But, as historian and Aftselokhes member Rachel Mattson notes, the years 1999 to 2001 were especially important in the crystallization of this project as a politicized, diasporic Jewish performance. Those two years saw several events of historical significance: the shutdown of the 1999 WTO ministerial meeting in Seattle by a coalition of radical movements, as well as many similar (if less successful) actions around the world; the beginning of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000, provoked by Israel’s continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza; the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; and the subsequent U.S. militarized reaction, including wars abroad and domestic repression authorized by the USA PATRIOT act (Mattson, *Rad Jew*). The epochal events of these two years have helped shape the Purim project, both in its content and perhaps its very existence (the first of these parties took place in 2002). The influence of Seattle and the global justice movement gives the event a kind of radical hope; the increasing militarism of Israel has renewed the project’s commitment to diaspora; the “war on terror”

and the heightened American security state have encouraged it to engage directly in combating Islamophobia and extrajudicial detention, and in supporting the rights of racialized and non-status people.

As a queer, diasporic, activist, puppet-theatre, Yiddishist event, the Purimspiel can be seen as the fusing of several strands, already intertwined in the cultural weave of New York City. One of these strands is the experimental object-theatre collective Great Small Works, perhaps the most innovative group to grow out of the Bread and Puppet Theater; director Jenny Romaine is also a member of that collective, and the Great Small Works studio hosts the workshop for the Purimspiel production.<sup>88</sup> In the late 1990s, Great Small Works put on a shorter Purimspiel in support of Charras El Barrio, a Lower East Side theatre and cultural centre that was eventually evicted as part of that neighbourhood's gentrification. Following this, Romaine and Adrienne Cooper, the late Yiddish singer and cultural worker who has been called the "patron saint" of this event, joined the Boston-based Puppeteers Collective to stage several Purimspiels in Port Washington, Long Island, answering a request to "enhance the ritual life of this community" (Romaine, Aftselokhes). In 2002, the pair decided to move the project to New York City. Cooper's job at the Arbeiter Ring helped create an institutional connection that would support the project for many years. That year's "Giant Purim Ball Against the Death Penalty" featured rhyming verse, figures taken from traditional Jewish paper cuts (Mordechai as a wolf, Esther as a tree), and music by punk-influenced Yiddish group the Klezmatiks.

Over the following years, the event became increasingly carnivalesque and increasingly queer. This was pushed along by the 2003 "Suck My Treyf Gender" Purim party in Philadelphia. Organized as a benefit for Jews Against the Occupation (JATO) and Palestinian solidarity groups, the Philadelphia party wed a series of carnivalesque cabaret acts, including a wrestling match between Kosher and Treyf, to a diasporic and queer political stance (Nepon). At the event, organizers distributed a leaflet titled "The Politics of the Party," which made explicit a certain parodic undermining of structures of ritual separation, what could be called a queer metaphysics of the profane:

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<sup>88</sup> See Orenstein, and the Great Small Works website for the company's history.

On Purim, we are religiously obligated to get so shit-faced [drunk] we can't tell the difference between "blessed" Haman and "cursed" Mordechai. Binaries, dichotomies, opposites are emphasized, exaggerated and celebrated. We masquerade as Good vs. Evil, Male vs. Female, Oppressed vs. Oppressor, but the goal is not to reinforce these dichotomies, but to realize that they are false separations, that there is a beautiful space between all opposites, and that is the space we live as happy, healthy beings. It is in between the extremes, somewhere between "male" and "female," healing our experiences of oppression while checking ourselves on the power we have to oppress others, that we walk Hashem's path.<sup>89</sup>

The "beautiful space between all opposites," where "we live as happy, healthy human beings" is something like the "order of the profane" described by Benjamin, an embrace of worldly transience that paradoxically is happiness itself. At this 2002 Purim party, walking a divine path meant undoing the "*religio* of norms" that props up the regimes of both gender and nation-states. This resulted in what was by all accounts a powerful mixture of the political and the carnivalesque, a Purim cabaret that was at once ritually meaningful and wildly sacrilegious.

From 2003 until the present, the New York Purimspiel has continued this profaning tradition. Members of the Philly crew, including organizer Ezra Nepon/Killer Sideburns and host(ess) Daniel Lang/Levitsky, formed a "Suck My Treyf Gender Posse" to anchor the New York party in 2003. That year also marked the beginning of the Purimspiel's collaboration with the organization Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), which still sponsors the project.<sup>90</sup> Each year the Aftselokhes collective reinterprets the Megillah, the story of Esther, to create an original play for the night. The theme and content varies each year, influenced by the campaign work of JFREJ, the pressing political concerns of the moment, collaborations

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<sup>89</sup> Hashem is one of the euphemistic Hebrew names for the divine – literally, "the name." The manifesto "The Politics of the Party" is cited in Nepon.

<sup>90</sup> The Workmen's Circle/Arbeiter Ring pulled out after 2010, uncomfortable with the event's flamboyantly queer party scene, which included occasional nudity and public making-out. As collective member Abigail Miller puts it, "It was homophobia – it's not that people were naked, it's that not the correct people were naked for them." The absence of this Yiddishist institutional anchor created a kind of "fault line" in the project which threatened some of its intergenerational links (Aftselokhes). In 2013, the Arbeiter Ring renewed its association with the project.

with other groups, and whatever fortuitous material pops up in the process. Past Purimspiels include the No Borders Non-Stop Purim (2004), Rehearsal for the Downfall of Shoeshine: An Immigrant Justice Purim (2005), Purim Without Papers (2006), Roti & Homentaschn: The Palace Workers Revolt! (2007, the first collaboration with Domestic Workers United), Lower East Shushan: A Purim of Vacant Lots (2008), 28 Condos Later: A Zombie Purim (2009), Choose Your Own Purim (2010), You Better Work: A Very Precarious Purim (2011), Your Homentaschen are Killing Me! (2012), I See What You're Doing: Purim, Puppets, Politsey (2013), and The Spawn of Estherlu present Parthenogenesis: The Next Generation (2014) (Aftselokhes).

When members of the Aftselokhes collective describe their favourite moments through these years of spectacle-making, they tend to tell stories of encounter – of sparks flying between this collective and other groups, between secular and sacred, between genres and styles, and between their work and global political events. Romaine describes a spontaneous cultural mash-up in the studio, which grew out of a longer collaborative process:

A peak moment: Rebel Diaz, this hip-hop group, walked into the rehearsal, and we were singing something. And they said, “What do you want us to do?” And I said, “Just freestyle over this, *right now*.” It was some Purim traditional awesome thing that we were playing the shit out of... And I was thinking, okay, this is why I do this project, this is it. Cause they're these amazing organizers from the Bronx... It was this moment where we were coming together as artists very strongly from our cultural places.

For Romaine, coming from a “distinctly Jewish place” allows the collective to meet other groups coming from their own distinct cultural positions. In her words, “culture is power.” Cultural specificity – the siting of the project within a vernacular, even a discontinuous and queered one – allows the process to exist as “an interesting lab,” a place for experimental practice. The studio becomes “a laboratory for investigating theoretical ideas and then staging them” (Romaine, Aftselokhes). In the studio, sparks fly between theory and practice, translating tradition across cultural, religious and generational divides.



The collective members also describe the sparks that fly between religious and political commitments as key to the power of this event. For the group, Adrienne Cooper was the “priestess” of that encounter between religion and politics, comfortable at the place of friction between the two (Romaine, Aftselokhes). Importantly, the Purimspiel has made an effort to reach out to New York’s Hassidic community, which has its own carnivalesque Purim tradition (Epstein), despite the religious, political, and gender-political differences between the two communities. Apparently, Hassidic Jews regularly attend the party, and are often the last to leave. Musical director and collective member Avi Fox-Rosen comes from a religious background, and his repertoire reaches deep into Hassidic *nigunim*, wordless melodies that make a mystical connection with the divine – while blending those melodies with searing rock guitar or electro-pop beats. This hybridizing of divine and worldly elements extends into Fox-Rosen’s ambivalent embrace of the repertoire of traditional Ashkenazic Purim songs, which he “grew up singing.” For Fox-Rosen, despite “problematic” lyrics celebrating the victory of the Jews, their exclusive connection to God, and the defeat of their enemies, these songs “kick ass.” As he writes in an essay printed in the 2012 program, they encourage a vibrational encounter: “The melodies make me wanna dance, and put my hands on my fellow singer, and twirl with you in a sweaty circle.” Fox-Rosen argues that we can sing these songs, dance and lose ourselves, without condoning their literal meaning (it surely helps that the words are in Hebrew, which most of the partygoers would not understand). Here, the friction between religion and politics does not lead to an abandonment of the tradition, but to an embrace of its ecstatic elements, profaned of any theocratic pretensions.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Fox-Rosen’s exegesis (titled “A Word on the Importance of Ritual, or ‘why do we sing songs with words we don’t believe?’”) explores this productive friction between tradition and politics, and between divine and profane. In his short essay, Fox-Rosen muses on the translation of two traditional Hebrew songs, sung during the show, that celebrate the Jews’ defeat of their enemies: “Utzu Eitza” (“They plot against us, it shan’t prevail, They scheme but to no avail! Because God is with us”), and “La’Yehidim” (“The Jews had joy, and happiness, and celebration, and reverence [upon surviving their Purim travails]).” For Fox-Rosen, these words convey a kind of “hoity toity self righteousness,” the idea that “‘God’ resides with ‘us’ (aka Jews/the chosen few) and not with ‘them’ (aka Haman/the oppressor).” The words also omit to mention that this happiness and reverence was achieved through the Jews’ slaughter of their enemies. Fox-Rosen wonders:

So – why the fuck do we sing these songs? Hell, why do we celebrate this holiday at all if it highlights moral grey areas like when the victim becomes the oppressor? Or when it reasserts dualities of ‘us’ vs ‘them,’ when we know that this duality, just like culture, gender, love, and hate, is in fact much more nuanced than the obstinate dualist would at first think?

The sparks between religion and politics can also fly from another kind of meeting, between the allegorical “mythic frame” of the story and world-political events. Collective member Abigail Miller describes the work process and performance of early 2011, which took place during the Egyptian Revolution (or “Arab Spring”), while the collective was getting ready to stage an allegorical battle between Winter and Spring:

Last year, the battle between Winter and Spring happened at a moment that was incredibly politically and emotionally important. The energy of the crowd felt really palpable... Maybe this is what it means to go into the studio and listen to [the radio program] Democracy Now! while you paint for a couple of weeks. Like this is not accidental – it actually is about this long winter ending.

Miller is describing another kind of translation, in which allegorical figures like Winter and Spring can condense and give shape to the emotional experience of individuals and communities. The Purim story (the Megillah) remains the same each year, but its mythic figures can vibrate with different content, depending on the telling of the tale and the context in which it is told. Some of this resonance is intentional, the result of the collective’s interpretation and artistic visioning, and some of it is just chance. In 2011, the story’s reversals of fortune resonated with events taking place halfway across the world, in Tahrir Square and throughout the Middle East. In 2012, the resonance was more domestic – with bodies made vulnerable by precarious labour and the US health care system, and with the protesters recently evicted from New York’s Zuccotti Park.

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Well – in short – I don’t know. And I don’t want to try to rationalize over this uncomfortable segment of the Jewish mythic imagination that imagines the meek gratuitously murdering the strong, or having exclusive access to the divine. BUT – after inundating your mind with these grizzly icky sticky yucky factoids, I want to avert your gaze from them, and remind you: WE DO THIS EVERY YEAR.

I grew up singing these songs, and they kick ass. The melodies make me wanna dance, and put my hands on my fellow singer, and twirl with you in a sweaty circle.

YES, the words are problematic. And now we share the knowledge of why. But the act of singing these songs together, dancing in a circle, and even doubting their intent, and pulling out our hair in angst over the intent of these words as it rubs up against the imperative to love in the face of hate – well, all this shit is culture.

Let’s make some dirty problematic hypocritical culture tonight.

**Sing along.** (Aftselokhes, Program 2012)

## Bodies in Trouble

The process by which the collective comes up with its adaptation of the Purim story varies each year, as does the way it works with other groups.<sup>92</sup> The choice of themes and partner organizations is partly determined by the campaign work of JFREJ, the project's sponsor; as Romaine puts it, the ten-plus years of this project represent a series of "experiments in how to meld campaign work into ritual and crazy queer spectacle" (Audio recording, 19 May 2012). The 2007 Spiel was a full-scale collaboration with the cultural committee of Domestic Workers United (DWU), which describes itself as "an organization of Caribbean, Latina and African nannies, housekeepers and elderly caregivers in New York, organizing for power, respect, fair labor standards and to help build a movement to end exploitation and oppression for all" (Aftselokhes, Program 2012). This relationship continued through the following years, with members of DWU both performing in the Spiel and serving Caribbean food at the party, with proceeds going toward its campaigns. In 2008, the collective worked with GOLES, a Lower East Side activist organization, and used the Purim story to stage a "verbatim voice" play on the radical social, political and cultural history of that neighbourhood. For the collective, each year's campaign work gives a formal discipline to the spectacle-making that follows. Aftselokhes members describe the process of creating a show from an activist campaign as strangely liberating: here, the demands of politics provide the "formal principles" that allow a moment of art to take shape (Romaine). As Fox-Rosen says, "It actually simplifies the show-creation, having these kinds of demands." For the artists, "the more demands the better."

The 2012 Spiel was no exception. That year, the project supported and drew inspiration from the activist work of Caring Across Generations, a DWU-affiliated campaign that brings together domestic workers and employers in what it describes as an effort to create jobs, improve wages and labour protections, and open up paths to citizenship for non-status

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<sup>92</sup> Interestingly, the collective's yearly restaging of the story of Esther conflates two traditions: the reading of the Megillah, and the staging of a Purim play. Most historical Purim plays are ribald and topical parodies with no direct connection to Esther's tale.

workers.<sup>93</sup> The work of CAG and DWU focused the attention of the collective on the politics of care and bodily vulnerability, a set of themes already present in their personal and political lives. In the work that followed, the personal and political were tightly intertwined. The eventual theme of the 2012 event – “The body: its fragility, its resilience, its bounce” – allowed a space for the collective to mourn the loss of Adrienne Cooper, and to articulate the experience of caring for her and for other sick loved ones. It also drew inspiration from diverse political sources, including the disability justice movement and the bodily disobedience of the Occupy protesters.

These and other themes were brought together at a meeting on Martin Luther King day (January 16), in which the collective gathered in the Great Small Works studio with volunteers and campaign organizers to cook up a “soup of ideas” for the 2012 Purim Ball.<sup>94</sup> Again, the studio became a laboratory in which sparks between secular and sacred, culture and politics, could fly. The event featured presentations by organizers from Caring Across Generations and the HIV Prevention Justice Alliance, as well as a lesson in traditional simcha dancing by Jill Gellerman, a Hassidic expert. Collective members Josh Waletzky, Jenny Romaine, and Zachary Wager-Scholl taught, respectively, a Yiddish lullaby, a traditional Purim song in Ladino (a Sephardic Jewish vernacular), and the basic body-techniques of New Orleans sissy bounce. As at nearly all the meetings and gatherings of this group, political education and vernacular art forms were mixed together in another set of unpredictable experiments.

At the January 16 gathering, the themes of care, vulnerability, and the body were present in both verbal discussion and physical movement. Julie Davids of HIV-PJA took the occasion of Dr. King’s birthday to remind the group of the power of civil disobedience, which uses human fragility to provoke the risk of crackdown and violence, while offering a counter-provocation of empathy and care. Rather than focus on rights and reforms, Davids proposed a “queer liberation model,” in which queer activists, like those of the disability justice

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<sup>93</sup> The five pillars of the Caring Across Generations campaign include job creation through the funding of home care, the institution of fair labour standards, access to job training, paths to citizenship for non-status people, and support for individuals and families. See the Caring Across Generations website.

<sup>94</sup> All citations are from Mattson, video recording, 16 January 2012.

movement, can offer innovative strategies of “resilience.” She also described the “trap of self-care,” which she termed a kind of “neo-colonialism” – the idea that “if I get sick it’s my fault.” Instead, Davids suggested that large-scale goals, including health-care reform, can be rooted in marginalized groups’ strategies of collective resilience. This message was anchored in the body through Wager-Scholl’s lesson in the theory and practice of sissy bounce – a working-class, black, Southern, queer dance form that he described as “centred in the core of the body, the hips and stomach region... celebrating a community of resilience and resistance.” Wager-Scholl, who dances with New Orleans bounce artist Big Freedia when she comes to town, told the group that sissy bounce shows create a “beautiful energy exchange between artist and audience.”<sup>95</sup> After a reminder of the tricky politics of appropriating this working-class black art form, the group was encouraged to shake their asses in the air, to enjoy this “very non-judgmental dance,” and to pay attention to “what you feel coming through your body.”

In locating the body as a site of both vulnerability and resistance, the collective was drawing on a long tradition of activist practice and theory in North America. The link between mourning, bodily vulnerability, and collective resistance is especially well-established in queer activism and thought, from Douglas Crimp’s “Mourning and Militancy” to Butler’s *Precarious Life*, in which she ties bodily vulnerability to the powers of mourning. There Butler argues that grief is “a mode of dispossession” that reminds us of “the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own” (26). For Butler, mourning reminds us of a fundamental “dependency” – the way that we are “exposed” to one another in our very formation (46-49). Yet that condition of exposure is often foreclosed and denied. Crimp’s famous essay on the AIDS epidemic describes what happens when mourning is thwarted – whether through “wholly inadequate and inhuman health care and social welfare systems” (15) or social prohibitions and their “ruthless interference with our bereavement” (8). Crimp argues that within the gay community in the 1980s, this inability to grieve in public sometimes resulted in a “moralizing self-abasement,” including the purging of “‘fringe’ gay groups” – “drag queens, radical fairies, pederasts, bull dykes, and

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<sup>95</sup> Big Freedia’s music, videos, and live shows are also a brilliantly carnivalesque, queer, radical-vernacular body of work. See the video for “Y’all Get Back Now,” and many others.

other assorted scum” (13).<sup>96</sup> Clearly, the Purim Ball is one of many queer projects that reject this moralizing self-abasement, and instead embrace “the fundamental sociality of embodied life,” celebrating all bodies in their constitutive vulnerability.<sup>97</sup>

The collective drew on these traditions of thought and activism in creating the 2012 Purimspiel. Making a Purim play about the body – its fragility, its resilience and its bounce – was a way to mourn Adrienne Cooper and other comrades, to act in solidarity with the gendered and racialized “intimate labour” of domestic workers, and to support the “bodies in alliance” of the Occupy movement.<sup>98</sup> This was not a new approach for this highly politicized group of activists and artists. As Mattson notes in a 2010 essay on the Purim party,

the event articulates the political desire for all work to be valued equally and for all kinds of bodies to be able to exist unhampered and to thrive – not just well-behaved, middle class gay and lesbian bodies, but also flamboyant bodies, transgender bodies, undocumented bodies, homeless bodies. (“Queer Political Desire”)

A marginal space – a queer netherworld, perhaps a kind of “temporary autonomous zone” (Bey) – the Purim party is also a space where marginalized bodies can thrive, where the norms that regulate bodies and public spaces can be loosened or even remade.<sup>99</sup> For Mattson, this space creates a zone of experimentation for “non-normative political desires”; these desires are not about encouraging tolerance for alternative lifestyles and sexualities, but about real “transformations in relationships between people and political work.” With its mixture of movement politics and the politics of movement, the January 16 meeting hoped to initiate this kind of transformation, which would continue through the process of creating the show and during the night itself.

The party’s themes of bodily vulnerability, care, and resilience also resonate with the carnivalesque holiday of Purim, and with Benjamin’s messianic embrace of both transience

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<sup>96</sup> Crimp is quoting from Kirk and Madsen’s notorious *After the Ball*.

<sup>97</sup> On the politics of bodily vulnerability and exposure, see also Esposito, *Communitas*.

<sup>98</sup> On gendered and racialized domestic work, see Boris and Parreñas. On “bodies in alliance,” see the essay of that title by Judith Butler, who used the phrase in her address to protesters in Zuccotti Park on October 23, 2011.

<sup>99</sup> See Moffat’s essay on Toronto artist Will Munro’s long-running party Vazaleen, which allowed participants to “relax into the communality of imperfect bodies and porous boundaries rather than the individualizing forces of fastidiously perfected beauty.”

and happiness. Carnival holidays celebrate degradation and renewal, death and rebirth, winter and spring; Bakhtin argues that carnival laughter has this double quality, connected with natural processes of decay and regeneration, even with the very flux of temporal becoming. Such holidays, like our fragile bodies, exist in the “order of the profane,” which as Benjamin reminds us is an order of transience and downfall but also of happiness. Bodies get sick and die, but they can also heal, care for each other, and act together. They exist in the flux of time, subject to the “eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence.” Yet in their very transience, as they are pulled into “the rhythm of messianic nature,” they are capable of action. Bodies might be subject to what one queer theorist has called “temporal drag” (Freeman), but they also are capable of temporal bounce. Bodies dance, rebound, dress up, move around in time, and move together in the world. They can act on their desires, political, queer, or otherwise. Drag and bounce: these could be two different modes of queer time, two directions of anachronistic temporal flux. But they are also forms of vernacular adornment and dance, and at this party, both are on full display.

### **It Only Has to Last One Night**

When I arrive in the Great Small Works studio in DUMBO two weeks before the show, the carnival is already starting.<sup>100</sup> Volunteers are scattered around the space in small groups; they work at long tables or tucked between storage shelves, sewing costumes and building puppets and scenery. Two members of the Occupy Wall Street Puppetry Guild, Alma Shepard-Matsuo and Joe Therrien, are on hand, putting in long volunteer days, their energy still buzzing from months of round-the-clock activity (the previous fall, Great Small Works had opened their studio up to this group of radical puppeteers). My first night in the studio, following Jenny’s brusque instructions, I help Alma sculpt a mountain made of green burlap glued over a stapled cardboard armature. We work barefoot on the concrete floor, fabric dripping everywhere, our hands sticky with white glue. A crew led by Daniel is sewing

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<sup>100</sup> DUMBO is Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass, a Brooklyn riverside neighbourhood now largely owned by a single developer who rents reduced-cost studio space to artists – a gentrifying strategy that has been thoroughly successful.

costumes, a dozen lab coats with grotesque trails of hair dangling from the pockets. A few wigs make the rounds, and I become George Washington for a couple of hours. Music pumps from the stereo: bhangra, Peaches, electric gamelan, house, anything to keep us moving. Abigail tries on one of her creations: the Venus Flytrap of Self-Care, an awkward lump of mask and fabric; she bops happily around the room. There are wheels of cheap brie from Zabar's, and wine and whiskey for later in the evening. While the mountain dries, Jenny and I make clouds to surround it – fake snow tied into bundles with fishing line, festooned with glittery bits of mylar, and glitter-sprinkled bubble-wrap stapled into bundles. I stumble out of there sometime after 9pm, splattered with paint and glue, while the crew works on, the music still going strong.

The construction is slipshod and ramshackle, sometimes ridiculously so, and goes at a crazy pace. Day after day, Jenny repeats the carnival refrain: “It only has to last one night!” The materials we use are scavenged and cheap – cardboard, recycled fabric, scraps from art-supply warehouses, house paint, whatever is lying around the studio. We are trying to be cheap and quick and splendid, patching together the “extraordinary temporary creative art” that will create a world for us and the audience and then vanish the next morning. As in much puppet-theatre construction, cardboard is the base material for scenic forms: it's lightweight, readily available, easily manipulated, easy to paint, and impermanent – it tends to degrade over time. Much of this stuff we are making will get thrown out the day after the party. The cheapness and transience of the materials suits the mirage-like nature of the show. The spectacle is ephemeral, temporary – like us human beings, whom the Greeks called *ephemeroi*, the temporary ones.

As the days count down, we work quickly, moving from task to task. After the mountain, our next job is to make a giant scrim that will divide the front of the stage from an elaborate set hidden upstage. We start from a bundle of semi-transparent pale-blue fabric that we'll paint with text and imagery inspired by traditional Jewish paper cuts – lions, birds, scrolls, tablets, Hebrew and Yiddish script, vines and flowers. Alma sketches out a design, we hang the scrim on the wall and chalk the outline from an acetate projection. Again, speed is everything. We lay it down across a long sixteen-foot table, filling in our chalk and sharpie



outlines with black acrylic, moving in sections, letting the rest fall in bundles to the side. Luckily, the porous fabric dries quickly. Next to us, Joe is patiently stitching wire through a giant Golem made of black netting, sculpting its torso, legs, arms and head. A little girl and her babysitter paint animals from cardboard stencils, brushing in bright pink, yellow, red and copper – they’ll be festive paper cut-outs adorning our blue-grey painted scrim. Tucked into different corners of the studio or spilling out into the hallway, little groups and solo helpers go about their tasks.

Our mode of production is typical of this type of carnival work: a core crew of directors and designers assigns set tasks to shifting groups of volunteers, who have more or less leeway to invent and play with their own ideas. To the women from the cultural committee of DWU who arrive for rehearsal later that week, bringing their own carnival knowledge, the studio is an instantly legible space: “Oh,” an activist from Trinidad exclaims, “this is a mas’ camp!” She’s right: this space has much in common with styles of carnival production across the Caribbean and its diaspora. The mas’ camp, a site for the making of masquerade band costumes and floats, extends the carnival spirit into the making of objects, putting into practice what Claire Tancons calls “the potential for carnival to function as a production system” (“Greatest” 52). Here, in its activist puppet-theatre version, the mas’ camp assembles bodies into provisional and flexible arrangements, under loose and reversible hierarchies. The process is adaptable and fluid. But this is not the fluidity of postmodern capitalism, which forces bodies to conform to externally imposed arrangements for the accumulation of profit. Instead, this mas’ camp turns the work process itself into an object of play, a way to see what “bodies in alliance” can do together. The borders between volunteers, directors and designers are blurry and sometimes unclear: no good idea is turned away, and committed volunteers have whole spheres of autonomy in design and construction.

Of course, unlike in Caribbean carnival mas’ camps, where crews sometimes turn out costumes on commission, almost no one here is getting paid. Even the core crew receives only a bare stipend, and the budget for the project is quite small. Money collected at the door and the bar will go toward reimbursing costs – materials, rental of space and vehicles, a few honoraria – and toward future projects. The party is not a benefit: the idea is to gather

momentum for activist campaigns, not to fundraise. The larger money-economy is kept at a distance; relations amongst the core crew and the volunteers are governed by mutual aid (what Graeber calls baseline “communism”), not by exchange (*Debt*). This positions the whole process at a distance from the “restricted economy,” the world of day jobs and making a living, and closer to the realm of “general economy,” of gift-giving and expenditure without reserve – a utopian positioning which is perhaps both a strength and weakness for the project.<sup>101</sup>

The emphasis on speed, play and the carnival spirit extends from production into rehearsals, which are quick, sketchy and fun. “Rehearsal” is the way the show gets made, and we plunge right in.<sup>102</sup> Avi Fox-Rosen leads us in songs that we’ll use in the show – Ashkenazic Purim songs, wordless *nigunim*, a version of “Body Language” by Queen. Choreographer J. Dellecave teaches us some simple and playful movement exercises to get us loosened up: in trios, we compose little shifting, goofy tableaux. There are a series of puppet try-outs: the Venus Flytrap, the Golem, the Topsy-Turvy Dress worn by two performers playing Esther. Then Jenny takes over, a whirlwind of manic energy. She is working on a scene with multiple Esthers and our green burlap mountain, which turns out to be a version of Mt. Sinai. In a set piece inspired by the writing of disability-justice advocate Eli Clare, the Esthers will furiously tear down Mt. Sinai – while two other performers, also playing Mordechai and Esther, sing a detoured version of Whitney Houston’s “Greatest Love of All.”<sup>103</sup> Jenny, who is both in and

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<sup>101</sup> On restricted and general economy, see Bataille, *Accursed*. Graeber’s “On the Phenomenology of Giant Puppets” contains a compelling though somewhat idealized description, seen from the outside, of a similar work process: the construction of giant papier-mâché puppets by small teams of activists for a political demonstration. According to his perceptive observations, the builders take “the most ephemeral of materials” and create both a monument, and “the mockery of the idea of a monument” (382). He argues that it is not so much the puppets, but the “process of production that is really the point”: “Everything is designed to be communal, egalitarian, expressive. The objects themselves are not expected to last” (382). I would qualify this statement: in the studio, hierarchies are flexible, not absent; the goal is not a utopian experience of equality in the work process, but a powerful and spectacular show.

<sup>102</sup> Romaine jokes, describing the long hours, collective labour and slapdash production techniques of this kind of spectacle-making: “There’s a word for it, ‘collective creation’ in the *goyishe* world. We just called it ‘rehearsal.’ Puppeteers don’t do training.”

<sup>103</sup> See “The Mountain” in Eli Clare’s *Exile and Pride*. Clare, who has cerebral palsy, describes an attempted hike up Mt. Adams that ends in retreat. In his view, those who have been marginalized should let go of the compulsion to scale the mountain of compensatory achievement – and instead imagine “the metaphoric mountain, collapsed in volcanic splendor.” (12)

outside the scene, whips the Esthers into a frenzy – in a move lifted from the choreography of Pina Bausch, they attack the scenery, writhing and pressing their bodies against the mountain. “Now *that’s* carnivalesque,” she laughs. Later, she jokes: “Some people take three years to make a show – we make one in about three minutes!” We end the rehearsal working on a key moment of the first act: an endless slow march to a dirge-like *nign*, walking in groups, singing the wordless tune together, hands on each other’s shoulders, eyes downcast. Avi plays his electrified, freaked-out backing track on the stereo, while we sing and march together – slow-moving bodies in alliance.

During the rehearsal process, it’s hard not to notice the vernacular omnivorousness of the show’s design and direction, its poaching and assimilation of heterogeneous elements. Like other theatre-makers in the queer tradition stretching from the Theater of the Ridiculous to Jennifer Miller’s *Circus Amok*, these artists don’t hesitate to pull from any cultural source, high or low, sacred or profane. The collective tends to incorporate into the show whatever is in the air around it – elements from “our vernacular – our life lived” (Romaine). So the theme of the body leads to discussions about bathing cultures, and then to painted banners of images of pipes, naked bathers, and curling script from the mysterious 16<sup>th</sup> century Voynich manuscript. Subsequent visits to the mineral-lined pavilions of Spa Castle, a Korean sauna complex in Queens, result in an elaborate set piece – a series of brightly-painted cardboard domes which lift to reveal naked bathers, writhing and singing “Body Language.” This isn’t about exoticism: as Romaine points out, “Spa Castle is another thing that’s in our world – people from our world go to Spa Castle.” Indeed, Spa Castle’s geode saunas and the world of the Purimspiel seem to belong to the same fairground universe. As Romaine recalls,

I went to Spa Castle, and I was like, this is carny as hell... What I was attracted to was that it was so gimmicky, and it’s so much about pleasure, and that’s what we want. We want to create what I would call a carny environment, a “World of Wonders.”

If there is a method to this omnivorous poaching, it’s something like a thirst for copying and montage, which is common to both avant-garde and folk practices.<sup>104</sup> Anything is fair game: Whitney, Pina and Freedia, Taiwanese street art, bogus-mystical Medieval manuscripts,

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<sup>104</sup> See Boon, *In Praise*, especially Chapters 3 and 5.

Jewish songs, and Korean sauna culture. Although the frame is a Jewish holiday, the ritual elements exist in a profane world of wonders where anything that works is welcome. The collective often repeats the motto that “good art is the fortuitous meeting on the operating table of the umbrella and the sewing machine.”<sup>105</sup> The operating table is the studio, and these surgeons are ready to suture in any heterogeneous cultural object – the more “carny” the better. This is not a random assembly: as the collective stresses, the whole piece must be absolutely legible in formal terms. Music, colour, theme, story, and politics tie the show together – while leaving space for absurd elements, including a bikini-clad Yeti in the middle of an array of naked bathers.<sup>106</sup>

If the atmosphere in the studio is often carnivalesque, full of music, food, and fooling around, the meetings about the script are a more serious business. There is a tension between the collective’s desire to make a fun and fast-paced show, and the need to work with a defined political content and process. Purim is going to be a long night, with bands interspersed between the three acts of the play, each of which should only run around 20 minutes. Cuts to the script become necessary – as much as a quarter of it will have to go. Rachel Mattson is the script captain, responding to the input of a dozen artists and activists, some of whom are more interested in political clarity than in freewheeling “carny” moments. Some tasteless jokes are cut, deemed likely to offend. In the discussion, there is confusion about some of the piece’s allegorical elements: who is the Golem that (in this mashed-up version of the story) Haman creates? Is it capitalism? Our own fears? Or the faceless and profit-seeking bureaucracy that stands between relations of care? The discussion feels intense, intimate and a little strained (as Jenny tells me later, “you really got under the hood”). But some of the jokes also get better

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<sup>105</sup> The Purimspielers attribute this quote to Duchamp, but it comes from Lautréamont via Breton and the Surrealists.

<sup>106</sup> Questions of the politics of appropriation arise amongst these politicized, mostly white, often highly educated artists. They grapple with these issues in discussions and in the program notes. The question of the appropriation of black American culture is particularly fraught. From the 2012 Program, on the Mt. Sinai scene: “Here, a white Jewish man will sing a song that is a re-adaptation of the song ‘greatest love of all’ sung by Whitney Houston, a black woman who sadly passed away this past year. As anti-racist Jews, we want to acknowledge and celebrate the song and the legend in this year’s purimshpil and are committed to being against cultural appropriation where white people appropriate culture of communities of color without giving credit where credit is due. All credit is due to Whitney Houston.”

after their political modification. And much of what eventually gets cut is the didactic material explaining that year's campaign work, which tends to bog down the rapid pace of the show.

As the night approaches, we move into the venue where the party will be held: the first floor of a warehouse building and artists' space called Industry City in Sunset Park, a still-industrial, mostly-immigrant area of South Brooklyn. The space is massive and open, a rough concrete floor, metal pillars and white-painted walls. Teams of volunteers load in bags and boxes of sets, puppets, tools, lights and sound equipment. Preparations begin to build a ramp over a short flight of stairs, making the space accessible. I volunteer for the lighting crew, and spend the next few days precariously balanced on a ladder, running power cables around heating and water pipes on the ceiling, trying to get everything plugged in to the right fuses. Terra, a lighting designer donating her days to the project, hops from ladder to ladder like a crazy lumberjack, wrenches hanging from her overalls. Others decorate the space, hang the scrim, install the sets, set up the bar, make signage, and organize rows of costumes backstage. In between, we make time for last-minute rehearsals and planning meetings.

Again, speed is more important than perfection or durability. Back in DUMBO at a rehearsal for the Rude Mechanical Orchestra (RMO), Jason, the technical director for the Purim party, calls out for volunteers with sound and lighting skills: "We're going to have a wild curtain, insane light set-up... It's the most jerry-rigged pile of shit you've ever seen." Many members from the Purim crew are also musicians or dancers with the RMO, a sixty-odd-piece anarchist brass band whose yearly set is one of the highlights of the party.<sup>107</sup> A trumpet player calls out for band members' participation in this "weirdo hippie art insanity thing." For the brass band, it's one of the more anticipated gigs of the year, a time to come together and let loose: "Everyone you know is performing that night. Be on time and look good. Okay? It's Purim. If you can't get laid on Purim..." She explains to the uninitiated, "It's the Jewish Mardi Gras, more or less. Dress in that style." Intoxication is encouraged: "bring your flasks, et cetera." She concludes, emphasizing the community of outcasts gathered by this event: "Like I said, every weirdo you love is involved in this show" (Audio recording, 27 Mar. 2012). All that's left to do is to bake the *hamantashn*, pick up the drinks, and get

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<sup>107</sup> On the HONK! festival, which gathers alternative brass bands including the RMO in Boston each year, see Garofalo.

everyone together in the same space. After months of meetings and weeks of intense work in the studio, it's time for these bodies in alliance to assemble, and to make some profane noise together.

### **A Party in Heaven**

In the studio, we've been preparing the theatrical part of the evening, the Purimspiel. But the play is only one element of the night: the party also features other small shows, bands, DJs, decoration, and feasting. The audience gets in on the act, dressing up in and out of drag, dancing, making out, drinking, and generally taking over the space. As Avi Fox-Rosen points out, this expanded, participatory environment helps ground the politics of the Purimspiel in corporeal experience, or "bodily participation" (Bakhtin):

The presentation of the theatre is broken up, it's in the context of a party... People take what they can take, then dance it off. It's a more holistic experience, you're not just sitting absorbing, you're embodying, you're in your body...

There are virtual elements to the party, too, which extend its life before and after the event. The organizers send out an invite over email and Facebook, with a detailed explanation of the collective's approach to the holiday, along with the theme of this year's show. After the party, photos are posted and shared online; the semi-public images (and the commentary on them) work to consolidate and shape the memories of both performers and audience. Yet these photos, like many images of this kind of event, struggle to capture the embodied experience of the party, which is multi-sensory and kinaesthetic. The event is a collective physical immersion in a common space and time, a shared, durational experience of pleasure. This bodily experience is notoriously hard to capture through the camera lens.

Which doesn't stop us from trying. A few cameras and cell phones flash backstage before the show, while performers are getting dressed up and made up. Friends pose in their masquerade drag, silver and sparkles on their cheeks; tables are piled with dollar-store makeup, lipstick, eyeliner and sequined jewellery. It's quite a scene: everyone is getting gussied up, trying to look fabulous; there's plenty of glitter and exposed skin. The ladies from

DWU are looking fine in red and black. I brought along a cream silk dress, but by itself it's too subdued for the occasion. I get some help from a couple of friends: a black-and-gold sparkly scarf, a flower made of silver pipe cleaners for my hair, and white, gold and glitter makeup for my face and mouth. I feel freer with this stuff on, more open, ready to perform, ready to dance. The pleasure of masquerade, which involves hiding oneself, is paradoxically all about openness. As Sarah Ahmed writes of such collective "queer pleasures": "Pleasures open bodies to worlds through an opening up of the body to others" (164). It is the flipside of our common vulnerability, a shared world of profane happiness to which we open through transient pleasure and play.<sup>108</sup>

The audience is coming in, eventually numbering around four hundred, some older folks and many young ones – they pay a sliding scale of \$12-\$20 at the door, with "no one turned away for lack of cash or costume" (Aftselokhes, "Purim"). There are early small shows in the chill-out room, including a dialogue between two voluptuous lovers, performed in profile with signs covering their heads. Their abundant flesh ordinarily draws public attention, but here, the two are welcomed, part of a "world of wonders" embraced in all its imperfect, bodily diversity. Back in the main space, a Brooklyn punk quartet called Daddy is wrapping up their set. There are a some general introductions, and then members of the collective take the floor to pay tribute to Adrienne Cooper. Josh Waletzky sings a Yiddish song, plaintive and wavering. A filmmaker in his sixties, Josh is a fluent Yiddish speaker who joined the project after Adrienne passed away; his job is to contribute his linguistic and cultural knowledge of Yiddishkeit to the mix. After he's done, Jenny and Daniel enter dressed in their narrators' outfits – bundles of green tulle at waist, head and shoulders, hats with delicate veils, bare skin, gold and black leggings, and high heels. They tell the audience about Adrienne's founding of the project, and lead everyone in a version of "Balebusteh," which as Jenny tells them "is a word that can mean landlady, but it also means chief woman in charge – the chief sensual

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<sup>108</sup> Ahmed's essay "Queer Pleasures" argues that there is an immanent politics to this kind of world-making pleasure: "Queer bodies 'gather' in spaces, through the pleasure of opening up to other bodies. These queer gatherings involve forms of activism; ways of claiming back the street, as well as the spaces of clubs, bars, parks and homes. The hope of queer politics is that bringing us closer to others, from whom we have been barred, might also bring us to different ways of living with others. Such possibilities are not about being free from norms, or being outside the circuits of exchange within global capitalism. *It is the non-transcendence of queer that allows queer to do its work*" (Cultural 165, italics in original).

woman in charge, which is how we understood Adrienne Cooper.” Everyone in the audience learns the song; as Jenny points out, this is “classic Cooper – each one teach one.” In full regalia, Daniel offers a libation, pouring slivovitz in a long line on the concrete floor: “All I can say is, we love the hell out of you, Adrienne.” She was a den mother, sister, mentor and comrade to this ragged, elective family of revivalists, and her generous spirit hovers over these events.

Now that we’ve honoured the ancestors, the show can begin. The narrators open with an introduction, repeated with variations from year to year, that lays out the stakes of the evening, its invocations of carnival, its embrace of misunderstanding, and its blurring of sacred and profane. To excited cheers, Jenny reminds the audience that

this is carnival. Everything is upside-down. We’re trying to get to the mystical place of perfect misunderstanding and inversion. The more we don’t understand, the more dyslexic we feel, the more supercharged and renewed we become. So do not struggle with the show, do not say, “I didn’t understand that, what does that mean?” Simply let your confusion entertain you.

Then it’s Daniel’s turn to describe the collective’s and volunteers’ sometimes vexed relationship to Judaism, in a bit of tortured prose which both describes and performs a blurring of distinctions:

a coalition of people made this show – religious and secular, formerly religious and formerly secular, both the secular and the unsecular, neither the secular nor the nonsecular, and the ones who can neither confirm or deny their secularism or nonsecularism.

Now that the holy waters have been thoroughly muddied, Jenny reminds us about the holiday’s invitation to drunkenness, which extends this zone of non-differentiation: “This is a holiday where you’re supposed to get so smashed, so hammered, so *verblunget*, that you can’t tell the difference between your enemy and your BFF.” Since we already know that “there are many paths to holy disorder, many routes to the place of perfect misunderstanding” (Aftselokhes, “Purim”), we can achieve that drunken blurring with or without chemical help. As Jenny proclaims to the audience, “We have a lot of people who can’t or don’t drink, or



don't like to use drugs in that way. And we don't want anyone to miss out. So we are going to fuck you up exquisitely – by way of good old-fashioned showmanship.” The crowd whoops; the staging of the Megillah can proceed.

This year's take on the story of Esther, we are told, takes place in the town of Shushan, Arizona – a state with an aging population and many immigrants and non-status workers, prefiguring the demographics of the United States. In this version, Esther is HIV-positive, a firm believer in self-care (lots of yoga and Vitamin D), while Mordechai is an ACT-UP activist fighting for collective solutions to the health-care crisis. Meanwhile, Haman leads a cabal of pharmaceutical executives fond of synchronized dance routines, who are looking to jack up prices at the expense of people's lives. The villainous Haman, played in high camp style in a gold-lamé-lined blazer by Zachary Wagar-Scholl, invites the white-coated pharma guys to his bunker to show them a Golem, “this mystical weird robot that I built in my spare time.” There is thunder and lightning, a freaked-out version of Queen's “Body Language” turned into “Money Language,” and the Golem comes alive, spouting broken fragments of postvernacular Yiddish.<sup>109</sup> The tall black mesh puppet, complete with the Hebrew word *EMES* (“truth”) on its forehead, imitates some of Haman's dance moves, then with a sigh of “*tate*” (“daddy”) offers its creator a beating three-dimensional cardboard heart.

The Golem is an allegorical abstraction, a hulking figure invoking the faceless, corporate bureaucracy that stands between sick people, their loved ones and the people who care for them. Eventually, this spectre is unmasked: at the climax of the third act, Esther tries to get some answers from the Golem, who plays the role of an automated telephone operator. The Golem responds in a robotic voice: “We of the government/insurance industry alliance are happy to help you... If you want to talk to a shmuck, say ‘shmuck.’ If you want to talk to a heartless robot, say ‘heartless robot.’” Esther demands free health care for all who need it – and the Golem refuses, on the grounds that humanity has (or is) “a pre-existing condition.” As the robot declares, “You're humans! You can't expect insurance companies to cover

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<sup>109</sup> On the Yiddish revival as a “postvernacular” movement, see Shandler, *Adventures*. Josh Waletzky's garbled groans in this scene are a perfect example of Shandler's description, in “Queer Yiddishkeit,” of Yiddish as a “travesty language.” In general, the Purimspiel doesn't so much “straddle the modes of heritage ... and camp” (109), as fuse heritage and camp into a carnivalesque whole.

humans – humans are fragile, their bodies deteriorate over time.” In our very condition of transience, our “eternity of downfall” as Benjamin terms it, the politics of care finds its feet. Esther realizes that the Golem is not only a “schmucky corporation,” but is also “a phony”: she tears the first letter from the *EMES* on its forehead, changing the word “truth” into *MES*, or “corpse.” “This is a mess!” she cries. *Venahafokh hu*, “the opposite happens”: the Golem collapses in a heap of fabric, and Esther herself is transformed. Instead of disavowing her own fragility through “double doses of Echinacea ... and yoga at Third Root,” she embraces a common bodily vulnerability as a resource for political action. In the process, she turns from a self-obsessed self-carer into brave activist fighting to transform an unjust and exploitative health-care system.

Of course, this deliberately clunky morality play happens via a series of campy and ridiculous scenes – including the detoured duet version of “Greatest Love of All” (“I decided long ago / Never to climb that mountain solo / If I fail, if I succeed / At least I live accountably”), delivered karaoke-style while multiple gyrating Esthers tear down Mt. Sinai. If that number brings down the house, it’s because the ground has already been prepared through a more sober breaking of the spectacle. At the beginning of the second act, the party comes to a halt, so that six activists and domestic workers allied with Caring Across Generations can share their “care stories.” One by one, these women and men tell the audience about their friends’ illnesses, their own illness, and their care for others. Members of DWU describe their long and hard-fought movement seeking to gain fair labour standards and paths to citizenship. Collective member Anna Jacobs talks about her own struggle living with “late-stage chronic neurological Lyme disease,” for which her insurer cut off funding after 30 days of treatment. As she says, her own experience drove home “how grave the situation is in terms of a lack of care, institutionally and structurally in our society.” She is lucky: “I had a lot of support from family – and family goes way beyond blood in this situation.” Her own description of her financial, physical and emotional difficulties is somehow made more forceful – and carnivalized – by her appearance in the next act as a diminutive King in butch drag, moaning to his new wife, “Oh, Esther, won’t you touch my golden sceptre one more time!” Through carnivalesque humour, her vulnerability becomes

power – and once again, the line between serious politics and carny spectacle is elided, to the benefit of both.

The back-and-forth between spectacle and political campaign work is helped by a performance style that embraces all levels of amateurism, while leaving room for talent to shine through. The casting for the show is quite offhand for such a big project: there are no auditions, and volunteers offer themselves to play roles as a kind of “service.” Some scenes have great energy and others fall flat; some performers ham it up with panache, while others struggle to get out their lines. The two scenes with DWU are particularly awkward in performance (which is a pity, after some very spirited rehearsals). During the show, performers speak into a pair of wireless microphones that need to be passed from hand to hand; the women from DWU haven’t practiced with the mics, and many of their lines get lost. Nobody is particularly fazed by this: in Fox-Rosen’s words, “this is one night of great intentions and great ideas and beautiful execution” (Aftselokhes). *Yasa*, as the *Tractate Megillah* likes to say: “it is sufficient.” The collective does what it can with often very limited rehearsal time. In fact, the varying quality of the performances, and the good-natured amateurish feeling to the whole event, helps open up the play to the audience: it’s part of what Romaine calls “the gifting of the spectacle.” This is not a polished show to be admired from the other side of the proscenium; the audience is right in the middle of things, and could very well be in the show themselves. Plus, the women from DWU are wearing incredible costumes, black-and-red-and-silver cardboard armour, shields, greaves, swords and helmets, as they suit up to fight the Golem. They look fierce – and they know that “the golem has weaknesses, his fear, his arrogance, of what we are and what we’re capable of.” “He needs to keep us subservient.” “He’s afraid of being confronted and us looking him in the eye.” Even if the crowd can’t quite hear the words, they look at these decked-out carnival warriors and they get the message.

The spectacle elements tie the show together, and make it work: the ochre colour-palette of the “Arizona” set, the lovingly sewn lab coats, the brightly-painted Spa Castle domes scattered around the audience. In the first act these cardboard domes lift to reveal several dozen singing naked bathers (and a bikini-wearing Yeti); their sexy come-on number is

followed by the slow march of the workers and maidens to the palace. They move through the crowd in groups of ten or so, hands on each others shoulders, swaying from side to side, singing the wordless Hassidic melody, while Fox-Rosen's band plays some screeching electro-doom accompaniment. It's hard to say where the power of this moment comes from. Is it its mixing of the carnival and the funereal, the ridiculous and the totally serious? Bathers become a procession of mourners, or maybe protesters, soberly and slowly shuffling to the seat of power. It's a clear place where mourning and militancy can meet. It also exemplifies the mixing of heterogeneous, vernacular elements in the performance, Jewish and non-Jewish – another profaning of the holiday beyond its ritual borders. This crowd may be singing a Hassidic melody, but they are an image and enactment of “the people” – “the 99 per cent,” in the language of the moment.<sup>110</sup> More than any of the show's allegorical, didactic elements, scenes like this affirm the power of this carnivalesque restaging and remixing of tradition.

That sense of power – both culture as power, and the power of bodies in alliance – is brought home by the bands that punctuate the evening. At the end of the first act, the sixty-strong Rude Mechanical Orchestra enters from the hallway at the very back of the space (they are a little late, and their cue has to be repeated a half-dozen times). Part of the wave of anarchist-leaning brass bands that has sprung up around North America in the new millennium, they play a raucous, non-virtuosic mix of cumbia, klezmer, funk, Hindi wedding music, top-40 hip-hop, and whatever other danceable sounds they can get their hands on. There are tubas, trombones, clarinets, flutes, trumpets, saxophones, plenty of drums, and a whole contingent of gender-queer dancers; the sound is huge, and the party gets started in earnest. The band is organized horizontally, and makes decisions on the basis of consensus. This lack of hierarchy comes through in performance, which is something like a musical version of a Deleuzian “assemblage” or the Invisible Committee's “swarm,” but goofier and more festive. Their spirited amateurism only adds to the atmosphere of equality that permeates the evening. You, too, could be in this band if you wanted to; skill is welcome, but not required. Everybody is dancing to the global brass band repertoire, unfazed by the switching between genres. Women from DWU join in on percussion. The band closes with a

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<sup>110</sup> On “the people” as an open-ended term or a “litigious name,” see Rancière, *Disagreement*.

heavy funk version of “Which Side Are You On,” which ends with a chant: “Occupy, shut it down, New York is a people’s town.” Again, “the people” appears briefly, in a utopian, festive, participatory mode (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: The Rude Mechanical Orchestra at the 2012 Purim Ball (photo by John Bell)

It has to be said, though, that “the people” in this band are generally white; so it’s important that the next band, blaKbüshe, is a black r&b crew led by singer Shelley Nicole. They are a serious, slick, musically adept bunch – no charming amateurism here – and they also know how to rock a party. The history between blacks and Jews in Brooklyn is a complicated one, and it’s appropriate that the two can meet here, at this Purim party by the East River, in a common ground of queerness. Everybody is bringing their cultural specificity into play, and the “queer time” of the evening allows those vernacular or postvernacular elements to bounce around into new combinations. This is true, too, for the final jam-out that closes the Purimspiel, which mixes music and text from Big Freedia’s “Excuse” (“Excuse – I

don't mean to be rude," "azz everywhere") with the Yiddish tune "Balebusteh," and the Purim song "La'Yehidim." Zachary has given the crowd a bounce lesson, so everyone knows how to "throw your pussy to the back of the wall, like so, while circling your hips." Avi plays his rock guitar, the band lays down a Hassidic electro-disco beat, and everyone dances – a combination of the traditional winding circle dances of Ashkenazic Jews, and the sexy balls-of-the-feet moves of New Orleans sissy bounce. The lyrics of the song might be celebrating the fact that "the Jews had joy and happiness." But here, happiness has been definitively profaned beyond the ritual community. This happiness is radically inclusive – it's for everybody.<sup>111</sup>

The blurriness of ritual borders in this zone of indistinction only heightens as the party slides into its later phases. Many of the performers and guests have taken to heart the rabbi's suggestion to drink "until you can't tell the difference" – words that are repeated, in English and Yiddish, on the doors of the gender-nonspecific bathrooms. As DJ Ripley starts her global-bass-heavy DJ set, the dancefloor is heating up. Some start making out with friends or strangers. The conviviality and shared radical politics of the partygoers make intoxication safe, even for those who don't usually indulge. As one member of the core crew recalls a couple of months later:

I'm not a drinker, and I drank a whole bottle of wine. And I was really sick the next morning. But it was just the best party... It was this culmination of a party that... It's like your dream party. Like, if you partied in heaven, what would it look like? The music was so good, and the people were so fun. It was just a lot of loved ones. (Audio recording, 19 May 2012.)

At this party in heaven, with a lot of loved ones, we are striving for transience, not transcendence. We are in the order of the profane, moving to the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, the rhythm of messianic nature. Borders are blurred, and not redrawn. Time drags and bounces. The rhythm moves insistently, and we're dancing to it, dancing to the rhythm of downfall. It is a kind of heaven, brought down to earth in Industry

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<sup>111</sup> This final number was the source of a rare aesthetic argument inside the collective. Should the medley be played at the bounce tempo, or the tempo of the Jewish songs? While one member described this as a "philosophical difference," it seemed to be more about what kind of dance party the group wanted to have. In the end, bounce won the day – which didn't hamper any of the dancing.

City. But it doesn't last. It's late – the crowd dwindles, and one by one or in small groups, we spill out into the cold March morning. We walk to the subway, getting ready for the long ride home.

### **After the Carnival**

After the ecstasy, the laundry. The next day at noon, after too few hours of sleep, we're back in the space in Industry City, nursing hangovers, tearing down the sets, folding costumes, coiling cables, and packing everything into trucks. The “extraordinary temporary creative art” has come and gone. It's a long day, and the work feels heavy – there's no pre-show adrenaline to propel us. Tempers flare up occasionally. We have plans to cap it off with a visit to the Russian baths in Brooklyn, picking up on the theme of the show, but we're exhausted, and the bathing is postponed.

Two months later, in late May, the collective and core crew gather again for a barbecue and conversation in the backyard of Anna Jacobs's house in Flatbush. This is the first time that this kind of Purim post-mortem has taken place. There are songs, of course, and food. It's a beautiful late-spring day. As we go around the circle, the Purimspielers describe what they liked about the event this year, and how it could improve. A few mention how there was a place for sadness in the process, which felt important. There was a rehearsal shortly after Adrienne's death where the group was discussing the death of an older partisan. Josh Waletzky brought in a Yiddish song; it was a “heavy space,” and everyone cried. This sadness made it into the final show in moments like the slow march – as well as the mixing-in of songs and text traditionally associated with Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement. You can feel this sadness hovering in the air, mixed with the pleasure of shared company, as we close the evening with more songs around a fire.

During the meeting, other members of the crew describe how the space and time of the Purim preparations offered them a particular kind of freedom. One says that unlike at our regular day jobs, which offer “little space for creativity,” in the studio “we could be our whole

selves.” The queer time and place of the Purimspiel offered the volunteers a space for collective expression, shared joy, sadness, and invention. Another member, LJ, recalls

one night where I just really needed to be creative and get some creative energy out and not think a whole lot. So I went in to paint some of the spa domes, and it was this super gender-queer crew, it was like an all gender-queer crew painting. And Whitney Houston had just died, so we were listening to the Pandora Whitney Houston station, but it was all sorts of music, like Luther Vandross... And everyone was singing, and it was really fun. (Audio recording, 19 May 2012)

For the performers and show-makers, queer or otherwise, the weeks of preparation were an extended “time out of time” which offered them experiences not always accessible in their daily lives. These experiences of shared play, mourning and pleasure were ways to (in the words of the Purim narrators) become “supercharged and renewed” – able to continue their personal and political struggles with newfound energy.

As LJ makes clear, the studio was an inclusive space, open to all volunteers, queer and straight, religious and secular (and various combinations thereof). This inclusiveness in the studio also extends to the audience of the Purimspiel, the ones who receive the collective’s “gifting of the spectacle.” It’s hard to know, as Jenny wonders, “what it’s like to receive this art that’s given so generously.” But she has often heard people at the event say “I never feel weird: when I go there I feel like there’s nothing weird about me at all.’ You hear that quite often. People go there and are like, ‘I’ll never feel weird about myself again.’” The event tries to create a space where all bodies can thrive, enacting its queer political desire, the “desire for huge inclusiveness.” The project’s “world of wonders” is all about weirdness – or queerness. In this experimental carnival, differences get multiplied and jumbled, not effaced or hardened. And messianic sparks can fly between these differences, in the lab of the studio and in the air of the party itself.

Importantly, the “desire for huge inclusiveness” extends to bridge religious and secular communities, as well as Jews and non-Jews. Avi describes this project as the “most heterogeneous Jewish place” he has experienced – a place where Jews who don’t fit into their often conservative families or communities can flourish. It’s open to Hassidim as well as



anarchists, cynics as well as mystics. And in a thoroughly diasporic move, it embraces non-Jewish elements, performers and audience members. This embrace of supposed opposites is another side of the queer, carnival freedom to which the project aspires. As Jenny explains,

Part of what I think of the queerness of the project, for me, is more freedom, more liberation, more freedom from what binds. And carnival is where you get the x-ray of civilization, where you see what the binds are. ... Purim is such a time when everything's weird. It's a great opportunity to reach out to people who think you're the opposite from them. A good moment to say, "Hey, Purim, let's freak out together." And that makes it really exciting. You're going into the *kavanah*, the intention, of the holiday when you do that.

You could even say that a queer political desire for radical inclusiveness is the *kavanah*, the intention, of this version of Purim. This crew has found a way to x-ray its society and to untie what binds, to find the exciting place where the illusion of opposites collapses and a new translation of tradition is born.

This is not to say that this experiment with tradition is a resounding success. Indeed, part of the experience of working with abjected cultural material like the Yiddish language is a constant experience of discontinuity, of never quite achieving the fullness and richness of the lost culture. As Jenny notes, the work the collective did with stories from the disability justice movement felt appropriate: "All this talk about disability, it's like, oh my god, this language is so disabled!" The collective has a strange relationship to the lost vernacular world of Yiddishkeit: it doesn't long for its full retrieval, but it is also not willing to let it go. Is this a kind of nostalgia? Jenny responds: "I am nostalgic, but the approach to the nostalgia is accepting the discontinuity, the failure – that's the hip term, the failure. Saying, yes, I'll always fail at this." Failure is not just an abstract term: the last first-generation speakers of Yiddish are aging, and the continuity of the language outside Hassidic communities is not a given. With Adrienne Cooper's death, this group lost not only her friendship, but also her deep knowledge and teaching of this endangered language and culture. Failure hurts, and it may only be a matter of time.

Yet the experience of working on the project is not one of failure, but of a shared power – the power of collective making. It is crucial that the Purim Ball is created by members of a collective, who then organize many dedicated artists and volunteers. As they explain, this mode of organization and creation is a direct response to the capitalist organization of labour, which “tells you that you have to be in certain kinds of roles, and that certain people have more value than other people” (Romaine). It’s also a response to the commercial art world, which still frowns on DIY creation outside of marketable and professionalized channels. Jenny recalls her early experience starting Great Small Works in the 1990s:

The commercial art world said you were a piece of shit. ... “Can we be in a theatre?”  
“No.” “Can we do this?” “No.” “Is there money?” “No.” And so the answer to “no”  
was, “Oh, then we’ll get our own space, and we’ll light everything with clip lights, and  
we’ll make our own work, and we’ll create our own world.” And that’s what we did...

Our group was the way we built power, and also our skills.

This DIY, world-building approach required years of dedication and perseverance, and meant a long process of learning through mistakes. But it created a firm foundation for collective art-making: “So that by the time I’m reaching this collective, it’s my assumption that everybody’s reaching for more than they are. That you always understand that you’re more than you think you are.” The power built during this work might be fragile, relying on clip lights, ramshackle technology and cheap materials. But it’s also a strong power, rooted in bodies in alliance, carnival skills and political intelligence. It is able to gather people together in a queer time and place and bring them beyond themselves, to help them make something weird, old and new. For a night, it does indeed make its own world – a world of profane happiness and shared capacity. And sparks struck that night can fly to unknown places, even after carnival time is over.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Remixing: A Tribe Called Red's Electric Pow Wow

*The Road – The Traditional Thing – Gone Digital – Pow Wow's Transmotion –  
Diasporic Bounce – Haunted Images – Working It Through – Remixing Resurgence*

#### The Road

In December of 2012, Ottawa DJ collective A Tribe Called Red released a new track, “The Road.” The Idle No More movement was gathering steam across Turtle Island, with blockades, teach-ins, and round dances in shopping malls relayed via online videos; hunger-striking Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence was camped on an island in the Ottawa river, demanding a meeting with representatives of the Crown to discuss the treaty relationship. ATCR was working on its second record, what would become *Nation II Nation*. Friends kept asking if the group had any music to contribute to this most recent surge of Native activism – set off by the Canadian Conservative government’s legislative agenda promoting resource extraction at all costs, and the state’s ongoing disregard for historic treaty rights and the sovereignty of Indigenous nations. As video artist and DJ Bear Witness, Dj NDN (Ian Campeau) and DJ Shub (Dan General) told me, Shub had already composed “The Road” in preparation for their next album.<sup>112</sup> Posted on the web platform Soundcloud – accompanied by a newly-iconic, black-and-white photo of flag-bearing protesters raising their fists under a windswept sky (taken at a rally on the Blood Reserve in Standoff, Alberta) – the track seemed at once historic, contemporary, and prophetic. As of early May 2013, it had garnered upward of 50,000 plays (A Tribe Called Red, “The Road”).

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<sup>112</sup> A Tribe Called Red (Ian Campeau, Dan General and Bear Witness), telephone interview, 2 Apr. 2013. All quotations from members of the collective are taken from this interview, unless otherwise noted.

I heard the track the day it was released, through headphones while sitting at my computer; even through this sedentary form of listening, “The Road” carried a powerful physical and affective charge. The song is built around a series of “drops,” a convention in Electronic Dance Music derived from Jamaican sound systems (Robbie Shakespeare, qtd. in Veal 201). It has become a stock move: the low end (bass and/or drum) drops out, a filter sweeps upward across the sound spectrum emphasizing the treble, and the beat returns with new insistence. In the case of “The Road,” the track begins with a pow wow drum marking the downbeats, soon overlaid with a heavy kick-drum sample. The tempo is a quick walking pace of 140 beats per minute. Layers are added and peeled away: a ringing hand drum syncopates the rhythm; a man sings in the high and taut style of the Northern pow wow; other members of the drum group Black Bear echo the same high-pitched melody in ragged unison; a digital synthesizer pedals a whole tone in fifths, eventually sketching out minor and major chords. Periodically the straight on-the-one rhythm breaks, shifting to the syncopated “trap beats” derived from Dirty South hip-hop, with a booming bass drum and skittering hi-hats. The synth ends the track on a reverberating note, a vibrant promise inviting a replay.

It’s a short, wordless tune that nonetheless feels strongly political. “The Road” breathes what the Chippewa poet and critic Gerald Vizenor calls “native survivance”: a quality that is “more than just survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence” (*Fugitive Poses* 15). In the first winter of Idle No More, that active presence was palpable, even via an online digital sound file vibrating in listeners’ ears. The title of the song, along with the quick march of the drums and the repeated, looped singing, suggested Indigenous peoples reclaiming the land, moving to reverse the ongoing dispossessions of the settler state. It recalled a series of walks along roads both real and imagined: activist journeys like The Longest Walk from Alcatraz to Washington, D.C. in 1978 and its many successors, or the walk of Indigenous people northward to the U.S. border in Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Almanac of the Dead*. It also prefigured the young Cree “Nishiyuu walkers” and their 1,600-kilometre journey from James Bay to Ottawa in the winter of 2013. Sounding out from nation to nation, “The Road” was a sonic counterpart to

the Indigenous “resurgence” moving step by step toward the difficult decolonization of this land.<sup>113</sup>

I listened to “The Road” as a citizen of the white settler nation, inspired by this movement’s creativity and its struggle for justice.<sup>114</sup> I also listened as a musician and fan of ATCR, and as a researcher investigating performative experiments with tradition. I knew I wanted to write about an experiment with vernacular musical forms in settler-colonial North America, preferably a project that had political resonances.<sup>115</sup> I felt that it was necessary to move beyond my own musical and cultural frame of reference, in order to approach the problem of “tradition” from the other side of the settler-colonial divide. This would mean navigating the historically charged terrain of academic research on, with or by Indigenous peoples.<sup>116</sup> The members of A Tribe Called Red identify both as urban Aboriginal people and as members of First Nations: Bear Witness and Dan General are both Cayuga from Six Nations, and Ian Campeau is Ojibwe from Nipissing First Nation. Given my position as the child of immigrants living on Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee land, reckoning with their creative translations of tradition seemed like an important challenge. I knew that writing about their practice from a critical perspective would run the risk of “blocking out the Aboriginal voice,” as Greg Young-Ing warns (qtd. in LaRocque 166). But to ignore their Indigenous experimentalism would leave political and aesthetic questions fundamental to this project unexplored.

A Tribe Called Red’s work illuminates the contemporary Indigenous re-engagement with “tradition,” and its relation to past and present experiences of settler colonialism. In Canada, the Indigenous resurgence of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century takes place across multiple breaks in intergenerational continuity, gaps caused by ongoing colonial violence. In settler colonies, “invasion is a structure, not an event.” Dispossession is not a historical phenomenon, but a constant slow-motion catastrophe that seeks “the elimination of the native” through

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<sup>113</sup> On resurgence, see Alfred, L. Simpson.

<sup>114</sup> On the vicissitudes of settler-Indigenous alliances, see Davis, ed.

<sup>115</sup> My own musical milieux in Toronto and Montreal offered some potential research subjects, but I felt too close to that work to write effectively about it. I was also reluctant to submit my own musical practice to an academic analysis, even an autoethnographic or phenomenological one.

<sup>116</sup> Among other sources, see Kovach and Tuhiwai Smith.

expropriation and assimilation (Wolfe, “Settler” 388). In Canada, the bureaucratic forms of this process include the state’s violation of treaty rights, the Indian Act and its various amendments, the Residential School system, and the predatory child welfare policies and practices of the “sixties scoop” – right up to what Russell Diabo calls the current “termination plan” for Indigenous rights and land title. As a result of this state-sanctioned violence and dispossession, urban Aboriginal people form what Bonita Lawrence properly terms a diaspora, whose links to the land, to language, and to cultural identity have been deliberately sundered and bureaucratized (“*Real*” *Indians*). These gaps are only recently and painfully being mended, thanks to the work of several generations of Native activists and artists. The music and live shows of ATCR can be seen as one of many lines cast across a history of violent dispossession and discontinuity. Their work is part of a wider reimagining of Indigenous history and futurity, which seeks to translate “traditional” knowledge and practices into new creative life.

The chapter that follows is not an insider account or (auto)ethnographic narrative. Rather, I look critically at ATCR’s music and videos, and especially their live performances, as creative works that demand a considered response. I argue that their remixing strategies aim to recover what could be called a “power of designation” over the traditional *thing*, a power normally reserved for the settler state (Cornellier; Povinelli, “Settler Modernity”). Along with many of their peers, A Tribe Called Red refuse to become what Elizabeth Povinelli describes as “the melancholic subject of tradition,” always failing to live up to colonial fantasies of pre-modern authenticity (“Settler Modernity” 23). Instead of chasing after a frozen genealogical past, the group’s remixing of Native vernacular music – along with Afrodiasporic sounds and settler-colonial images – sets history in motion in the body. Their live DJ sets, especially, offer a simultaneity of *haunting* and *vibration*, giving their work a specific play of absence and presence. Borrowing from psychoanalytic thought, I analyze these multimedia performances as sites of collective working-through (Freud, “Remembering”). ATCR’s montage of sounds, images, and movement work to break up spectral historical fantasies, while their vibratory intensities open up new affective configurations for settler, migrant, and Indigenous subjects. This is not to say that these concerts are utopian spaces, exempt from “enterprise culture”

(Sholette) and the commodifying pressures of the music business. In fact, part of their power comes through their engagement with mainstream networks of music promotion and distribution. At their best, ATCR's live sets reject utopian discourses in favour of the creation of new *popular* forms of aesthetic experience and political encounter.

This chapter takes the work of the group as a point of departure, examining its contexts and its different aspects in turn. I begin by exploring discourses of tradition in settler-colonial cultures, drawing on critical anthropological and Indigenous theory to deepen the analysis begun in my Introduction. Against this background, I look at the work of ATCR in the context of Indigenous engagements with media technologies. I then connect ATCR's music and concerts to the "Indigenous modernity" of the contemporary pow wow, which is already a site of what Vizenor calls "native *transmotion*," a space of remembrance, active presence, and cultural experimentation (*Fugitive Poses* 15). I consider the group's innovative blending of the "bounce" of pow wow with the syncopations of "global bass" music, which circulate in digital networks that stretch across the Black Atlantic and the Americas. I then examine questions of haunting, looking at the video work of A Tribe Called Red, which – in Bear Witness's comic-ironic montages of colonial images – presents a decolonizing remix of another kind. Finally, I explore the affective and bodily politics of ATCR's live shows. At their monthly Electric Pow Wow club night in Ottawa and on tour, vibrant sounds and haunted images open up an experimental space for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, offering an opportunity to work through a haunted past and imagine what a shared, decolonized future might look like. This is a space in which decolonization can be worked through in the body, if not achieved. The non-metaphorical return of the land to its First Peoples – the baseline goal of decolonization – remains a work to be accomplished (Tuck and Yang). But on a symbolic level, on an affective level, and on the level of collective practice, A Tribe Called Red is walking on that road.

## The Traditional Thing

Before turning to the work of *A Tribe Called Red*, it will be helpful to re-examine how discourses of “tradition” shape the experience of Indigenous subjects in settler colonies. In the opening monologue of his novel *Keeper’n me*, the Ojibway writer Richard Wagamese captures the ambiguity of the term, in a characteristically ironic voice. Keeper, the knowledge holder at White Dog reservation, jokes:

Anishnaabe got a good word no one ever argues with, Indyun or not, makes everything right and okay. We say – TRA-DISH-UNN. Heh, heh, heh. Wanna make white people believe what you tell ’em? Say it’s TRA-DISH-UNN. Same thing with the young ones round here. You gotta do it, we say, it’s TRA-DISH-UNN. Good word that. Makes life easy. (2-3)

Addressing himself directly to the reader, Keeper reveals how the term “tradition” works to designate past practices and obscure them at the same time. “Tradition” can be what Raymond Williams called a “structure of feeling,” tied up with notions of belonging, sovereignty and cultural continuity. It can also be a way to shut down internal debate, or to poke fun at settler fantasies. Wagamese’s Keeper knows that “tradition” can be a toxic word used to place Native peoples in a timeless and frozen past. Turning it into “TRA-DISH-UNN” frees up more ironic and flexible possibilities of self-designation.

In both settler and imperial colonies, anthropology has been the master discourse that designates what is and is not “traditional.” In its anthropological sense, as I have noted, “tradition” only acquires meaning in relation to the presumed rupture of “modernity.” This means that customary practice – what Adorno describes as “the pregiven, unreflected and binding existence of social forms” – becomes “tradition” when it is threatened by territorial, economic, cultural and linguistic dislocation (“On Tradition” 75). The discipline of anthropology has been historically tied to allegories of loss and salvage that mark and mourn these dislocations. From its instantiation until the late twentieth century, ethnography was largely a pastoral genre, mourning “organic” lifeways on the verge of disappearance. As James Clifford writes: “The theme of the vanishing primitive, of the end of traditional society (the



very act of naming it 'traditional' implies a rupture) is pervasive in ethnographic writing" (112). Clifford notes that in the ethnographic pastoral, "'Primitive,' nonliterate, underdeveloped, tribal societies are constantly yielding to progress, 'losing' their traditions" (114-115). The ethnographer was tasked with recording those vanishing practices, translating them into textual form before they were gone forever.

This pastoral vision of the lost idyll of tradition becomes politically potent in settler colonies, especially after explicitly genocidal regimes give way to frameworks of multicultural recognition. Elizabeth Povinelli, writing of the Australian context, describes the structuring fantasy of what she calls "the traditional thing" ("Settler Modernity"). "The traditional thing," in Povinelli's essay, recalls Lacan's concept of "the thing," *das Ding*, the non-phenomenal, unknowable X beyond signification, which is also the lost object of desire (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis*). Povinelli argues that in settler colonies, the "traditional thing" is a "lost authenticity" just out of reach, the mirage of "a social practice and space which predates the settler state" (28). Settler subjects reach for "the traditional thing" in order to differentiate themselves from imperial identities and redeem or disavow a tainted, bloody history. To this end, "traditional" Indigenous practices and iconographies are incorporated into the rituals of settler nationhood, as in Olympic ceremonies and other national pageants. State-sanctioned Aboriginal culture invites settler subjects to "enjoy their traditions" – or in the form of commodities with an Aboriginal flavour, to "enjoy our product *like* you enjoy their traditions" (30, emphasis in original). For Povinelli, this "traditional thing" gives settler national discourses a utopian and fantastical quality. "The nation," she writes, "truly celebrates this actually good, whole, intact, and somewhat terrifying something lying just beyond the torn flesh of present national social life" (34). For settler subjects in North America, the "traditional thing" is phantasmatic and mutable, an "Indian thing" manifesting "a concreteness that is still in the realm of the indeterminate" (Cornellier 54). It is both sublime and evanescent, always in the past, always just out of reach.

If white subjects reach anxiously after the "traditional thing" as a way of smoothing out the rough patches of history and of marking their own difference or specialness, Indigenous subjects are oriented toward it by bureaucratic regimes of recognition. Povinelli

points out that for Indigenous peoples, the performance of “tradition” has become necessary to “gain access to public sympathy and state resources” (22). This process is especially notable in Australia, where proof of “traditional ownership” of land requires the demonstration of continuous customary practices, even as those practices are constantly disrupted (see Povinelli, *Cunning*). The requirement to perform tradition is no less powerful in Canada, where the bureaucracy of Indian status, based on blood quantum, works to re-inscribe divisions between “real’ Indians and others” (Lawrence). The injunction to identify with identities and practices which the state has done its best to destroy is a mode of managing Indigenous peoples, who are pushed to abandon present struggles in favour of chasing after a vanished past. Povinelli argues that in “(post)colonial multicultural societies,” “hegemonic domination works by inspiring in the indigenous a desire to identify with a lost indeterminate object – to become the melancholic subject of tradition” (23). As Povinelli points out, this melancholic identification is doomed to failure. Any existing Indigenous subject inevitably lacks the full presence of authentic “Indigenous tradition.”

Can theories and practices that re-engage with or remix Indigenous “tradition” be wrested from a colonial melancholy? Povinelli argues that we should abandon “tradition” as a critical term, as it serves only to encourage repressive fantasies of an unchanging, pre-colonial past. Some Indigenous theorists would seem to agree. In *When The Other Is Me*, Cree-Métis literary scholar Emma LaRocque underscores the impossibility of the demand that Native people be “authentic” and “uncontaminated.” She observes that in settler colonies, “the moment the Native steps out of timelessness, he or she is deemed assimilated, that is, non-Indian” (127). LaRocque argues that this has encouraged an “archiving mentality,” involving “the sacralization of the old and anyone who represents the past” (137). In this truly melancholic position, authenticity belongs only to the dying or the dead, and traditions of Indigenous practice are “mummified,” frozen in lost time (137). Yet other theorists are more willing to see “tradition” as a flexible and open-ended mode of defining cultural continuity and invention. “Native traditional practice,” as Chippewa scholar Gail Valaskakis argues, need not be a matter of “feathers and fantasy” or an “oppressive reification of the distant past” (10). For Valaskakis, “Indian traditionalism is neither of these; nor is it lost in transformation

or revived as a privileged expression of resistance. Traditionalism is an instrumental code to action knitted into the fabric of everyday life” (10). Valaskakis argues that tradition is not a lost object but a way of laying claim to past practices that might serve present use.

For Indigenous subjects, the alternative to a melancholic position is to reclaim an active “power of designation” over what constitutes Indigenous tradition, identity, and practice (Cornellier). This reclaiming can take place in a variety of ways. As Valaskakis writes, that to which “tradition” refers might be a vernacular mode of everyday action and cultural transmission rather than any specific lost cultural content. Yet specific lapsed practices, dug up from the distant or not-so-distant past, can also offer cultural and political resources for the present. In *Life Stages and Native Women*, Kim Anderson presents an archive of traditional Anishnaabek women’s practices running from childhood to old age; she describes her work as an act of “digging up the medicines” lost in the wake of genocidal policies of assimilation (3).<sup>117</sup> In a fitting irony, Anderson’s reconstruction of tradition draws heavily on the writing of ethnographers, who have preserved pieces of a shattered puzzle that can be reassembled in the present (Campbell; see my Introduction above). Mohawk activist and scholar Taiaiake Alfred writes in opposition to static “traditionalism,” pointing out that in Indigenous practice “traditions have always changed” (225). Nevertheless, his writing breathes new life into lineages of Indigenous cultural and political work, notably the warrior tradition. Some of these writers look to lapsed traditions as a foothold in present struggles for land and cultural continuity. Others stress traditions of invention and adaptation. In the most recent wave of Indigenous theorizations of tradition, authenticity is not a significant concern. What is important is the cultural sovereignty that allows the content of “the traditional thing” to be determined by Indigenous peoples themselves.

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<sup>117</sup> Wolfe argues, convincingly, that forced assimilation (as in the Canadian Residential Schools system) should be understood as genocide (397ff).

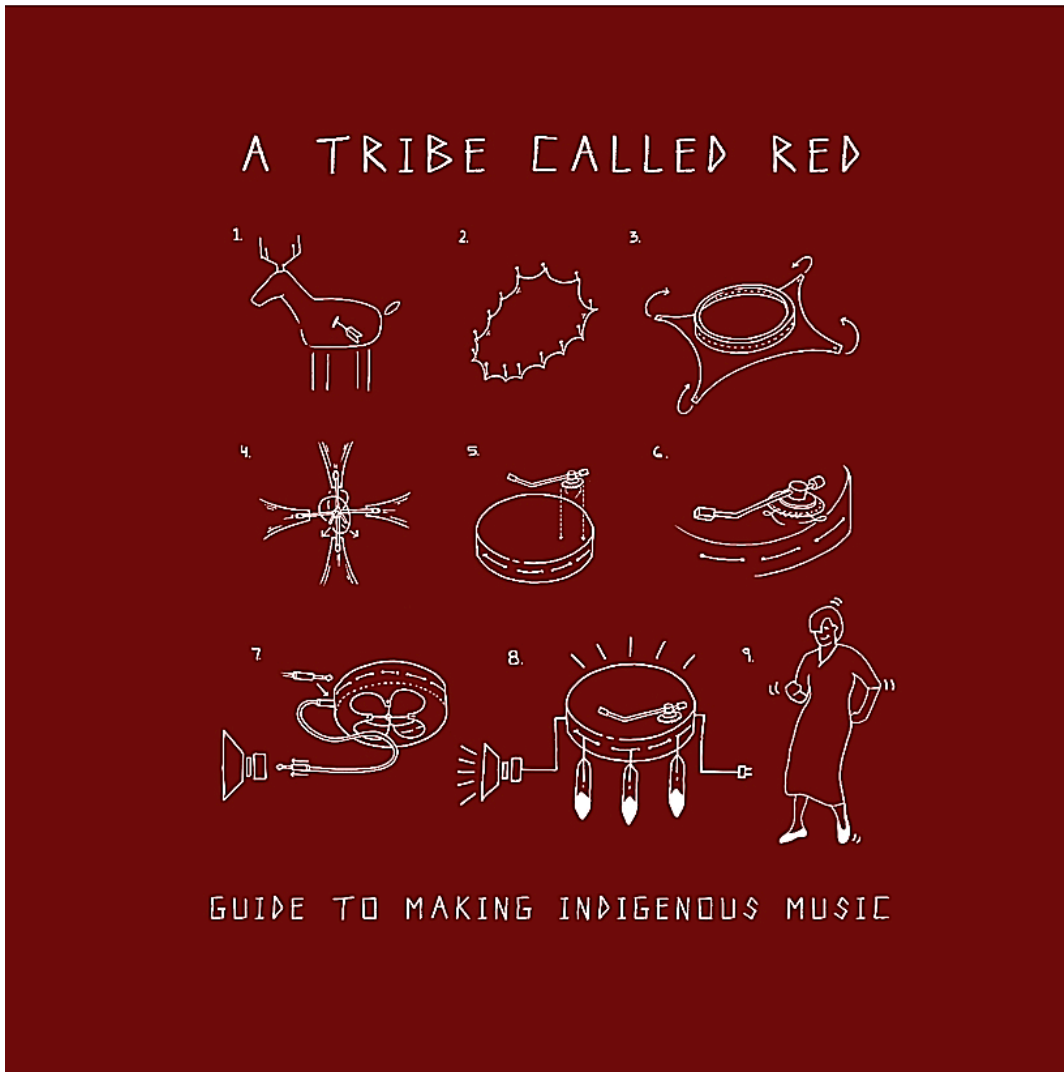


Figure 3: “Guide to Making Indigenous Music,” t-shirt design by Ryan Red Corn and Ben Brown

### Gone Digital<sup>118</sup>

Contemporary Indigenous music and media art is one site where this “power of designation” over tradition is being energetically challenged.<sup>119</sup> Native media artists and musicians, including A Tribe Called Red, reject the pastoral colonial frameworks that would

<sup>118</sup> The title of this section is borrowed from Christen’s article of the same name.

<sup>119</sup> See Townsend, Claxton, and Loft; Ginsburg.

place Indigenous peoples in the past (as in Edward Curtis's "vanishing race") or in a timeless present-as-past (what Johannes Fabian famously called the "denial of coevalness"). Instead, ATCR situate their work firmly in the present. As Ian Campeau (Dj NDN) says, "we're telling people that we're not the stereotypes that you think we are. We're not headdress-wearing, something-from-the-past, brave warrior types; we're just dudes. I'm wearing a Brooklyn Nets hat and a sweater. I'm not this idea of a brave, I'm not this idea of a mystic, I'm not something from the past that uses stone tools. I'm a fully-functioning person today." The same goes for the pow wow drum groups they work with, who (as I describe below) are thoroughly engaged with contemporary audiovisual technologies and networks. ATCR often need to remind non-Indigenous interviewers and fans that they aren't sampling archival recordings: "there are full-on successful labels right now that are signing only pow wow music, and signing young drums" (Campeau, interview). All of this work, by DJs, video artists, or singers and drummers, is enmeshed in digital, technologically-mediated forms of media practice (see Figure 3).

The fantasy of the "traditional thing" has special power when it comes to Indigenous peoples' engagement with new technologies. In the colonial imaginary, technologies are linked with regimes of time, marking forms of practice as traditional or modern, authentic or inauthentic. If one of the functions of "the traditional thing" is to encourage Indigenous peoples to chase after a vanished, pre-modern past, another is to make their present technological engagements seem exotic, surprising, or romantic. As anthropologist Kimberley Christen observes, academic researchers can be seduced by the apparent contrast between Indigenous tradition and digital technologies. Christen writes: "The allure of studying indigenous uses of new technologies lies in the juxtaposition of two seemingly contradictory elements: the past-oriented, romantic notion of indigenous peoples who are somehow in modernity but not of it, set against the future-oriented, equally romantic notion of new technologies as the signifier of a progressive, fast-paced, global modernity" (318). This fetishizing approach should be thoroughly rejected. If ATCR's project is of interest, it is because of its specific, decolonizing audiovisual configuration – its mixing of Native and

Afrodiasporic vernacular sounds with colonial images in a space of bodily encounter – and not because of any romantic juxtaposition of old traditions with new technologies.

The binary opposition between “technology” and “tradition” is at its heart a colonial one, and is rejected by contemporary Indigenous practitioners. In a 2003 interview, Cree performance and media artist Archer Pechawis is asked: “Do you find there is a resistance to your use of technology as art form from those harbouring a more traditionalist interpretation of art?” Pechawis’s response complicates these loaded terms: “what is traditional? using plant-based paints on bone-knife scraped hide to draw images of a buffalo hunt is using technology, and plenty of it. i respect all artists’ right to express themselves in whatever medium they choose, whether i like it or not” (qtd. in Maskegon-Iskwew 212). Similarly, for Buffy Sainte-Marie, whose 1969 album *Illuminations* used analog synthesis to manipulate her voice and guitar, digital technologies are just another opportunity to play with sound and colour: “To me, a Macintosh is a natural and easy to learn tool, and it belongs in the hands of our bead workers and powwow singers, our linguists, our historians” (qtd. in J. Evans). Progressive and romantic ideologies of technological difference obscure the long engagement of Indigenous peoples with technology, before and after colonization. Whether an artist uses potter’s clay or digital modelling, stone tools or Pro Tools, what matters is the “power of designation” over tradition and cultural identity – the ability to determine what counts as Indigenous practice.<sup>120</sup>

In the realm of electronic music, Indigenous producers like A Tribe Called Red and Mexico’s Javier Estrada are reclaiming that power of designation by rewriting global musical discourses long shaped by curators of European origin. These discourses were for many years split into another romantic binary, tied to allegories of salvage and futurity. In late-20<sup>th</sup> century Western markets, “world music” curators offered “‘truth,’ ‘tradition,’ ‘roots,’ and ‘authenticity,’” treating Indigenous musical practices as endangered and in need of preservation from the forces of modernity. Admirers of “world beat,” on the other hand, uncritically celebrated “practices of mixing, syncretic hybridization, blending, fusion,

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<sup>120</sup> As Ginsburg writes of current Indigenous film and video practice, “The sense of its contemporary novelty is in part the product of the deliberate erasure of indigenous ethnographic subjects as actual or potential participants in their own screen representations in the past century” (39-40).

creolization, [and] collaboration across gulfs,” with little attention to questions of power and commodification (Feld 265). Still operating today, these two discourses share utopian and ahistorical qualities. They also enact, in varying ways, what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang call “settler moves to innocence,” disavowing listeners’ complicity in ongoing colonial relationships (3). As Jayna Brown writes, such discourses tend to allegorize Indigenous peoples, situating them “as representatives of the past and the holders of the future, the transcendent solution to the fracturing politics of race and global inequality. ... [Through “world music”] the entitled violence of Western imperialism and colonialism could be placed in the past and resolved. Social hierarchies could be euphemistically called ‘differences’ and, in the space of music, dissolve into a state of utopian unity” (130-131). By taking control of technologies of production and distribution, Indigenous musicians have been able to engage with these colonial scripts on their own terms: appropriating and remixing them, or tearing them up and writing their own.<sup>121</sup>

Contemporary Indigenous musicians such as ATCR – who produce their own tracks, DJ, make videos, and manage their business on digital platforms – are in no sense betraying “traditional” culture; nor are they engaged in a revolutionary, unprecedented blending of past and present, “world music” and “world beat.” Rather, they should be considered part of a long history of Indigenous technological adaptation and remixing. Tlingit curator Candice Hopkins argues that current Indigenous media work is “a continuation of what aboriginal people have been doing from time immemorial: making things our own” (342). For Cherokee artist and activist Jimmie Durham, adaptability and dynamism have been crucial Indigenous traditions – including the adaptation of colonial technologies such as the horse, and later the skidoo. Durham notes that in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, “every object, every material brought in from Europe was taken and transformed with great energy. A rifle in the hands of a soldier was not the same as a rifle that had undergone Duchampian changes in the hands of a defender, which often included changes in the form by the employment of feathers, leather,

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<sup>121</sup> Jace Clayton (aka DJ /rupture) notes this tendency in Javier Estrada’s Aztec-inspired club music: “Estrada’s music complicates the narratives of newness or progress that propel global dance music. If there is no newness and everything has already happened then we can jettison related concepts like ‘original’ or ‘old’, and start listening to music in its promiscuous, iterative glory.”

and beadwork” (qtd. in Hopkins 341).<sup>122</sup> This tradition of innovation continues in the contemporary proliferation of Aboriginal media arts (as documented, for example, in Townsend et al). Indeed, it could be argued that digital technologies extend the processes of copying, reuse, and montage that are already present in Indigenous and “folk” cultural practice (Boon, *In Praise*).

If digital technologies allow sounds to be repurposed, copied and displaced, they also allow those sounds to travel between neighbouring or distant nations. In the first Internet boom of the 1990s, Indigenous practitioners were quick to seize on the connective possibilities of collaborative websites, including the gallery/chat network “CyberPowWow,” “an Aboriginally determined territory in cyberspace” set up in 1996. Hopkins argues that the connectivity enabled by digital networks (and amplified by social media) is both a continuation and a restoration, echoing modes of communication that have long joined Indigenous nations, such as “storytelling, the moccasin telegraph and ancient trade routes” (343). For Bear Witness, the collaborations between A Tribe Called Red and Javier Estrada recall the pre-colonial sharing of cultural practices such as Three Sisters agriculture (beans, corn and squash) across the Americas (Interview). The current wave of Indigenous electronic music revives these networks of dissemination, using websites and social networks (Soundcloud, Facebook) to connect distant communities broken up by colonial borders. For these artists, digital networks allow the communication of images, voices, and sounds between nations, and between Indigenous nations and the settler nation. As ATCR told me, their 2013 disc should really be called “Nation to Nation to Nation to Nation to Nation...”

Contemporary digital networks are often described in this utopian language by Indigenous new media practitioners, as they are in the culture at large.<sup>123</sup> While there is some truth in these enthusiastic claims, they must be set against a more sober analysis of the current media landscape. Communications networks are spaces of surveillance and commodification as well as exchange, and they amplify conflicts over intellectual property and cultural

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<sup>122</sup> Rayna Green makes a similar point regarding Indigenous peoples’ “readaptive use” of European clothing in her crucial article, “The Tribe Called Wannabee” (33).

<sup>123</sup> For a historical critique of digital utopianism, see F. Turner. For a contemporary examination, see Ballard et al.



sovereignty that are not easily resolved. Discourses of “the digital commons” or “the public domain” can undermine the ability of Indigenous peoples to determine who has access to their knowledge, sounds and images (Christen). Social media sites like Facebook are just as useful to advertisers and state security agencies as they are to activists and artists. Paeans to the power of “remix culture” in a digital age (Bourriaud, Lessig) tend to glide over the corporate-owned infrastructure which enables that cultural remixing. This includes the “physical Internet” of cables and servers, run by providers who profit from the bandwidth costs of legally or illegally downloaded files, and the pervasive advertising that makes “free” content highly lucrative (Blum, Fuchs et al). Any analysis of these inter-national digital networks and platforms should follow the money – which is overwhelmingly flowing to tech companies like Google, service providers like Rogers Communications, and content curators like VICE Media, leaving artists like ATCR to make most of their living on the road. Like any other musicians, ATCR must find their way through this contemporary “enterprise culture,” supporting themselves with DJ fees and state-funded touring grants, commodifying their music and selling their brand to the public.

Conscious of these constraints, A Tribe Called Red move adeptly through a complex new media landscape. They released their first album as a free download on their website, and regularly post new tracks and live mixes to Soundcloud, including their 2012 *Trapline* EP (the title is a pun on the “trap” beats that provide its musical backbone). 2013’s *Nation II Nation*, while pre-released in a live stream on VICE’s Noisey website, exists as a paid download and a physical CD. A collaboration with the Native-owned Tribal Spirit label and its drum groups (as well as with the eclectic Toronto label Pirates Blend), the album is an example of digitally mediated conversation between Indigenous nations, and between those nations and the settler nation. It honours the integrity of the Tribal Spirit drum groups, whose names and nations are listed on its tracks: Black Bear (Atikamekw), Sitting Bear (Ojibway), Northern Voice (Atikamekw), Smoke Trail (Ojibway), Eastern Eagle (Mi’kmaq), Sheldon Sundon (Seneca) and Chippewa Travelers (Ojibway). The album’s main innovations are in its production and distribution, which open up a dialogue between urban and land-based Native peoples, and between different musical “traditions of innovation.” During the recording process, ATCR

remixed tracks for the Tribal Spirit drum groups, which will appear on those groups' forthcoming albums. And to the three DJs' excitement, in the summer of 2013, physical copies of *Nation II Nation* were available for sale on the pow wow trail (Interview). As I will now explore, this ongoing engagement with pow wow music and culture is crucial to A Tribe Called Red's sonic and performative remixing of tradition.

### **Pow Wow's Transmotion**

In April 2013 in downtown Ottawa, parties are trickling into the Electric Pow Wow, and Bear Witness is warming up the crowd with a set of dancehall. Gently bobbing over his laptop, his denim vest dotted with pins, he eyes the crowd expectantly. Groups of young friends gather around the ratty couches of the appropriately-named Babylon nightclub, below airbrush-style murals of martyred rock, soul and rap artists from Aaliyah to Cobain. The crowd is hard to place: there are lots of young people in baseball caps and streetwear, a few glamorously dressed club-goers, Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people. There are even a few middle-aged non-hipsters. As the line outside lengthens and the dancefloor fills up, Shub and Dj NDN join Bear Witness on the low DJ stage. They start playing more hyped-up electro club tracks, moombahton and trap music. A camera crew circles the room; Shub on the mic says, "CBC is in the house, so don't do anything your mom wouldn't do." It's a warm spring night, and the energy of the crowd is edgy: many of them seem like undergraduates juiced up after their exams. Bear drops one of his favourite mashups: the anthemic chorus of Paul Revere and the Raiders' "Indian Reservation" ("Cherokee people! Cherokee tribe! So proud to live, so proud to die!"), montaged with a vocal sample ("this is real hardcore") and a heavy synth-driven bass drop. ATCR forego the coolness of some club DJs; they get into their music, whipping up the crowd (see Figure 4). When they spin their own tunes, the crowd gets excited and joins in, bouncing and singing along with the chorus of "Electric Pow Wow Drum."



Figure 4: A Tribe Called Red live (photo by Nadya Kwandibens)

Questions of belonging and appropriation don't disappear in this celebratory setting; there have been controversies about white kids showing up in war paint (Wheeler). But the very existence of such controversies, and their informal resolution through online debate, points to the Electric Pow Wow as a Native-defined cultural space, not unlike the reservation pow wows from which it takes its name. The group often describes how they were surprised by the success of the monthly party in Ottawa, which has been running since 2008. According to Campeau, friends told them that above all it was "a comfortable space for the Native population in the city," a "really safe space where people can listen to good music and DJs." In addition to being a safe space for urban Native people, the party is a place for gathering, for conversation between nations, for Indigenous artistic invention, and for reclaiming the power of designation over tradition. Calling the party an Electric Pow Wow is not an offhand gesture: the group sees the event as "a cultural continuance." As Campeau says, "Pow wows are celebrations of songs and food and friends. It's a gathering of people to share songs and

dances, and compete in a friendly sort of way. The only place you'd be able to do that in an urban setting would be a club." Like reservation pow wows, this urban club night expresses "the ways that Indians render their own experience into being, how they represent themselves and their people *to each other*" (A. Simpson, "Paths" 126, emphasis in original).

The continuity between reservation pow wows and an urban club night is not as far-fetched as it might appear. "Traditional" pow wows, as vernacular cultural practices, are sites of invention and reinvention, in a process of constant change and dialogue. Bear Witness makes this clear:

I'm a strong believer in the idea that culture and tradition are living, growing and changing things. We learn to understand our past to guide us into the future. I will always remember going to pow wows when I was a kid in the early '80s, right around the time break dancing was getting really big. There were fancy dancers who were adding break dancing moves in with the pow wow steps and things like checkered bandanas to their regalia. (qtd. in toksala)

This tradition of creative adaptation – between multiple Indigenous nations, from settler cultures, or (as Bear Witness describes) from the African diaspora – is part of pow wow's own "cultural continuance." "Pow wow" itself is a European term (meaning "medicine man") reappropriated by Natives. While pow wow can be traced back to summer tribal gatherings led by medicine societies, it began to take shape as a newly defined practice in the early 1800s, starting on the Plains and spreading eastward in secrecy. As a cultural form, it is a response to the suppression of Native ceremony in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, arising on the far side of cultural discontinuity. Historically linked to practices of cultural resistance like the Ghost Dance and the Sun Dance, the modern-day pow wow emerged in the 1940s in a newly visible and popular form (Valaskakis 162). Its music, dance, and cultural practice have only recently been the subject of serious study (Scales, Krystal, Browner). Twentieth-century anthropologists tended to regard it as syncretic and inauthentic, a corrupted version of the "traditional thing," unworthy of the salvage operations of ethnography.

The Electric Pow Wow translates into a club setting pow wow's ability to unify through music and dance, its embodied quality, as well as its relation to cultural pride,

memory and feeling. As Valaskakis writes, the “sweetgrass solidarity of pow wow” is built around dance and song, the vibration of the drum, and the gathering of members of different nations.<sup>124</sup> Pow wow itself can be seen as a remixing of traditional practice, a way to activate and reinterpret the historical, spiritual, and ancestral past of Indigenous nations. Pow wow dancers describe how each step on the ground should be a prayer to the Creator, and how the beat of the drum (the “heartbeat of the nations”) invokes the memory of the ancestors (Valaskakis 155-156). The pow wow drum is a “mnemonic device” that calls up feeling in the body, creating a sensation of continuance, joy and unity (Valaskakis 157). Through embodied and shared remembrance, in music, dress and dance, pow wow becomes a site for the reconstruction of Native collectivity. It is a contested site: contemporary competition pow wows, with their standardized categories and cash prizes, have been criticized for promoting a “pan-Indian” culture that tends to blur the distinctiveness of the songs and dances of individual nations.<sup>125</sup> Yet pow wow’s images and expressions of unity encourage a “feeling of collective identity and shared community” (Valaskakis 160). This community does not root itself in the unchanging past; it “is not an expression of nativistic revitalization but an awareness of cultural persistence” (160). As a form of persistence, it allows for variation and adaptation, for movement in time and (in Gerald Vizenor’s terms) cultural *survivance* and *transmotion*. As Valaskakis writes, “In the commonness of ceremony, Native people not only remember the past but also imagine the future” (160).

Pow wow songs can carry these feelings of remembrance, unity and persistence beyond the context of ceremony and gathering, far from the pow wow trail. As Choctaw musicologist Tara Browner writes, pow wow music has in practice become a specialized genre of popular music – particularly intertribal songs, which are mostly sung in vocables rather than tribal languages. Browner describes how for many participants on the pow wow circuit, “intertribal songs (as well as tribal-specific ones) fill a specific sonic and emotional void, especially when speeding down a rural highway played at full blast on the car stereo. Detached from their original function and meaning, the songs create a kind of portable Indian space,

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<sup>124</sup> Valaskakis takes the phrase “sweetgrass solidarity” from Robert Allen Warrior.

<sup>125</sup> See, for example, Russell Means’ scathing comments in the Epilogue to his autobiography, 538-39.

not really an extension of the pow-wow arena but instead an intensification of the self" (139). These songs are not static relics of some forgotten past, but in a state of constant transformation and negotiation, engaged with media technologies and processes of commodification. In the recording studio and in performance, innovative drum groups like Northern Cree, Eyabay and Midnite Express experiment with sound and rhythm to create new translations of tradition. Songs flow between nations, due to the "unprecedented levels of intertribal connectivity" brought about by both the pow wow trail and the Internet (Scales 7). Videos of performances or studio recordings by Northern Cree can easily top 100,000 views on YouTube. Performance styles are "borrowed" and adapted, and songs recorded with hand-held devices can show up in the repertoire of distant drum groups (Browner 135). A Tribe Called Red draws from this rich sonic universe, importing pow wow music's structure of feeling – its memory, futurity, and affective intensity – into their own club tracks.

### **Diasporic Bounce**

ATCR's singular musical innovation is to take recordings of pow wow drum groups and collage them into the electronic Afrodiasporic vernaculars of dubstep and global bass, creating what has been called "Powwow step." Their remix of Northern Cree's "Red Skin Girl," for example, takes an intertribal song by the popular drum group (sung in vocables and English) and marries it to Afro-British dubstep's abrasive timbres and staggered rhythms. ATCR's remix opens with a clavé-syncopated drum, a 3-3-2 beat quite different from pow wow drum groups' straight or swung downbeats. Over this, it layers fragments of singing in interlocking lines, with a high voice swooping up like a siren from a Bomb Squad production. The track then splinters into digital shards of sound and sweeping filters. As the chorus hits, the Northern Cree singers enter in powerful unison over a funky bass-drum-snare-hi-hat breakbeat, with accents on the "honour beats" of the original song. Even when the track strips itself down to its bare essence in the coda – just singers and drums – the groove is irresistible.

Pow wow drum groups already have their own groove or "bounce" – what Charlie Keil calls "participatory discrepancies," the rhythmic, melodic, and textural idiosyncrasies that

set heads nodding and bodies moving, causing music to be productively “out of tune and out of time” (96; see my Introduction). Pow wow’s “bounce” could be described in musical terms as “displaced syncopation”: singers tend to sing “off the beat,” in slight tension with the drum (Scales 81, 104). Drum groups themselves use the term “bounce” to describe the “rhythmic energy” that results from “the tension between the drumbeat and the melody.” As singers strike the drum in unison, their sticks literally bounce off the skin; when voices and drum find the right relation, the right bounce, it “feels as if the melody is floating effortlessly but firmly over the drumbeat” (Scales 104) “Powwow step” takes this “displaced syncopation” and allies it with the more blatant syncopation of Afrodiasporic rhythms. Pow wow music already bounces; Campeau will sometimes drop a track in unadulterated form as part of his DJ sets (Interview). When ATCR mashes drum groups’ off-the-beat singing with the heavy syncopation of trap music, or with the “heartbeat” house tempo and percussion flourishes of moombahton, the rhythmic and melodic energy becomes electric.

This sonic mash-up has deep historical roots in parallel colonial experiences. If pow wow’s remixing of tradition carries forward the histories and memories of Indigenous nations, then A Tribe Called Red opens this work up to include the sonic histories and memories of Africa and its diaspora. Contemporary electronic dance music and DJ culture grow out of black vernacular forms: “While the overarching category of dance music comprises a multiracial global movement,” writes Alexander G. Weheliye, “it is of note that most of these genres and the practices of DJing related to them originated in and still have strong ties with black cultural practices” (88). From hip hop to *reggaeton* to *baile* to *kuduro* to dancehall, musics of African origin are a touchstone for ATCR, as they are for other contemporary dance music producers tapping into the “sound of a black planet” (J. Brown 140). These sounds carry a freight of history, before, during and after the colonization and enslavement of Indigenous Africans – histories of discontinuity and persistence, terror and resilience.<sup>126</sup> In their music, the three members of ATCR both insert themselves into those histories and rewrite them to decolonize them further, interweaving the pasts and futures of Blackness and Indigeneity. ATCR tends to take its mixing of sounds and histories for granted:

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<sup>126</sup> Paul Gilroy’s “Jewels Brought from Bondage’: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity,” in *The Black Atlantic*, remains an important reference here.

for Bear Witness, listening to and DJing dancehall and hip hop was simply a product of growing up in a certain urban time and place – Toronto, with its large Jamaican diaspora, in the 1980s and 1990s (Interview). Yet the seamlessness of the group’s integration of Afrodiasporic music should not obscure its criticality and power. Echoing out from the internal diaspora of urban Aboriginal people, ATCR’s music becomes an evocative point of intersection: a way for peoples whose lands were stolen, or who were stolen from their lands, to “chant down Babylon” in the midst of the settler state.

As prominent Indigenous “global bass” artists, A Tribe Called Red occupy an intriguing position. “Global bass” is an umbrella term that embraces diverse dance music genres originating in the growing cities of the Global South. Like “world music” or “world beat,” it has a utopian quality, suggesting that the structural inequities of the global economy can at least temporarily dissolve in the low-frequency vibration of the dancefloor. As in the experience of Aboriginal media artists, global bass musicians must navigate enduring neocolonial economic structures, and wrestle with ideologies of tradition, time, and authenticity. The dissemination and reception of contemporary bass music is all too often curated by globe-trotting white DJs like Diplo, who has worked with ATCR and numerous other electronic artists. The talented producer of M.I.A.’s debut mixtape *Piracy Funds Terrorism* and 2008 hit “Paper Planes,” Diplo is a voracious poacher of global musical vernaculars, jumping between continents in search of new sounds; he has built a mini-empire by gathering diasporic beats under his Mad Decent brand. Thanks to the work of such European and North American curators, *kuduro* from Luanda finds a second life in the clubs of Lisbon, and a third among the cognoscenti of North America. Yet there can be no real comparison between the DJ fees in Las Vegas, where Diplo’s version of *baile* is a hot commodity, and those in Brazilian *favelas* from where it originated. In the majority of cases, the flow of dollars follows well-worn colonial routes (Eells, Greenburg).

Ideologies, too, move along familiar pathways and are slow to change. Much of global bass’s promotional discourse recalls the exoticizing stereotypes of “world beat,” that uncritical celebration of “practices of mixing, syncretic hybridization, blending, fusion, creolization, [and] collaboration across gulfs” described by Feld (265). To take a typical example, the



“Tropical Bass” website, based in Germany, embraces the impacts of global capital and its technologies on musical production, while declaring itself an arbiter of that music’s authenticity. As the site proclaims: “We are living in a new musical and cultural age, a constant mashup of the western and tropical world. No folklore kitsch, no fake-authentic traditional music with funny hats on. Global Bass with influences crossing continents on a daily basis. Contemporary and real-time.” The promoters seem to imagine a level playing field on which questions of power and cultural sovereignty are moot, and from which histories of ongoing colonization have magically vanished. In this vision, “authenticity” has simply shifted from “fake” tradition (and “funny hats”) to “real-time” mashups. Meanwhile, curators of European origin still hold the power of designation, the ability to distinguish between kitsch and real culture. Indeed, the very adjective “fake-authentic” implies a *real* authenticity, measured against which Aboriginal or African subjects can only fall short.<sup>127</sup>

By bringing together the Afrodiasporic sounds of global bass with the music of pow wow drum groups, A Tribe Called Red find another way to reject the false contradiction between the traditional and the contemporary. Here they find common ground with the diverse practitioners of what has been called “Afrofuturism”: the artists, writers and musicians of African origin who also struggle against racist and colonial temporal frameworks, offering a technologized “vision of the future that is purposely inflected with tradition” (Nelson 8). Afrofuturist discourse often borrows its tropes from science fiction; like Indigenous media theory, it offers contrasting approaches to the problem of tradition. Kodwe Eshun’s 1998 Afrofuturist manifesto *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, for example, resists the temporal drag of past practices on sonic futurity. “Sonic Futurism doesn’t locate you in tradition,” Eshun writes; “instead it dislocates you from origins. It uproutes you by introducing a gulf crisis, a perceptual daze rendering today’s sonic discontinuum immediately audible” (453). Following Jacques Attali’s *Noise*, Eshun is above all interested in the prophetic and anticipatory qualities of black sonic process, and critiques the orientation of twentieth-century Afrodiasporic

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<sup>127</sup> Feld’s mid-1990s analysis is still acute: “What rhetorically sets world beat [or “global bass”] apart is often the assertion of a new, postmodern species of ‘authenticity,’ one constituted not in isolation or difference but in creolization proper, an authenticity precisely guaranteed by its obvious blendings, its synthesis and syncretism” (266).

subjects toward projects of recovery. Eshun's future-oriented subjectivity is echoed by contemporary global bass DJs like the aptly-named DJ /rupture (aka Jace Clayton), who puts out mixes with titles like *Minesweeper Suite* and *Uproot*. Yet despite his stage name, /rupture's work is not pure discontinuity, deterritorialization or deracination. His mixes – which move quickly between Egyptian *shaabi*, Mexican *cumbia rebejada*, abrasive hip hop, and ambient experimentation – are stylistically eclectic but steeped in situated vernacular knowledge. Rather than uprooting, they practice “uprooting,” as Eshun terms it, a sonic rewiring that makes the global “changing same” audible and affectively present (Baraka). Along with other contemporary sonic experiments in the Afrodiasporic tradition, they vibrate with temporal bounce.

Afrofuturism, like contemporary Indigenous media art, does not call for a radical break with the past, but rather for a remixing of tradition. In his later essay “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” Eshun offers a more nuanced engagement with tradition and futurity, memory and anticipation. “The field of Afrofuturism does not seek to deny the tradition of countermemory,” Eshun claims. “Rather, it aims to extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective” (289). Echoing Benjamin, he argues that both past and future can be a repository of “temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress” (297). For Eshun, music – specifically, black vernacular music – is a privileged site of investigation: “It is difficult to conceive of Afrofuturism without a place for sonic process in its vernacular, speculative, and syncopated modes” (294). Eshun lauds those musicians, from jazz composer Sun Ra to techno DJ Derrick May, who specialize in “the articulation of futures within the everyday form of black vernacular expression” (293). Such an articulation is not the sole preserve of African or Afrodiasporic subjects. It can be seen in the work of musicians such as Maga Bo, an American DJ and producer who lives in Rio de Janeiro, whose 2012 album *Quilombo do Futuro* gathers a musical community of liberated runaways of all stripes, inspired by the history of Brazilian “maroon states” (R. Anderson). And it can be seen in the work of Indigenous sonic artists like A Tribe Called Red, who also

weave multiple past and future-oriented vernacular practices into a vibratory force in the present tense.

Beyond the temporal orientation of ATCR's work, its compositional techniques of cutting and mixing can be linked to Afrodiasporic cultural practice. "Cut 'n' mix" (the title of Dick Hebdige's classic book on Caribbean music) remains the basic strategy of "sonic Afro-modernity" (Weheliye), and by extension of most forms of contemporary popular music. As Julian Henriques writes in *Sonic Bodies*, cutting and mixing are complementary practices, "*partnered*, to use a Jamaican expression": one divides, the other reunites; one makes a break, the other sutures and smooths out (160). Certain musical genres that spring from black vernacular practice, like hip hop, tend to foreground the disjunctive cut; others, like disco or house, glide smoothly across the sonic mix.<sup>128</sup> Henriques argues that cutting and mixing are "invariably coupled together" as a form of syncopated repetition, a repetition that is a primary feature of African and Afrodiasporic music. Yet this repetition does not indicate temporal stasis or regression, a quality that Eurocentric critics have historically ascribed to musics of African origin (Snead). As Henriques writes, repetition moves both forwards and backwards in time, dragging and bouncing by turns: "one side of the cut is the moment of return, going back to the beginning, and regression. On the other side is the moment of renewal, emergence, and progression" (169). Cutting and mixing can be seen as a mode of working with the past, of prying historical material from settled frameworks and reorienting it toward the emergence of the new. With this in mind, the practice of the DJ can be seen as a kind of sonic history-writing (Apple). Cutting and mixing turn the sonic archive into a repertoire (to use Diana Taylor's terms), opening history to new performative possibilities. In certain cases, as in the work of A Tribe Called Red, remixing can even be a mode of decolonization. "There's not a problem that I can't fix, 'cause I can do it in the mix," in the words of Indeeep's often-sampled "Last Night a DJ Saved My Life."<sup>129</sup> The "problem" of race in music cannot be elided,

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<sup>128</sup> ATCR's name appropriates that of the hip-hop group A Tribe Called Quest; they draw on hip-hop style and iconography, and occasionally collaborate with rap artists. But their strongest connection to hip-hop culture is in their strategies of sonic and visual appropriation and montage.

<sup>129</sup> Weheliye quotes this line in *Phonographies*.

but perhaps it can be “fixed” (both identified and repaired) in the mix – as this iconic song by a white artist suggests.

A Tribe Called Red’s cutting and mixing ranges across Indigenous and Afrodiasporic pasts, marking their divergences and points of intersection in colonial modernity. One particularly multi-layered example of their sonic history-writing is “NDNs From All Directions,” a remix of dancehall DJs Super Cat and Nicodemus’s “Scalp Dem.”<sup>130</sup> Opening the track with a loop of high pow wow singing gives Super Cat’s toasting, with its Western-themed references to cavalry and Apaches, another historical twist. The Jamaican DJ threatens to send in “Indians from all directions”; as appropriated by ATCR, the threat becomes an affirmation of resurgence. The remix doesn’t condemn Super Cat’s fantasies of “playing Indian” (Green) and avenging himself on his enemies (which in any case are self-conscious fantasies: in the original video for “Scalp Dem,” Super Cat falls asleep in front of a sepia-toned Western on TV and dreams himself inside it). Instead, A Tribe Called Red pushes these fantasies front and centre. Bear Witness’s video for “NDNs” doubles down on the grim humour of this complex history, adding a layer of white ultra-violence in a stuttered loop: an enraged Southerner (Merle Dixon from the zombie drama *The Walking Dead*) brandishing a gun over what might be a beaten body, yelling “We’re gonna have ourselves a little pow wow, huh?” The brief image of the white zombie-survivor condenses and displaces the bad conscience of colonial modernity, acting as a screen for its “ghostly and haunting trouble” (Gordon 16). Here, the zombie-figure is the colonizer, the undead revenant who keeps staggering back, mindlessly cannibalizing Indigenous and Afrodiasporic culture. Super Cat and ATCR are uneasy allies in this horror-comedy. Full of unsettled energy, driven by a stripped-down dancehall beat, the remix drops into the scratched grooves of history, following the ambiguous appropriations between peoples thriving in the wake of colonial dispossession.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> The track is from the Wild-West obsessed *The Good, The Bad, The Ugly & the Crazy* (1994), released on Super Cat’s Wild Apache label.

<sup>131</sup> On the “grooves of history,” see Weheliye’s discussion of Ralph Ellison, Walter Benjamin, W.E.B. Du Bois and DJing in *Phonographies*, 73-105.



Figure 5: “NDNs From All Directions,” video still by Bear Witness

### Haunted Images

If A Tribe Called Red’s music vibrates with Afrodiasporic and Native survivance, Bear Witness’s videos deal with a different kind of temporal survival – the endless, repeated images of “Imaginary Indians” that persist in the colonial visual archive (D. Francis). The video artist selects clips from his extensive collection; using digital editing software, he then loops, colour-saturates, distorts, and montages them into new narratives (see Figure 5). The videos are often synchronized with the jagged rhythms of ATCR’s tracks, stuttering along with a dubstep beat or punctuating a bass drop. They are in the tradition of video appropriation artists such as Dara Birnbaum, or Gorilla Tapes’ “scratch video” work, in which mass-media video clips are looped repetitively and set to music to satirical effect (McIntosh). Projected live behind the DJs or in online videos, Bear Witness’s alternately disturbing, eerie and comical montages critically remix colonial and Indigenous modernity. They record a haunting, and perform a kind of exorcism.

While Bear Witness’s clips are drawn from diverse sources, they tend to cluster around the image-factory of the Hollywood Western, which for the past century has churned

out pictures of alternately savage and noble Indians in relatively static form.<sup>132</sup> As Roger Cornellier argues, these contradictory images and narratives are manifestations of settler society's "insatiable drive to correct, designate and celebrate that which corresponds to the reality of native peoples" (51). Their contradictory quality reflects the undecidability of what Cornellier calls the "Indian thing," which is "neither bad nor good, neither noble nor bloodthirsty, neither loved nor despised," or rather, moves erratically between these poles (56). Settler anxieties work themselves out in narrative and filmic genres like the Western, which oscillate between desire and disavowal in their relation to the Indigenous (Goldie). These narratives fulfill a dual purpose: "the suppression or effacement of the indigene" and "the concomitant indigenization of the settler" (Johnston and Lawless 369). Rayna Green points out that these genres are hardly innocuous: if "playing Indian" is an obsession in settler colonies, "play Indian roles depend on dead Indians" (49). The removal of the territory's first inhabitants makes room for stories of the Indigenized settler: the *gaucho*, the cowboy, the backwoodsman, the Mountie, the voyageur. Settler narratives often involve a peculiar inversion, in which "Indigenous people are seen as entering the settler space (and disturbing an otherwise serene unperturbed circumstance) *after* the beginning of the colonization process (Veracini 371). Veracini describes this inversion in Freudian terms. Settler narratives create "screen memories" – compromise memory-formations marked by dream-like displacements and condensations – which disavow the founding violence of colonization (371).

In the settler imaginary, this disavowed violence returns in symptomatic form: Indigenous people become threatening shadows, fleeting spectres, or ambivalent ghosts that haunt the present. "Indigenous spectrality," as Emilie Cameron calls it, is a "deadly trope" common to all settler colonies, from Canada to Australia to the United States.<sup>133</sup> Literary critics sometimes mischaracterize stories of Indigenous ghosts haunting the settled landscape as postcolonial. In fact, as Cameron argues, such stories reinscribe ongoing colonial relations

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<sup>132</sup> Rayna Green traces the Western's generic clichés back to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Wild West Shows, as well as dime novels, the works of James Fenimore Cooper, and "stagey versions" of Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha" (41).

<sup>133</sup> See Cariou, Gelder and Jacobs, Bergland.

by “writing out” “the bodies and voices of living, politically active Indigenous peoples” (388). Sometimes this “writing out” is quite literal, as in the poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott, who worked as Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs during one of the Department’s most aggressively assimilative phases. While traveling to Northern Ontario in 1905 “to arrange the surrender of Cree and Ojibway lands,” Scott wrote a poem called “Indian Place Names,” a sort of elegy (Cameron 385). The poem begins: “The race has waned and left but tales of ghosts, / That hover in the world like fading smoke / About the lodges...” (1-3) Scott laments the “vaunted prowess” of the Native, which is “Gone like a moose-track in April snow,” yet lingers in the “wild names” of Canadian rivers, lakes, and city streets (10-14). As Cameron points out, Scott was engaged in negotiations with “real, live Indians” when he wrote his allegorical ghost story. His spectralizing operation was ultimately unsuccessful: “In spite of Scott’s efforts, both poetic and bureaucratic,” Cameron writes, “the Cree and Ojibway clearly did not ‘wane,’ after all. They were real then and are real today” (385).

In the Indigenous experience of colonization, the haunting paradigm is inverted: Maria Campbell recounts how elders describe white settlers as “ghosts trying to find their clothes” (qtd. in M. Francis 1). In the domain of the visible, settler subjects produce spectral images of “the Indian” that haunt the present, affectively shaping the lived experience of colonialism. Racist images from over a century of audiovisual production – ethnographic films, Westerns, advertisements – linger in the electronic archive, on videotape, film reels, DVDs, or online. Preserved in “the medium of the media,” their being is subject to a certain “hauntology,” as Derrida terms it, a being that is “neither living nor dead, present nor absent; it spectralizes” (*Spectres* 63). These haunted images have had destructive political consequences. As Emma LaRocque writes, the repetition of racist images and texts has legitimized processes of dispossession by serving to “degrade,” “infantilize and objectify [...] Native people and their societies.” For settler subjects, these ghostly representations have “become more real in the minds of the public than any *real* Native peoples as human beings” (63-64). Native people themselves grow up surrounded by these colonial representations and can internalize them, leading to a “sense of shame concerning their Indianness” (LaRocque

22).<sup>134</sup> Such images are “survivals,” to use the term that Aby Warburg borrowed from nineteenth-century anthropology; their “afterlives” echo through “ghostly and symptomatic time” (Didi-Huberman, “Artistic Survival” 274). Yet this “colonial debris” has nonetheless elicited a tremendous creative response: for LaRocque, these images are “colonial shadows that have both haunted and inspired our own expression” (162).

If some Native artists and writers have responded to this “denied history of Indigenous erasure and spectacularisation” (M. Francis 15) by laying out a counter-vision of Indigenous culture, others, like Bear Witness, wade deep into the sludge of colonial visual history. His decolonizing work, like that of many other Indigenous artists, operates through appropriation and humour. The video artist sees his work as a kind of revisionist history-writing; through his “life project” of working with colonial images, he ultimately aims to depict “Aboriginal history from an Aboriginal perspective” (Interview; Ritter and Willard). In its inversion, counter-appropriation, humour and exaggeration, Bear Witness’s work has much in common with the work of Indigenous visual artists such as Edward Poitras, Terrance Houle, Jim Logan (in *The Classical Aboriginal Series*) and Kent Monkman (in his *Moral Landscapes*) (Hill et al., Ryan). In its reclaiming of debris from settler culture, it resonates with sculptural work of contemporary First Nations artists such as Brian Jungen and Sonny Assu. And in its ambivalent engagement with racist images, it intersects with works by African-American artists: Kara Walker’s cut-outs and shadow videos, for example, or Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*. Bear Witness’s comic-ironic inversions also recall those of his father, the celebrated photographer Jeff Thomas. In Thomas’s photo *FBI, Bear with Indian Scout* (1998), the young Ehren “Bear” Thomas (a.k.a. Bear Witness) leans casually at the base of the notorious Champlain Monument, his arm draped over the bent leg of the bronze sculpture of a well-muscled Native guide. The young video artist’s T-shirt sports an iconic Edward Curtis image of Native American chiefs, superimposed with the text “FBI – Full-Blooded Indians” (M. Francis 145).

A Tribe Called Red’s album art and press photography are filled with similar subversions of stereotypes and counter-appropriations of colonial imagery. The inside sleeve

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<sup>134</sup> Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* remains an essential resource for understanding the workings of shame in colonial contexts.



of *Nation II Nation* features an earlier Jeff Thomas photo of the same “Indian scout” statue, this time looking over the Ottawa valley and Parliament Hill. The CD jacket also reproduces the three DJs’ Indian Status Cards, which certify that each of them “is an Indian within the meaning of the *Indian Act*, chapter 27, Statutes of Canada (1985).” Their blank-faced ID photos echo similar mug shots in hip-hop album art, including the welfare card (“Identification Card for Food Coupons and/or Public Assistance”) on the cover of Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s 1995 debut album. These counter-appropriation strategies, both humorous and serious, are what Kobena Mercer calls “visual maroonage” (134) after the practices of the maroons, enslaved Africans who escaped from Caribbean and South American plantations and set up their own communities of resistance, joining forces and intermarrying with local Indigenous peoples (Price). They reclaim a power of designation over lives and identities that have long been defined by white settler institutions and racist iconography.

Like Jeff Thomas’s photographs of colonial statues and Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s Photoshopped ID card, Bear Witness’s videos are classic examples of *détournement*. In his visual montages, haunted images are reversed and cut loose from the web of colonial narratives. Looped to the music of vibrant Afrodiasporic and Native survivance, they can turn an injurious and objectifying gaze back onto their makers. Some of these painful images even contain an element that can be redeemed. Bear Witness often refers to the character of Billy, the “Indian scout” from the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *Predator*, who the artist says was a “powerful icon” for him growing up. As he recalls, Billy “has all the normal things that come with being the Indian scout: he doesn’t speak in full sentences, he spends a lot of time staring off into the bush.” But in *Predator*, the character also demonstrates real skill and courage: “As a young man, I looked at that and said, here was a really powerful Native actor in this awesome movie.” In videos like ACTR’s “Indigenous Power,” Billy is placed alongside clips of the WWF wrestler The Ultimate Warrior, and is played partly for laughs. But he also carries with him powerful affects formed by childhood desires and identifications. Pulled from the narrative matrix of the action film, looped and made the hero of his own story, Billy can be redeemed from racist stereotypes of the “stoic Indian,” becoming a half-ironic, half-sincere icon of a certain Native masculinity.

Such strategies of appropriation and redemption are widespread in found-footage film and video work, as Catherine Russell explores in her 1999 study *Experimental Ethnography*. Indeed, with their saturated colours and grainy degradations, Bear Witness's blown-out video loops strongly resemble the computer-synthesized images presented by the artist Hayao Yamaneko in Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*. Bear Witness's images, like the clips of political demonstrations worked over in Yamaneko's "zone," foreground their mediated quality. As the narrator of *Sans Soleil* observes, Yamaneko's images "proclaim themselves to be what they are: images, not the portable and compact form of an already inaccessible reality" (Marker).<sup>135</sup> Bear Witness's videos proclaim themselves to be images in a similar fashion, though humour is more important to his approach. One could even say that ATCR's videos use laughter to break up the compactness of colonial reality, exposing it as a series of spectacular images.<sup>136</sup> Looped and treated in the "zone" of video editing software, the images Bear Witness pulls from the settler visual archive are revealed as spectral: "digitalized, abstracted, and ghostly in their video form" (Russell 307). By dredging up these haunted images and exposing them to laughter, he strips them of their power, symbolically decolonizing them and shaking off their ability to shame. Watching Yamaneko run images of protest through his synthesizer, the narrator of *Sans Soleil* offers a remedy for political and visual inertia: "if the images of the present don't change, then change the images of the past" (Marker). Bear Witness's video work shares this anachronistic remixing strategy, if in a more irreverent key.

Russell argues that found-footage films and video remixes often employ a "redemptive aesthetic," assembling "allegories of history" from the image-bank of colonial modernity (269). Yet in Bear Witness's videos, redemption is always ambiguous and uneasy. His tools, as with other found-footage filmmakers, are juxtaposition and irony (Russell 272). In the artist's montage, some sequences are grindingly racist, while others are more complex, like the shots

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<sup>135</sup> This is the critical promise of found-footage film and video more generally. As William Wees writes, found-footage films "present images as images, as representations of the image-producing apparatus of cinema and television, but collage also promotes an analytical and critical attitude toward its images and their institutional sources" (53). See also Zryd.

<sup>136</sup> For Walter Benjamin, Chaplin's films used laughter in a similar way, to break up the "compact mass" of the viewing public: "Chaplin—the plowshare that cuts through the masses; laughter loosens up the mass" (SW2 792).

of the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team dancing the Maori haka “Ka Mate.” In his live projections and streaming videos, images rub up against each other: Judy Garland as a dancing Hollywood Indian, African-American Mardi Gras Indians in full regalia, the clichéd blue warriors of *Avatar*, Gary Farmer as Nobody in Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*, black-and-white ethnographic footage, endless loops of the 1980s sci-fi cartoon *BraveStarr*, and ghostly clips that are less easily identified. The whole forms a montage that is often queasy, sometimes comic, and generally difficult to pin down. Bear Witness’s visual remixing changes the signification of these ambivalent images, thus rewriting the historical past that they repeat in spectral form.

Much of the power of A Tribe Called Red’s video montage results from the uncanny familiarity of its sources. Russell notes that while “it is always tempting to trace the sources of images in found-footage films, the effect of the images is precisely due to the unknown status of the sources, which is what provokes the images’ radical ambiguity” (348n). This is not quite the case for the ambiguity of Bear Witness’s work, in which the source is sometimes buried and sometimes unnervingly obvious. Through selective cutting, he can take a familiar sequence and render it *unheimlich*. The “Wild West” setting of *Back to the Future 3*, for example, when remixed and projected live behind the three DJs, becomes a kind of “dream analysis,” puncturing the colonial dreamworld of my own settler childhood.<sup>137</sup> In live projections, Bear Witness often loops one particular sequence from *Back to the Future 3*: an anxious Marty McFly, catapulted back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, guns the motor of his DeLorean, pursued by mounted Indians galloping across the Plains. Marty looks in front of him and into the side mirror, and sees Indians coming “from all directions.” When accompanied by such images, ATCR’s live shows become an unsettling conversation, a remixing of history that is also a working-through. The title of that 1990 film seems appropriate: perhaps the group is suggesting that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people had better go back, and work through these difficult images together, if we are to share any kind of future on this land.

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<sup>137</sup> The phrase “dream analysis” is Russell’s (258). As Jameson reminds us, dream analysis might be a good model for allegorical interpretation: “the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogeneous representation of the symbol” (“Third World Literature” 73).

## Working It Through

Outside of ATCR's performances, Bear Witness's work is often presented in gallery exhibitions or streamed online. Some of his videos are specific to those more contemplative platforms – including “Woodcarver,” which assembles surveillance footage of the fatal police shooting of Seattle totem carver John Williams, superimposed with an over-the-shoulder shot of a long-haired man running toward a setting sun. But the videos work differently in the context of ATCR's live touring sets, which blend music, dancing and video into an immersive experience. It is one thing to observe an audiovisual “allegory of history” from the vantage point of a desk chair or the hard bench of a museum; it's quite another to absorb historical ghosts into your body while dancing in a sweaty mass (even when dancing in the atrium of a museum, as in the group's February 2013 show at the Art Gallery of Ontario). Live DJs already depend on the contribution of the “performing audience,” the dancers who along with producer and DJ “form a third side of the triangle of creative activity in electronic dance music” (M. Butler 72). Bear Witness's videos add another relationship to this circle, in which playing, listening, and dancing are joined by viewing. At ATCR's shows, dancers might look at each other or at the DJs, while absorbing the videos half-consciously; they might also pause and concentrate on the flow of images that Bear Witness mixes live from his laptop. Projected behind the DJs, the video loops invite the performing audience to work through “haunting legacies” while working it out on the dancefloor (Schwab).

At this point, exploring the concept of “working-through” – an important, if under-theorized, term in psychoanalytic thought – will help illuminate ATCR's decolonizing practice. In “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” Freud notes that psychoanalysis aims gradually to replace the patient's “compulsion to repeat” a symptom with a process of remembering. What Freud calls the “playground” (*Spielraum*) of the transference is the space in which the symptom can be “acted out” safely. Through free association, shards of the patient's unconscious memories enter into this play-space; the symptom condenses the “afterlives” of those unconscious memories. One could argue that psychoanalysis happens by

way of a kind of montage: analyst and patient gather and weave together memory-fragments, making them conscious so as to rob them of their compulsive power. In this process, the analyst might give a name to the resistances that cause the patient to repeat rather than to remember. Yet conscious naming is not enough; rational knowledge of a resistance does not cause it to disappear. As Freud writes, “One must allow the patient time to become more conversant with this resistance with which he has now become acquainted, to *work through it*, to overcome it” (“Remembering” 155). This working-through, Freud observes, often occurs during periods of relative stagnation in the analysis, when no apparent progress is being made. But there is movement underneath the surface. “Working-through,” according to Laplanche and Pontalis, “permits the subject to pass from rejection or merely intellectual acceptance to a conviction based on lived experience (*Erleben*) of the repressed instincts which ‘are feeding the resistance.’ In this sense, it is by becoming more conversant with the resistance that the patient is enabled to carry out the working-through” (487).

It is tempting to draw a parallel here with A Tribe Called Red’s video work, which also moves an intellectual knowledge of psychic and social repetitions – the traumas of colonial history – into the realm of lived, embodied experience. Bear Witness, in this somewhat problematic analogy, plays the role of the analyst, montaging fragments from the “optical unconscious” of settler-colonial North America into new narratives (Benjamin SW2 512). These images are symptoms, compulsively repeated and acted out. As Adam Phillips observes, “Repetition is the sign of trauma; our reiterations, our mannerisms, link us to our losses, to our buried conflicts” (142). The screen memories of literary and filmic genres use repetition to displace or block out the historical past: “genre,” Phillips writes, “is itself a form of repetition that easily obscures its own history, the conflicts it was born out of, the problems which made it feel like a solution” (142). Yet in order to “make the past memorable rather than spellbinding,” as Phillips puts it (143), we need more than an intellectual understanding – in this case, of the “deadly tropes” that overshadow Indigenous and colonial history. We need a *Spielraum*, a safe space where we can “become more conversant” in our lived experience with the resistances that block emergent decolonial futures. ATCR’s live show offers one of these possible spaces of play. In this relatively protected space, settlers, diasporic

and Indigenous peoples can “work through” images of a traumatic past, shaking them up in the vibratory intensities of the dance floor.<sup>138</sup>

ATCR’s live set accomplishes this working-through by bringing the repetitions of colonial imagery into the participatory realm of sound and music. In *Listening*, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that the sonic has an inherently participatory quality, what Greek philosophy calls *methexis*. For Nancy, “the visual is tendentially mimetic, and the sonorous tendentially methexic (that is, having to do with participation, sharing, or contagion), which does not mean that these tendencies do not intersect” (10). Sound tends to work on the level of participation, of sympathetic vibration and affect, rather than on the level of representation. This makes it an appropriate vehicle for working-through, which seeks to bring the representations of thought into the body, into lived experience (*Erleben*). It is interesting to note that Freud’s *Durcharbeitung*, translated in English as “working-through,” is also a musical term: it refers to the “working-out” or development of a musical theme in the sonata form.<sup>139</sup> In the case of dance music especially, we cannot ignore the bodily dimension of this musical working-through. Henriques emphasizes the carnal qualities of working-through via sonic media: “We work *through* something to find out more, or to ‘work it out,’” he writes in *Sonic Bodies*. “This can mean ‘taking it in,’ or letting it ‘sink in,’ that is, absorbing, assimilating, incorporating, or even ingesting something, so that we become part of it and it becomes part of us. So the passage of working *through* indicates the crossing of a threshold” (xviii). In the sonic field of A Tribe Called Red’s live shows, we work through the afterlives of colonial images by incorporating them, ingesting them. We bring these survivals into the body, as each one of us moves across the many thresholds of this music’s transmotion.

The politics of ATCR’s party, in Ottawa or on tour, depend on this embodied participation, this *methexis*. For Bear Witness, this “echoes the way Aboriginal spirituality works, where it’s a holistic thing – it’s part of your entire life, it’s part of your whole day, it’s

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<sup>138</sup> For similar arguments about music and healing, see J. Brown, Mbembe.

<sup>139</sup> The Lacanian analyst Darien Leader argues that the sonata form demonstrates a kind of meta-repetition: after the development, the recapitulation brings back the theme in its original form. Thus, he claims, psychoanalytic working-through does not necessarily have progressive connotations. However, in a musical sonata, even if the theme reoccurs more or less unchanged, it has been irrevocably transformed by its development, coloured and altered by its working-through. We no longer hear it in the same way.

part of how you get up in the morning, it's part of how you go to sleep at night. The political part of A Tribe Called Red and of the Electric Pow Wow party is a holistic thing; it's all part of the dance party." The videos and music catch us when our backs are down, in a place where we're looking for a good time. Their comic juxtapositions allow us to make our own connections, to take our "own experiences and start to put things together" (Interview). The politics of these gatherings are indeed "holistic," connected to everyday, embodied, lived experience. But they are also uncanny, haunted by the repetitions of histories that seep into the audiovisual mix. A Tribe Called Red's often jarring montage of images and sounds keeps their shows off-balance, preventing them from becoming a utopian space in which history is transcended and conflict is dissolved. Montage, here, is a way of puncturing the utopian yearning that haunts electronic dance music, which often manifests a "desire for a time that is not in time, a *unity outside history*" (Clover 70, emphasis in original). Although ATCR open up the possibility of certain embodied alliances, there is nothing utopian about their mash-up of Native song and Afrodiasporic musics, especially when combined with images dredged up from the colonial image-bank. Together, they present an aesthetics of colonial dislocation that is soaked in history.

Still, even given its haunted engagement with colonial images, the group's energetic remixing of sounds and images from the past and present should not be reduced to an allegory of dispossession, nor to an act of exorcism. As Paul Gilroy writes of hip-hop's montage-like techniques of breaks, cutting and mixing, "it is tempting to endorse the Brechtian suggestion that some version of 'montage' corresponds to an unprecedented type of realism, appropriate to the extreme historical conditions which form it. But these dense, implosive combinations of diverse and dissimilar sounds amount to more than the technique they employ in their joyously artificial reconstruction of the instability of lived, profane racial identity" (*Black Atlantic* 104). It can be useful to hear "*sound as history*," and to treat music as a medium that can register historical experiences of colonization and displacement (Veal 253, emphasis in original). But if sound is history, it is also more than history. A Tribe Called Red's sonic and visual montage absorbs and remixes the history of Indigenous peoples – both "a pain that is 400 years old" (Obomsawin, in Alioff and Levine 13) and the laughter that can

help translate that pain into Native *survivance* and *transmotion*. At their shows, as part of the “performing audience” – and in my case, as part of the settler nation – I am placed in bodily relation to these sounds and images, a relation that is unsettling but ultimately hopeful. What transpires at these parties is neither utopia nor historical allegory, but an experimental space where new relationships – between bodies vibrating to the same bassline – can emerge.

Ultimately, the body is where we must work through resistances built up by an ongoing, haunted history. As Brian Massumi writes, affect is fundamentally historical: “The body doesn’t just absorb pulses or discrete stimulations; it infolds *contexts*, it infolds volitions and cognitions that are nothing if not situated” (“Autonomy” 91, emphasis in original). Histories of hurt, guilt, prejudice, illness, and shame are held in the body. In the vibratory intensities of the sound system and the dance floor, some of that can be loosened up, changed into vitality, capacity, a “sense of aliveness” (Massumi, “Autonomy” 97). This process necessarily works in different ways for different bodies – diasporic bodies, Native bodies, migrant bodies, settler bodies – and for each body in the room. There is an incommensurability that this experimental space does not attempt to reconcile. ATCR’s “politics of vibration” plays across these gaps, acknowledging and bridging them at the same time (Boon, “One Nation”). At their shows, “the agency distributed around a vibrational encounter” (Goodman 82) can be felt across incommensurable pasts – in the bass of the sound system, in diasporic rhythms and Native voices. These vibrations are helped along by the “sonic dominance” of a PA system, which lets bass frequencies rumble in inner bodily space (Henriques). Yet sonic dominance doesn’t necessarily require amplification. At a June 2013 concert in a Toronto club, ATCR invited the drum group Sitting Bear to open up the set. Dressed in white, seated around their drum in the middle of the dance floor, surrounded by concentric rings of young listeners, the group played a short set of intertribal songs. Their unison beats and high singing bounced harder than any club track, vibrating Indigenous pasts and presents through the flesh, bones, ears and skin of everyone in that room.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> This “vibrational encounter” is sometimes re-symbolized in familiar language. The journalist Anne Hoffman narrates the bodily affects of ATCR’s audiovisual sets, at least for white settler subjects, as an experience of (dis)possession. Note the ambiguous racialized overtones, somewhere between fascination, guilt, and *jouissance*: “Finally, the group took the stage. They started out where the previous DJ had left off, playing a party track. And then – on the projector behind them flashed images of native cartoon characters,



## Remixing Resurgence

A Tribe Called Red's remixing of Indigenous and colonial history operates on a symbolic level, and on the level of bodily affect and practice. It could be argued that it fails to address the key decolonizing struggle in settler-colonial Canada: the defense of the land and its return to its First Peoples. Indeed, a certain amount of the group's energy has gone into struggles over Indigenous iconography – from hipsters wearing headdresses to sports teams like the Nepean Redskins – which might appear to be of secondary importance (Sibley). Yet “symbolic,” “affective,” and “actual” struggles cannot be neatly distinguished. As Cherokee blogger Adrienne Keene asks, in the context of debates over the appropriation of Native identity in the United States: “How can we expect mainstream support for sovereignty, self-determination, Nation Building, tribally controlled education, health care, and jobs when 90% of Americans only view Native people as one-dimensional stereotypes, situated in the historic past, or even worse, situated in their imaginations?” Symbolic struggles are struggles over legitimation and hegemony, with a powerful impact on the lived experience of colonization. This lived experience is stored in the body, working itself out in structural patterns of sickness and health, through felt states of capacity and incapacity. Images, sounds, and bodies matter. This is why another generation of Native artists and intellectuals is working hard to reshape the audiovisual and bodily world established by settler colonialism, addressing all the peoples living on this land.

ATCR's populism and popularity allow the group to play an influential role in this regard. In interviews and photographs, they project an urban style and relaxed, joking demeanour, counteracting colonial stereotypes that continue to wound and shame. Their music is utterly accessible, drawing on all the conventions and many of the clichés of electronic dance music; its “bounce” is irresistible. No one is turned away from the party (free festival shows sponsored by various state institutions make sure of that). The group

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grotesquely racist and yet so culturally widespread. Up surged the deep bass, the heavy drums. The sensation began in my hips and traveled up through my arms, until my entire body was shaking, seemingly without my consent.”

participates in mainstream structures of musical commodification, state funding, and media publicity, which give them the opportunity to speak broadly to youth from both Indigenous nations and the settler nation. This opportunity is extended on tour, in Canada and abroad, where they see their role as “ambassadors,” allied with more directly political movements like Idle No More (Bear Witness, Interview). Although their work takes place in cities, they are as invested in the continuance and reshaping of tradition as land-based Native activists and culture workers. Indeed, their work with pow wow drum groups helps strengthen the links between urban and land-based communities. As Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard has written, “whether in reserve settings like Grassy Narrows and Six Nations, or in urban centres like Vancouver and Victoria ... the best of today’s Indigenous movements ... are attempting to critically reconstruct and deploy previously disparaged traditions and practices in a manner that consciously seeks to prefigure a lasting alternative to the colonial present” (199). ATCR can certainly be counted among these reconstructive and prefigurative movements; its music has become part of a soundtrack to them, transportable to various settings on reserve and in the urban diaspora.<sup>141</sup>

A future-oriented remixing of tradition is a thread running through current Indigenous cultural, artistic and political movements. Contemporary Indigenous activists, writers and artists are consciously reclaiming a “power of designation” over “the traditional thing.” Their work has little use for pastoral allegories or melancholy readings of tradition; it embraces new technologies by, as Hopkins writes, “making things our own.” The emphasis is on cultural continuance and emergence, which often passes through an engagement with “traditional” practices, living or abandoned. With the lifting of the colonial suppression and shaming of Indigenous language, culture and ceremony, new translations of tradition become possible. This is especially true for the younger generation in Canada, which as ATCR’s Ian Campeau points out is the first to grow up without the violent intergenerational disruption of the Residential School system. For Native scholars, artists, and activists, now is the time for “picking up the pieces” of what has been shattered, for “digging up the medicines” to see what

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<sup>141</sup> At Toronto’s Pride march in 2013, for example, a joyful cohort of two-spirit dancers in regalia worked their way down Yonge street to the house beat of ATCR’s high-energy track “Sisters,” which features the singers of Northern Voice.

they can offer to the present (K. Anderson 3). A Tribe Called Red, with their remixing of Indigenous songs, Afrodiasporic beats, and colonial images, are wholly of this cultural-political moment. If they make music and art that is firmly in the urban present, they are also deeply invested in reworking history and tradition. And if they are engaged in a dialogue with the settler nation, they are also part of a larger wave of Indigenous resurgence that looks to the past to move into the future. The basic tension in their music and art, between vibrant sound and haunted images, makes clear the need to work through the resistances of a complex history so that new, unexpected political and cultural forms can emerge.

In the current resurgence, artists and writers often draw on concepts from Indigenous languages to address this need. I will close this chapter by indicating this limit to my own thinking of the translation of tradition, which can only gesture toward a rich lineage of Indigenous thought. Decontextualization and appropriation are real dangers; Leanne Simpson makes this clear in her discussion of the Nishnaabeg word-concept of *Biskaabiiyang*, which can mean “to look back,” or “returning to ourselves.” As she writes, “I could only really learn to understand this concept within the web of relationships of my existence” (*Dancing* 52).<sup>142</sup> She describes how researchers and scholars from the Seventh Generation Institute have used *Biskaabiiyang* in a similar way as the term “decolonizing” – “to pick up the things we were forced to leave behind, whether they are songs, dances, values, or philosophies, and bring them into existence in the future.” For Simpson, there is no sense in returning to an imagined pre-colonial past; those songs, dances, values and philosophies were never static and cannot be treated as such. As she writes, “Within Nishnaabeg theoretical foundations, *Biskaabiiyang* does not literally mean returning to the past, but rather re-creating the cultural and political flourishing of the past to support the well-being of our contemporary citizens. It means reclaiming the fluidity around our traditions, not the rigidity of colonialism...” *Biskaabiiyang*, as an Elder explained to her, could be defined in terms of “a new emergence” (49-51). Simpson’s discussion of this and other Nishnaabeg stories and philosophies is itself a remixing of tradition, a reinterpretation of the ancestral teachings that she has sought out, translated into her own experience, and put into writing. Her work walks a path of Native-

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<sup>142</sup> Simpson draws on Geniusz in this analysis.

defined reconstruction and prefiguration that avoids the pitfalls of “reconciliation” and other forms of engagement offered by the settler state.<sup>143</sup>

As Simpson makes clear, the Indigenous engagement with tradition, in the context of this “new emergence,” means invention and interpretation as much as recovery, moving forward as much as going back. In the realm of culture, this work is being done on the land as well as in cities, by writers, singers, dancers, artists, video makers and DJs. Their goal is to reclaim, in Simpson’s words, “the fluidity around our traditions, not the rigidity of colonialism.” This is not simply a matter of cultural renewal: as Simpson argues, and as Idle No More has demonstrated, a fluidity around tradition – which could perhaps be called “cultural sovereignty” – can translate into more directly political practice.<sup>144</sup> In the Indigenous experience, culture and politics are intimately intertwined, and the colonial suppression of cultural practices has only reinforced this bond. A Tribe Called Red’s remixing of tradition melds culture and politics in this “holistic” fashion. In the present musical landscape, their sonic politics can only go so far; they are limited by the constraints of the music business in which they operate.<sup>145</sup> But in December 2012, when they released “The Road,” the three DJs found themselves in a rare position: able to give affective shape to a political conjuncture, even in a song without words.

Four months later, in April 2013, as young people lined up outside Babylon to party with A Tribe Called Red, the political optimism of this moment was still palpable. Yet it was gradually becoming more tempered. Idle No More had showed how Indigenous cultural reclamation could translate politically, but the future of the movement remained uncertain. It was clear that struggles over Indigenous land title and resource extraction would only intensify in the coming years, and would require a broader political response than had thus far been assembled. The massive scale of the industrial transformation of this land – transcontinental pipelines carrying Alberta bitumen, large-scale shipping through the newly

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<sup>143</sup> For a sustained critique of the politics of reconciliation promoted by the Canadian state, see Coulthard, Alfred.

<sup>144</sup> On the concept of cultural sovereignty, see Coffey and Tsosie, who draw on Robert Allen Warrior and Vine Deloria, Jr.

<sup>145</sup> For example, their touring sets are relatively scripted and predictable, in contrast with their longer DJ sets, which allow for more improvisational juxtapositions of sound and images.

ice-free Arctic – would implicate everyone living on Turtle Island, even on this planet. Faced with dramatic transformations ahead, settler and migrant subjects were joining with Indigenous movements to slow or halt the extractive industries, their ecological and human violence, and their “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey). Building these alliances, and ensuring that they were true alliances, would require a great deal of work. As part of this process, settler subjects would need to work through a haunted past, decolonize our own thoughts and practices, and act in solidarity with Indigenous struggles for land and rights. For now, this process was only just beginning. At least these were my thoughts – as the dancefloor filled up at the Electric Pow Wow at Babylon, as “solidarity spring” looked forward to “sovereignty summer” (“Idle No More”), and as kids in baseball caps bounced and sang along to melodies that vibrated with the promise of a different future.



## CHAPTER THREE

### **Responding: the Abandoned Practices Institute**

*First Day, Second Naïveté – Leaving Goat Island – Practicing Anachronism –  
Expurgations in the Park – Response (Forced Love) – Attention and Abandon – Idyll by the  
Vltava – The Alfred Assembly – How to Say Goodbye – The Ones to Come (Second Thoughts)*

#### **First Day, Second Naïveté**

Prague: July 9, 2012. Day one of the workshop begins without introduction. Our group assembles in a large painting-and-sculpture studio on the second floor of AVU, the Prague Academy of Fine Arts, a stately, run-down beaux-arts building in a humdrum neighbourhood north of the Vltava river.<sup>146</sup> The studio's concrete floor is caked with years of pigment and glue; formerly white walls bear scars of tackings, tapings and hangings; a wall of window-panes rises and curves elegantly, reaching halfway across the ceiling in a high arc. The trees of the Stromovka wood sway just outside. The room is a machine for daylight, a place where the European tradition of plastic arts, of figuration and its modernist disturbance, can be transmitted. But now it has been cleared of easels, paints, and half-finished projects, and stands empty, except for a long table against one wall and a circle of black plastic chairs in the centre of the paint-spattered floor.

Today, those chairs seat the twenty-five students of the Abandoned Practices Institute, plus three instructors and a teaching assistant. Of the students, twenty are from the United States, mostly undergraduate or graduate students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), which provides the institutional base for the three-week workshop. There are also two

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<sup>146</sup> AVU is an acronym for the *Akademie výtvarných umění v Praze*.

students from Canada, one each from Brazil and Romania, and one Korean SAIC student, just back from military service in his home country. We have heard about the course through word of mouth, and have come to Prague at some expense, lured by the charisma and reputation of the three teachers, Matthew Goulish, Lin Hixson and Mark Jeffrey, all former members of the Chicago-based experimental performance troupe Goat Island. The subject of the course is amorphous, as is its methodology: what exactly are “abandoned practices,” and what will we be doing with them? Some of the students, who have studied with these teachers at SAIC or seen their work, have an idea of what to expect. All I have to go on is an online video of performances from last year’s workshop in Chicago. The video shows a relatively incomprehensible series of overlapping actions before a blank-faced audience – young Americans tuning a radio, jumping rope and singing, and cracking eggs over their heads. My interest in the politics of anachronism has led me here, but I am a bit wary, to say the least, with no special love for the transgressive clichés of performance art. I am conscious of my habits of aesthetic judgment and my critical prejudices, which I try to hold at bay.

There is no icebreaker, no team-building, no extended go-round. Highly formalized introductions will come later. The day begins, as many of these days will begin, with a short reading by Matthew Goulish, a mini-lecture or an aphoristic essay. Goulish is a slender, monk-like man with bright eyes and a shy grin. He reads slowly, in a calm, quiet voice; the words rush over me like a shower of sparks. I catch a few phrases: his introduction of the teachers and guest lecturers, and then his description of the course: “It is strange to teach a practice-based course like this one conceived in relation to a subject, when the subject is practice, or a form of practice – in this case, abandoned practices and endangered uses.”<sup>147</sup> He explains that the course is not organized around a set of methods, and does not engage specific media. Instead, it will look at “abandoned practices” as a “field of study” – “by which I mean transposing the subject to a set of activities, constraints or challenges that we will pose to you.” We learn that the course will shift between three basic modes of creation: writing, installation and performance, and that each of these modes will come into contact with “some

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<sup>147</sup> All references to text spoken during the workshop are from Goulish’s notes, which he kindly made available, or from my field notes and audio recordings.



form of research, of looking outward” – inspired by the sources that the teachers give us, and the unfamiliar city where we find ourselves.

Today, Goulish tells us, will be a day focusing on experience and doing, rather than talking and analysis.<sup>148</sup> We will jump into a one-day mini-workshop, a self-contained microcosm of the Institute, and save the discussion for later. But he does give us a hint of what is to come: “The three of us will take turns giving you instructions, directives, or constraints for your activities, and for structuring your time.” These time-structures will be a constant throughout the three weeks. Time constraint – *chronos* or clock-time – is intimately entwined with practice, which Goulish here describes as “methods of disciplined creativity.” As he puts it, “we are serious about time”: time-constraint is needed “to establish an activity as a practice, something like high school ‘band practice’ or ‘cheerleading practice,’ from 3:30 to 4:30 every day. Our responsibility is to give you those tasks and times to work within, and your responsibility is to allow the time we give you to be the perfect amount of time for the task.” Over the next few weeks, we will get used to creating by the clock, and to fitting our creative work into elaborate chronographic schema. Strangely, mathematical time-structures are one of the ways these teachers have found to free their students from self-imposed critical and artistic paralysis.

The day’s time-bound tasks are about to begin. There are more words from Goulish, which I struggle to absorb – short excursions on performance (“when we say *performance* we do not know entirely what we mean, and we hope that each of you will contribute to the definition of that concept, by placing something unexpected or ordinary into that container”); on community (“For these three weeks, beside the point of the subject of our study, we have an indirect objective of opening spaces for community. Community in this context is the experience of a set of others outside the self, in some manageable fixed proportion, or measure”); on how to interpret the teachers’ directives (“don’t be afraid of starting small or doing something uninteresting, or insufficient, or less than your capability. On the contrary – that may be the best way to start, to allow space for the unknown to appear”). The flurry of

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<sup>148</sup> This is typical of their work: as Lin Hixson writes of Goat Island workshops, “In general, we begin with an emphasis on doing and experiencing rather than talking and discussing. This is deliberate on our part.” In Bottoms and Goulish, *Small Acts* 193. (Hereafter cited as SA.)

words comes to a close, and we are invited to approach the long table, which is covered in white laminated cards lying face-down. One by one, in no particular order, we each pick up one of these cards and turn it over.

The cards are an eclectic archive or incomplete catalogue of abandoned practices, our first introduction to the Institute's "field of study." Each one features an image accompanied by an archly-written text, describing a specific abandoned or endangered practice. Looking at the cards together, the field seems undefined and broad: there are abandoned practices of healing (medieval "Beak Doctors," "Blood Transfusions from Animals to Humans,"), abandoned practices of communication and navigation ("Paris pneumatic mail," "Portolan charts"), abandoned practices of production ("Ice cutting," "Ropewalk," "Concussion Theory or Rain Making by Explosion"), and abandoned practices of performance ("Pole-sitting," "Ornamental Hermit," "Pepper's Ghost"). Some vanishing practices suggest elaborate or exotic routines ("Danse Macabre," "Digesting Duck," "Marathon Dancing"); some are more mundane or familiar acts just out of reach ("Rotary Dial," "Tug-of-war," "The Twist"). Some practices are absurd, some are romantic, and others are disturbing – like the "Ducking Stool," a vanished mode of public humiliation (and witch-testing) by mechanical submersion. They all seem to have occurred in U.S. or European contexts. As Goulish and Hixson later explain, the cards serve as a "point of contact with history," a way of encouraging students to work and think in relation to an external, concrete element of the past. Each card has also been carefully chosen for "some abstract-able something," a formal element that could be "neutralized and transferred to something that somebody might want to do now," at least in an aesthetic mode (Interview). But at the moment, no explanations are given – we only have the one card that each of us has chosen.

My card is Prague-specific: "House Signs," the sculptural markers that sit above many of the historical city's doorways. The card explains that these allegorical sculptures or emblems "depicting saints, animals, musical instruments, or everyday objects" were once the city-dwellers' main way of identifying and locating a house; they competed with a numbering system introduced by the Hapsburg Empress Maria Theresa in 1770 (Abandoned Practices Cards). The card gives me four examples, each illustrated with a small photo: "At the Three

Fiddles,” “At the Stone Ram,” “At the Carp,” “At the Black Sun.” Each sculpture seems self-contained, hieratic. We are instructed to make a list of elements or qualities of the abandoned practices on the card, and given 12 minutes to complete this task. My list assembles itself quickly, jumbling the descriptive, the associative, and the theoretical:

place – at

making a home

animals – a ram, a carp – with people

three fiddles, one with its back turned

creatures and things

filigree, decoration

how to find your way

the single place – at the carp

a particular history, tradition

generations – families

what does the city look like with this map?

carp – pious fish? ram – pious beast?

religion

a face to the world – a lasting face

numbering – enlightenment

fungibility, convertibility

empire – rulers

symbols or emblems? allegory?

the emblem – coat of arms

pub signs

house numbers – property bought and sold – value – commerce, individuality

late medieval flowering – death and surplus

fine beasts – scales and fur

a child, a saint?

the sun – heavy face – music – wind and weather – rays – organ pipes

I feel my thoughts running along familiar grooves: the clichéd opposition of tradition and modernity, the particular, hand-carved sculpture gradually giving way to the universal, bureaucratic rationality of house numbers... But beyond these habits of thought, there are also concrete details that lodge in my thinking like burrs stuck to my trousers – a simile on poetic knowledge (from Robert Frost) that Goulish will offer us later.<sup>149</sup> There is something wholly *other* about these signs – in the smile of the child leading the ram, in the rippling detail of the beast’s wool, in the organ pipes that splay out in rays from the black sun. I feel my mind tugging in that other direction – the direction of the particular, but also of the not-me, the unknown.

Perhaps this alterity is what’s expected: Goulish now tells us to choose an element from our list that strikes us as “the most foreign, the most strange and distant from your own experience.” I settle on the word “pious” – the sense that these house signs are not just markers of territory, but emblems of devotion. (The Christ-like child, ram and fish suggest as much.)<sup>150</sup> Goulish then instructs us to compose what he calls an “objective response” to that element. He explains:

By *response* I mean a short composition in whatever form you choose – engaging movement, performance, speech, writing, visual tableau or image, explanation, or some other mode – but a response that you can present somehow, communicate somehow, to another person.

By *objective* I mean from a place of non-understanding, or trying to understand rather than already understanding, as if understanding has been disengaged.

To help us, or to confuse us further, Goulish refers to the idea of a “second naïveté,” which we can experience upon arrival in an unfamiliar place – like this old and new city where we now find ourselves. In this state of encounter, he explains, judgments, prejudices and habits of

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<sup>149</sup> From Frost’s “The Figure a Poem Makes”: “Scholars get [their knowledge] with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic; poets theirs cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books. They stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields” (133).

<sup>150</sup> The intertwining of religious iconography and these sculptural house signs – at once iconic, indexical, and symbolic – could also be the expression of a semi-literate society. As Alfred North Whitehead writes in *Modes of Thought*, “About five hundred years ago, only a small minority could read – at least among the European races. That is one great reason for the symbolism of religion, and the pictorial signs of inns and shops.” Qtd. in Goulish, *Microlectures* 205.

perception can give way to “a kind of innocence of perception,” where “small triumphs of understanding, as learning,” appear “like instantaneous fulgurations, lightning flashes.”<sup>151</sup> Goulish connects this “objectivity” of the second naïveté with Roland Barthes’ description of the “neutral awakening,” the “suspended time” between the death-like experience of sleep and the anxiety of waking life.<sup>152</sup> His instructions to us are poetic, but cryptic:

Consider the neutral awakening like the “second naïveté” – precious, rare, fragile, brief – as the transitional body (between death and anxiety) from which you devise your objective response to your abandoned practice card, or the one foreign quality of it from your list of qualities. It is as if you see this quality now from your neutral state in a process of awakening, and begin to come to a drip-by-drip wakeful understanding of it.

The “objective response” that comes out of this state of half-understanding, we are told, should be written down as a set of instructions for ourselves that can be presented to another person. The same goes for our next task – selecting an element from our list that seems most familiar, and composing a “subjective response,” a creative response that hybridizes this element with our own past experience and creative practice. Each of these tasks is also allotted twelve minutes. We are all scattered around the AVU studio, sitting on plastic chairs or on the paint-caked concrete, scribbling in our notebooks or experimenting with movements in space. An hour and a half has gone by, and we haven’t yet introduced ourselves.

Over the next few hours, we will follow further directives, this time from Mark Jeffery and Lin Hixson – formal, sometimes obscure instructions for developing, editing and transforming these objective and subjective “responses.” Jeffery, a younger redhead with a midlands drawl and a penchant for eccentric purple clothes, instructs us to “develop some of the material with reference to someone on your periphery.” The room fills with sound and movement, young artists stretching their legs and taking stuttering steps – fragmented gestures, bursts of noise, or further scribbling in notebooks. I compose a long sequence of instructions – which is immediately truncated, as Jeffery tells us to break our response down

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<sup>151</sup> Goulish, Lecture. He links the concept of the “second naïveté” to Stanley Cavell, though it is likely traceable through Ricoeur, Adorno, Cioran and Barthes.

<sup>152</sup> See Barthes, *Neutral* 37.

into versions of 30 and 15 seconds. We pause for lunch, sitting on a ledge behind the school overlooking a slope that descends into the Stromovka wood. On our return, we are met with one of the teachers' chance-based methods for pairing us off: each of us is given a little object, some souvenir of this new city; there are twelve pairs of these *tchotchkes*. I take a woven wicker snowflake, and then find my partner, Aundra, who holds the same folksy ornament. We teach each other our objective responses. I tell her to kneel and hold an imaginary fish in her arms, singing to it; she tells me to wander through the crowd, to rest a hand lightly on a stranger's shoulder and whisper softly, "to all it comes."

Hixson now prepares us for a series of three-minute performances, which will close the day. The former director of Goat Island, warm and straight-backed with a jumble of black curls, Hixson's specialty is getting us ready for performance – helping us transition from making to showing. She instructs us to think of the area code of our phone number – in my case, 416 – and to take each of those numbers as the number of times we will perform our action during each minute of the performance (for me, 4 times, 1 time, and then 6 times). We are also told to think about the following qualities for each minute of the three-minute composition: "out of sight," "official," and "domestic." The three minutes will be a sequence of three actions: each of us will perform our own subjective response, our partner's objective response, and finally our partner's objective response with words. In performance, she adds, we should think about where we put our eyes. The layering of instructions is overwhelming – and I have entirely let go of any special attachment to my own "creation." Each pair of performers is combined with another pair, forming a quartet of simultaneous, unrelated, overlapping acts. The six quartets perform in a relay around the studio space. Goulish tells us that although there will be no formal response to the performances, we should "pay close attention to the work of the other groups." He reminds us: "the quality of your attention is an informal form of response, after all." So we focus our frazzled thoughts and watch and perform, in turn.

My impressions of the first day's performances are more judgmental than I would have hoped: our actions seem futile, abstracted, isolated from each other, often showily absurd or grotesque. The word "juvenile" comes to mind – a collection of pranks, party tricks,

shouts and pratfalls. Of course, a nicer word would be “playful,” but I’m not feeling quite ready to enter into this game. We are all a bit anxious, showing off, trying to defend our own identities through this day’s strange process of formalization and depersonalization. I think of the “long practice” of the abandoned practice cards, those various lost traditions, now abstracted and broken up into timed units of repetitive action. Like Benjamin’s description of Baudelaire’s “spleen,” these three-minute compositions seem strangely reified, lost fragments caught in historyless time, an empty time in which “the minutes cover a man like snowflakes” (SW4 335). We have moved from the description of a vanished practice into a strictly timed “performance” that plays with the loss of that practice. Are we just reenacting, in a postmodern, fragmented vein, modernity’s rationalization of lived time – a rationalization here translated not as work, but as play?

Yet the quality of “attention” that Goulisch asks of us helps to move the performances into a different register. Our attention respects the commitment of the day’s work, and honours the invention that our commitment has produced. We’ve worked hard, and looked on each other’s work with respect – and our attention somehow redeems the fragmented, awkward and forced performances themselves. I am still not quite at the state of “neutral awakening” or “second naïveté,” still holding onto my own wakeful critical prejudices. But as we walk out of the studio, I feel a little lighter, a little freer, ready for conversation and encounter. The teachers lead us through the streets of Holešovice, uphill into the Letná gardens, to a site that will hold some significance for the workshop. In a wide clearing overlooking the city, we come upon a giant metal sculpture of a metronome – that marker of musical time and tool for musical practice. Red and black, its iron arm swings slowly over the spires and bridges below. We learn that the metronome, a sculpture by Vratislav Karel Novák, sits on the site of a vanished Soviet monument, a monstrously huge sculpture of Stalin leading an army of workers. The metronome: a monument to time both chronographic and musical, and a placeholder for abandoned history. It’s a fitting place to close the day.

## Leaving Goat Island

Even on its first day, the pedagogy of the Abandoned Practices Institute emphasizes objective constraints, and the interruption of personal practice. Rather than seeking to meld its participants into an integral community, or instruct them in a pre-existing artistic methodology, it works via formal processes of subtraction, interruption, and exposure to alterity.<sup>153</sup> For the three teachers, this mode of creating through formal, time-constrained directives has a long history, rooted in their own work with their former company Goat Island. Hixson and Goulish began Goat Island with two other friends over a Chicago thanksgiving in 1986, and they produced one finished full-length piece roughly every two years until the group's dissolution in 2007. The collective achieved a kind of legendary status in the worlds of avant-garde performance and "post-dramatic theatre," due to its intimate and intense shows, its dogged working methods, its innovative workshops, and the accomplished writing of its members, Goulish in particular.<sup>154</sup> It has also been canonized by critics and academics in Performance and Theatre Studies, whose writing on Goat Island's shows can slip into a lyrical or even awestruck tone (Anderson-Rabern, Heathfield, Phelan). The group's working methods contributed to this mythology: for twenty years, they would "meet three times a week for three hours each meeting," rehearsing in a gymnasium on the third floor of a church, marking out the playing area with tape, putting plastic over the windows in winter, slowly gathering material and assembling it into a show (Jeffery, in Bottoms and Goulish, *Small Acts* 115).<sup>155</sup> Each member of the group – which shifted over time – would make monthly contributions to a company account, and would help the others in finding

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<sup>153</sup> Garoian's discussion of a Goat Island workshop offers an overview of this pedagogy of "interruption," which diverges sharply from the Grotowskian *via negativa* or stripping away of habitual patterns. These teachers' emphasis on formalism, chance and constraint is quite unlike most modernist performance pedagogies from Stanislavski on, which tend to present a substantive "method" that can be learned. Instead, their philosophy owes much to American experimentalists and conceptualists such as John Cage, Alan Kaprow, and John Baldessari, as I explore below. An approach based on formal or conceptual directives and constraints has become widespread in recent decades in the pedagogical worlds of studio art, poetry, post-dramatic theatre and contemporary dance. For a compelling "practice text" that adapts this approach to contemporary choreography, see Burrows's *A Choreographer's Handbook*. In the realm of the studio art assignment, a practice text along these lines is Paper Monument's *Draw It With Your Eyes Closed*.

<sup>154</sup> On post-dramatic theatre, see Lehmann.

<sup>155</sup> Hereafter cited as SA.



meaningful day jobs (from teaching to carpentry) to pay the bills. Although Hixson acted as director, Goat Island was a collective from the beginning: it was “a structure of living,” which created its “own minute society” (Jeffery, Hixson, SA 115-16). Even its dissolution – with the 2007 piece *The Lastmaker*, a meditation on both lasting and ending – was a planned, collaborative act. Few artistic collectives have been so consistently egalitarian, or have endured so long.

The remarkable book *Small Acts of Repair: Performance, Ecology and Goat Island* (2006), which gathers essays and fragments of writing by company members, friends and scholars, opens a window onto the group’s working process. As Hixson puts it, “our process could be described as a series of directives and responses”: she would pose questions or challenges to company members, who would bring in “acts of return,” interpreting those directives in the way they saw fit (SA 131). Goulish lists the directives that initiated the group’s early pieces:

Describe the last time you had sex.

Create an event of bliss/create an event of terror.

Why were you in pain in such a beautiful place?

Create a shivering homage.

Invent an arrival.

How do you say goodbye? (*Microlectures* 10)

In taking up these tasks or questions, the group’s members could choose to “take [the question] literally; take it allegorically; take it as a preface; take it as a mystery to decode” (Goulish, SA 133). Responses might be dances, bits of text, objects, images, or pieces of historical material. This mode of creation through directive and response extended into the many workshops and summer schools that Goat Island ran in North America and Europe over its twenty-year lifespan. Watching workshop participants create installations from objects gathered from the streets, Goat Island member Karen Christopher realized that both the students and their teachers were acting as “scavengers – like seagulls cleaning the beach, or vultures settling over dead, discarded things – devouring the waste, making new use, transforming, digesting, and re-gifting the world with a new twist on old matter” (SA 135).

Such a response, an “act of return,” tends less to create something out of whole cloth, and more to scavenge lost or discarded remnants – the flotsam of history or the detritus of modernity – gathering it into a nest with other bits picked up along the way.<sup>156</sup>

The group freely admits that this kind of scavenging response gave their work a “found” quality, composed as it was from material plagiarized and montaged from multiple sources. Unlike other avant-garde stalwarts like the Wooster Group, whom the collective admired, Goat Island engaged in “construction” more than deconstruction, assembling bits of invented or stolen material into a “multi-voiced, polyphonic” structure, which nonetheless “makes sense” for performers and audience (Hixson, SA 141).<sup>157</sup> As an example, Goulish describes his awkward attempt to imitate a brief fragment of dance by Dominique Mercy, which he had seen on videotape while staying at a friend’s house in Vienna. Through the serendipity of losing the tape, Goulish was forced to work and rework three seconds of the virtuosic dance, adding movement from another of Mercy’s performances, eventually turning it into “an ecstatic misremembered catechistic jumble” (SA 160). This awkward, stolen dance then became working material for the group, to be further jumbled with other borrowed fragments through a process of “re-authorship” (SA 66). As Hixson writes, her direction would allow a piece’s structure to develop through continual decomposition and recomposition: “Separating fibers, filaments and strands in an unweaving process more akin to forgetting and re-collecting than remembering” (SA 169).<sup>158</sup> This unweaving, it is important to note, was not a fetishism of the fragment: the undone strands would be re-collected, woven into a new pattern, making a garment as whole and self-contained as any island.

The group’s shows have in fact been described as little islands: intimate, eye-level performances surrounded on multiple sides by a small “sea” of audience, staged in adapted spaces that recalled their church-gymnasium home, with the playing areas marked out with tape on the wooden floorboards (Bottoms, SA 36). In performance, the group’s omnivorous,

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<sup>156</sup> Steven Bottoms describes the fragments of old TV shows and advertisements in Goat Island’s work in these Benjaminian terms, as “like flotsam – detached from the conveniently linear cultural narratives they are assumed to be a part of, or retrieved from the ashcan of the discarded and the forgotten” (SA 93).

<sup>157</sup> On the Wooster Group and deconstruction, see Auslander, Vanden Heuvel.

<sup>158</sup> For more on “unweaving,” see the discussion of Laplanche in my Conclusion, below.

scavenging approach was matched by an emphasis on everyday bodies and everyday materials. Here Hixson was inspired by the early Judson Church work of Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton, with its pedestrian movement, facial neutrality, and task-like activity. Goat Island's performers often tended toward an "exhaustive physicality" recalling military drills or dance marathons, highlighting the fragility of their untrained limbs. Sequences like "the impossible dance" from the 1998 show *The Sea and Poison*, an un-danceable, computer-generated choreographic routine, subjected them to "a kind of strategic humiliation, exposing their awkwardness, their vulnerability, their limits" (Bottoms, SA 77). The group's emphasis on everyday movement pushed to extremes was paralleled by its materials, which Jeffery reports were "generally connected to the everyday, to the banal, to the ordinary" – in a grey zone between nature and artifice, like the cardboard and Astroturf in *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy* (2004), or the dollar-store plastic frogs used to create a rainstorm in *The Sea and Poison* (SA 41). Certain notable moments could be at once banal and transcendent, like Goulish planting a bean seed on his head, carefully placing it in a mound of dirt and watering it – an act of repair, despair, or devotion (SA 81, 190).

The group's collective process, and its depiction of an exhausted world filled with exhausted bodies that nonetheless move together, gave their work a political dimension despite its lack of manifest political content. The world of Goat Island performances was a world after nature: the all-too-human world of the Anthropocene, or more specifically "the dirty, sweaty, poisoned, exhausted world of expanding global capitalism" (Bottoms, SA 78). According to Adrian Heathfield, *It's an Earthquake in My Heart* (2001) asked its audience: "How to live when the late-capitalist complex has buried its mechanisms deep inside our flesh?" (SA 79) If the group had a modest answer to this question, at least for its fellow artists, it might lie in its own commitment to collaborative work, a commitment that Hixson carried with her from the feminist art community of late-'70s and early-'80s Los Angeles. Against the orientation of the art world toward the individual artist – the property and propriety of "my work" – the group cultivated strategies of deappropriation, sidestepping the ownership of ideas within the shared economy of the rehearsal process. By making the choice to work together,

the group's members had to cultivate certain habits of non-attachment. As Hixson recalls, they quickly learned

the danger of bringing completed thoughts and intentions into rehearsal. The attachment and preciousness that come from perceiving a movement and text as mine halted the group process with its inability to let things go. We formed a habit out of necessity; bringing in bits of ideas, half-empty movements, fractions of texts, and under-developed schemes. The completion of an idea, of a movement, of a sentence comes from uniting a half-empty fragment with someone else's half-empty fragment. ... This is our habit of completion, stringing the incomplete with another's incomplete. (SA 124)

Hixson refers to Levinas here: the other breaks in on my solitary intentions, and the interruption of being emerges as a primordial ethical relation.<sup>159</sup> For Hixson, the rehearsal process stages this interruption of being, often in messy and crazy-making ways: "Thus there is intention, rupture, and overflow. These others are constantly interrupting what I have intended and fill me over the brim with their beings" (SA 125) Collaboration, when it is thoughtfully structured and entered into freely, is one way of making perceptible this difficult being-in-common. Feelings get hurt, people sniff at your dearest ideas, and the whole thing might just break down. Outside, the world is exhausted, damaged, and in need of greater repair than seems possible to offer. Yet, as Goat Island's work suggests, opening to the hurt and pleasure of this interruption of being might point toward a politics of repair, by inventing actions that stage our "originary coexistence" (Nancy, *Being* 11).

The group's emphasis on collaboration extended into the many Goat Island workshops and summer schools, which became a key component of its practice. Successful rehearsal directives or experiments from their own process were reverse-engineered into workshop structures: like the directive to "name and describe an impossible task," which could be used to generate bits of movement for performance (Garoian 86). The "interruption of being" experienced in collaborative rehearsals was dramatized in the many "interruptions" used to structure a Goat Island workshop – interruptions of each participant's singular

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<sup>159</sup> Hixson is drawing on Faulconer's discussion of Levinas in the context of psychology.

existence, each one's attachment to his or her own particular thoughts or practices. The formal, precisely constructed nature of these interruptions helped avoid the shapelessness of "working together" – the neoliberal injunction to collaborate, which can be as oppressive as any more plainly hierarchical structure (see Schneider, Kunst). Crucially, the group also introduced structures of "creative response" into these workshops, based on its own method of creation through "acts of return." Rather than engage in a discursive, critical discussion of another's work, participants were given directives to help them respond in an aesthetic mode (which could of course include text). These highly formal structures for creation and response opened up a neutral space, a common ground on which participants could encounter each other in a spirit of equality. As Goulish notes, there was "a primary-ness to people encountering one another in the Goat Island workshops." The emphasis on "learning how to collaborate" through the use of highly formal procedures allowed this spirit of egalitarian encounter to drive the process (Interview).

Since its dissolution, the group's members seem to have made a smooth transition into other projects. Networks from the Goat Island years are strong, with former members working on each other's pieces. In 2008, Hixson and Goulish began the company Every House Has a Door, inviting in different "specialists" for each new work – like their recent *Testimony 2.2*, which adapts Charles Reznikoff's long poem in collaboration with the math-rock band Joan of Arc. This new company's working methods differ from Goat Island's: rather than gathering and editing scraps like scavenging birds, they tend to work from and stay within a single question or proposition, drawing from a few predetermined sources. Goulish, referring to Whitehead, describes Goat Island as more "scientific," and Every House as more "mathematical" (Interview; see *Modes of Thought*). This mathematical quality is front and centre in their 2010 piece *They're Mending the Great Forest Highway*, which features a three-man dance that is a precise re-scoring of the Bartok trio "Contrasts," for clarinet, violin, and piano, with each musical phrase translated into set movement. The piece takes some of the more formal experiments of Goat Island and presents them as a kind of mathematical proposition, a complex equation which may or may not result in a solution.

In December of 2012 I sat in on a rehearsal of *Mending* for an upcoming remount, in another run-down church gymnasium in Chicago's north end. The furnace was on the fritz, so I bundled up in my sweater and parka and sat next to director Hixson. We watched Goulish and two younger men go through a repertoire of jumps, spins, scrapes, gestures and crouches, like dervishes driven by an insatiable machine. The performers were dressed in anachronistic hats and vests, vaguely recalling Benny Goodman, for whom "Contrasts" was written. The composer and musician Liz Payne was stationed in the middle of the dance, huddled over a laptop, experimenting with samples of bowed bass and ambient chimes. As I followed Goulish's mathematical time-score, with each dancer represented by a squiggling line and detailed textual instructions, it was hard not to feel a little nostalgic for Goat Island's more omnivorous, scavenging approach. I thought about Bartok, and his reworking of Hungarian village music in compositions like the "Violin Duets." He was an admirable scavenger of vernacular forms. But now, I thought, who is left to mend the great forest highway? We seemed to be another step away from that composer's experiments with tradition – left to play with fragments of fragments, to decipher translations of translations. And yet there was a certain gusto and precise playfulness in this dance, the energy of three men moving together yet apart, not meeting but sharing the same space and time, with vernacular ghosts hovering in the church gymnasium's cold air.

### **Practicing Anachronism**

As Hixson and Goulish's working methods have changed since the end of Goat Island, growing less omnivorous and more "mathematical," their recent workshop design (in concert with Mark Jeffery) has shifted in a parallel direction. Collaboration and encounter are no longer the explicit themes of this new summer Institute, which is (at least on the surface) more concerned with its titular problem: the question of "abandoned practices." As Goulish puts it, participants in the Abandoned Practices Institute "still have to encounter each other, but it's more in a minor key, and the major key or the major focus is encountering this other, outside, pretty strict thing" (Interview). The workshop is set up as a series of encounters with

this “external element” of abandoned practices: the students, who already have their own pre-existing practices of writing, visual art, or performance, are brought into dialogue with lost bits of history, with cast-off concepts, disciplines, ways of doing and being. This “tempering from outside the aesthetic preferences of the artist” through “points of contact” with the past aims to give each artist’s practice a little more depth and substance (Goulish, Lecture). It introduces a kind of “research,” even if in a brief and sketchy way (Hixson, Interview). The students’ contact with temporal alterity is what Adorno might call a “push from outside,” nudging them out of the enchantment of subjectivity (*Negative Dialectics* 110). It is also a way for them to reach beyond the bubble of the contemporary art world, which tends to envelop them in its shiny, up-to-the-minute veneer.

The words “abandoned practices” have gone through at least two pairs of hands before being picked up by these teachers. The phrase was coined by theatre scholar Alan Read, a professor at King’s College in London and friend of Goat Island, who used “abandoned practices” as the inaugural theme for an interdisciplinary research unit housed in that school’s Anatomy Theatre and Museum. The surgical theatre at King’s was formerly the site of the Master Astrologer’s observatory – connecting the study of the body with the study of the stars, and seductively blending scientific and poetic knowledge. As a theatre scholar whose term for theatre is “the human laboratory” (from “the labour of oratory”), Read was interested in the connections between science and performance suggested by the surgical theatre. He describes the “performance lectures” that the chemist John Frederic Daniell delivered in this theatre at a cost of 10 shillings, speaking as a “proxy” on behalf of the chemicals and materials he assembled in the lab to form an improved model of the electric battery. This type of scientific public speaking on behalf of non-human materials recognizes the performative, collaborative, hybrid dimension of scientific knowledge – something that the so-called “modern” work of purification tries to play down (Latour, *We Have Never*). For Read, the idea wasn’t so much to revive such abandoned mixtures of the scientific and the theatrical, but rather to experiment with “their recovery through performance” (“Alan Read’s”).<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> For more on “abandoned practices,” see the Preface to Read’s *Theatre in the Expanded Field*. See also his *Theatre, Intimacy, Engagement* for an extended discussion of collectivity (beyond the human) and community (among humans), with reference to contemporary theatrical practice.

Read, in turn, took the concept of “abandoned practices” from the philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers, who has written extensively on the threat posed by capitalism to communities of practice (see my Introduction). Stengers, in a series of books and articles, argues against the doctrine of “eliminativism,” which she claims consigns “irrational” or outmoded practices to a temporal graveyard (“Diderot’s Egg”). In her view, the relentless forward motion of capitalism has “made our world a cemetery of enslaved or destroyed practices” – ranging from experimental science to traditional agriculture (“History,” “Introductory”). She argues that the dissolution of the attachments formed by these divergent communities of practice poses a grave risk; in her view, “it may well be that this destruction is the destruction of what enables humans to think, imagine and resist” (“Diderot’s Egg” 15). In Read’s hands, Stengers’s critical theory becomes an aesthetic investigation, more playful than politicized in tone. Reflecting on his project, Read explains that he hoped “to explore the ways in which practices have been abandoned for political or economic reasons, and to then reactivate and explore some of these practices through play. That is after all what theatre people tend to do in their work” (“Christina’s response”). This playful reactivation of abandoned practices, Read argues, is a serious matter: such play can function in Agamben’s terms as an act of “profanation,” as bringing what has been purified or separated back into renewed use (see Chapter 1 above).

Of course, collective practices marked for elimination have a peculiar way of sticking around – as ghosts, as symptoms, or as histories ripe for reinvention. As Stengers shows, certain collective practices that have been temporally abjected – defined as anachronisms – can gather a kind of power around themselves. Stengers describes her encounter with practitioners of one of these seemingly anachronistic arts: North American neo-pagan witches, who have reinvented the term “magic” to describe their rituals of non-violent political action (see my Introduction). The collective efficacy of their anachronistic rituals is what Stengers emphasizes, using language that resonates with the work of the Abandoned Practices Institute. As she writes, in a key passage:

the name “magic” makes fully explicit something which both feminists and non-violent activists have discovered – the need to create techniques which entail what I



would call “depsychologization.” Rituals are modes of gathering, the achievement of which is that it is no longer I, as a subject, as meant to belong to nobody but myself, who thinks and feels. But it is not because I have been overwhelmed by something those who gather would have in common. And it is not because of the powerful influence of that in the name of which we do gather, or in which we believe. What the ritual achieves could perhaps be compared to what physicists describe as “putting out of equilibrium,” out of the position which allows us to speak in terms of psychology, or habits, or stakes. Not that they forget about personal stakes but because the gathering makes present – and this is what is named magic – something which transforms their relation to the stakes they have put up. (“Introductory” 195)

This is one way that a collective practice can empower thought, action, and resistance: by gathering individuals together and putting them out of equilibrium, even helping them shift the stakes with which they have marked out their own proper territory. What Stengers calls “depsychologization” – and which on an ontological level could be called “depropriation” – is a constant in all the modes of gathering that I explore here, including the Abandoned Practices Institute. These practices aim to interrupt the temporal and personal propriety of their participants without subsuming them into an already defined whole. In the case of Stengers’s witches, anachronism is a key mode of this interruption. The temporal impropriety of “magic” (an “abandoned practice” if there ever was one) can remind individuals of their constitutive impropriety – a becoming-with rooted in the “irrational” attachments that (often patriarchal) modernisers think themselves above. All of these modes of gathering stage the play of working and unworking, untying and tying attachments through shared practice. Their shifting of the stakes, through what might be called a staging of the collective, occurs even in the fragmented and highly formalized mode of the Abandoned Practices Institute.

Unlike some of the communities of practice explored by Stengers, the Abandoned Practices Institute operates in the spheres of art and pedagogy, not politics. As in Read’s work, we are playing in the ruins of time; what could be called a politics of abandoned practices is present only implicitly in the frame of the workshop, which otherwise strives for a non-politicized and inclusive atmosphere. As teachers, Goulish, Hixson and Jeffery make use of

the concept of abandoned practices because they find that it disarms their students. They are less interested in actually reanimating discarded practices, and more in using that abjected material to help the workshop participants stand a little outside themselves, to put them productively out of equilibrium. Here, anachronism is put forward in a gentle fashion, as a way of shifting the students' relation to the stakes – of identity, critique, or practice – that they have put up. Yet this is not to say that the work of the Institute is disengaged from collective acting-in-the-world. The various abandoned practices introduced in the course are not meant for abstract contemplation, but as invitations for tactile play with words, bodies and materials. Encountering and responding to these points of contact, and to each other's work, pushes the students outside their own ego-bound modes of practice. It opens them up to the world and to each other, often in surprising ways. And it stages the collective by engaging in mimetic and transitive play, experimenting freely with practices left behind by the tides of history.

### **Expurgations in the Park**

For the Institute, “abandoned practices” are a gentle push that initiates a collective “shift in equilibrium.” As on the workshop's first day (and as in their creative practice more generally), these teachers work by introducing prompts or directives, and then setting up structures that allow students to compose responses to these prompts. They take their inspiration for their directives from works of art, bits of history, or their own rehearsal techniques. As Goulish explains, they work hard to “reverse-engineer” from various sources “that kind of directive that communicates some kind of supposed neutrality,” a formal quality which is “often structural pattern, or shape, or sense of timing” (Interview). The teachers turn a complex aesthetic and historical object into a set of instructions, which will then result in a multiplicity of aesthetic responses all linked through some formal quality. The element of constraint is important: as Goulish says, “the point at which we can abstract a directive that's very constraining, that's very limiting, but also very free, is the point at which it's ready for the classroom” (Interview). Constraint, even extreme constraint, is what enables thought and action within the space of the workshop. Our next performance project, for example, is

prompted by abandoned practices of “expurgation”: the sometimes violent censoring or elimination of offending images, passages and works.

Goulish introduces the concept of expurgation via a series of “case studies,” which he sets forth in a lecture on the second day of the workshop. Some of these case studies are serious – like the gigantic monument of Stalin leading a train of workers overlooking Prague, which was demolished after his death in 1962 and eventually replaced by the swinging iron metronome in 1991. Others are comical – like the “goldfish improvement” of Dušan Makavejev’s film *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*, in which the director, faced with the threat of censorship of an erotic scene by Britain’s Channel 4, superimposed over copulating bodies the image of a swimming goldfish. Ironically, as Goulish notes, the formal practice of expurgation is itself being abandoned: the *Index Expurgatorius*, the Catholic Church’s list of forbidden passages and works, was abrogated in 1966. Without the external restrictions of religion or the state, abandonment tends to happen more through neglect, with works of all types lost in the high-turnover melee of consumer society. The older, cruder forms of expurgation are not to be mourned: no one would regret the decline of official censorship in liberal-democratic states. But we can take up the abandoned practice of expurgation, argues Goulish, as a powerful mode of aesthetic response. Expurgation can become a way of putting oneself out of equilibrium through contact with the object. And even if the object is effaced, echoes or traces of it will remain.

As an example of expurgation as creative response, Goulish plays us an excerpt from John Cage’s composition *44 Harmonies from Apartment House 1776*. Cage’s piece is a series of fragmentary quartets created by subjecting 18<sup>th</sup>-century American hymns to carefully constructed chance operations, inserting silences and lengthening tones within each voice. The result, as arranged for string quartet, is a haunting series of melodic lines that are tonal without cadence, drama or resolution, like sheets of ice sliding across a still lake. As Cage said of the piece,

you can recognize it as eighteenth century music; but it’s suddenly brilliant in a new way. It is because each sound vibrates from itself, not from a theory. ... The cadences

which were the function of theory, to make syntax and all, all of that is gone, so that you get the most marvellous overlappings. (qtd. in Pritchett 3)

Goulsh glosses Cage's comment by referring to the music's profaning, playful qualities: "If we define sacred as the elevation of the object, as to take it out of circulation, and to place it in a position of contemplation, maybe we can consider Cage's expurgation composition as a kind of profanation, of returning the object to circulation, to play, or to use."<sup>161</sup> Cage's playful response to this harmonically rigid church music is indeed exemplary. Through expurgation, the composer removes these sounds from their sacred harmonic matrix, allowing each note to vibrate "from itself." His tactics are chance operations, but while these operations may be playful, they are not careless or offhand. Cage himself noted that he used chance "as a discipline," one as strict as any Zen practice, and similarly designed to diminish the activity of the ego in favour of an acceptance of all creation (Kostelanetz 17, 45). But this acceptance did not mean giving up on aesthetic shaping. For the composer, who laboured over his chance operations, fine-tuning them to produce "beautiful" results, it was not a question of refusing to make choices, but of carefully "choosing which questions to ask" (Kostelanetz 17). The composer puts himself in contact with these old hymns, which were initially foreign (or even repellent) to him. Through his playful yet disciplined practice, by silencing and extending tones, he finds a way to let their anachronistic voices vibrate. His act brings the original music down to earth and back into circulation, in an altered, ecstatic form – an occasion for (in his words) "marvellous overlappings."

These case studies of expurgation provide the structure for our next assignment, as we gather a couple of days later at the edge of Stromovka wood behind AVU for our first public performance. The goal is to respond, like Cage, in a playful and disciplined fashion to the prompts that we've been offered. We've been rehearsing for several days, again working in pairs, developing the material created the very first day in response to the abandoned practice cards. Each of us has composed a three-minute solo performance, and then entered into an expurgation of our partner's work: covering, censoring, overwriting, or interfering with their composition. As we compose our solo, Jeffery invites us to think of our performance as both

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<sup>161</sup> Again, this takes its inspiration from Agamben's reauthoring of Benjamin, in Agamben's essay "In Praise of Profanation" (see Chapter 1).

“monument” and “rubble” – an attempt at integrating the temporalities of the iron metronome, built on the debris of an absolutist monument. Expurgating a relative stranger’s work is a challenge, and some students find this playful censorship uncomfortable. For Ioana, who is from Romania, memories of official state-sponsored expurgation are all too fresh. Working with my new partner Laurel, a writer, I decide (somewhat cruelly) to gradually and carefully prevent her from speaking, cutting her off from her own habitual practice. She has responded to her abandoned practice card (“Blood Transfusions from Animals to Humans”) with a string of text and a series of collapsing movements. I approach her like a doctor ministering to an invalid, progressively muffling her words by winding a scarf around her mouth. I try to perform this censoring gesture with as much love and care as possible. She is similarly merciless, in a more subtle way: my solo involves singing and marking a wall with a thick paintbrush, and Laurel decides to remove chair, bucket and brush in turn, leaving me a stranded singer, wandering aimlessly and empty-handed by a graffiti-covered garage door.

The performances take place in and around a concrete circle at the entrance to the park, bordered by the wood to the north and a quiet avenue to the south. It’s a gorgeous summer afternoon. As Hixson reminds us, we are “misusing” this space, profaning it in a certain sense by turning it into an “event space.” Other Prague-based students and teachers have been invited to come and watch, but the audience is mostly our own group along with a few surprised passers-by (including one transfixed toddler with his mom). The teachers have set up what hopefully will be an occasion for “marvellous overlappings” by placing us into one of their carefully conceived time-scores. We are divided into three groups of eight performers, each group consisting of four duets arranged in a score of 14 minutes. The composition of the groups and the order of performers have all been determined through chance operations. The “expurgation duets” take place in different spots around the concrete circle, overlapping each other at two-minute intervals. The effect is like an absurdist relay-race, with the milling audience surprised by each new happening beside or amidst them. Each group ends with a very specific coda, informed by the abandoned practice of “winding down.” Here, “winding down” is meant literally, in the way that mechanical timepieces slow to a stop, unlike battery-powered devices which die abruptly. As a prompt, we are shown a video of Gyorgy Ligeti’s

*Symphonique Poem for 100 Metronomes* (1962), in which one hundred metronomes are released in an explosion of clicks and eventually slow rhythmically to stillness. In the park, we each become one of those little metronomes, taking up fixed spots on the slope down into the wood, standing under trees or by garbage bins, repeating a broken gesture from our performance until the whole group winds down together.

It's hard to judge the efficacy of this presentation, which even from the inside feels a bit jumbled and ragged. Our expurgations, once again, mostly happen in the mode of play. The pairs of performers seem like children on manic play-dates, getting in each other's faces, mocking their dances and directions, altering their carefully constructed sculptures and schemes. One performer stuffs a banana in his partner's mouth; another glues herself to her partner's back; another parodies her partner's military-style dance with a sassy shuffle to the tune of "Fly Me to the Moon." Objects are similarly an occasion for playful misuse. These performances could be seen as a composition for found objects: an animal hide, umbrellas, a ladder, chairs, string, socks, a pencil and pencil sharpener, shoelace and shoes, paper towels, green leaves, a wooden board, cobblestones, a blanket, a lemon, a plastic bag. Away from their homes, studios and workshops, the students grab whatever objects are at hand – in their suitcases, on the street, or lying about the AVU studios. Things are repeatedly misused, torn from their intended matrix: socks worn on the hands, a pencil sharpened with the feet; a lemon used to paint on the concrete; a board dropped meaninglessly from height with a shout. The cobblestones are a particular source of fascination: in one of the afternoon's more evocative gestures, a student stands with a mound of cobblestones in her cupped hands, and determinedly blows at them as if they were sea foam.

This fractured play with humans and materials is summed up in what turns out to be the final solo of the last piece. A tall, bearded student in jeans and running shoes points a finger on the concrete and painstakingly draws a wide circle around his patch of concrete, grunting with effort. It takes a long time and a lot of work. With the circle closed, he stands upright with hands splayed, grinning and panting, as if to say "Ta-da! I did it." It's an emblematic gesture: in a way, this whole exercise has been about laboriously marking out a play-space, a circle within a circle, a time and place in which bodies and things can be jumbled

into new configurations. Paradoxically, the rigid structure of collaboration through expurgation has allowed us to drop our defences, to become playful, even silly. The performances have a slapstick quality, which is occasionally deliberate. One performer's "winding down" consists in his slowly tumbling down the slope into the wood while singing a Bruce Springsteen song, strumming his guitar. The stocky New Jerseyite turns head over heels, his voice lowering in pitch like a record player shutting down. It's goofy, but also poignant: as he and the other members of his group slow to a halt, we hear the sound of the trees, the birds, the city traffic. I'm not sure where the original "abandoned practices" have gone, but something in this tableau is productively out of time.

The day's performances still feel fragmented, a collection of images and actions floating against a leafy background. It falls to our guest lecturers to "respond" to this pile of fragments, to thread them into some kind of new fabric with their "acts of return." Laura Cull, a UK-based scholar of performance, is up to the challenge. Back in the AVU studio, we sit on the floor, as she weaves allusions to our actions, along with material from Goulish's lecture and her own philosophical citations, into a new composition. A computer screen shows images of metronomes and expurgated text ("At the \_\_\_", "Try to blow \_\_\_ away"), occasionally "improved" by a swimming goldfish. She reads a text, a reauthoring of multiple sources including Deleuze, Cage, Bergson, and Diderot's "Essay on the Blind." Between phrases, she hands each of us a tourist postcard of Prague's famous astronomical clock – with the dials removed, expurgated. The climax incorporates several passages from the Japanese dance artist Hijikata, one of the founders of Butoh, into a kind of peroration:

Sharpen a pencil with your feet

Mouths are for holding apples in

*Since to a production-oriented society, the aimless use of the body, which I call dance, is a deadly enemy which must be taboo*

The sign of the censor covers your aimless dancing ass.

They want to expurgate the useless.

*But you can't just use the body you know.*

*It has a life of its own, you see, a mind of its own.*

*Taking into your own body the idea that your wrist is not your own – there’s an important hidden secret in this concept. The basis of dance is concealed there.*

They want to redact the process without product, action without goal, means without end

And to distract those who see the movement hidden in the fixed.

But do not be distracted.

Persist, insist, endure

You *can* blow away stones

Blow up the monuments

And watch them dissipate in the air like so many dandelion seeds. (Cull, “Ones to Come”)<sup>162</sup>

Her response ends with this ode to performance as becoming, a “pure means” or “means without end” (Agamben, *Means*). For Cull, our practice is already “aimless,” set free from teleologies of use, and distracted from technologies of distraction. If we persist, it can even reveal the historical monument as ephemeral. What seems immovable to us is, after all, only frozen movement – a metronome paused in mid-swing. But we can’t set it moving by ourselves. We need to let go of fantasies of ownership and of “proper” being. As Hijikata puts it, we need to take into our bodies the idea that our wrist is not our own. Without that, we’re just going through the motions, not dancing. In our exercise in the park, and in Cull’s “act of return,” time is moving again: expurgation and response have joined in a kind of dance. It’s to the credit of these teachers that they have collected and refined strategies for practicing this depropriation, this “putting out of equilibrium,” this exposure to community, this dancing.

### **Response (Forced Love)**

Cull’s response, an intellectual and aesthetic “act of return” to our expurgations, sums up the pedagogical leanings of the Institute. If there is a master practice that gathers up all the various practices explored by the Institute, it is surely the practice of response. Each exercise

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<sup>162</sup> The passages from Hijikata are in italics, and are cited in Cull, *Theatres* 114-115.



contains multiple layers of response: in our expurgation performance in the park, our solos respond to the abandoned practice cards; our expurgations respond, in the mode of censorship, to our partner's solos; our duets respond to the other expurgation duets overlapping with our own; our "winding down" responds to Ligeti's metronomes; more formal responses, like Cull's, respond to specific groups of performers or to the performance as a whole. These dialogical structures continue, as pedagogy, the formal strategies of collaborative composition explored by Goat Island. At the Institute, response becomes a way to play with lost traditions, via our responses to specific abandoned practices. But it is also a way to experiment with each other – a way to shift the stakes of subjectivity, and even stage the collective, within this very limited group of students.

Goulsh's opening lecture theorizes the practice of response as a current running through this workshop on "abandoned practices." He starts with the notion of abandoned practices as "points of contact" with history and with the city of Prague, where the Institute is now located.<sup>163</sup> These tactile points of contact invite a kind of "forced love," an idea that Goulsh borrows from Proust – an attaching of one's thought and action to worldly things. Here is how Proust describes John Ruskin's work on the history of cathedral-building:

...Ruskin's thought is not the thought of an Emerson, for example, which is contained in its entirety in a book, something abstract that is a pure sign of itself. The object to which a thought like Ruskin's is applied and from which it is inseparable, is not immaterial, it is scattered across the surface of the earth. One must go seek it wherever it is found, to Pisa, to Florence, to the National Gallery, to Rouen, to Amiens, into the mountains of Switzerland. Such a thought, which has an object other than itself, which has realized itself in space, which is thought no longer infinite and free but limited and subjugated, which is incarnate in bodies of sculpted marble, in snow-covered mountains, in painted faces, is perhaps less godlike than pure thought. But it makes the universe more beautiful for us, or at least certain parts of it, certain named

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<sup>163</sup> The Institute was initiated in Chicago and held there for three summers, from 2009 to 2011; since then, it has alternated between Prague and Chicago. In his notes, Goulsh gives a French translation for "points of contact": *les prises*, sites of attachment, places where one can "get a hold." For a more politicized discussion of ways to "get a hold" (*faire prise*) on the slippery surface of global capitalism, see Pignarre and Stengers.

parts, because it has touched them and initiated us into them by forcing us, if we would understand them, to love them.<sup>164</sup>

Proust highlights the affective and tactile qualities of thinking-as-response, which touches its objects and obliges not only our consideration but also our love. Goulish offers this invitation: to follow Proust and Ruskin and lodge our thought in things, attaching ourselves to “certain named parts” of the universe which, although initially strange, have the power to force us to love them. This is a useful invitation for a group of students gathered in an unfamiliar city filled with humans and non-humans that invite encounter. For Goulish, “thought in the world” requires a certain kind of “pilgrimage” to objects scattered across the surface of the earth. The hope is that our presence in Prague can facilitate an encounter, forcing our creative practices to respond with love for this place – at least for certain of its named parts.

In the practice of these teachers, response has its own structure and modes of operation. For Goulish, response can take three broad paths, each offering different aesthetic possibilities: *quotation* or *description* of the object; *imitation* of the object’s structure; and a kind of intuitive *becoming* of the object’s mode of existence (Lecture). These are three modes of reckoning with a thing, of allowing it to alter one’s own practice, of letting oneself be productively put out of equilibrium. The emphasis on response places us a long way from the twin imaginaries of *sui generis* creative subjectivity and scholarly objectivity. Instead, as artist-researchers, we are invited to engage in a mimetic opening to the object that transforms the subject – or perhaps, an opening to the networks of humans and nonhumans that we tend to define as objects and subjects.

The mimetic opening of response also has a corporeal dimension: the act of describing, imitating, or “becoming” changes our bodily being-in-the-world. In Proust’s reading of Ruskin, as Goulish points out,

the initial impulse of seeking some scholarly erudition of art history has been replaced by an unforeseeable transformation. Now there is a reimagining of one’s own body,

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<sup>164</sup> From Proust’s preface to his translation of Ruskin’s *Bible of Amiens*, in *Days of Reading*. (Ironically, Proust’s critique of Ruskin’s “idolatry” in that essay could be applied to the Abandoned Practices Institute as well.) Following Proust, we could trace a whole lineage of investigations into “things forcing thought,” from Spinoza to Thoreau to more recent work in science studies, art history, political theory and philosophy (see Brown and Whatmore, Bennett, and many others).

remade from the outside, in a new relationship with the *certain named parts* of the world (actual more than virtual), in which one has allowed one's thought to locate. Responding to these certain named parts requires a reimagining of the body and language "from the outside," a re-orientation in relation to other human and nonhuman bodies. It has tactile qualities which recall Benjamin's "mimetic faculty," the "capacity for producing similarities" schooled by play (SW2 720). Description, imitation and becoming each requires its own kind of mimetic practice, some combination of semblance and play – a polarity which for Benjamin lies enfolded like a pair of seed-buds (cotyledons) in the seedpod of mimesis. During the workshop, we will each explore these playful modes of reckoning with things, as we start to sprout our own practice of response.<sup>165</sup>

In considering the practice of response, the choice of the word "practice" is crucial. After all, the Institute deals with abandoned *practices*, not vanished objects or activities. "Practice," Goulish reminds us, "suggests activity that is 1) repeatable, and 2) that such repeatability requires discipline, at least in terms of persistence and use of time, and 3) such discipline involves restraint, constraint, in its partialness, its instance of a serial act" (Lecture). For Goulish, an activity becomes a practice through repetition, discipline, and limitation. Clearly Cage's chance operations are an exemplary practice, a compositional discipline carried out through limited, serial and repeated actions. But any form of constrained composition – or just getting up every day and doing *x* – could be considered a practice. To these qualities of repeatability, discipline, and constraint, Goulish adds the act of naming. Naming makes a practice more identifiable and shareable, and gathers its practitioners into a kind of community, even if they are not present or personally known to each other.<sup>166</sup>

To make the practice of response more concrete, Goulish offers another case study: the keeping of a commonplace book, or "a collection of quotations, transcribed, into a personal volume, sometimes with commentary." This writerly tradition is well-established, if

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<sup>165</sup> See Benjamin's "On the Mimetic Faculty," SW2 720-22, and the second (earlier) version of the "Work of Art" essay, SW3 101-33. There are some strong parallels between the Institute's emphasis on response and Benjamin's thinking. It could be argued that translation, criticism and the work of the historian, all key practices for Benjamin, are practices of response. For Benjamin, these practices bring texts or events to a certain redemption or fulfillment. For the Institute, responses ("acts of return") remain provisional, unfulfilled, open to further response.

<sup>166</sup> See, for example, Blanchot's concept of "literary communism" in *Unavowable*.

now less diligently pursued, at least in paper form. Goulish himself began keeping a commonplace book some thirty years ago, a repository of quotations from which he assembles his lectures and prose pieces. In Goulish's view, the keeping of a commonplace book meets the conditions that differentiate a practice from an activity: it is a repeated action, requiring discipline, expressed in a series of partial, constrained acts. Through the act of naming, the commonplace book differentiates itself from less disciplined activities like note-taking or underlining, and puts one into an odd community of practitioners: the community of those who keep commonplace books. Practice, notes Goulish, also has the connotation of rehearsal, as in "band practice," and keeping a commonplace book can be seen as practice in this sense: writers such as Wallace Stevens (among many others) have used it as a thought-rehearsal for the practice of writing.<sup>167</sup> Above all, the keeping of a commonplace book, with its repeated quotations and personal glosses, can be understood as a practice of response. It is a matter of locating one's thought in the world, naming a textual "point of contact" and then responding to it in various ways: through universalization, disagreement, irony, association, or enthusiasm. The commonplace book can act as a structure for practicing the "forced love" described by Proust. For those who pay special attention to the relation between quotations and glosses, as Stevens did, it is a way of honing one's responsive faculties – a serial discipline of response.

Drawing on this case study, the workshop leaders repeatedly use the commonplace book as a structure for response. When we finally introduce ourselves to the group, in presentations beginning at the end of the first week, it will be in the mode of "commonplace book introductions." We each present four quotations: one relating to our place of birth, one relating to our year of birth, one relating to our practice, and a "free" quotation of our choice. These short presentations introduce us not as self-contained subjects, but as a collection of attachments – to words, songs, or images (many of these artists will show video clips or play music for one or more of their quotations).<sup>168</sup> Over the following three weeks, each of the

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<sup>167</sup> Stevens's commonplace book has been published as *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets*.

<sup>168</sup> There is a certain lightness of chance involved: because we are separated from our libraries, we scavenge whatever texts and images are at hand – though the omnipresence of the Internet means that a great deal is at hand.

students in the Institute will also engage in a “commonplace book response” to other students’ creative work: reading (or playing) a quotation to the group, and then presenting a gloss on that quotation in the form of text, object or performance. This response through quotation-and-gloss forges an attachment to a “certain named part” of the universe outside the world of the workshop, in the form of words chosen for their resonance. The chosen quotation might be straightforward, oblique, ironic, goofy, or sincere. It is brought into the room to vibrate against both the original work and the gloss-response. Sometimes this vibration is only slight, and dissipates; sometimes it is wild, and sparks fly. The dialogical nature of these criss-crossing “acts of return” is what begins to weave new attachments between the students, gathering us into a certain community of practice. One might say (adapting Nancy and Bataille) that in the workshop response becomes a *practice of exposure*, a way to admit the “principle of insufficiency at the root of each being” (Bataille, qtd. in Blanchot, *Unavowable* 5). By responding and being responded to, we are exposed to a constitutive becoming-with. Our proper being is put into question through this repeated, disciplined, constrained, and named activity.

Considered in the more mundane mode of art-school pedagogy, the practice of response is a conscious revision of the practice of critique. This workshop is, after all, housed within the institutional structure of an art college, for which the “group crit” is the standard mode of evaluation (Day). The art critique tends to be a matter of starting from one’s own position, of making critical judgments based on the stakes that one has put up; students can end up making work “for the critique,” in the hope of validation by their teachers or peers. This “institutional fascination” can have a stifling effect on a group (Goulis, Hixson, Interview). In this workshop, a great deal of effort goes into suspending the critical reflex, allowing participants to be led by what the teachers call a creative, responsive intelligence more than a critical one. As Goulis tells us, “the purpose of response is not to police the work observed, to point out weaknesses or problems, but rather to apply some critical thinking while keeping the creative impulse engaged and focused” (“First Responses”). He later notes that removing the policing structures of critique

produces a very complicated kind of crisis that is hopefully productive. People learn the extent to which they have been depending on it; they don't even realize until it's gone. And then it's like there's no floor, there's no compass. And I'm just going to keep producing, and I won't be told if it's good or not. Eventually, I think there's a breakthrough that happens, about this being much more like the world outside of an institution, where so often you get very little response for what you put out there.

Hopefully, eventually, the response builds a different sort of structure. (Interview)

Practicing this structure of response can help you find your feet and a sense of direction in your own practice. In this way, the teachers are really “pedagogues” in the ancient sense: not the sages imparting wisdom, but the family slaves who led students to be taught (see Phelan, Schneider). This is not to say that these pedagogues are “ignorant schoolmasters”: they share a wealth of experience and practical knowledge which is sedimented in the structure and content of the workshop. But they are less interested in staking out their own territory by transmitting a given style, and more interested helping students loosen the stakes they have put up. They are teachers who recognize, as Roland Barthes did, that “what can be oppressive in our teaching is not, finally, the knowledge or the culture it conveys, but the discursive forms through which we propose them.” Their method, like Barthes' own, is attentive to the power that inheres in pedagogical forms, and seeks out ways of “loosening, baffling, or at the very least, of lightening this power” (“Lecture” 15). The “forced love” required by response is one way to (in Barthes' words) neutralize, baffle, or “outplay” (*déjouer*) the paradigm of critique.

The practice of response also offers a different way to engage with work by one's peers, or work that one admires. It provides an alternative to the paralyzing envy and insecurities that can plague practitioners of all kinds. “Rather than just saying, that's fantastic, I wish I could do work like that,” Goulish suggests, the practice of response allows you “to extract something” from that work, to “import it into your own practice, value it, keep it close, continue it,” and in the process give new life to your own practice (Interview). “Compare breeds despair,” as Hixson likes to say – so why not poach, incorporate, describe, imitate, or become? The resulting response will be “drawn from the responder's experience, subjectivity,

and creative practice – a work in itself, but one that would never have come into existence without the prior existence of the observed work that inspired it” (Goulish, “First Responses”). Response is a way to unwork “the work” in its caricature as a self-contained and self-generated monad (Shershow). It can be liberating, a practice of baffling or “outplaying,” that allows students to step outside themselves and make something that surprises them and others in its strangeness, its alterity.

As a pedagogical strategy that relies on encouragement more than judgment, response does have its limits. These teachers tend to call their students’ work things like “absolutely exquisite” (Hixson’s words for our expurgations in the park). Sometimes we are left wanting more critical feedback – though as Goulish notes, this is precisely the point: the idea is to develop your own compass, your own ability to know when you have made something worthwhile. The teachers’ non-critical attitude can extend to the workshop’s philosophical grab-bag, from which they draw scavenged concepts like “abandoned practices” with no great rigour. But the trade-off for their suspension of critique is a practical lightness, a playful atmosphere in which the practice of response does indeed force a kind of love. There is great value in this experimental lightness, which can lead a group to find more open relationships and make better work. And beyond the frame of the workshop, it is surely crucial to share structures for practicing this sort of “response-ability” – the learned ability to respond with attention to one another, and to the world.<sup>169</sup>

### **Attention and Abandon**

This responsive attention is what’s asked of us as we begin our next project, which requires us to explore the abandoned mode of “pure seriality” through a disciplined and repeated observation of an everyday site in Holešovice, near the AVU studios.<sup>170</sup> Each of us is led to a particular spot selected by chance operation – a cafe table, a park bench, a metro

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<sup>169</sup> On “response-ability” beyond the human, see Haraway, *When Species*. On response and responsibility, see also Derrida, “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering,’” in *On the Name*.

<sup>170</sup> The Institute’s understanding of pure seriality as an abandoned mode (with the rise, for example, of parallel computing) is drawn from Rotman.

passageway – and instructed to remain there for an hour. We are to make one observation every five minutes in the medium of our choice, resulting in twelve “recordings” – on paper, by audio recorder or camera, or through found objects. We are also told to invent our own “perceptual frame” for these recordings: a method for marking off our observations from the flux that surrounds us. As always, Hixson encourages us to begin from our own practice and interests, while responding to this push from outside. The result should be a “fusion of concentrated introspection and wide-eyed beholding.” She asks us to look for how these sites capture the ordinary, the pedestrian, the quotidian – a sense of everyday life in this modestly unfamiliar place.

With these words in mind, I sit for an hour in the middle of a roundabout, on the steps of an empty fountain at the edge of the 1891 Prague Exhibition grounds. Trams glide around the wide circle, rails whining as the vehicles turn into the Stromovka wood. To my left are the exhibition grounds’ decaying neo-baroque spires. It’s drizzling rain. I huddle under my jacket hood, speaking every five minutes into an audio recorder, trying to conjure up some Perec-like magic from exhaustive, punctual description. I think of Robert Ashley’s floating voice in *The Park*, and try to bring some of that dispassion to my tone. My descriptions move from micro to macro scales. Cigarette butts at my feet. Tufts of grass poking from the concrete. Metal bollards, curling bike racks. Joggers, women pushing strollers, young people on dates. Advertisements on electrical poles, police cars, kiosks selling snacks. The recorder captures my voice and the ambient sounds of the street, laughter and traffic punctuated by the keening of the trams. The roundabout is a meeting place and a place of transit, and it’s pleasant to pause here in the light rain and try to capture its circular motion, the feeling of slowing down.

There is a lightness to my attention, like the floating attention of a psychoanalyst, periodically alighting on and reckoning with an object. Mostly, I’m waiting – which Blanchot describes as the essence of attention:

Attention is waiting: not the effort, the tension, or the mobilization of knowledge around something which might concern oneself. Attention waits. ... [It] is the



emptiness of thought oriented by a gentle force and maintained in an accord with the empty intimacy of time. (*Infinite* 121)

For Blanchot, there is no haste or desire in this attentive waiting; the trick is to stop our “horror of emptiness” from filling in the blankness. Sitting in the roundabout, trying to reckon with the objects around me, I experience this emptiness of attention as another mode of depsychologization or deappropriation. As Blanchot writes:

Attention is impersonal. It is not the self that is attentive in attention; rather, with an extreme delicacy and through insensible, constant contacts, attention has always already detached me from myself, freeing me for the attention that I for an instant become. (*Infinite* 121)

Tipping out of ourselves for the space of an hour, we enter into insensible, constant contact with the outside. Blanchot contrasts this “impersonal attention,” which is “idle and unoccupied,” with “average, personal attention” that organises self and object through pre-existing knowledge (*Infinite* 121). In this exercise, we are aiming for impersonal attention, opening into a kind of ecstatic encounter with the world. Delicately, we detach from ourselves and attach like barnacles to these punctual points of contact. Then, like naturalists, or like writers keeping a commonplace book, we respond by making recordings, glosses of a sort. These recordings – words, sounds, images, or drawings – will follow us back into the studio, providing material for further response.<sup>171</sup>

This isn't a revolutionary exercise. Our serial attention to the everyday takes part in a long lineage of investments in the “transfiguration of the commonplace,” going back at least to Wordsworth's time (Danto, Leonard). Like the poet, we are learning how to discover Paradise in the “simple produce of the common day” (Wordsworth, cited in Leonard 53). The Institute has a strong investment in reclaiming and transfiguring the ordinary, whether through research into past vernacular practices, or attention to present ones. Goulish himself tends to write in praise of “the charge of the ordinary,” which requires “a refusal to overlook that which can be overlooked” (“Strain” 82). In his view, the ordinary, “the object invested with attention that multiplies it,” has been neglected in the avant-garde rush to ever greater

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<sup>171</sup> For a moving depiction of a naturalist's attention to the minutiae of memory, see Goulish on the “visionary naturalist” and diarist W.N.P. Barbellion (in *The Brightest Thing in the World*).

extremes (“Strain” 85, Lecture). Here Goulish is adding his voice to the longstanding American hymn to the ordinary and the everyday, an avant-garde staple from Whitman to Cage to Kaprow right up to present-day “social practice.” Indeed, this “strain of the ordinary” (the title of one of Goulish’s essays) is particularly strong in art and writing from the United States, with its “high regard for everything vernacular” (Kelley 200). Transfiguring the commonplace may even be, as George M. Leonard suggests, a kind of American religion, which found its apotheosis in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde art.<sup>172</sup>

We do seem to be in a strangely American territory here, as we mark out our recordings in the streets of Prague. It’s a commonplace territory that John Cage describes somewhat glibly in “Lecture on Nothing” as “Kansas,” a place “like an empty glass, nothing but wheat, or is it corn? Does it matter which?” Like Blanchot’s impersonal attention, the empty territory of Kansas offers a way to detach from oneself and embrace the empty intimacy and indeterminacy of time. “Kansas,” for Cage,

has this about it: at any instant, one may leave it, and whenever one wishes one may return to it. Or you may leave it forever and never return to it, for we pos-sess nothing. Our poetry now is the reali-zation that we possess nothing. Anything therefore is a delight (since we do not pos-sess it) and thus need not fear its loss. We need not destroy the past: it is gone; at any moment, it might reappear and seem to be and be the present. Would it be a repetition? Only if we thought we owned it, but since we don’t, it is free and so are we.<sup>173</sup>

Our serial recording opens onto this territory, our attention coming and going without possession. The exercise is a practice of abandonment, which only becomes repetition if we think we own it. Falling into the ordinary promises some vertiginous delights: the historical world becomes a vast horizontal plane, a wheat-filled Kansas of space and time that we can explore at our leisure. There is a democratic quality to this strain of the ordinary, recalling the

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<sup>172</sup> Of course, the terms “ordinary,” “everyday” and “vernacular” should be carefully distinguished; the first lacks the latter’s subaltern connotations and political charge. For a philosophical-political genealogy of “the everyday” in 20th-century thought, see Roberts.

<sup>173</sup> *Silence* 110. The hyphens are Cage’s (though I do not reproduce his innovative layout). In “Strain,” Goulish also quotes this passage from Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing.”

philosophers' "haecceity" or "thisness" of things.<sup>174</sup> For Cage, moving through this un-owned landscape, any idea at all might emerge like "something seen momentarily through a window while traveling" (*Silence* 110). Yet there are dangers to this aesthetic strategy, which tends to flatten historical time into a blurred abstraction, leaving it vulnerable to appropriation for less-than-delightful ends. The past might really be destroyed and need active repair, not just delicate attention – and of course not everyone can leave and return to this territory as they please. Just think of Kansas's own history of colonial dispossession, the indigenous Kanzas' ancestral territory turned into private property and violently staked out in order to grow all that wheat – or is it corn? Does it matter which?

For the moment, these critical-historical doubts are far from my thoughts, as I walk back from the roundabout to the AVU studios. As a structured exercise, attention to the ordinary is another way to dispossess us gently from ourselves. Attention puts us in contact with each other and with the empty intimacy of time, not the overflowing continuum of history. Indeed, capital-H History is mostly bracketed off during the workshop, in favour of a transformative encounter with "certain named parts" of the past and present: this is both the weakness of the Institute and its strength.<sup>175</sup> Walking back, all I see is what's before me – the roundabout in the rain, the trams curving into the wood – and all I take with me are the recordings that I've made. We straggle back to AVU, our responses in hand. On the studio floor we find a grid of taped-out rectangles, each six feet long by one foot wide, lined up in pairs. In this narrow space each of us will condense our twelve recordings into six 1-by-1 figurations – responding, in installation form, to our limited, serial attention to the ordinary (see Figure 6).

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<sup>174</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari, Rancière's *Politics of Literature*, and others.

<sup>175</sup> The shift from Stalin to emptiness to metronome is emblematic of this bracketing: the replacement of monstrous, monumental History by neutral, chronographic time. It's no coincidence that the metronome was finally installed in Letná Park (three decades after the detonation of the Stalin monument) in 1991, the historical moment of the "End of History." Just north of the metronome, the empty plateau that housed the monument is now a famous gathering spot for skateboarders. The "End of History" has opened up a space for play.



Figure 6: Working on installations at AVU (photo by Daviel Shy)

These installations, as they materialize over the next few days, are something of a marvel: the strict form of the 1x6 rectangle allows for a wild array of figurations and transfigurations of the commonplace. Found and scavenged objects are once again the order of the day. Many come from the street or the wood – bedsprings, cobblestones, pieces of cardboard, cigarette butts, dirt and leaves and twigs – while others are nicked from the AVU studios and hallways. Again, we're forced to improvise happily with cheap materials. In one rectangular installation, a little world grows out of dollar-store crepe ribbon and foil, swirling umbrellas and swooping structures in primary colours and silver. In another, a watermelon slice dangles in a plastic bag from a precarious metal frame; the melon swings like a pendulum and the frame taps a coin beneath its feet – tick-tock. Throughout the room are fragments of attention, little snapshots in various media of the hour's empty intimacy. Polaroid pictures of branches, in a line amid cobblestones. Black lines are marked on white sheets of paper, tracing the arc of the metronome. Discarded objects (a lighter, a scrap of cloth) seem to grow out of

the crusted paint on the studio floor. One cityscape jumbles bars of soap carved with nonsensical words, a cart with wheels made from loaves of bread, and a careful reproduction of a Renaissance *sgraffito* wall pattern.

Many installations cheat the frame a little. A fat white skin stuffed with styrofoam pellets sits on casters high up on a stool; below is the word ANYTIME in orange letters (see Figure 7). (Later, we honour this sausage of time by lighting birthday candles.) Fishing line stretches wall-to-wall above one pair of rectangles, supporting transparencies hung with successive words: “my – constant – observers – are – these – gnats.” There is sound, too, from hidden speakers or on headphones. Han Gil, who was assigned to sit by the swinging metronome, brings history into the picture. He assembles a miniature prison museum or torture chamber: a bare chair hung with the South Korean flag, a teacup, and a small drawing of a bust of Stalin. Otherwise, the installations attend more to the ecstatic present than to the haunted past.



Figure 7: Installation by Ioana Gheorghiu (photo by Daviel Shy)

Each rectangle is paired with another, end-to-end in a kind of sequence: two artists have attended to the same location in successive hours. In nearly every case, there is nothing that visibly connects the two figurations of the same everyday site. The combination of introspection and wide-eyed beholding has produced totally divergent results, as if we had been sitting for successive hours in parallel worlds. Serial repetition can take place within one rectangular frame, but the overall effect of the twelve pairs (and one trio) of installations is more like utter heterogeneity.

There are several more directives to this project, further responses that dispossess us from our “proper” work. Our 1x6 rectangle soon becomes 1x7, as we add another square either at the end or the beginning: a recapitulation or a “precapitulation” of our serial figurations. Then, after touring around each other’s installations, we collectively dismantle them and replace them with a “score” in the same 1x7 frame – a kind of retrospective reverse-engineering of what we have produced. These installation-scores are like the graphic scores that improvising dancers or musicians use to generate material, with an equal variety of expression (Van Imschoot). Some are sets of instructions in graphic or discursive form; some arrange materials, tools, and mementos of the hour (crepe ribbon, pencils, money, cameras, cigarettes); some are stripped-down installations, minimal works in their own right. It’s as if we are creating instructional prompts for others to follow in our footsteps, reverse-engineering directives or deriving a set of compositional principles from our own work.

The project cycle closes, as usual, with a series of responses, including “commonplace book responses” from a number of chance-designated students. Then, in a new exercise, each of us must respond to our “partner” who has observed the same location. We have each generated a list of questions, and chosen one from the list to ask our partner. (My sincerely rueful question: “Why did I want to ruin everything, make it crappy and pathetic? And why was that so hard to do?”) The next morning, we return to the studio to offer each other our responses. Standing in pairs, at the far ends of the scores derived from our divergent figurations of place and time, as across a chasm of subjectivity, we ask and answer our questions in turn.

Who could predict that this would be the fulcrum of the workshop – the moment when the word “love” could be publicly spoken and when the exposure to community could be felt so acutely? The simple act of asking and answering questions provokes what Blanchot calls “an active abandonment,” “the fact of giving ourselves in abandoning” (*Infinite* 117). In the first group of installations, Justus and Sam set the tone. Sam has created a wild assemblage of magazine clippings, pebbles, crossed-out words and photos, string running zigzags up the wall, a found text that reads Anonymní zóny/Anonymous zones. The taped border of her rectangle is scribbled serially with YOU/ME/YOU/ME/YOU, a spilling-out of subjectivity beyond the frame of attention. Justus’s installation is more cryptic and sober: found photos of geological formations, a camera tripod and rocks pasted with bits of text clipped from magazines. Justus’s question seems straightforward: “What does labeling do to the objects, does labeling change them at all?” Sam answers with what she calls a “love letter,” describing Justus’s “care, or love, for the object itself (finding a home, or a new home) as well as a love & care for the observer (me, you & everyone who viewed), a kind of guidance.” She signs it with her name, and adds a number of passionate postscripts. Justus responds to her letter with his own, reckoning with Sam’s abundant words and objects:

Dearest Sam,

After our meeting I must exert an outpouring of love at least 6 if not 12 times. Being in love means that the coffee cup that boy is drinking out of is not so beautiful that it extends to his watch and then to the leaves on his sleeve along the thread of his shirt down to the small rocks he is standing on – every part of this ‘love’ is ‘loving’ and it is a whole universe you are trying to describe filled with all of these objects and moments. You were writing a love letter on every piece of paper, box, photo, you could find and stopping at a simple “that was nice” doesn’t create a universe of passion that it takes to be in love 12 times. (...)

In this moment, the Institute’s pedagogy of response truly takes hold. “Forced love” becomes something tangible, a practice that can be repeated six or twelve times in an hour – and then prolonged, echoed by the discipline of response. Making a response to a given place or to another’s work is like writing a love letter, a practice which needs to be practiced. As Justus

notes, love letters aren't easy: it's not enough to say "that was nice" and then move on. To respond with love, you need to practice unworking your proper boundaries. You need to practice response-ability. Then forced love might become unforced love, a love that spreads from hand to cup to sleeve to rocks, like the "gentle force" that (for Blanchot) animates attention.

This kind of response can only emerge spontaneously, through the intimacy of attention. As Nancy writes, "community" can't be presupposed, only exposed.<sup>176</sup> And the love letter is of course a highly intimate form. There is something strangely "unavowable" about our avowals, an exposure to the other that, as Blanchot emphasizes, is more at home in the community of lovers than in a public setting (*Unavowable*). How to communicate a community that can't be avowed? You might as well start with an address, delivered across the spacing of the work: "Dear Justus, I kinda wanna write you in the form of a love letter, but I don't really know what that means, for me or you..." In the studio, you can feel the shifting of the stakes, as the group settles into a new, more responsive equilibrium. As we answer each other's questions, borders are left undefended and bodies made vulnerable. Sometimes the answers we give each other are pretty tough. But always there is this address – in what Nancy calls "finite existence exposed to finite existence" (*Inoperative* xl). One by one, we profess what can't be professed. Response, it seems, is a practice of exposure, an "active abandonment" which we are slowly learning over these weeks together.

### **Idyll by the Vltava**

This moment of abandon takes place within a particular pattern of living-together, a rhythm of space and time defined by the Institute. All the students save myself are housed in a hostel near Prague's historic Old Town. We spend time outside of workshop hours shopping, cooking, eating, reading, emailing and exploring, together or apart, as we please. This flexible arrangement is a kind of "idiorrhymy," a concept that Barthes explores in one of his late seminars (*How To Live Together*). Barthes describes idiorrhymy as a "fantasy" of living-

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<sup>176</sup> *Inoperative* xxxix. Nancy is adapting Paul Celan ("La poésie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose").



together, one that avoids the total isolation of the hermit but also the forced togetherness of family or phalanstery. It is a “median, utopian, Edenic, idyllic form,” like those monks on Mount Athos who live in solitude but share meals and conversation (10).<sup>177</sup> Unlike other “study trips” organised through SAIC, which include evening activities and weekend excursions, the Institute’s hours are strictly demarcated: Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm. This leaves plenty of unstructured time for solitary or shared pursuits. To help us navigate this rhythm, we are instructed toward the end of the workshop in “the Correct Uses of Free Time,” which include “Rest and/or sleep” and “Background Thinking.” Goulish even warns us of “the dangers of lucubration,” or misguided work by candlelight. There are certainly some late-night work sessions at the Jerome House, where the group is staying. And among those students sharing rooms, there are the usual struggles over intimate space and contrasting biorhythms (strangely, there seem to be few or no love stories of the more conventional kind). But I also notice that there is plenty of time for doing one’s own thing – a rhythmic spacing of the common, perhaps not so far from Barthes’s fantasy of a “median” form of living-together.

Our daily life adapts in response to the city where we find ourselves. There are little adjustments to make: a transit system to navigate, a language to learn (if only a few phrases), markets to shop in, sights to see, foods to taste and beer to drink. The choice of Prague as the site for the Institute was mostly a matter of administrative convenience, but it is fortuitous (Hixson and Goulish, Interview). The city is a living palimpsest, offering up and effacing its own past. There are centuries of history on all sides, sedimented in the stone houses, churches, synagogues, and bridges of the undestroyed Old Town, and the cubist and constructivist buildings of the past century. The presence of this past is then museified and framed as tourist spectacle. For the visitors who choke the pedestrian streets – bus trippers from Japan, stag and hen partiers from the UK – the city presents itself as a postcard image of Europe, a spired simulacrum, castles and all. Then there’s the political history of the last century: the years under Soviet Communism, visible traces of which have been scrupulously expurgated from the tourist centre (the outlying areas, with their prefab tower blocks and monumental plazas, are another matter). Flowering amid all this history is a modest

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<sup>177</sup> For Barthes, idiorrhythmy introduces some “swing” or imperfection into externally-imposed social rhythms. As he puts it, “the demand for idiorrhythmy is always made in opposition to power” (35).

contemporary art scene, far from the major European art capitals. And all around, there's the new "Czech Dream" (the title of an incisive recent documentary film): the post-1989 neoliberal economy of gentrification, giant hypermarkets, corruption, and rampant real estate speculation.<sup>178</sup>

The Abandoned Practices Institute is a little ambivalent in relating to all this tourist spectacle and consumer culture. On the second day, as we walk from the hostel through the Old Town, Goulish points out some of the old stone house signs, the sculptures adorning certain doorways, which I had learned about on my Abandoned Practice card. Before setting out, Goulish advises us not to linger by the Astronomical Clock, the famous 15<sup>th</sup>-century timepiece with its animated puppet figures, which simultaneously measures time in five different ways: "standard European Time, Old Bohemian time, and Babylonian time, as well as zodiacal and seasonal times." In fact, Goulish tells us baldly, "don't look at the Astronomical Clock." Our route will also take us by the Tesco, a large multinational chain supermarket where students can do their food shopping. "But don't look at the Tesco, either," Goulish jokes. It's as if he's trying to bracket off both tourist and capitalist temporalities, to focus our attention on a subtle, anachronistic, everyday register that we don't usually pick up. Of course, this bracketing comes at a cost. It's not only beautiful objects like sculptural house signs that are (in Proust's words) "scattered across the surface of the earth," forcing our love – it's also chain supermarkets and tourist spectacle culture. By excluding them from our attention, even half-jokingly, we court a very unworldly aestheticism, one which occasionally seeps into the work of the Institute.<sup>179</sup>

Despite various explorations of Prague's extraordinary and ordinary spaces, our aesthetic responses to the city rarely burrow into its layers of sedimented time. "Research," in the workshop, tends to stop with the texts and images given to us as prompts. Two exceptions are the work of Sabri and Andrew, a couple from North Carolina who establish their own shared rhythms and modes of experimentation with the city's past. Sabri retraces the steps of her Jewish grandparents, who in the late 1930s moved from the Czech countryside to the city.

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<sup>178</sup> See A. Cook, and the film *Český sen*.

<sup>179</sup> Goulish's words come back to haunt him in graphic form: during her response to our expurgations, Laura Cull gives us each a postcard of the Astronomical Clock with the dials crudely cut out.

They lived in an unassuming apartment before being detained in Terezín and deported to the death camps. Sabri has brought a short memoir written by her grandfather, an unreliable document that nonetheless offers clues to their daily life in the prewar city. Like the title character of Sebald's *Austerlitz*, she wanders the streets of Prague searching for hints of a destroyed past: house numbers, restaurants and cafes, parks and bakeries. Something of this hunt will end up in the performances Sabri creates for the workshop's final project. She offers several tenebrous scenes. A woman removes a stretchy lump of raw dough from her red purse, and displays it impassively to the audience. Two performers rotate in a circle while flinging a red pot back and forth. The audience is encouraged to join in a repeated chant: "We will lead you on a dark path." The performance merges lost history, death, daily life and domesticity – the red pot and the unbaked dough an uncanny memory of an ill-fated exodus.

Andrew, meanwhile, is inspired by a text from a "Prague As You Never Saw It" tourist brochure, which describes the 19<sup>th</sup>-century arcades near Wenceslas Square. These passages are a maze of art-deco twists and dead ends, with a storied past: "Knowledge of the labyrinths could prove to be an advantage during the war for those hiding on the run or participating in clandestine operations. Under communist rule these hidden places were frequented by non-conformist youth and avant-garde artists who found free space for their self-expression there." Andrew's research leads him to a group of Prague artists of the 1970s, led by Jiří Kovanda, who experimented with actions just beyond the scale of the everyday. These were subtle, public diversions of the ordinary, just small enough to avoid detection and arrest by the authorities.<sup>180</sup>

One evening, in preparation for our final project, Andrew stages an homage, re-enacting and reworking three of these actions. He leads a group of us on a wild goose chase through the streets and passageways of the New Town. Andrew stands on the steps of the National Museum, overlooking Wenceslas Square. He removes a sneaker, takes out some chalk dust, spreads it on the stairs in a line, and reads a short text. Sabri lurches through the golden halls of the Passage Lucerna. She knots and unknots a ball of string, dodging abruptly

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<sup>180</sup> As Bishop notes, Kovanda's actions were not overtly political; instead, they attempted to create a space for intimate and subjective experience "in a society where privacy was all but eliminated" (*Artificial Hells* 149).

to shake us from her path. Nico, dapper and well-groomed, stands in reverse on an endless metro escalator, blocking traffic. He pulls out a clementine and slowly peels, sections and eats it. It's a strange exercise, chasing these clandestine reenactments through streets and passageways where anything is now permitted. We weave between food stands selling fried cheese sandwiches and strip clubs catering to a tourist clientele. What was once a daring transfiguration of the ordinary has become just another art-school project, and a few of us snap photos, documenting as usual. Yet something of these past experiments with the everyday has become tangible, even if only for our small group. After a couple of hours, you can almost feel the presence in the passageways of those unruly Czech artists, making the most of their impossible situation.

At night, our rhythms often converge on a single point: the Bicycle Bar, a shack on the east bank of the Vltava, south of the Charles Bridge. It's a shadowy spot, tucked away by the boats with the city twinkling above us. There are aluminum tables and chairs scattered across the quay, a rain-damaged piano, and pilsner in plastic cups. The scene is familiar to me from past European wanderings: a bohemian enclave of artists and travellers. Our first Saturday night, we are treated to music from an accordion player and an astounding vocalist, a young costume designer for the National Theatre. She launches into Czech folksongs, French chanson and Roma ballads. With a reedy voice and upturned chin, she takes the floor as if in a prewar cabaret, occasionally breaking into a skirt-swishing dance. Everyone who knows these tunes is singing along, especially the Bulgarian and Romanian members of our group. There is dancing, and some of us are among the most enthusiastic and able movers. The dark river laps against its concrete banks. It is a fantasy for sure, though this idyll is not to be repeated. There are further pleasant, tipsy nights; we come back to the Bicycle Bar many times, looking to recapture that effervescent moment. But the accordionist and singer never return.

### **The Alfred Assembly**

Three days before the end of the workshop, we present a final performance, a culmination of sorts. Our presentation takes place in a real theatre this time, the Alfred ve

Dvoře, which translates as “Alfred in the courtyard.” The name pays homage to theatrical provocateur Alfred Jarry, and to the space’s unique architecture: dug into the courtyard of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century apartment building, overlooked by residents’ balconies. As its Canadian-expat director tells us, the space was built in the early 1990s, in a moment when the new Czech state was flush with cash. Now the corrugated metal roof leaks, though the structure still stands, inspiring a troglodyte wonder. We have invited friends and new acquaintances, who gather in the sunlit courtyard by recycling bins and an old stone wall. Goulis gives a short introduction, explaining the themes of the Institute and the structure of the event which will follow. Then the audience steps inside the big iron doors, and descends past a set of risers. Down below, the stage is arranged as if for a performance by Goat Island. Lines of black tape are stretched across the theatre’s wood floor in two rectangles, each containing a row of wooden folding chairs. The chairs face each other in the middle of the stage, dividing the space into equal parts. The first group of performers is already seated there. The audience settles down, choosing to sit either on the risers or in a line at the rear of the stage, as the show begins (see Figure 8).

For a week, the twenty-five students have been developing performances in response to one of four abandoned practices from the Institute’s archive – “Cursive Script,” “Link Boy,” “St. Vitus’ Dance,” and “Whore Dialogue.” Working in four groups determined by chance operations, each student has composed a two-minute solo and directed a three-minute trio. These solos and trios have been arranged into intricate time-structures, in another set of “marvellous overlappings” (see Figure 9). (Our rehearsals for these performances have been scheduled just as meticulously as the presentation itself.) The audience will thus witness three 18-minute performances with six people, and one 21-minute performance with seven people. Solos take place on stage right, and trios on stage left, staggered slightly in time. During the moments in our group’s presentation where we are not explicitly performing, we sit in the folding chairs, facing each other centre-stage. Each group has found its own way of marking the time, sticking to its 18- or 21-minute frame. Some call out the minutes as they pass. Our group, “Link Boy,” tries to keep an internal chronographic rhythm, while occasionally glancing at a cellphone timer hidden under one of the chairs.



Figure 8: Overlapping solo and trio at the Alfred Theatre (video still by Daviel Shy)

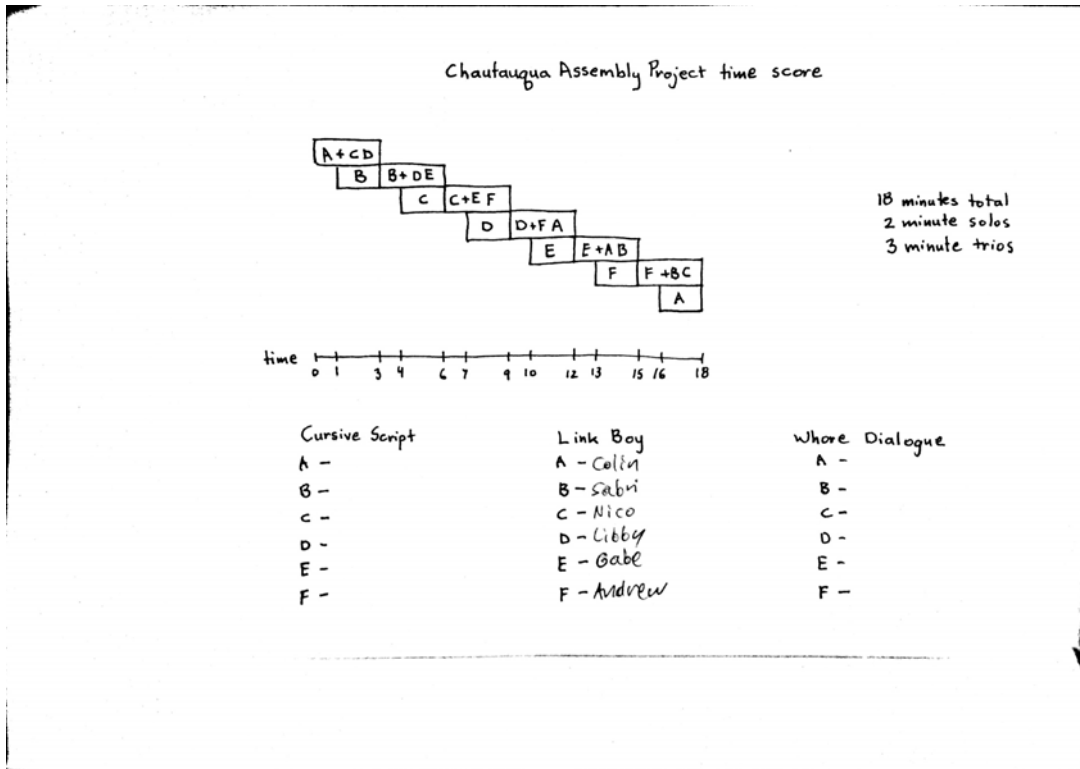


Figure 9: Time score for the Alfred performances, determined by chance operation

The conceit that organises this presentation is yet another abandoned practice: the Chautauqua Assembly, a rural summer camp and traveling school for adults that flourished in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States. As Goulish explains to us, the assembly grew out of Protestant summer retreats for Sunday School teachers, and soon grew broader and more secular. Named after the lake that hosted the inaugural 1874 event, Chautauqua eventually became “an institution – a summer assembly featuring lectures, lessons, performances, activities, and recreation, all geared toward individual adult self-betterment and social reform – spiritual, philosophical, intellectual, and practical” (Goulish, “Chautauqua”). At the traveling assembly, attendees shuttled between religious instruction in the Hall of Philosophy and secular presentations in the Auditorium. Musical performances mingled with scientific demonstrations, which sometimes resembled magic acts or shadow puppet shows. There was a strong interest in natural history and geography, including a large plaster-of-Paris scale model of the Holy Land, which traveled on a flatbed railcar. The assembly combined progressive and regressive tendencies. It had strong ties to the Suffragist movement, but it also promoted a defensive, Protestant ruralism, hostile to new immigrants, labour unions, and African-American migration from the south.<sup>181</sup>

As usual, this mixed history is not presented to us in order to be revived or replayed, but as a collection of prompts that call for creative response. What most interests the Institute is the Chautauqua Assembly’s quaint commitment to the civic and to “adult education,” along with its anachronistic modes of performative presentation. The teachers have boiled down these performance modes into four formal possibilities, which we are encouraged to adapt: traveling exhibition, educational performance, entertainment performance, and expert lecture. All these modes juxtapose “the arts, sciences, spirituality, and physicality”; as performances, they blur boundaries between the aesthetic, the educational, the ethical, the religious, the political, and the scientific.<sup>182</sup> Goulish also tells us that these various modes are ways to “start from the center,” in the words of Vito Acconci (qtd. in Read, *Theatre* 20). They

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<sup>181</sup> Goulish, “Chautauqua.” Reiser argues that the Assembly’s particular brand of “lily-white” Midwestern liberalism was engaged in a “flight from race” (129).

<sup>182</sup> Goulish, “Chautauqua.” See Alan Read on the chemist Daniell’s performance lectures, above.

forsake the borderlands of the avant-garde, with its attachment to the transgressive and the marginal, in favour of the middle ground of the ordinary. Working with this form, in this place, leads us into all sorts of productive paradoxes. Chautauqua was a phenomenon of the Midwest or “middle America”; here we are in *Mittleuropa*, adapting this Midwestern form in an underground theatre named after a French avant-guardist. We might, indeed, be taking part in a kind of summer camp for adults. But while our performances draw on Chautauqua’s anachronistic modes of educational presentation, they are anything but didactic, and far from ordinary.

The performance begins with “Cursive Script” – an endangered practice that exemplifies the contradictions of the Institute’s work. The everyday practice of writing in cursive has not been abandoned, but it does have an anachronistic or at least residual quality. It represents a strange mix of the universal and the particular: both cosmopolitan and vernacular, at once standardized and individual. Cursive script is official writing, modelled by public institutions; Declarations of Independence and decrees of empire are written in cursive script. In the school, cursive discipline is enforced. Pens are ripped from clenched hands, and lefties are frowned upon – they smudge the ink. As children, we write on lined paper, in exercise books, modelling our characters on standard examples. This is the curved tail of the “y,” the long loop of the “l,” the strange capital “G.” This is how it’s done, the proper way to write – the script of efficiency, the economical script. Yet once let loose from the prison of the classroom, cursive script starts to ramble and mutate, adapting itself to the hand of the individual. Graphology, the reading of character from an individual’s handwriting, was once a booming science. I think of my father’s cursive script – an illegible explosion of black swoops, bunched up and then flying in all directions, a code meant only for himself. Or of my grandmother’s elegant scrawl, made for writing letters and invitations, with its midcentury perfume. All these scripts now breathe a certain aura, the mark of a singular hand, leaving a trace of longing which my own endless emails and texts have surely abandoned.

In the hands of these six performers, “Cursive Script” – the practice of putting pen to paper – becomes a series of curving lines of force, connecting threads, childhood images and fantasies, balloons and flags and violent games. The abandoned practice lurks behind the



performance like a spectre, colouring its translations or mistranslations. Solos and trios overlap in the space, responding in various modes as they see fit. Sometimes the abandoned practice is imported into the performance through quotation: there is a hokey musical about the Declaration of Independence and its flowing letters, and a reading of personal texts commemorating childhood lessons in penmanship. Sometimes the response works through imitation: the script's connecting lines are impassively beaten on the body, or whipped as little coloured flags in a civic ritual dance. And some responses dissolve into the great flow of becoming, letters turning into other letters – a balloon-strewn boat putting out to sea. Throughout the piece, “democracy” appears as a collection of connecting public practices, both disciplinary and emancipatory. There is no reactionary nostalgia here, no longing for the auratic past of penmanship. But neither is cursive script cast by the wayside in favour of more efficient forms of electronic communication. These performances are a way to outwit (or outplay) the bind between reactionary nostalgia and blind celebrations of the contemporary. What's important is to *respond* to this stitch in time, to allow this anachronistic object to force our love. Through our overlapping responses, something lighter and freer emerges, a more playful and experimental engagement with practices of the past.

The other three practices given to us as prompts are more clearly abandoned, more resolutely discontinuous in time. “Link Boy” is described on his card as “a boy for hire who carried a torch of flaming pitch to guide pedestrians at night before towns had street lights.” Our group offers images of leading and following, light and darkness, boyhood, care, and class. There are sharp contrasts between dark and light: while Sabri leads the audience in chanting “I will lead you on a dark path,” Nico, dressed in shorts and a tank top, is teaching them how to cut out pictures of boys from magazines. Three boys attend a slumber party that mixes violent play and toenail-painting; there are other public humiliations, like the boy forced to walk in circles with a lighter, auditioning for the Link Boy's job. I offer a meditation on the sedan chair and the injuries of class: Colin and Sabri carry my collapsed body gently around the stage in a circle, as I sing the Beatles – “Boy, you've got to carry that weight, a long time...” The piece ends with a pantomime reenactment of the Prague artists' actions just beyond the scale of the everyday – or more precisely a reenactment of Andrew's reenactment;

he had led us around town a few nights earlier like a perverse Link Boy himself. During this careful trio, Colin is dancing clumsily stage right to music playing on his headphones, singing along to the Counting Crows' "Mr. Jones" – perhaps a memory of his own vanished boyhood. He ends by winding down his desperate dance, breathing heavily, a boy abandoned in a dark theatre.

In all four group pieces, the juxtapositions of style and tone are striking. Each features a dozen overlapping solos and trios that are unified only by the abandoned practice to which the performers have responded. Starting from that anachronistic "point of contact" with the past, each piece develops its own colour, its own set of preoccupations. The students collectively shape their work into a rhythm, playing along to the metronome of the time-structure by which we have been constrained. We pay special attention to how we cross the threshold of the taped-out resting areas, how the solos and trios begin and end, and how they overlap, working with the simultaneities that have been given to us by the discipline of chance. The abandoned performance modes of the Chautauqua Assembly also unify our work: many of the solos, in particular, have the quality of an educational presentation or demonstration. But the strongest unifying influence is the abandoned practice with which we attempt to reckon. In "St. Vitus Dance," for instance, ecstatic or compulsive dancing is naturally the order of the day.<sup>183</sup> And the solos and trios that make up "Whore Dialogue," while offering the sharpest possible contrasts in style, are unified by their preoccupations with sex and language.

I've been assigned (again by chance operation) to respond to "Whore Dialogue," so I watch the piece with special attention. The "Whore Dialogue," according to the card, was an early genre of European literary erotica "with an educational veneer," in the form of a conversation between "a young and sexually inexperienced maid ... and an older, crasser married friend." Dialogue has shaped the group's responses, which are the product of a certain amount of late-night lucubration; their trios were generated through impromptu

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<sup>183</sup> This abandoned practice commemorates the compulsive dancing that swept Strasbourg, Germany, in the 16th century. It could be seen as Prague-specific: the deadly chorea was only cured by a mass pilgrimage to a shrine dedicated to St. Vitus, and a hand-bone of that saint is held in Prague's St. Vitus Cathedral.

rehearsals in hostel rooms and hallways.<sup>184</sup> Our teachers have instructed us to not be afraid of doing less, to think about holding something back in performance. So while “Whore Dialogue” presents their work with an almost feral commitment, there is nothing orgiastic about their eroticism. Instead, as Laurel puts it in a “lecture” written on a scroll that she unrolls out of the waistband of her jean shorts, this is a space where “the erotic body meets the political body.” Half the group is dressed in red, the other half in black; they offer a series of perverse lessons in seduction and discomfort, bringing a new meaning to the phrase “adult education” (Goulish, “Response.”).

In this piece, actions and texts are arrayed in truly marvellous overlappings. The mood is playful but anxious. A tongue pokes out of a stretched lump of dough, accompanied by a brittle laugh; black sticky tape is stretched with grimaces from mouth to mouth; bodies gyrate while their voices wonder, “Does this look okay? Am I doing this right?” The piece lurches from eros to thanatos. Han Gil interrupts a couple’s gyrations with barked orders in Korean; he teaches Sam a military salute. Moki gulps down a quart bottle of milk, wincing with nausea, and collapses to the floor; she is dragged across the stage and her head is ceremonially buried in a mound of cobblestones. With all its erotic power games, the piece is surprisingly funny. In Justus’s trio, Sam is obliged to read a list of her most awkward sexual moments; then, for her solo, she launches into a chain of associations connecting the Institute in Prague with the film *Dirty Dancing*, a very American story of erotic education. But things end on a more sombre note, with bodies strewn across the stage. Justus shouts in a whisper, “She’s still burning, she’s still burning!” before falling like the rest. All the while the group is counting the minutes with stopwatches and cellphones: the effect becomes funereal, bodies exposed to the relentless passing of time. Across the space, far from these corpses, Courtney sings a lullaby, “Now is new, and new is now.” It’s only at the very end, after the clock has run down, that Moki, who has remained buried, removes the cobblestones from her face and stands up. Her breath and her red dress are a fragile resurrection, an improbable sign of life.

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<sup>184</sup> In composing our trios, many of us draw on techniques we’ve learned over the previous weeks, inventing prompts and directives to help generate creative responses.

## How to Say Goodbye

Following the assembly at the Alfred, we spend our last two days back in the AVU painting studio. We wind down with final responses, and with transitional writing exercises that aim to take us back into our lives bearing some traces of our experience here. I offer my response to “Whore Dialogue,” in commonplace-book form. For my quotation, I decide to detourn the preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, in which Foucault recommends that Deleuze and Guattari’s book be read as “an art,” in the sense of an “erotic art”: “*ars erotica, ars theoretica, ars politica*” (xiv). The performance, with its seriocomic subversion and neutralization of power, reminded me of Foucault’s words. I misquote a little, taking liberties: “‘Whore Dialogue’ often leads one to believe that it is all fun and games, when something essential is taking place, something of extreme seriousness: the tracking down of all varieties of fascism, from the enormous ones that surround and crush us to the petty ones that constitute the tyrannical bitterness and anxious pleasures of our everyday lives” (xvi, modified). As a gloss, I give each member of the group a little wire bracelet, adorned with a piece of amber and a copy of Lacan’s maxim: “Don’t give up on your desire.” After watching them grow more fearless over the past few weeks, I have fallen in love, a little, with these young artists.

Responses follow on responses, echoing each other in a relay. Perhaps the finest comes from Daviel Shy, the Institute’s teaching assistant, who was a student the workshop’s previous year in Chicago. She reads us a letter she will send to Singapore, addressed to Zihan Loo, her predecessor as teaching assistant. It’s a long letter, composed in fits and starts over the time of the workshop. In it, Daviel meditates on the homonyms “envelop(e)” and “address” in English and Czech, on this city of writers and its subtle glories, and on the layers of time contained in the endangered practice of letter-writing. She hands us each an envelope made from scraps of Czech books or magazines; inside is a drawing of an object (a boat, a metronome) that corresponds to a drawing taped to the steps outside AVU’s beaux-arts façade. We assemble on the steps, in formation: Daviel wants to commit us to memory, before leaving in a taxi for the airport. She holds up a group photo, taken on the day of questions and

answers spoken across the scores of our installations, and places it in the envelope. She describes the moment to Zihan, addressing us as well:

By day eight, the day we took this picture, they address each other so personally, through love letters, challenging careful attention, and bluntness that was heartbreaking and hilarious.

They stood across from each other, these two or in one case three, who had occupied the same site. Across the span of their installations' memory, now their scores, they called out to each other, a question and answer, a call and response.

A truce

A challenge

An insult

An embrace

We saw the space close and open like an accordion – oh and how they danced with that accordion by the Vltava!

There is something about these who came here to be disoriented twice over, to be misplaced or placed in a new relation. To surrender to not understanding, which is also a form of trust. To allow their home and habits to be viewed from afar, to be fortified or dismantled, to become monumental rubble. It is equally important what you've built and what you've torn down over these weeks. You worked, with time always in view, a massive metronome with an invisible shadow of creative destruction, a destruction we can imagine was experienced as a great relief. Do not be afraid to leave here more broken than you came.

I've been witness to wild experimentation, and for that I am deeply thankful. ...

Zee, I have them arranged on the stairs in rows, like a choir. And I think of Rory's words [from our public presentations, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012]: "We found songs. We sang them together again and again, late into the night, each time becoming more joyous, more somber, more hopeful, more desperate. Then it was time to leave..."

Daviel seals the letter, and gives it to a volunteer who will post it in the Prague Central Post Office, with its mural of "cherubs writing letters, reading letters and opening packages with

delight.” Then she steps into her taxi. Behind me on the steps, Courtney sings a lilting verse from the Magnetic Fields: “Oh Sunset City/ I’ve got to see the world/ Don’t hold me too tightly / Don’t whisper my name/ When the time comes to say goodbye...” We’re all facing forward, so it’s hard to tell who is crying. As I watch the cab pull away, I can’t help but sing along.

### **The Ones to Come (Second Thoughts)**

What to make of this experience, this shift in equilibrium lived collectively and then left behind? Justus writes me six months after the workshop, responding to a set of questions I emailed to the group:

Experiences are bracketed internally and externally. Externally, time is domineering and makes itself known, imposing its chronology. Internally, the experience becomes a sculpture that assumes a pulse and a vitality that is not certain, one that can wax and wane, wither and expand, as a cancer, as a light, as a darkness.

Each of us is left bearing the traces of this collective experience. For Justus, it is “a rock in a river that is changing with the water level, growing lichen and moss; it will have a different smell soon, and a different colour that is a patina accumulated from other actions and times” (J. Harris). We are not speaking of a dramatic transformation, but of a residue that will reshape whatever is layered beneath and above it. Our own practices are now marked by this new layer. For myself, I leave Prague feeling a little bit more broken than I came, productively cracked open – a “happy ruin,” as I tell the group in the final go-round.

The course was above all a carefully protected space of gathering. For many students, the structure of the workshop provided “the support to feel safe to experiment,” as my colleague Dao writes. She found that submitting to the teachers’ rigid chronographic constraints, directives, chance operations, and time-scores “made collaborating with strangers that we may not necessarily choose seem natural. There was no power or ego.” This defusing (or “outplaying”) of power relations was aided by the experience of working from prompts like the abandoned practice cards. For Dao, these cards “provided a starting point, something

to respond to, which helped us to jump right in and start making something on the first day.” Working in this way might have seemed obscure at first, she writes, but “it was also equalizing. The whole structure and process was equalizing.” Returning to Chicago, Dao discovered that working with prompts, constraints, and responses allowed her “to experiment quickly without worrying about the meaning or details, which can often slow or stop the creative process” (Nguyen). Other students also described a feeling of confidence in their own work, which remained with them following the workshop. Perhaps, as the teachers hoped, these practices of response were helping us find our own compass, a renewed internal sense of direction.

As Goulish noted in his final response to the group, the prompts and directives of the course are techniques for disrupting the propriety of one’s own practice. “Of course,” he told us, “you need your practice.” But the “task is to set a trap for it.” He described the “new life” that can spring from the process of “submit[ing] your work to an unexpected and often violent procedure.” (An example of this would be the expurgation duets; as Dao writes, they used censorship to create a “third new thing, instead of merely juxtaposing two different things.”) In an email to me, Laurel describes this process of depropriation at work on the very first day of the course. A writer by training, she entered the workshop without much experience in the performing arts, and was nervous about performing for this group of strangers. “But as Matthew and Lin and Mark introduced each new instruction,” she recalls,

it became clear that the exercise was not about me making performance; it was just about making performance. With each step, the material was removed more and more from its origin: we gave our gestures to someone else or changed the tempo or chopped it into sections, and we ultimately performed our gestures in small groups.

The performances transformed and the performers could let go of any precious feelings of ownership. (Foglia)

It was surely the letting go of any “precious feelings of ownership” that allowed community to emerge within the frame of the workshop as more than just a buzzword. Structures, directives, prompts, responses: all of these became ways of stepping outside one’s own self-drawn borders, of opening oneself to others and to the world. The work generated in that protected

space was nobody's property; it often surprised its supposed authors with its vibrant and responsive life. And the richness of the work extended to the lived experience of the group, both inside and outside workshop hours.

Of course, this opening occurred within a highly protected space, even a privileged one. Access to the summer course is restricted to those who can afford it, or borrow enough to pay for it. Tuition is high at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; as Hixson admits, "our students are in loans up the kazoo" (Interview). On top of this, there are travel and housing costs. The teachers have fought for a two-tiered tuition structure, which allows artists outside the institution to attend the workshop at a reduced cost. In the future they plan to provide a few scholarships for Eastern-European-based students. But the tuition-driven SAIC can provide only limited bursaries and financial aid. These barriers to access certainly skew the class composition of the group, and likely act as a depoliticizing force. It's notable that in this age of austerity and rampant inequality, money and political economy were subjects *non grata* in the artistic work produced by the Institute's students.

Not surprisingly, Hixson, Goulish and Jeffery are painfully conscious of these barriers to access and the limits created by working within a private institution. Goulish remains hopeful: the infrastructure of the art school, he points out, is what enables such a large group to travel and assemble in a formalized way. As he tells me,

It's like what Wittgenstein said about teaching philosophy in an institution, it's like teaching art in an institution – can you align inspiration with the clock, with the calendar? But we think you can. And so it's a matter of taking advantage of what the institution can offer, but also trying always to keep it alive, keep it vital... to allow those institutional structures to create the space where something can happen that's meaningful and creative.

Institutions are not always sterile containers; they can incubate new forms of creation and becoming-with. And the structures, practices and techniques developed within this Institute could certainly be extended beyond its privileged and protected space. Already, the three teachers give regular public workshops, and their students bring pedagogy inspired by them to diverse contexts. Yet it would be a shame if the politics of the workshop remained limited



by its protected, institutional frame, which does seem to encourage a certain unworldliness – a disengagement from what Cedric Robinson calls “the nastiness,” or historical suffering and its complexities (qtd. in Gordon 193).

A similar critique could be made in regard to the organizing principle of the Institute, which is designed to put its students into closer contact with history and with the world: the concept of abandoned practices. Drawing on this jumbled profusion of objects torn from their historical context in order to create prompts for generating performances tends to flatten the past into a collection of anachronistic images. It could be read as a postmodern aesthetic, a playful bricolage of antiquated culture. Casting across a gulf of historical change, we appropriate those drifting fragments of the past that please us, that help us think new thoughts or make new works. In a quite different context, Joshua Clover describes this as “a privileged culture-is-my-playground position, which allows for much of its delight” (43). Indeed, this position is not without its attractions. In his “Lecture” from 1977, Roland Barthes describes it as the position of the literary critic following the tumult of May ’68:

The old values are no longer transmitted, no longer circulate, no longer impress; literature is desacralized, institutions are impotent to defend and impose it as the implicit model of the human. It is not, if you like, that literature is destroyed; rather it is no longer protected, so that this is the moment to deal with it. Literary semiology is, as it were, that journey which lands us in a country free by default; angels and dragons are no longer there to defend it. Our gaze can fall, not without perversity, upon certain old and lovely things, whose signified is abstract, out of date. It is a moment at once decadent and prophetic, a moment of gentle apocalypse, a historical moment of the greatest possible pleasure. (14)

At the Abandoned Practices Institute, it is not literature that has been desacralized, but the historical past itself. The Institute works with practices that have been abandoned by narratives of progress, left undefended by the angels and demons of contextual and schematic explanation. On the one hand, these anachronistic “points of contact” allow students to anchor their work in historical research, to disrupt their own self-contained practices with a “push from outside.” But there is an aestheticism in the immersion in “certain old and lovely

things,” the “certain named parts” that we have been forced to love. As the old world crumbles around us in a not-so-gentle catastrophe, we are sifting through the rubble, looking for those shiny things that catch our eye. This aestheticism lurks even in the more ambiguous practices collected in the Institute’s archive. Even the beaten-down “Link Boy” has his romantic torch; even the gendered violence of “Ducking Stool” is illustrated by “a beautiful woodcut” (Goulish, interview). Students can and do approach these abandoned practices critically, but they are offered to us as through a shimmering, auratic veil.

Still, if this aestheticism is sometimes decadent, it is also prophetic. Working with abandoned practices puts us in touch with both the past and its constant disappearance. If these everyday practices have all, for better or worse, fallen prey to the doctrine of “eliminativism,” the practice of response offers a glimpse of redemption, or at least a mode of repair. Goulish begins his lecture on the Chautauqua Assembly with a quotation from Charles Olson’s *The Post Office*:

We have got so used to change that we are unwilling to believe that suddenly some change may be so total as to destroy. The path does die, and there are times when, to find his way back, man has to pick up, fiercely and without any easy emotion, traces of the way. (44)<sup>185</sup>

For the Institute’s teachers, working with these failed practices is one way to understand and subvert the structure of our market-driven society, with its cycles of obsolescence and relentless insistence on novelty. Goulish argues that “the study of abandoned practices produces a kind of interference with the dominance of the new. ... In capitalism, in a market-driven society, abandonment is a kind of failure. So looking at things that fail reveals the structure of that society” (Interview). If, as Stengers writes, the capitalist doctrine of eliminativism is leaving a mountain of junk behind it, then engaging with that junk can help us get a better grip on the structures, processes, and powers that shape our lives. Modes of

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<sup>185</sup> Accidentally or deliberately, Goulish alters the quotation to read “the path does not die.” Olson is describing the rationalization of the U.S. Postal Service, for which his father worked as a mail carrier. Eventually, meaningful work – the pride and responsibility his father took in delivering letters – was sacrificed to efficiency. As Olson writes: “The loss was the loss common to most labor since. This better be understood as not nostalgia ... What happened to work during the first world war is a trace.” Again, there is a process of abstraction at work. Olson’s historical subject matter – labour struggles and the transformation of work in the early 20th century – vanishes in Goulish’s citation.

gathering, including those (like the Abandoned Practices Institute) that operate in the aesthetic sphere, do more than sharpen our powers of critique. While sifting through the wreckage of the vanished everyday, we can experiment with relational modes of grappling with catastrophe, of collectively weathering the storm of progress. And perhaps when that storm has passed, we might be better able to pick up, as the poet says, “fiercely and without any easy emotion, traces of the way.”

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To pick up traces of the way – but whose way? And who will do the picking up? These are my questions as, several months later, I watch *Pour la suite du monde* (“For the Ones to Come”), a Québécois documentary that Laura Cull made the centrepiece of her lecture to the Institute. This 1963 classic of “lived cinema” stages the revival of beluga whale trapping by residents of the Isle-aux-coudres; they catch the small whales using a weir of saplings laboriously staked into the St. Laurence riverbed. The revival of this abandoned practice – the hunt had not taken place since 1927 – was instigated by the filmmakers, Pierre Perrault and Michel Brault, who state their role clearly in the title card that opens the film: “À l’instigation des cinéastes, les gens de l’île ont ‘relevé la pêche’ en 1962 pour en perpétuer la mémoire.” The revival of the hunt is symbolic, a matter of carrying memory into the future: because of the lack of a market for whale oil, the islanders arrange to sell any whales they catch to the New York Aquarium, for \$500 per live animal.

The film is full of vernacular delights, from the ingenious weir itself, to the islanders’ rich language, their *turlutage* or wordless rhythmic singing, and their carnivalesque mumming of *Mi-Carême* or Mid-Lent. *Pour la suite du monde* also serves as one of Deleuze’s prime examples of cinematic “fabulation,” the “invention of a people” through the “powers of the false” concocted by filmmakers and subjects (*Cinema 2* 150). As many commentators have noted, including Perrault himself, the islanders are in the process of “legending” their past, rather than unearthing a preexisting truth. In repeated discussions, they wonder – was the practice of whale-fishing taught to their settler ancestors by the First Peoples of the island, or

was it initiated by fishermen from Brittany? As the islanders debate the origins of the weir, the camera records them “in a state of “legending,” “of legending *in flagrante delicto* [*en flagrant délit de légender*]” (Perrault, qtd. in Bogue 99). For Deleuze, the film’s engagement with fabulation and the powers of the false is tied up with the status of the Québécois as “a dominated people” (*Cinema 2* 152). As he writes, drawing on Bergson’s concept of “fabulation”: “What is opposed to fiction is not the real; it is not the truth which is always that of the masters or colonizers; it is the story-telling function [*fonction fabulatrice*] of the poor, in so far as it gives the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend, a monster” (150). Indeed, this film has a powerful relationship with Québécois national identity, in its collision and collusion of urban filmmakers with the quirky countryfolk who stand in for “the people,” with all its ambiguous origins (Marshall).

Cull argues that Deleuze, in his reading of *Pour la suite du monde*, misses the other partner in the revival of this abandoned practice: the beluga whales or “sea canaries” whom the islanders attempt to catch. Her point is well taken; despite his writings elsewhere on “becoming-animal,” Deleuze doesn’t have much to say about these elegant non-humans who participate in the fabulations of Perrault’s film. Yet what’s most striking in Deleuze’s account is another omission: the original, Indigenous inhabitants of the island, who repeatedly crop up in discussion as “*les sauvages*.” The islanders keep circling back to debate the origins of the weir technique, using opaque language that in its repetition masks as much as it reveals. The whale-trapping practice was invented by ancestors, savages, geniuses... As Dalie Giroux notes, it is a kind of refrain or *ritournelle*:

The old times are coming back again!

The old times – when the savages invented this... Now it's come back. The same savages want to renew this. After thirty years. The same savages.

We're doing the same thing that the savages did.

Where's it from? The savages. When the first settlers arrived here, the weir traces were there. That's all that we can know.

We're finding traces by the stumps that our ancestors had planted.

Planted by the old people!

Planted by a genius!

We're geniuses too... A genius revival.

This must have been started by a genius.

It was the Bretons. The savages were too lazy for that.

(*Pour la suite du monde*, translation modified)

While the Québécois have been a dominated people, to ascribe a simple identity to the residents of the island as colonized, as Deleuze does, is a serious error. As revealed in their conversation, their fabulation has its darker side. If, as Bill Marshall writes, the film crew and the islanders are engaged in a “double becoming” (29), that becoming is only possible by effacing the history of colonization in which both islanders and filmmakers participate. This verbal effacing is mirrored on a formal level: in the first few minutes of the film, an islander reads from Jacques Cartier’s journal of his 1535 voyage, in which the French explorer describes a beautiful, unspoiled island that he “names” after its abundant hazelnut trees. What follows is a landscape shot of one end of the Isle-aux-coudres, taken from high above, as if presenting a virgin territory. Needless to say, that territory’s Indigenous inhabitants are only present in this story as ghosts and abstractions – geniuses or savages – and “that’s all that we can know.”

It’s a bit too easy to jump, as Cull does, from these charming islanders to the charming whales, all of whom collaborate with a film crew in the revival of “*la pêche*.” What’s lost in the cinematic “fabulation” or “legending” of this abandoned practice is not only the river’s non-human residents (not to mention the island’s women, who are notably absent from the film). What’s lost, as at other moments in the thinking of the Abandoned Practices Institute, is the hurt of history. Here, the island’s history of First Peoples and settler colonialism is so thoroughly effaced that it can only emerge symptomatically, in fragments of the islanders’ otherwise eloquent speech. The filmmakers present this speech without comment, without response; the words probably hurt more now, in 2013, than when the film was first released. As the islanders stake out their weir, driving saplings into the riverbed, they are also staking out their territory – the territory of memory and of the future, a symbolic and geographic home for the ones to come, for the world hereafter. Those stakes, planted

alongside stumps laid generations before European settlement, are what now need to be shifted into a new, more just equilibrium. Laura Cull prophetically titled her lecture to the Institute, “The Ones to Come are Already Here.” Yes, and more – the ones to come are already here, have been here from old, and are here to stay. Here are the traces of the way.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Fermenting: Sandor Katz and the Politics of Folk Practice**

*Microcultural Revival – Grassroots Modernism? – DIY Moralism – Habitus, Tactics, Ascetics – The Planet of the Practicing – Being Entangled – Strange Strangers – This Compost – Recipe: Eat Some Dirt – Nourishing Traditions, Stolen Land – Radical Healing – Political Ferments*

#### **Microcultural Revival**

My case studies thus far have looked at performance projects that work with “tradition” in experimental ways, using collective practice to transform experiences of shame, colonization, and abandonment into shared capacity and action. These artistic projects have defined boundaries – whether they take the shape of a one-night festival (“Profaning”), a three-week workshop (“Responding”), or a portable audiovisual performance (“Remixing”). This final chapter, on the other hand, analyses vernacular revivals at the level of everyday practice. Here, I take a close look at one of the more intriguing and wide-ranging collective experiments with tradition in settler-colonial North America: the rediscovery and adaptation of culinary traditions of home fermentation. This “microcultural revival” has been most eloquently articulated by one charismatic proselytizer of pickling, the writer and food activist Sandor Ellix Katz. In his books *Wild Fermentation*, *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved* and *The Art of Fermentation*, Katz collages multiple culinary traditions into syncretic manuals for home experiment.<sup>186</sup> His writing often slips into the imperative, repeating a simple watchword: “Use what is abundantly available to you, and be bold in your fermentation

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<sup>186</sup> Hereafter cited as *WF*, *RWN*, and *AF*.

experimentation!” (WF 59). Across the U.S., Canada, and abroad, practitioners have taken up Katz’s exhortations to revive these slow and strange ways of making cultured foods, working with microorganisms as silent and powerful partners.

Katz and other “cultural revivalists” have overlapping motives, including the struggle for a more sustainable food system, the health benefits of live-culture foods, the importance of these foods to almost all culinary traditions, and their pungent and sour deliciousness. Yet as home fermentation has become more popular, the making of sauerkraut, pickles, kombucha, and kimchi has come to acquire contradictory political connotations. To sceptics, it is one of the more laughable signs of privileged lifestyles and tendencies toward gentrification. Pickles, it seems, are a particularly easy target for ridicule. The TV comedy *Portlandia*, which skewers the narcissism of locavore and DIY movements, opened its second season with a sketch called “We Can Pickle That.” A Yelp Wordmap of the term “hipster” “can be used to eschew aficionados of pickling, Pabst, pretension, pay-what-you-can, performance art, and pretending to know everyone” (“Toronto Hipster Map”). Walking through Toronto’s gentrifying Kensington Market, you can buy a one-dollar “pickle-on-a-stick” from a new artisanal boutique – and then be greeted with a derisive “Yeah, you’re cool...” from a passer-by.

This mockery is all too easy, and not entirely misplaced. A class dimension is often absent from slow food and locavore movements, including some parts of the fermentation revival, which tend to imagine an unjust food system transformed by micro-changes in lifestyle practices. The rhetoric of certain “fermentos” – including the recently converted food writer Michael Pollan – is not exempt from this fantasy. Their vision fails to take into account the ways in which specialized lifestyle practices are easily accommodated as market niches within larger capitalist structures (Sharzer). From a Marxist perspective that focuses on social relations of production and class antagonism, anyone who considers their pickling practice revolutionary is at best a well-intentioned but delusional petit-bourgeois. History, after all, is made in the streets, not in the kitchen.

To practitioners, on the other hand, the gentle cultivation of bacteria in home fermentation has strong political resonances and even a certain efficacy. “Fermentos” argue



that the experimental revival of these practices cultivates a resistance to forces of cultural homogenization, while allowing traditions to be reshaped and to grow in unexpected directions. Integrating home fermenting into daily routines alters one's relation to "productive" time; sharing recipes and bubbling mason jars within fermentation networks builds resources outside the industrial food system. With the help of bacteria from the air and soil, consumers of dead commodities become producers of living food. This is a grassroots "microbiopolitics," as anthropologist Heather Paxson has termed it, on its smallest scale and at its slowest speed. In an accelerated economy, when most food is produced on a mass scale and consumed in haste, home fermentation offers a way to scale down and slow down. Even if such transformations do not alter larger structures of exploitation, they are techniques of bodily and spiritual regeneration, building strength, energy and hope (Wade).

Fermentation can also be read as a metaphor for collective activist practice (see Figure 10). Sandor Katz himself came to lacto-fermentation for health reasons in the 1990s after testing HIV-positive, following an intense engagement with civil disobedience and creative protest as a member of ACT UP. Drawing on this activist impulse, he often invokes the parallel between culinary and social ferment. "The word ferment," he writes, "along with the words fervor and fervent, comes from the Latin verb *fervere*, to agitate or boil. Just as fermenting liquids exhibit a bubbling action similar to boiling, so do excited people, filled with passion and unrestrained" (*RWNM* xiii). He invites experimenters to spread their effervescent cultures through the body politic: "As microorganisms work their transformative magic and you witness the miracles of fermentation, envision yourself as an agent for change, creating agitation, releasing bubbles of transformation into the social order" (*WF* 166). His rhetoric is infectious, and offers a way to connect daily practice with social change, a connection sometimes missing from more universalist voices on the political left.

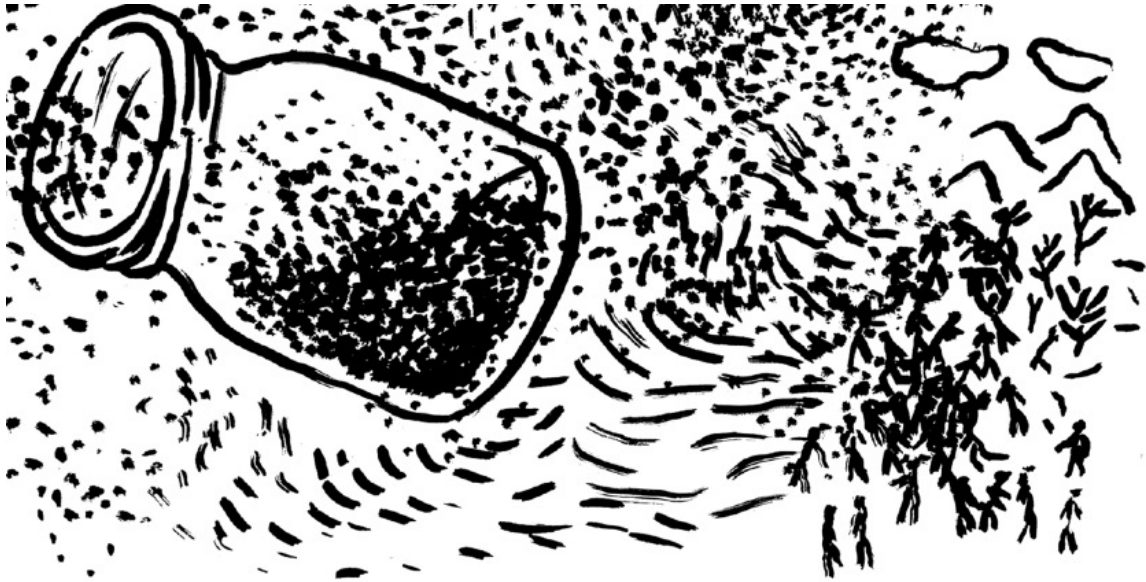


Figure 10: The analogy between fermentation and collective practice. From the *Microcultures Zine* (illustration by Vahida Ramujkic)

This chapter investigates the human and microbial cultures of the fermentation revival, while engaging with debates over the aesthetics and politics of everyday life. Do-It-Yourself fermentation could be considered as a radical vernacular practice, opening up toward collective social transformation. It could also be seen as a practice of self-care, the latest culinary trend, part of a return to an imagined “traditional” diet, a hobby for “creative” workers with time on their hands, and a way to sell value-added foodstuffs to niche markets. In fact, it is often many of these things at once. In what follows, I will explore the philosophical, aesthetic, and political ramifications of this movement. I begin by posing the problem of the politics of DIY, looking at arguments for and against the political value of local, everyday, vernacular practices, including pickling. This leads me to a more general discussion of the politics of daily practice, in the writings of Bourdieu, de Certeau, Foucault, and Sloterdijk. I then turn to a philosophical reading of the microbiological side of home fermenting, and look at it as a set of “post-Pasteurian” practices of hospitality toward the “strange stranger” (Paxson, Derrida, Morton). I explore the practice of composting – another kind of fermentation – and its relation to intoxication, digestion, death, and regeneration. I then argue that fermentation is perhaps most intriguing as an aesthetico-political practice,

tracing connections between Katz's writing and avant-garde art movements. This leads me to another critique of the fermentation revival: its relation to aesthetic holism, the appropriation of Indigenous cultures and settler-colonial imaginings of tradition. Finally, I look at the fermentation revival's wider political resonances, touching on recent movements of political contestation and social ferment.

### **Grassroots Modernism?**

Defenders of DIY are well aware of the gap between the small-scale practices they promote – community gardens, bicycle co-ops, coding collectives, craft circles – and the large-scale global problems of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. “Grassroots Modernism,” a 2011/2012 issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, zeroes in on this discrepancy, as it tries to strengthen the ties between what its editors, Marc Herbst and Christina Ulrike, call “the general” and “the specific.” In the wake of the Occupy movement's reassertion of the general (“the 99%”) in North American politics, Herbst and Ulrike attempt to link small-scale practices to broad-based social movements. They write:

Broadly speaking, movements are successful not because of a unified ideology but because of the common dream we maintain before us. We bat at it as a moving target on the horizon. We attempt to achieve it through making things. We make artwork, situations, events, proposals, laws, procedures, non-profits, broken newspaper boxes, gardens. We write manifestos and statements, songs and barricades. Each act, real, spectacularly real, structural, spectacular, contributes to the institutionalization of forms in the production of social meaning. (4)

For the editors, these specific practices of “making things” can all be gathered up into a “common dream,” which perhaps necessarily remains undefined. Such a common dream is difficult to grasp. As the editors note, there is a “dynamic tension between autonomy and sociality” that underlies the various projects and practices they discuss (4). Yet they are convinced that diverse acts – from the writing of songs to the building of barricades, from

litigation in the courts to the planting of gardens – can be institutionalized in common forms of social struggle, creating a sort of popular front of the practices.

In the same issue of the *JOAAP*, an article by Meg Wade entitled “Grassroots Modernism as Autonomous Ethos and Practice” offers one of the more thoughtful political defences of DIY. Wade acknowledges that the “small actions” of DIY practitioners seem inadequate in the face of “an expansion of state and corporate powers” and the threat of ecological devastation. How can “bicycle coops and backyard homesteads” even begin to solve “the vast problems described by our grand analyses”? Such activities do not seem large enough. “Nor,” she writes, “do they seem new enough, looking very much like the practices that humans have always engaged in throughout the ages” (45). Yet for Wade, these small-scale, anachronistic activities have a key role to play – not so much as components of mass movements, but on the spiritual plane. They encourage “a renewal of souls that are crushed, defeated” (46). Drawing on Franco Berardi’s notion of the “soul at work” under “semicapitalism,” Wade argues that the kitchen, the garden, or the workshop offer spaces of retreat where “signs are less dense.” In an ever-accelerating spectacular economy, they create the possibility of a certain “scaling down and slowing down.” The revival of a traditional practice like home fermentation, for example, allows one to step back from hectic consumer activity: “The instantaneous delivery of goods and entertainment is not the point here; one must wait weeks for the bacteria in a batch of sauerkraut to do their work” (50-51). The slowness of microbial growth, the patient work with organic matter in garden and kitchen, can be a kind of healing, regenerative activity.

To the slowness of DIY practices, Wade adds the virtues of tinkering and collective experimentation. Her piece, intriguingly, draws on Kant and Foucault’s essays on the Enlightenment to offer a vision of DIY practices as a “way out of our state of submission.”<sup>187</sup> This is the “modernism” of the essay’s title – the power of critique to break with an inherited and unjust state of affairs. Paradoxically, Wade’s modernism works through a return to the past, by reactivating ways of doing and making that are not particularly new. In contrast to the Enlightenment’s supposedly progressive and universal conception of reason, Wade argues

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<sup>187</sup> See Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment”; Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”

that DIY modernism is anchored in the “grassroots,” in horizontal forms of knowledge worked out in daily experimental practice. She notes that there is “something decidedly early modern about grassroots modernism. Perhaps it is a return to the experimental mode of early modern natural philosophy, to science as garage experiment rather than as a universalizing, dominating, state-corporate partnership” (47). The philosopher Isabelle Stengers would dispute Wade’s blanket condemnation of contemporary scientists, who are not necessarily in thrall to forces of domination; but she would nevertheless appreciate Wade’s argument that DIY communities build collective confidence and the “capacity to produce, to think, and to want” (Wade 53). For Stengers, too, communities of practice such as experimental science are what enable humans “to think, imagine and resist” (“Diderot’s Egg” 15; see Chapter 3 above). This is what Wade means by “an autonomous ethos and practice”: not the autonomy of the self-governing liberal subject, but the collective autonomy worked out in “the daily practice of transforming our own material conditions” (53) – even, it seems, when that daily practice is as small-scale and slow-paced as the fermenting of vegetables.

Wade’s defence of DIY can be seen as broadly anarchist, concerned with building the capacity for anti-capitalist collective renewal. Other more left-liberal writers such as Rebecca Solnit and Michael Pollan have also praised the slowness and experimental nature of DIY practices, including practices of fermentation. In a 2013 essay on the transformation of the experience of time in an era of smartphones and social networks, Solnit observes that “[s]ome of the young have taken up gardening and knitting and a host of other things that involve working with their hands, making things from scratch, and often doing things the old way” (33). For her, this is “a slow everything movement in need of a manifesto.” Like Wade, Solnit is torn between recognizing the limits of DIY and praising its virtues. As she acknowledges, “We won’t overthrow corporations by knitting – but understanding the pleasures of knitting or weeding or making pickles might articulate the value of that world outside electronic chatter and distraction, and inside a more stately sense of time” (33). Solnit’s “stately sense of time” may be a fantasy, one that every generation seems to long for. Yet if, as David Harvey has argued, capitalism repeatedly transforms daily life through time-space compression, it isn’t surprising that the experience of time in metropolitan centres grows ever more fractured

(*Condition*). For Solnit, echoing Wade in a less radical key, reclaiming anachronistic vernacular practices such as home fermentation might offer a way to take a breath, to gather a collective sense of value, and to build shared resources.

The food writer Michael Pollan shares Solnit's sense of the remedial promise of DIY food practices. As he writes in *Cooked*, which includes a long section on fermentation, doing it yourself offers "a first-person, physical kind of knowledge that is the precise opposite of abstract or academic" (406). The "abstract" is Pollan's enemy throughout his book: he contrasts the abstracting processes of the global industrial food system to the concrete knowledge gained by, say, learning how to ferment milk into cheese (17). Pollan offers the kitchen as an antidote to what he describes as the immateriality and anti-sensuality of computer work, including his own writing practice. He doubts that it is "a coincidence that interest in all kinds of DIY pursuits has intensified at the precise historical moment when we find ourselves spending most of our waking hours in front of screens – senseless, or nearly so." For the author, projects like the rise of artisanal pickling "offer the best kind of respite. They're antidotes to our abstraction" (407). In an economy governed by the historyless abstractions of circulating commodities, Pollan views his own DIY fermentation practice as a form of "remembering where things come from." It allows him to memorialize the concrete qualities of food: "To make [beer] yourself once in a while, to handle the barley and inhale the aroma of hops and yeast, becomes, among other things, a form of observance, *a weekend ritual of remembrance*" (408, italics added). Pollan is gifted at conveying the texture of his hands-on engagement with cooking from scratch, and his writing on fermentation is scientifically and symbolically astute. Yet here, his political imagination is limited to lodging a "small but eloquent protest" against industrial agriculture and consumer capitalism through his own experiments in growing, cooking, and fermenting food (414).

### **DIY Moralism**

The slide from Wade's "autonomous ethos and practice" through Solnit's "more stately sense of time" to Pollan's "weekend ritual of remembrance" illustrates the dangers of

putting too much faith in the micropolitics of DIY. Pollan's weekend ritual is, indeed, a kind of compensation – the reenactment of traditional foodways as a “respite” from the pressures of the market. It is an expression of what political economist Greg Sharzer doesn't hesitate to call “petit-bourgeois ideology.” In his 2012 polemic *No Local*, Sharzer argues that the petite bourgeoisie – including what more boosterish thinkers call “the creative class” – is shut out from the antagonistic relation between capital and labour, and finds itself confronting capitalism on the level of everyday consumer choices. Its political proposals thus tend to turn around the ethics of these choices – what products to buy, or what things to make oneself. Sharzer argues that DIY movements can at best create niche markets for “ethical” consumption, or small, protected spaces sheltered from commodification. Meanwhile, the great wheel of the global economy keeps turning, content to let these scattered experimenters continue their tinkering.

Sharzer is especially critical of anti-capitalist localist projects proposed in books like Chris Carlsson's *Nowtopia: How Pirate Programmers, Outlaw Bicyclists, and Vacant Lot Gardeners are Inventing the Future Today!* For Sharzer, such experimenters enact a debased version of the cooperative proposals of Proudhon, which were already outmoded in the mid-nineteenth century. He notes that “in the face of oligopolies Proudhon could never have dreamt of in his worst nightmares, [they create] tiny alternatives at the margins” (55). Vacant lot gardeners, for example, are not outside the broader capitalist food system. Nor do they pose any threat to it: in fact, they tend to fuel urban gentrification and raise real-estate values, effectively pricing themselves out of their own neighbourhoods.

Sharzer observes, correctly, that the evident insufficiency of DIY small-scale proposals leads their proponents to oscillate between utopian and apocalyptic imaginaries. Perhaps we are changing the world by growing and pickling vegetables or learning how to fix bicycles; if not, these skills will help us to survive the coming catastrophe. For Sharzer, “hidden behind localism's DIY attitude is a deep pessimism; it assumes we can't make large-scale, collective social change” (3). Along with pessimism, Sharzer argues that localism generally tends toward moralism, a belief that individual behaviour is the ultimate target and motor of reform. He likens DIY proselytizers to the sandal-wearing socialists savaged by George Orwell in *The*

*Road to Wigan Pier*. Like nineteenth-century paternalist reformers, twenty-first-century localists seek to reform the structural inequities of capitalism through moral change at the level of the individual. In Sharzer's estimation, "Hygiene and poetry have been replaced by ethical consumption and Do-It-Yourself, but the high-mindedness of patience and restraint remains" (84). The emphasis on individual behaviour deflects attention from structural exploitation and injustices, and drives a wedge between localist activists and the people whose behaviour they are trying to alter. Instead of experimenting with micro-alternatives and lifestyle adjustments, Sharzer argues, activists need to unite in class struggle, which ultimately unifies its participants around a common revolutionary goal.

Despite its own anachronisms, including its focus on the working class as global revolutionary subject, *No Local* offers an important critique of localist and DIY movements. Yet it does not address the gist of Wade's argument for "grassroots modernism" – that DIY practices, including experimental revivals of vernacular knowledge, "offer a renewal for souls that have been crushed, defeated." Indeed, Sharzer admits that his analysis does not touch the affective dimension of DIY practices, or the know-how and resources they can foster. He professes generosity on this point: "If growing your own vegetables makes you feel better and helps you meet your neighbours, then you should do it. Moreover, participating in a local DIY project can provide the strength and tools for community activism. Inspiration and political imagination are highly personal and subjective things, and no one can predict what inspires a critical understanding of society and how to change it" (3). Despite this seemingly open-minded admission, his perspective is teleological. For him, the strength and tools gained from DIY projects are only valuable if they lead to a broader understanding of the necessity of class struggle, rather than existing as what Agamben might call "means without ends." Ultimately, Sharzer sees these projects as a drain of time and energy that could more profitably be spent building revolutionary alliances – which in his view also offer a more promising route to spiritual renewal.



## Habitus, Tactics, Ascetics

An even more significant omission from Sharzer's argument is the question of practice. In Sharzer's analysis, practice is inevitably subordinated to *praxis*, what for the Marxist tradition could be described as revolutionary action informed by theory. Yet daily *practice* is at the heart of Wade's argument: for her, "grassroots modernism" is an ethos and a practice, a "form of life" that must be constantly exercised. It is an example of what Michel Foucault famously termed an *askesis*, after that term's use in Greek philosophy: a mode of self-constitution as an ethical subject through daily exercises. The politics of practice are highly ambivalent. Many of the practices proposed by localist or DIY movements, such as Pollan's weekend beer-brewing rituals, seem stuck at the level of compensation through lifestyle adjustments. Yet others, including Sandor Katz's fermentation experiments, might offer a more radical opening – a way, as Foucault puts it in *The Use of Pleasure*, "to release oneself from one self" (*se déprendre de soi-même*). The task would then become to find ways to broaden and generalize this release, to link practice with political action, and to work ourselves collectively out of what Wade terms "our state of submission." But first, we need to consider the question of practice in general, and fermentation practices in particular, in greater detail.

The valences of "practice," as they shift from language to language, are too slippery to pin down here. But a short excursus on a few formulations of the concept can help clarify the political stakes of DIY practices, including the fermentation revival. In French thought in the 1970s and early 1980s, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault each articulated a major "theory of practice." Their arguments are cross-currents running in markedly different directions. Bourdieu's *The Logic of Practice*, for example, analyzes practice as ultimately reducible to *habitus*, the inertial weight of class-based social logics, which are held in the body and worked out in the structured repetitions and improvisations of daily behaviour. (Sharzer's *No Local* draws on Bourdieu's *habitus* in its analysis of localism as an ideology.) Bourdieu would likely view fermentation practices as beholden to these social logics. Whether the fermenter is a Korean householder rubbing red pepper over brined cabbage leaves, or a white North American student stuffing those cabbage leaves into a crock,

each practitioner is engaged in a discursive field that links bodily actions with social meaning. The connotations of those actions will vary, but remain socially defined: perhaps “tradition” and “hand taste” for the one, and “adventurousness” and “do-it-yourself” for the other.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau rejects the “mystical reality” of habitus, what he calls “the blanket that Bourdieu’s theory throws over tactics” (59). For de Certeau, tactics or “ways of doing” (*arts de faire*), far from being reducible to social logics, are a constantly regenerating and proliferating mode of everyday creativity. In the two volumes of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau and his collaborators explore everyday arts, including those of cooking and eating. These arts are full of “ancient tricks,” which de Certeau traces back to folkloric “hunter’s cunning,” through the Greek *metis* (“way of operating” or “practical intelligence”), all the way to an evolutionary bedrock – “to the immemorial intelligence displayed in the tricks and imitations of plants and fishes” (*Practice*, xx). For de Certeau, practice can be seen as the tactical inventions of daily existence, an ancient subterfuge that is present even under exploitative or oppressive social conditions. Following this analysis, we might look at the fermentation revival as a rediscovery of ancient techniques of culinary bricolage and tinkering. In Volume 2 of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Luce Giard explores these culinary arts in France around 1980, recounting her own pleasures in the kitchen of “manipulating raw material, of organizing, combining, modifying, and inventing” (153). Such experimental pleasures are central to the ancient arts of home fermentation. These diverse arts also require practitioners to approach the world of plants, animals and microbes with a certain “hunter’s cunning.”

In the last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault is after a different quarry. Foucault is not particularly interested in Bourdieu’s bodily inertias, or de Certeau’s subversive tactics of everyday consumers, readers and cooks. Instead, his work investigates how the ethical comportment of everyday life – in his research, sexual life – becomes “problematized,” a matter of concern and the subject of disciplined work. In the Introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault begins to theorize the “techniques of the self” that constitute the ethical subject as such, exemplified by Stoic philosophy in the ancient world. Rather than understanding ethics as primarily a set of prohibitions or injunctions laid out in a moral code,

Foucault shifts the focus to the individual's "self-formation as an 'ethical subject'" through practical exercises (28). These "practices of the self" do not refer to practices as inherited social logic (Bourdieu), nor practices as creative adaptation (de Certeau). Rather, Foucault explores practice as a highly reflexive and demanding process of self-elaboration. The practicing individual, writes Foucault, goes through "a process in which [he] delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself" (28).<sup>188</sup> As his late interviews indicate, Foucault's research into this practice-based ethics was ultimately oriented toward an expansion of freedom ("Ethics"). Yet this freedom is only accessible to those who choose submit themselves to the ascetic path.<sup>189</sup>

The etho-poetics of Foucault undoubtedly promote a certain kind of "autological" subject, one who tears him or herself away from tradition, custom and habit in order to live by a higher set of rules. This is not an uncommon vision. In his book *Infinitely Demanding*, the philosopher Simon Critchley argues that Foucault's late ethical writings do not escape what he calls "the autonomy orthodoxy" – the tendency of European philosophy (especially from Kant onwards) to propose some version of the autonomous ethical subject capable of ruling itself. Critchley sees this tendency toward autonomy and autarchy in a range of contrasting figures, including Heidegger's authentic *Dasein* and Marx's collective *praxis* of the proletariat.<sup>190</sup> In the case of Foucault, Critchley understands the "care for the self as a practice of freedom" as moving toward "a more embedded, practice-based account of autonomy" (40). Yet for Critchley, the "work of the self upon itself" that Foucault examines "always seems to be oriented around practices of self-mastery" (11). Indeed, the goal of Foucault's Greek and Roman texts is self-mastery and self-control, sexual and otherwise. Echoes of the Stoic call for autarchy are also heard in Meg Wade's formulation of grassroots modernism as an

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<sup>188</sup> For an entirely different, less sanguine reading of "testing," see Ronell.

<sup>189</sup> Or those who are able to pursue that path: Foucault notes that the exclusive subjects of Greek and Roman ascetic moral discourse were men. In the ancient world, women and slaves were naturally not encouraged to train themselves in "practices of the self."

<sup>190</sup> Critchley readily admits that this reading of Heidegger is "hugely tendentious" (153).

“autonomous” ethos and practice. Much anarchist theory, in fact, shares the “autonomy orthodoxy,” not of the individual moral subject but of the self-organizing collective.

While Critchley offers the work of Levinas as a possible alternative to this orthodoxy of autonomy, it is interesting to note that Foucault himself suggests an undoing of self-mastery in his description of his own writing process. Foucault admits that his detour through Greek and Roman “practice texts” was unexpected, the result of “the knower’s straying afield of himself.” His straying (*égarement*) had a simple cause: “It was curiosity – the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself” (*History* 8). Foucault writes that philosophy is undoubtedly “an ‘ascesis,’ *askesis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought” (9). But his own example suggests that philosophical exercise, while critical and reflective, can also be a practice of undoing. It does not involve self-mastery or the assimilation of the proper, but a curious straying through unknown fields, a straying that allows one to shake one’s own grip on oneself (*se déprendre de soi-même*). For Foucault, the exercise of thought can become a practice of abandonment, much like the depropriation exercises developed by the Abandoned Practices Institute (see Chapter 3). As we will see, some of the more radical currents of the fermentation revival have developed their own practices of abandonment, which are quite unlike the exercises in self-mastery that Foucault explores.

### **The Planet of the Practicing**

Foucault’s investigation of ascetic “practices of the self” finds an amplified echo a few decades later in *You Must Change Your Life*, philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s 2009 treatise on the subject of practice. Sloterdijk expands Foucault’s analysis of ascetic techniques into a broad investigation of “anthropotechnics,” developing what he calls a “general ascetology.” Sloterdijk’s tour of “the planet of the practicing” covers all sorts of subjectifying work that humans do on themselves, “whether they are farmers, workers, warriors, writers, yogis, athletes, rhetoricians, circus artistes, rhapsodists, scholars, instrumental virtuosos or models”

– or, presumably, fermenters (110). Aside from a few focused case studies (of Nietzsche, Kafka, Cioran, and, surprisingly, L. Ron Hubbard), which open the book, Sloterdijk does not delve into a detailed comparative anthropology of “the practicing phenomenon.” He is more interested in sketching its philosophical ideal type, based on two key characteristics: *verticality* and *separation*. For Sloterdijk, unlike de Certeau, practice is not a mode of everyday life. Instead, it is opposed to the everyday on both vertical and horizontal planes.

Sloterdijk makes this argument through two metaphorical oppositions: the base camp and the summit, and the river and the shore. In Sloterdijk’s Nietzschean view, critical theorists like Bourdieu are ultimately concerned with what goes on in the “base camps” of humanity. They study the inertial behaviour and the games of power and distinction that take place at the foot of the mountain, which the acrobats of practice attempt to climb. Sloterdijk considers Bourdieu’s habitus to be a useful sociological concept, but he is more interested in conscious *habit*, the disciplined use of repetition to break socially determined, repetitive behaviour. He calls this discipline “turning the power of repetition against repetition” (197). Through repetition, the acrobats of practice exit the base camps of everyday life, with all their banal struggles, in order to make the ascent of “Mount Improbable” (a term Sloterdijk borrows from evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins). This mountain can only be scaled when “individual people – whether alone or in the company of co-conspirators – begin to catapult themselves out of the habitus communities to which they initially and mostly belong” (190). Outside the base camp, the air is clearer, squabbles over distinction fall away, and the peak reveals itself with all of its stark imperatives. But you have to train to climb.

Preparing for the ascent of Mount Improbable thus requires another kind of verticality: the verticality between master and disciple. In the monastic call to practice, “one looks at someone perfect, from whom one receives, incredulous and credulous at once, the message that one could be the same one day” (78). This vertical structure continues through the “de-spiritualization of asceticisms,” which Sloterdijk dates to the late nineteenth century and its passion for athletics. For the would-be practitioner, trainers, coaches and teachers are crucial. Whether religious or secular, philosopher, acolyte or athlete, all those who enter a community of the practicing begin by realizing their own lack of self-possession and control,

but “in the hope, supported by actual role models, of one day mastering the art of self-governance (*enkrateia*)” (229). Mount Improbable is not easy to climb: mastery may never be realized, but it remains the goal. The vertical tension created between master and undisciplined pupil can be almost unbearable. As Sloterdijk notes, “The Hindu title swami (from Sanskrit *svāmī*, ‘own’ or ‘self’; compare Latin *suus*), which can belong to a chief in profane contexts, refers in its spiritual meaning to the ‘master over oneself,’ the ascetic, who has achieved complete control over his own powers on the path of practice” (229). While Sloterdijk is interested in the eventual “collectivization” of mastery, he suggests that, in the meantime, individuals may as well keep training for the ascent of Mount Improbable through their own disciplined practice (297).

Sloterdijk’s other central metaphor is one of separation: practitioners begin by stepping outside the river of life, and observing its currents and swimmers from the shore. This is how Sloterdijk understands the emergence of philosophy in the “axial age of practice” across the ancient world (197). In the era of Socrates, Confucius, the Buddha, Jeremiah, and the Upanishads, thinkers began to analyze the forces of confusion, passion and habit that carried along humans in their stream.<sup>191</sup> The view of everyday swimmers from the riverbank creates what Sloterdijk calls “shore subjectivity”; to avoid getting swept back into the stream, one must adopt a new mode of life. As he writes, “*Askesis* became inescapable from the moment when an avant-garde of observers found themselves compelled to overcome their inner obstacles – more precisely, the three obstacles that faced them in the form of passions, habits, and unclear ideas” (195). The possession of habitual “automated programmes” had to be broken through repetitive exercise sequences, which separate the practicing from the rest of the human world. Sloterdijk claims that “entering ethical thought means making a difference with one’s own existence that no one had previously made. If there were an accompanying speech act, it would be: ‘I herewith exit ordinary reality’” (219). Michel de Certeau is never mentioned in *You Must Change Your Life*, perhaps for this reason. In Sloterdijk’s view, the tricks and ruses of everyday existence are precisely what the acrobats of practice reject as they separate themselves from the world of daily affairs. From the vantage

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<sup>191</sup> Sloterdijk takes the idea of “the axial age” from Karl Jaspers’s *The Origin and Goal of History*.

point of the shore, such subtle tactical manoeuvres look like the vain gestures performed by the drowning.

Sloterdijk's insistence on verticality and separation leads him into some theoretical contortions. He ends his book by suggesting that only "the global catastrophe" – presumably ecological collapse – now has the authority to say "You must change your life!" (444) In the face of the coming catastrophe, humans must invent a new set of "monastic rules," and make the decision "to take on the good habits of shared survival in daily exercises" (452). Many proponents of "grassroots modernism" might share this endorsement of common exercises of survival. But Sloterdijk's insistence on vertical and horizontal separation from the world leaves a gap in his ethical argument. It is as though only the threat of catastrophe can shock the practicing into rejoining the everyday life they have abandoned. Only melting glaciers will lead the mountaineers to bother with what goes on in the base camps; only rising floodwaters will cause the watchers to abandon their perch on the riverbank. This ethics of self-preservation is hardly worthy of the call of Rilke's poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo" – a hymn to the wrenching power of aesthetic brokenness and incompleteness, whose final line, "You must change your life," bursts on the reader like a thunderclap. Sloterdijk's late plea for shared survival contradicts the spirit of his book, which emphasizes the individual's acrobatic self-mastery, not collective ethico-political practice. Indeed, the collective dimension of practice is notably downplayed in Sloterdijk's thinking, which draws on highly selective theoretical sources. For example, the philosopher doesn't look at the voluminous educational literature on "communities of practice."<sup>192</sup>

Sloterdijk's emphases on verticality, separation, and mastery do not extend to DIY fermentation practices, which (as I will argue) tend to be horizontal, imbricated, and unmasterable. Yet Sloterdijk and Foucault are helpful in their focus on practice as a kind of asceticism. Like other grassroots modernists, "fermentos" are not simply engaged in the tactics of everyday consumers described by de Certeau and his collaborators. Nor are their experiments reducible to Bourdieuan games of distinction. Instead, fermenters draw on deliberately anachronistic culinary tactics and techniques, which require a certain discipline

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<sup>192</sup> See Lave and Wegner; Wegner.

and exist in tension with the broader food system. The paradox is that these fermentation practices were once customary and habitual. They are new translations made possible by what Benjamin calls “a sickening of tradition.” What was once a vernacular “way of doing” has become a conscious *askesis*. As Sloterdijk points out, “asceticism-based thought only becomes clearly visible when the most conspicuous standard exercises in culture, known as ‘traditions,’ find themselves in the difficult situation of Kafka’s hunger artist – as soon as one can say that interest in them ‘has markedly diminished during these last decades’” (82). The “grassroots modernism” of Sandor Katz and other DIY-ers emerges against a background of loss; forgotten tactics (fixing things, fermenting food) are revived as ascetic practice. For the settlers of North America, home fermentation practices were once integrated into everyday life; each wave of immigrants brought its vernacular techniques and starter cultures (sourdoughs, yoghurts, miso spores) from the old country. But over the course of the twentieth century, Pasteurian anti-bacterial ideologies and the general industrialization of the food system caused home fermentation practices to lapse. Out of the ashes of custom, a new set of experimental practices have been revived, invented, and disseminated. This requires collective learning and the sharing of practical techniques and ethical models.

In fact, Katz’s writings – his fermentation cookbooks, his blog posts, and his book on underground food movements – are generically close to the “practical” texts analyzed by Foucault in his late work. Foucault writes that these Greek and Roman documents were texts written for the purpose of offering rules, opinions, and advice on how to behave as one should: ‘practical’ texts, which are themselves objects of a ‘practice’ in that they were designed to be read, learned, reflected upon, and tested out, and they were intended to constitute the eventual framework of everyday conduct. These texts thus served as functional devices that would enable individuals to question their own conduct, to watch and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects; in short, their function was ‘etho-poetic,’ to transpose a word found in Plutarch. (*History* 11-12)

Katz’s books are undoubtedly ‘etho-poetic’: they constantly slip into the imperative voice, calling on readers to become practitioners and to change their everyday lives in small but



significant ways. More than collections of culinary recipes, they contain recipes for altering the self and the social world. They outline an ascetology that is both disciplined and full of new bodily sensations and pleasures. They do not invite readers to scale Mount Improbable, but they do suggest a critical separation from the networks of capitalist reproduction running through the industrial food system. At their core, they understand fermentation as a process of ethical awakening and collective transformation. Importantly, this transformation is not a solely human affair. Katz's version of "You must change your life" does not limit itself to an *anthropo*-technics. Instead, it is rooted in those original agents of change, the microbes that initiate the fermentation of organic matter. As he suggests, "Draw inspiration from the action of bacteria and yeast, and make your life a transformative process" (WF 166). This human-microbial etho-poetics goes a long way toward undoing the main knot in Foucault and Sloterdijk's conceptualizations of practice: their tendency toward autonomy, autarchy, and self-mastery.

### **Being Entangled**

In Sandor Katz's books, fermentation is another kind of depropriation exercise, a straying (*égarement*) through fields of nature-culture full of strange little creatures. In his practice, "wild fermentation" means working with the airborne yeasts and bacteria present in all organic matter, creating the right conditions that allow microorganisms to break down a substrate – vegetables, fruits, honey, grains, meat or milk – turning it into pickles, wine, bread, sausage or cheese. Experiments in home fermentation require a high tolerance for the unexpected; while skills may be gained through repetition, mastery is unlikely and not usually desirable. A given ferment will have its own taste, depending on a host of factors – the particular substrate, the ambient temperature, the strain of lactic acid bacteria on the vegetable or in the starter culture, whatever airborne yeasts propagate on the surface of the crock. Inevitably, things will go awry. Katz warns would-be pickling practitioners toward the beginning of *Wild Fermentation*: "If your desire is for perfectly uniform, predictable food, this is the wrong book for you. If you are willing to collaborate with tiny beings with somewhat

capricious habits and vast transformative powers, read on.” He has a fitting motto: “Our perfection lies in our imperfection” (31).<sup>193</sup>

In fact, the bacteria cultivated and consumed in fermentation practices open up a world of practice that is far removed from the “autonomy orthodoxy” of Foucault’s “work of the self upon itself” and Sloterdijk’s anthropotechnics. Bacteria are the original “companion species,” to use Donna Haraway’s language; they are the bearers of primordial “significant otherness” (*Companion*). They are inside us and outside us, on our skin and in our guts. It is more accurate to say that they *are* us: over 90 per cent of cells in our bodies are microbial, and these microbial cells together contain over one hundred times as many genes as the human genome (Paxson 39). “Microbes participate in our breathing, eating, drinking, and digesting,” writes Mrill Ingram in “Fermentation, Rot, and Other Human-Microbial Performances”; we need to appreciate “the infinite fuzziness of any boundary between microbe and human” (101). Microbes are not a non-human supplement to humanity, which in any case has its evolutionary origin in single-celled creatures. Rather, “we” are the product of what Karen Barad calls “entanglements,” an ongoing process of “intra-action” at every level, in which organisms do not precede their relating (“On Touching,” “Posthumanist,” *Meeting*).

As Lynn Margulis famously argues in *Microcosmos*, symbiosis is the origin and driving force of evolution at all levels. Bacteria originally formed the energy-producing mitochondria in animals and chloroplasts in plants. All eukaryotic organisms (plants, animals, fungi) are integrated with a host of prokaryotic bacteria, whose DNA is free-floating, not contained in nuclei. Bacteria are thus genetically fluid and can adapt much more quickly to meet environmental challenges than can their symbionts (Margulis and Sagan). Co-evolution and companion species are the norm: “Earth’s beings are prehensile, opportunistic, ready to yoke unlikely partners into something new, something symbiogenetic” (Haraway, *Companion* 32). Paxson (mis)quotes Rimbaud to suggest this inter-species porosity: “The man

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<sup>193</sup> I kept this in mind in my own fermenting practice in 2013, as a late-summer crock of cucumber pickles was invaded by a vigorous Kahm yeast, which spread its white tendrils across the surface of the brine and down into the vegetable matter below. It competed with the *Lactobacilli*, the acidifying bacteria working in the anaerobic depths. My daily practice that August was skimming off the white yeast as it broke up into clots and sank into the brine, only to regenerate into a fuzzy fractal stretching across the surface the next morning. The batch was saved, but those yeasty pickles were a rebuttal of any illusions of mastery I might have entertained.

of the future will be filled with animals.”<sup>194</sup> Except that we have always been those animals, all the way down – as we carry around a trillion or so bacteria in our gastrointestinal tract that break down the food we eat, and as those bacteria use the gut’s anaerobic container to survive and thrive. “I is another,” indeed. Or better, “I is a crowd.”

This constitutive entanglement is rejected by the ongoing “War on Bacteria” (as Katz terms it), in which human-bacterial symbiosis is replaced by a managerial effort aimed at containing, controlling, and eliminating our single-celled companions. Beyond the chemical sterilization of water, the over-prescription of antibiotic drugs, and the gratuitous use of antibacterial soaps, the food system is the most heated front of this war on microbes. “Antimicrobial policies are firmly embedded in our conventional food-production system, and the industrialized methods through which we produce meat and vegetables,” writes Ingram (107). This includes the overwhelming use of antibiotic drugs in livestock production: 25 million pounds a year in the U.S. alone, or eight times the amount of antimicrobials used in human medicine (Ingram 107). The vast and complex networks of industrial food processing massively increase the reach and impact of *E. Coli*, *Listeria monocytogenes* and other pathogenic bacteria. Meanwhile, we are constantly warned of the dangers of drinking raw milk from small producers, or, for pregnant women, the dangers of eating soft or raw-milk cheeses. Paxson calls this a “Pasteurian biopolitics” aimed at eliminating the risk of contamination, both microbial and social. As Bruno Latour argued in *The Pasteurization of France*, the eradication of microbes in the age of Pasteur was originally tied to a rationalization and purification of the social order. Paxson suggests that “Pasteurianism is a biopolitics predicated on the indirect control of human bodies through direct control over microbial bodies” (36). It creates germophobic subjects who are encouraged to manage their own behaviour to avoid risk. This top-down microbiopolitics clearly does not welcome home experimentation, in non-sterile conditions, with wild bacteria and yeasts.

In *The Art of Fermentation*, Katz quotes a 1979 microbiology textbook which proclaims that “Microorganisms are [our] most numerous servants.” For Katz, this epitomizes “a worldview of humans as the supreme creation of evolution, with all other life-

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<sup>194</sup> Rimbaud’s original words suggest something quite different: that the poet is “responsible for” (*chargé de*) both humans and animals. See Côté.

forms ours to freely exploit” (11). The fermentation revival is not interested in this Pasteurian mastery over the invisible world, and over the world of human-microbial collaboration. Instead of mastery and servitude, exploiter and exploited, parasite and host, Katz and his colleagues prefer the messy, entangled and sometimes playful relationships of the microbiome. “To view ourselves as masters and microorganisms as servants denies our mutual interdependence,” he writes (*AF* 11). The DIY practices of the fermentation revival embrace intra-species heteronomy, not autonomy, and promote practices of intimacy, co-existence, and responsibility toward single-celled “queer critters” (Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity”). Paxson calls the work of raw-milk cheese makers and other fermenters “Post-Pasteurian practices,” in which “the care of the self” goes through “the care of the microbe” (40).<sup>195</sup> Katz himself offers more of a pastoral approach, inviting readers to practice “the harnessing and gentle manipulation of wild microbial cultures” (*WF* 27). The bubbling crock becomes an example of what we can do together when species meet.

### Strange Strangers

The fermentation crock, this homely spot on the planet of the practicing, is not the training ground of an all-too-human acrobatics. It is the container for a kind of inter-species love. For Donna Haraway, whose love for various canines includes some entangled “agility training,” this is not “unconditional love,” which she describes as more or less a “neurotic fantasy.” Rather, love means “meeting the other in all the fleshly detail of a mortal relationship,” and encourages “the permanent search for knowledge of the intimate other” (*Companion* 34-36). Practices of knowledgeable intimacy, not mastery, are what is necessary among “such organic beings as rice, bees, tulips, and intestinal flora, all of whom make life for humans what it is – and vice versa” (15). Many fermentos share a kind of “biophilia”; their

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<sup>195</sup> Remarkably, Walter Benjamin anticipates this post-Pasteurian position: in a fragment accompanying an early version of his “Work of Art” essay, he hints at an anti-fascist technological utopia in which nature “strives to make its medicine a playground (*Spielraum*) for all microbes” (“A Different Utopian Will,” *SW*3 134).

practices soften the borders between species, and the borders inside them as well. Bacteria are our closest and most constant companions, simultaneously self and other. The fermentation revival reinvents ways of working with these intimate strangers, basing their ethical relations on fleshly mortality and knowledgeable intimacy.

Fermentos often like to theorize their own practice in these entangled terms. Lisa Heldke, a philosophy professor and DIY fermentation enthusiast, writes that fermented foods remind her of

the unpredictable interconnections between me and not-me. Other people experience this complex interconnectivity when they garden, or sail, or parent, or perform brain surgery. For me, it is encapsulated in a rubbery mat, stained brown and floating on top of a jar of tea. Yes, the mat is creepy and slightly malevolent. But treat it gently, for you and it are in a subtle, tenuous relationship, the parameters of which you are only beginning to discern. (AF 40)

Heldke's philosophical rhapsody is directed to a kombucha mother, a symbiotic community of bacteria and yeasts (or SCOBY) that ferments sugared tea. Like any companion species, kombucha mothers need to be cared for and fed regularly. Heldke's "subtle, tenuous relationship" with that floating thing perfectly captures the fermentation revival's search for intimate knowledge of the other, and its post-Pasteurian care for human-microbial collectives.

Heldke's version of love is directed toward what Timothy Morton terms "the strange stranger" – a creative translation of Jacques Derrida's *arrivant*, the one who turns up unexpectedly. The "strange stranger" might be "creepy and slightly malevolent," like Heldke's kombucha mother. (What could be creepier than calling that brown rubbery thing a "mother"?) It might be floating slimily in a mason jar or hanging out in our intestines. As Morton writes, quoting the poet George Morrison, "strange strangers are right next to us. They are us. Inner space is right here, 'nearer than breathing, closer than hands and feet'" (*Ecological* 78). Morton calls for an intimate acceptance of "uncanny familiarity" – an "erotics of coexistence" that he doesn't hesitate to define as queer (75, 127). As he writes, "Loving the strange stranger has an excessive, unquantifiable, nonlinear, 'queer' quality" (79). Morton calls for a "queer ecology," with an eroticism that departs from social codes: "To contemplate

ecology's unfathomable intimacies is to imagine pleasures that are not heteronormative, not genital, not geared to ideologies about where the body stops and starts" ("Queer" 280; see also Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson). The erotic ecology of the fermentation revival is certainly a queer one. It embraces the abject: fermentation is essentially controlled rot. It undoes inside-outside boundaries on both physical and metaphysical planes, as it welcomes the strange strangers in our guts and in the soil to the feast.

Considering the "strange stranger" in the form of Derrida's *arrivant*, as Morton does, is appropriate here. Fermentation is traditionally linked to practices of hospitality, and it can be seen as a practice of hospitality in its own right. The *arrivant* is the one to whom we must offer sustenance, the one who turns up unexpectedly at our door. Among humans, we serve the new arrival prized ferments – bread and wine, nourishing foods, refreshing and intoxicating drinks. Beyond the various customs and laws of hospitality, Derrida argues that there is an ethical Law that requires us to offer the *arrivant* an unconditional welcome: "Let us say yes to *who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female" (*Of Hospitality* 77). Or a bacterial community: neither male nor female, living in the midst of its wastes, perhaps undead, not exactly "animal," neither human nor divine.<sup>196</sup> Derrida's term *hôte*, which in French means both host and guest, captures the ambivalent queerness of fermentation's hospitality. In fermentation processes, both we and the microbes are *hôtes*, in what Haraway calls an "ontological choreography" of conjoined intimate strangeness (*Companion* 100). The products of that strange intimacy are then transformed, through controlled decay, into the culinary offerings of welcome.

Yet Haraway's image of the ontological dance paints too rosy a picture, both of hospitality and of human-microbial collectives. "The stranger is a digression that risks corrupting the proximity to self of the proper," Derrida argues, a corruption that is not easy to

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<sup>196</sup> As Lynn Margulis contends in "Kefir, Sex, and Death," single-celled organisms are not mortal in the same sense as eukaryotes; a SCOBY or bacterial community can live indefinitely given the right conditions. Inevitable death is a later evolutionary development, tied to sexual differentiation.

endure (“Hostipitality” 402). In his lectures on hospitality, Derrida repeatedly refers to the difficulty of the Law of “radical hospitality,” which consists in “*receiving without invitation, beyond or before the invitation*” (360, italics in original). This radical receptivity invites a certain violence: “to be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken ... to not even *let* oneself be overtaken, to be surprised, in a fashion almost violent, violated and raped [*violée*], stolen [*volée*] (the whole question of violence and violation and of expropriation and of depropriation is waiting for us)” (361). Hospitality is a depropriation without invitation: one must say yes to precisely that which one does not expect or await or even want. Derrida observes that the arrival of the stranger has something messianic about it; indeed, that there is a messianic “madness” at the core of the concept of hospitality (362). The violence and madness of the Law of absolute hospitality exist in tension with the traditional laws and customs of hospitality, creating an unresolvable aporia in the act of welcoming the stranger.

Timothy Morton, in adapting the concept of the *arrivant*, pursues Derrida’s conception of radical hospitality into ecological thought. Morton argues that welcoming the strange stranger goes beyond “the animal” or even the “non-human” to extend hospitality to “the inhuman,” to “the radically strange, dangerous, even ‘evil.’ For the inhuman is the strangely strange core of the human” (*Ecological* 92).<sup>197</sup> Morton would join Sandor Katz and Lynn Margulis in rejecting the imaginary division between “good bacteria” and “bad bacteria”; bacteria are thoroughly mutable and are helpful or harmful to humans only under certain specific conditions. But if we take Morton seriously, we should be extending an unconditional invitation to *E. Coli* and salmonella, along with more familiar and helpful strange strangers like *L. plantarum* and *S. cerevisiae*, the fermenters of sauerkraut and beer. The unconditional Law of hospitality starts to break down when we approach the question of immune systems, toxicity and infection. The strange stranger might be *really* malevolent, not just a bit slimy. Pasteur’s discoveries may have been allied to some sinister biopolitical purposes, but microbial management is not something that most humans would be willing to give up altogether. Cholera, for example, is not welcome at the table.

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<sup>197</sup> Morton is drawing on the Lacanian language of Žižek’s “Neighbors and Other Monsters.”

It might be more helpful to understand hospitality not only as governed by a Law, even a non-absolute Law, but also as a threshold practice, one which moves across borders. Hospitality is only meaningful if it involves actually welcoming the stranger, human or otherwise, giving them shelter and sustenance. Practicing hospitality means that there must be one who welcomes and one who is welcomed; it can't completely dissolve the threshold between inside and outside. Since we are dealing with the world of microbes, the immune system offers a fitting metaphor. As Roberto Esposito writes, "the immune system cannot be reduced to the simple function of rejecting all things foreign. If anything, the immune system must be interpreted as an internal resonance chamber, like the diaphragm through which difference, as such, engages and traverses us" (*Immunitas* 18). Derrida is right that the stranger corrupts the proximity of the self to the proper. But this corruption can't lead to a total dissolution, or immunological collapse. Nor can corruption raise a total defence, leading to a kind of hyper-immunity or autoimmune disorder. Instead, the practice of hospitality plays across immunological thresholds and allows a co-existence in difference to emerge.

To adapt Esposito's language, we might say that practices of hospitality, including fermentation practices, are another kind of diaphragm through which difference traverses us. The practitioners of the fermentation revival play across the borders between human and microbial communities, strengthening immune systems (figuratively and literally) in the process. Their hospitable practices undo orthodoxies of autonomy and fantasies of mastery without collapsing back into the primordial soup, which contains some rather nasty guests. As Derrida might observe, there is a messianic quality to their welcome, or even love, of the microscopic *arrivant*. But their messianism is thoroughly entangled with creaturely life, recalling the messianism of Benjamin's "order of the profane."<sup>198</sup> In the order of the profane, happiness lies in "the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence," in nature's "eternal and total passing away" (*Reflections* 313). Fermentos, too, find happiness in profane rhythms, welcoming the strange stranger while elbow-deep in buckets of transience and decay.

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<sup>198</sup> See Chapter 1 above.



## This Compost

Fermenting is indeed intimate with what Benjamin calls “the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence” (*Reflections* 313). It adopts a creaturely materiality, entangled with larger processes of degeneration. As many writers on fermentation point out, microorganisms are not only responsible for the culturing of food and drink by breaking down and reorganizing plant and animal cells into tasty substances like cheese, chocolate, salami, miso, coffee, bread, wine and beer. Those strange strangers also work to degrade dead matter into elements that regenerate the soil. As Jacob Lipman writes in *Bacteria in Relation to Country Life* (1908), microorganisms

are the connecting link between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

They are the great scavengers intrusted [sic] with restoring to circulation the carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, sulphur, and other elements held fast in the dead bodies of plants and animals. Without them, dead bodies would accumulate, and the kingdom of the living would be replaced by the kingdom of the dead. (qtd. in *WF* 158)

Each tablespoon of soil contains around 50 billion microbes, as well as thousands of mites and springtails and several kilometres of fungal filaments; under good conditions, those tiny creatures can start turning dead matter into regenerative humus (E. Evans). Katz celebrates this process as an “everyday miracle” (*RWN* 316), in which dead things – fallen leaves, animal excrement, rotting trees and plants, carcasses – provide nutrients that allow the living to flourish.

There is, indeed, something miraculous and even frightening to this transformation. Walt Whitman writes in “This Compost” (from *Leaves of Grass*):

Now I am terrified at the Earth! ...

It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions...

It distils such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor...

It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.

(42-47)

There is a terror to death and fertility, the birth of new life from corruption and waste. But this miraculous terror is easy to forget. Whitman marvels at its apparent disappearance: “The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead” (30).

Fermentation preserves a hint of that mortal sourness in each crock of sauerkraut, with its slow-motion degeneration of cabbage and salt into exquisite pungency.

Degradation also links soil fertility to another power of fermentation: its ability to produce intoxicating alcohol. In alcoholic fermentation, microbially driven processes of decay create “substances with power” that can transform consciousness and bodily experience. The intoxicating powers of decaying substances were likely first discovered through the spontaneous fermentation of tree sap and fallen fruit. Humans are not the only animals to appreciate such rotten delicacies: in *Intoxication*, Ronald K. Siegel describes elephants, monkeys, and flying foxes gorging themselves silly on decaying, fermented durian in the Malaysian jungle (116-117). Yet humans are unique in having reorganized whole swaths of the earth in order to alter their bodies and minds by ingesting fermented substances. Some archaeologists argue that in the ancient Near East, agricultural settlements emerged primarily to secure a steady supply of grain used for brewing beer (Hayden, Canuel, and Shanse).

Intoxicating and pungent drinks often accompany celebration, ritual and feasting, honouring the intertwining of life and death. Nearly every culinary tradition, especially those engaged in subsistence agriculture, has its vernacular techniques for fermenting drinks from fruits, milk, honey, grains, and other plants. In *The Physiology of Taste* (1825), the French gastronome Brillat-Savarin notes this near-universality. He writes: “All men, even the ones we have agreed to call savages, have been so tortured by this thirst for strong liquors, which they are impelled to procure for themselves, that they have been pushed beyond their known capacities to satisfy it. They have soured the milk of their domestic animals; they have extracted the juices of various fruits and roots where they have suspected there might be the elements of fermentation; and wherever men have gathered together they have been armed with strong drinks, which they employed during their feastings, their sacrificial ceremonies, their marriages, their funerals, and in fact whenever anything happened which had for them an air of celebration and solemnity” (149-50). Brillat-Savarin’s observations still hold true:

marriages, funeral rites, and agricultural festivals (springtide, midsummer and harvest) honour the links between death and fertility with “strong liquors.” At these events, intoxicating and pungent ferments are often taken into the body in order to celebrate cycles of growth and degeneration, living and dying. Such ritual structures are invoked by latter-day fermentos, who revive vernacular techniques for the wild fermentation of sugar into alcohol through the work of airborne yeasts. Their “practice texts” abound with reclaimed recipes for “Herbal Elixir Meads” and “Sacred and Herbal Healing Beers” (*RWN* 117, Buhner). Some fermentos seem to get intoxicated on the earthly, degenerative powers of lactic acid bacteria alone.

A steaming pile of compost, a cup of sour kvass, or a frothing jug of honey mead evidently mix elements of destruction and regeneration. But so does the production of cheese, with its lengthy process of managed rot. The Benedictine Sister Noëlla Marcellino, otherwise known as the Cheese Nun, suggests that cheese should be included in the Eucharist along with bread and wine, those other products of fermentation. “Cheese,” she says, “forces you to contemplate death, and confronting our mortality is a necessary part of spiritual growth” (qtd. in Pollan 346). Cheese-making has an immediate link with death: it requires not only lactic acid bacteria but rennet, an enzyme traditionally culled from the lining of a cow’s stomach. The disgust that some people feel at the smell of a stinky ferment – runny Reblochon or stinky tofu – is traceable to an intelligent wariness around decaying animal bodies, which can carry pathogens. Vernacular practices of fermentation find ways to mediate this wariness and to let death traverse us by incorporating it into the body. They experiment with the regenerative properties of degradation, and play across thresholds between life and death, clean and unclean. Fermentation, as Whitman writes, “distils such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor.” Its techniques celebrate the microbial link between generation and decay – even if, until relatively recently, the microbes themselves received little credit.

Folk fermenting techniques all involve some kind of Bakhtinian degradation to the material level. “Degradation,” Mikhail Bakhtin writes, “means coming down to earth, the contact with the earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. ... Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect,

but also a regenerating one” (21). Bakhtin already felt that this vision of degradation as both death and regeneration had begun to disappear with the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. But in the agricultural modernization of the past century, it has been beaten back on a global scale. The “green revolution” of the second half of the twentieth century separates Bakhtin’s two aspects of degradation. It temporarily pumps up soil fertility through nitrogen-based fertilizers, while using Pasteurian policies of microbial management to discourage the recycling of animal waste into compost (Ingram). Fertility is forced on the soil through chemicals and on animals through hormones; plants are protected by genetic engineering and pesticide sprays, and animals by antibiotics. Total immunization, against bacterial contamination and other dangers caused by economies of scale, is the rule. As a result, for industrial agriculture, degradation means only the pure despoiling of the land. The fermentation revival, by allying itself with vernacular techniques of promoting soil fertility, consciously struggles against this one-sided degradation. Its techniques work with our microbial partners in the air and in the dirt, who are experts at complex processes of decay and regeneration.

The fermentation revival’s reclaiming of decay and degradation extends to what Bakhtin calls “the lower bodily stratum” in the processes of digestion and excretion. Digestion is another form of fermentation, the anaerobic work of communities of single-celled organisms. The consumption of live-culture foods is considered by both vernacular knowledge and scientific communities to help with digestion; lactic acid bacteria adhere to the gastrointestinal wall, strengthening it and promoting digestive health and immune response. For many lovers of fermented foods, the process of digestion becomes eroticized in a truly queer manner. Roland Barthes writes that for Brillat-Savarin, “Food provokes an internal pleasure, interior to the body, enclosed within it, not even beneath the skin, but in that deep, central zone, all the more original for being soft, confused, permeable, which is called in the most general sense, the bowels.” Barthes describes how, for the author of *The Physiology of Taste*, “gustative delight is diffuse, extensive to the entire secret lining of the mucous membranes.” Although localized in the mouth, it spreads out in a kind of “*cenesthesia*, the total sensation of our internal body” (“Reading” 252). Brillat-Savarin undoubtedly enjoyed

feeling a scoop of Brie de Meaux slide down his gastrointestinal tract, and he would surely have thrilled to learn of the role of microorganisms in both its creation and its digestion. These diffuse and secret gustatory pleasures are familiar to the proponents of the fermentation revival, who are often just as concerned with well-being and sensation in that “soft, confused, permeable” zone as they are with strong flavours in the mouth.

Sandor Katz shares a version of Brillat-Savarin’s permeable eroticism that includes both digestion and excretion. For Katz, too, “Eating is a full-body experience, involving the nose, the mouth, the hands, the teeth, the tongue, the throat, the vast array of internal sensations relating to digestion, and the renewing pleasure of defecation” (*RWN* xviii). To these sensory pleasures he adds a healthy philosophical embrace of decay. “In our contemporary culture,” he writes, “we treat shit as unspeakable and flush it away to make it disappear instantly. Personally, I like to talk about shit. When I feel completely reborn by a particularly satisfying movement, I like to share my enthusiasm. If a friend is sick and experiencing changes in shit texture or consistency, I like to hear about that, too. For me it’s about claiming the body and all its functions without shame” (*RWN* 318). This rejection of bodily shame recalls Bakhtin’s profaning carnival laughter, which “liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from ... fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power” (Bakhtin 94). Reclaiming shit brings us back to our common carnal vulnerability and baseness. It is also an ecological act. For the vernacular experimenters of the “humanure” movement, faeces – the product of human digestive fermentation – can be turned into compost, beginning the cycle of fertility and degradation once more (Jenkins). We can think of Antonin Artaud’s proclamation from “The Pursuit of Fecality”: “There where it smells of shit/ it smells of being” (559). Or as Katz puts it, in a characteristic imperative: “We must face our shit, embrace our bodies, and feel our connection to the earth” (*RWN* 318).

There is something almost mystical to these fermenters’ love of earthly corruption and profane bodily processes. Sometimes this mystical tendency turns into full-blown magic, as in the case of Steiner-inspired biodynamic farmers, who draw on a series of alchemical preparations (or “preps”) to enhance soil fertility. “For instance,” Katz writes, “cow horns are

stuffed with fresh manure from lactating cows and buried from fall to spring. For another prep, a stag's bladder is stuffed with yarrow flowers and hung up in a tree over the summer. After its fermentation, a small amount of this prep is added to water and stirred for a full hour" (AF 392). A biodynamic farming manual states that these "preparations bear concentrated forces within them and are used to *organize* the chaotic elements within the compost piles," resulting in "*medicines* for the Earth which draw new forces from the cosmos" (qtd. in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Playing" 14). Contrasted to this cosmic folk magic is the more subtle mysticism of the tiny world of microbial fermentation. When Sister Noëlla Marcellino looks through her microscope at a cheese culture, she sees "something microcosmic that opens up a world to me, a vision." She likens this experience to that of Saint Benedict, who "saw the whole world in a ray of light" (qtd. in Paxson 40). That microcosmic world, as she is well aware, is nothing but the continual downfall and regeneration of creaturely life. Fermentation harnesses earthly processes of decay: as Whitman sings, "It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions." Sweet things, sour things, intoxicating things, pungent things – and the fertile earth itself.

### **Recipe: Eat Some Dirt**

Fermentation's engagement with earthly transience roots its politics in everyday life. Facing our shit, embracing our bodies, and feeling our connection to the earth, as Sandor Katz suggests, brings ecological practice into daily experience. It reminds us that we are beings among other beings, subjected to – and subjectifying ourselves through – earthly forces. Timothy Morton suggests that this kind of shared abasement might be a good place to locate an ecological politics: "Politics in the wake of the ecological thought must begin with the Copernican 'humiliations' – coming closer to the actual dirt beneath our feet, the actuality of Earth" (*Ecological* 125).<sup>199</sup> This is not an elegant or beautiful process: Morton suggests that "we must base ecological action on ethics, not aesthetics" (124). In his view, the collectives we

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<sup>199</sup> Following Freud, Morton is referring to the successive "revolutions in human thinking about mind and society ... that displaced human agency," which he attributes to Marx, Freud, Saussure, Derrida and Darwin.

form with other beings can't be predicated on those beings looking or feeling nice, or on being delicious, for that matter. Yet the fermentation revival shows that ethics and aesthetics are not so easily disentangled. Katz's books are indeed ethical "practice texts" like those explored by Foucault. But they are also *aesthetic* practice texts, in the broad sense of the term. They instruct their readers to experiment with strange forms of sensory experience.

Katz's aesthetic instructions come in the form of another vernacular genre: the recipe. Recipes have historically been a medium of "tradition" as *tradere* – passed down from hand to hand through practice, archived on index cards or scribbled notes, and eventually collected in cookbooks. Those traditions are now scattered and omnipresent, disseminated through various online platforms and accessible at any time to anyone with an Internet connection. Like works in the public domain, they are exempt from copyright, and can be freely copied, distributed and altered.<sup>200</sup> Katz encourages this kind of bricolage with his own practice texts. He writes that he enjoys consulting recipes, "but then I end up ignoring them, varying the ingredients, using what's around, and learning from my experiments. That's what I like for people to do with my recipes" (RWN 341). This encouragement to experimentation is especially appropriate for vegetable ferments, for which, unlike the delicate and precise arts of patisserie, proportions are rough and ingredients replaceable. Reflecting this roughness, Katz's own published recipes have grown increasingly spare, becoming more like prompts or directives than detailed instructions. *Wild Fermentation* (2003) contains conventional recipes with proportions and measurements, while *The Art of Fermentation* (2013) offers more general principles and watchwords (he summarizes the section on fermenting vegetables as "Chop, Salt, Pack, Wait").

The recipe's imperative voice suits Katz's inclination to offer practical steps toward reordering the sensible world. Even his book on radical food politics, *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved*, includes thematic recipes: for the chapter on edible weeds, Katz suggests a foraged chickweed pesto; for the chapter on "slow food for cultural survival," he proposes

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<sup>200</sup> Given the current aggressive climate of intellectual property law, this may be changing. Buccafusco writes: "If we recognize the dish as an expressive medium and the recipe as its means of fixation, there would be little or no doctrinal limit on extending copyright to dishes" (1123) – though he goes on to argue that this extension of copyright would not be necessary, appropriate or desirable.

“shav,” a chilled purée made from lemony sorrel leaves, boiled potatoes, and pickle juice. His success as an ambassador of pickling can be seen in the many practitioners who have taken up the call to change their lives through the art of fermentation. On Katz’s website, wildfermentation.com, other fermentos share the results of their own experiments – posting recipes and photos of complex culturally specific delicacies (“Takuan – the transformation of a radish”), or of home ferments made with whatever ingredients are close at hand (“Adzuki Bean Spritzer”). Users with names like “the fart rocket” start lively discussions (“Fermentation Obsession Disorder and Old Soft Beets”) tied to their proclivities. The fermentation subculture continues to spread like some creeping bacterial colony, fuelled by the instructions in Katz’s writings. He admits there are no step-by-step instructions or easy recipes for social change (RWN 341). But even the sparsest of recipes activates the reader to concoct – or at least imagine – a material change in the fabric of the sensible.

Despite plenty of research, proselytizing, and polemic, *Wild Fermentation* and *The Art of Fermentation* contain mostly recipes and instructions for making ferments. But in *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved*, Katz moves beyond food-preparation instructions into recipes for altering everyday life. One of these recipes puts Morton’s “humiliations” into practice, getting close indeed to the dirt beneath our feet:

Recipe: Eat Some Dirt

Try it. Choose a place that seems clean, away from chemical waste, lead paint, traffic, and fresh excrement. In a garden, perhaps, or a forest. Taste a little dirt. On its own, or what you find clinging to a fresh carrot or radish or burdock root. It may be gritty, so protect your teeth and don’t bite down on it too hard. Savor the flavor. The earth is good for you. Pregnant and lactating women in many places routinely eat dirt to obtain minerals, a practice known as *geophagy*. And probiotic formulations known as soil-based organisms (SBO) are some of the most expensive nutritional supplements on the market. Don’t buy a capsule; taste the earth to get your SBOs. This is another important aspect of eating locally: eating the local soil organisms further integrates us into the web of life of our environment and adapts us to the local microbial ecology. Be here now. Learn to love the flavor of the earth. (RWN 116-117)



“Eat Some Dirt,” while not exactly a fermentation recipe, brings together many aspects of the fermentation revival: its emphasis on experimental vernacular practice, its queer ecologies and pleasures, its orientation beyond the human, and its rejoining of death and fecundity. The practice of geophagy, which Katz links to Indigenous traditions of pregnant women eating dirt, is thoroughly opposed to the anti-bacterial fanaticism that marks our current microbiopolitical regime. He tells us to “choose a place that seems clean” – not a sanitary or sterilized environment, but a dirty playing-field where humans and other organisms can meet. What better way to learn to love these strange strangers than to feel their gritty medium in our mouths? With “Eat Some Dirt,” Katz offers more than just a “ritual of remembrance,” a lifestyle practice meant to compensate for the abstractions of consumer capitalism. His recipe is what Agamben calls a “profanation,” a set of instructions for play across the ritual separations – between degradation and fertility, between human and nonhuman – that characterize the industrial food system.

This kind of recipe for sensory profanation can be traced back at least as far as the “instruction pieces” of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes, which also sought to transform everyday life through aesthetic exercises. Peter Bürger argues that the avant-gardes’ “intention to do away with art as a sphere that is separate from the praxis of life” brought some artists to formulate their work as practice texts, or as recipes. As Bürger writes,

It is no accident that both [Tristan] Tzara’s instructions for the making of a Dadaist poem and [André] Breton’s for the writing of automatic texts have the character of recipes. This represents not only a polemical attack on the individual creativity of the artist; the recipe is to be taken quite literally as suggesting a possible activity on the part of the recipient. The automatic texts also should be read as guides to individual production. But such production is not to be understood as artistic production, but as part of a liberating life praxis. This is what is meant by Breton’s demand that poetry be practiced (*pratiquer la poésie*). (53)

For Breton and other avant-guardists, poetry was a mode of existence to be practiced in everyday life, not a genre reserved for the autonomous realm of art. The recipe or set of instructions, or even certain works of art like automatic texts, became an invitation to the

reader to reorganise his or her subjectivity by way of life-altering practice. Bürger argues that this historical project failed in the realm of art, only to be recuperated by art-world and literary institutions. But it is alive in the ethico-aesthetic practices of movements like the fermentation revival. In this respect, Katz can be seen as part of a web of avant-garde practitioners running from the Surrealists (including Salvador Dalí's cookbook *Les Dîners de Gala*) to the Situationists, Fluxus and certain Conceptualists, before dispersing into movements and countercultures that were and are more interested in transforming life than in making art. The spirit of Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* lives on in the more radical pockets of the DIY world. As Katz writes of various political food movements, from feral foragers to infusers of plant medicines, "This is a revolution of the everyday, and it's already happening" (*RWN* xvi). In the case of the fermentation revival, this revolution of the everyday is happening by way of anachronistic, vernacular experiments – remixing multiple traditions across a gulf of discontinuity.

Like "Eat Some Dirt," the fermentation revival as a whole can be understood as both an aesthetic and an ethico-political movement. It participates in what Jacques Rancière calls "the aesthetic regime of the arts," operating since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which "the things of art" are "identified less according to criteria of 'ways of doing', and more in terms of 'ways of sensible being'" (*Aesthetics* 11). Under the aesthetic regime of the arts, sensory activities like preparing and eating ferments can be understood as performances. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out the suitability of food as a performance medium: "An art of the concrete, food, like performance, is alive, fugitive, and sensory" ("Playing" 1). Fermentation seems especially performance-like: humans, ingredients, and bacteria put on a show together, each iteration singular and ephemeral, to be consumed and then repeated with a difference. In fact, some might consider these events as superior to artistic performances: Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, for example, prefers vernacular creativity to "Art art" (as Alan Kaprow calls it), or art framed as art and presented in art-world contexts. For her, culturally embedded food practices are "the envy of many an artist ... such complexes do not have to work across the gap between art and life because there is no gap" ("Playing" 14). Art and life can dissolve into artful modes of living, as in the aesthetic degenerations of a fermentation experiment. And recipes, a

vernacular genre, can become instructions for the aesthetic alteration of everyday practice – whether that means practicing poetry, fermenting miso, or eating dirt.

As Rancière argues, this kind of working – or playing – across the gap between art and life is one of the defining qualities of “the aesthetic regime of the arts.” Since at least the “aesthetic revolution” of the Romantic era, art has engaged in a constant back-and-forth between autonomy and heteronomy, separating itself from or embracing everyday experience (“Aesthetic”). In certain works and projects, everyday aesthetic practices can be played with, reshaped or reframed so as to cast a shadow on the sensible world. In some cases, we could say that art ferments daily life, working on its quotidian substrate to produce new effervescent compounds. Henri Lefebvre draws exactly this analogy between art and fermentation. As he writes in the second volume of the *Critique of Everyday Life*: “art is a play-generating ‘yeast’” in the everyday (205) We could say the same for Katz’s “art of fermentation,” which also invites the playful transformation – or fermentation – of everyday life, seeking to make it both more ethical and more sensual.

A “play-generating yeast” in the everyday, Katz’s “Recipe: Eat Some Dirt” can also be understood as a kind of performance score. If the ferment or meal is a performance, a time-based, shared sensory experience, the recipe is a score: “one realizes the recipe, just as one performs a musical composition (transforms written notations into sounds)” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing” 22). Recipes and scores are generically similar: they are both instructions for sensory events that may or may not be enacted by their readers. While some complex recipes might mirror the elaborate scores of Western symphonic music, “Eat Some Dirt” is more along the lines of an “event score” by the likes of George Brecht, Yoko Ono, or Alan Kaprow. Like certain conceptual works, “Eat Some Dirt” is an aesthetic experiment that can be enacted or imagined, often with similar results.<sup>201</sup> It seeks to alter our experience and understanding of the world, and to discover what comes of that change. Yet while focused on sensation, Katz’s proposal goes beyond the dimension of aesthetic or sensory experience. To

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<sup>201</sup> Alan Kaprow writes that George Brecht’s *Events* (1959-1962) could be experienced equally as performances or as mental exercises. “Those wishing to conventionalize the brief scores (as Brecht called them) into a neo-Dada theater could and did do so. Those who wanted to project their tiny forms into daily activity, or into contemplation, were also free to follow that route” (169).

use Foucault and Sloterdijk's language, it is an "etho-poetic" invitation to step outside of our daily habits and customary practices. Katz's aesthetic exercise in abasement pushes us to live otherwise in a shared and damaged world.

Given its intertwining of the ethical and the aesthetic, it is no surprise that in recent years the growing, cooking, and eating of food has become a rich medium for artists. The backdrop of their actions is the sensorium of the industrial food system, which has what Susan Buck-Morss calls an "anaesthetic" quality. Brightly-lit supermarket shelves hide antibacterial and hyper-immunological practices, monocropped and pesticide-sprayed fields, factories of animal suffering, and the global immiseration of farmers and farm workers. Food arrives to consumers in sealed packages, free from any visible blemish or trace of dirt; soil-based organisms are best ingested in pill form. In response to this numbed sensorium, numerous contemporary artists create projects that reinvent more hands-on and sensual forms of sociability and relations to the land. In their work, touch, taste, smell, and commensality (or "eating together") are affective pathways to share new and old sensations in a desensitized world. Some of these artists have begun to integrate fermentation practices into their work – from Marissa Lee Benedict's algae-nourishing vats of mead, to the Microcultures collective's exercises in public fermentation (including the sonic amplification of fizzy mason jars), to Eva Bakkeslett's yoghurt-making workshops, to Claire Pentecost's troughs of compost. Their projects take inspiration from the work of Katz and other cultural revivalists, while moving those cross-species experiments with tradition into an explicitly aesthetic discursive field.

Claire Pentecost, an artist based in Chicago, sees her own composting exhibits and investigations into soil fertility as vernacular experiments in aesthetic form. For her, as for Katz, such experiments can open onto Sloterdijk's "good habits of shared survival in daily exercises." A vermicomposter, Pentecost works with earthworms, another set of strange strangers who live close to the ground. She writes, in support of what she calls "the public amateur":

It becomes increasingly clear that no one is going to save us and we have to work together to experiment with new ways of being in the world. For this we have to return knowledge to the realm of the social by producing knowledge collectively. We have to

start with “I don’t know,” and proceed to think across disciplines to propose alternatives to a system founded on violence against life. (Donovan)

As an artist, Pentecost is proposing a kind of “grassroots modernism” with clear links to DIY movements. Even in her orientation to future alternatives, she calls for a “return” to collectivized knowledge, the shared knowledge of the vernacular. Like Katz, she proposes that we start with our hands (or mouths) in the dirt. Her art projects and his fermentation practice may be framed differently, but they open onto similar territory. Ethical knowledge and practical alternatives to economic and ecological violence come by way of sensory experience. These “ways of sensible being” may not be pretty or nice. They might be framed as art, or they might be part of daily practice. But they start with bringing us down to earth: with the worms in the soil and dirt under the fingernails, or with the gritty taste of minerals and microorganisms in the mouth.

### **Nourishing Traditions, Stolen Land**

The writings of Katz and other fermentation revivalists play across the borders between art and life, seeking to alter everyday experience by making it both more ethical and more aesthetic. In so doing, they participate in another aspect of “the aesthetic age”: the yearning to make life more unified and whole through aesthetic experience. In a fragmented, “abstracted” and alienated reality, they seek wholeness, concreteness, and connection. Friedrich Schiller, a key figure in Rancière’s genealogy of the aesthetic regime of the arts, presented one of the earliest and most eloquent formulations of this perspective in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794). As he wrote, in a society marked by increasingly specialized knowledge and the division of labour, “State and Church, laws and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was divorced from labour, the means from the end, the effort from the reward.” The results were a fragmented and stunted existence: “Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of the wheel that he turns, he never develops the harmony of his being...” (35) For Schiller, the answer was the “play-drive,” the aesthetic

mode that could heal the division between sensible experience and rational knowledge, and knit together a fragmented society into a free and harmonious “Aesthetic State.” Many food activists and writers take a similar approach, promoting playful ethico-aesthetic practices to heal what are essentially political and economic wounds.

Fermentos enact, in a culinary key, an ambiguity of what Terry Eagleton calls “the ideology of the aesthetic”: its search for “the ideal unity of a divided reality” (*Ideology* 111). For practitioners and writers like Michael Pollan, the fragmentation of capitalist modernity is experienced primarily as an aesthetic problem, which can be tackled on the level of aesthetic practice. Pollan’s *Cooked* echoes Schiller’s *Letters*: he fears that within a generation, “food will have become completely abstracted from its various contexts: from the labor of human hands, from the natural world of plants and animals, from imagination and culture and community.” To heal this abstraction, he proposes what is arguably an aesthetic remedy: “My wager in *Cooked* is that the best way to recover the reality of food, to return it to its proper place in our lives, is by attempting to master the physical processes by which it has traditionally been made” (17). This aesthetic has a utopian quality: if we can experience wholeness, connection, and freedom in art (or in making sourdough bread), then we can critique a society (or food system) that lacks these qualities. In this perspective, the experience of the aesthetic is an agent that can begin to transform an “anaesthetic” and unjust social system.

In the case of the fermentation revival and related food movements, aesthetic experience finds its healing agency in folk foodways. This approach can be seen in Katz’s work to some extent, but it is more evident in books like Jessica Prentice’s *Full Moon Feast: Food and the Hunger for Connection* (2006), which draws on multiple traditions to promote a more holistic relationship to food. *Full Moon Feast* contains many recipes for live ferments, and emphasizes unpasteurized milk and whole ingredients. Prentice divides her book into thirteen seasonal chapters based on the lunar calendar, with names like “Mead Moon,” “Wort Moon,” and “Moon of Making Fat.” In “Sap Moon,” she contrasts small-scale maple, palm, sorghum and cane sugaring with the massive operations that produce contemporary cane sugar, with its history of slavery, violence, exploitation, and the expropriation of Indigenous land. “The heart of the difference,” she claims, “has to do with wholeness versus fragmentation” – a

rather Schillerian complaint (38). Prentice describes the exploitation of labourers and the ravages of the plantation system, but her real focus is on how capitalism and colonialism bring about the disruption of ancestral foodways. The production of refined white sugar “broke down communities and wiped out traditions,” leaving the people who grew sugar with no “ancestral relationship” to the cane or the refined product (39). To heal this “disconnect from both people and place,” Prentice proposes delicious-sounding recipes like “Coconut and Palm Sugar Semifreddi,” “Cardamom and Jaggery Rice Pudding,” and “Lacto-fermented Tabbouleh.” In *Full Moon Feast*, “the hunger for connection” can be sated, and social wounds healed, by an aesthetic reimagining and remixing of multiple traditions.

In settler-colonial North America, the agent of aesthetic healing often comes packaged as “the Indigenous.” This is surely the case for Prentice’s *Full Moon Feast*, which is deeply engaged with Indigenous traditions and foodways on Turtle Island. Prentice is not a naïve appropriator of native cultures: her book enters into conversation with writers including Jeannette Armstrong of Okanagan First Nation, and begins with a dialogue between two Karuk elders, in Karuk and English on facing pages, describing the “poison food, world-come-to-an-end-food” that settlers brought to First Peoples (np). Nevertheless, in *Full Moon Feast*, Indigenous traditions are what have the power to heal a fragmented food system and bring connection to a disconnected world. As Jayna Brown points out, such utopian discourses position native peoples “as representatives of the past and the holders of the future, the transcendent solution to the fracturing politics of race and global inequality” (130, see Chapter 2 above). Indigenous practices – music or foodways – stand in for Eagleton’s “ideal unity of a divided reality.” The settler can assume a colonial aesthetic position, becoming a kind of curator or remixer of global Indigeneity. The DJ and producer Diplo flies around the world (or surfs the Internet) collecting global beats; Prentice flits from Tibet to Mexico, from the Celts to the Quechua, gathering recipes to heal our wounded bodies and souls. The fragmentation imposed by economic processes and encouraged by media technologies allows for syncretic remixes that draw on multiple traditions – whether they celebrate that fragmentation, like Diplo and M.I.A.’s *Piracy Funds Terrorism*, or seek to heal it, like Prentice’s *Full Moon Feast*.

This position, in which the settler becomes the gatherer and curator of Indigenous practices, structures another cookbook that has been influential in the fermentation revival: Sally Fallon's *Nourishing Traditions* (1999). Fallon heads the Weston Price Foundation (of which Jessica Prentice is a regional director), named after the American dentist Weston A. Price. Price's *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration* (1939) has attained the status of a founding text, a Book of Mormon for some anachronistic food movements, an error-filled heresy for others. "In the 1930s," writes Fallon, "Dr. Price traveled the world over to observe population groups untouched by civilization, living entirely on local foods. ... Dr. Price found fourteen groups – from isolated Irish and Swiss, from Eskimos to Africans – in which almost every member of the tribe or village enjoyed superb health. They were free of chronic disease, dental decay and mental illness; they were strong, sturdy and attractive; and they produced healthy children with ease, generation after generation." Price compared these people with "members of the same racial group who had become 'civilized' and were living on the products of the industrial revolution – refined grains, canned foods, pasteurized milk and sugar. In these peoples, he found rampant tooth decay, infectious disease, degenerative illness and infertility" (xi). Based on these findings, Price's interest in eugenics as a mode of combatting "degeneration" shifted to a focus on nutrition (Renner). Food, not heredity, was the key to the health of the species. Drawing on evidence that was more anecdotal than experimental, he promoted a diet that drew on Indigenous foodways, made up of whole grains and vegetables, seafood, organ meats, raw milk products, animal fats, and unrefined foods.<sup>202</sup>

*Nourishing Traditions* takes Price's nutritional anti-modernism and folds it into a practice text, filled with recipes, invective against "politically correct nutrition and the diet dictocrats," and citations of scientific papers (often produced by the Foundation itself). Many of its recipes involve fermentation with live cultures. Fallon writes that "later research" shows "almost universally" that "traditional and nonindustrialized peoples ... allow grains, milk products and often vegetables, fruits and meats to ferment or pickle by a process called lacto-fermentation." Fermentation preserves foods without damaging their nutritional value, and "supplies the intestinal tract with health-promoting lactic acid and lactic-acid producing

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<sup>202</sup> For a careful assessment of the innovations and the limits of Price's research, see Renner.



bacteria” (xii). Fallon’s cookbook includes a section on fermented vegetables and fruits, from *curtido* (“Latin American Sauerkraut”) to papaya chutney (89-111). As in Prentice’s *Full Moon Feast*, Fallon jumps from nourishing tradition to nourishing tradition, which collectively offer a salve for modern disaffection and disease. Indigenous peoples “the world over” are celebrated for their consumption of animal fats, organ meats, and fermented foods. The cover of *Nourishing Traditions* illustrates a harmonious vision of these global Indigenous foodways: south sea islanders, American pioneers, Maasai herdswomen, Arabian camel-drivers, and Chinese sages smile at us in various shades of brown. Drawn in pastel colours, separated by patterned borders, sheep, fish, and other animals are ready to sacrifice themselves to feed this multi-ethnic family of man. Fallon herself is photographed smiling knowingly on the back cover, impeccably lipsticked and coiffed, the modern gatherer of this repository of traditional culinary wisdom.

Politically, Fallon’s cookbook seems to be geared more toward home-schooling libertarians and less toward Katz’s anarchist experimenters or Prentice’s liberals longing for connection. She advocates the union of ancestral wisdom with scientific knowledge in explicitly gendered terms. As she writes, “Technology can be a kind father but only in partnership with his mothering, feminine partner – the nourishing traditions of our ancestors.” Fallon officiates at the wedding between father science and mother tradition, ushering in a new era of social harmony: “The wise and loving marriage of modern invention with the sustaining, nurturing folk foodways of our ancestors is the partnership that will transform the Twenty-First Century into the Golden Age.” The breakdown of this marriage would be catastrophic, turning utopia into dystopia: “divorce hastens the physical degeneration of the human race, cheats mankind of his limitless potential, destroys his will and condemns him to the role of undercitizen in a totalitarian world order” (xii). Here again, folk and Indigenous cultures present a transcendent solution to a fractured social reality. Fallon’s call for a “marriage” of traditional wisdom and scientific knowledge is a gendered, colonial version of Schiller’s “Aesthetic State.”<sup>203</sup> Her insistence on the marriage of science and

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<sup>203</sup> Fallon even suggests at one point that lacto-fermentation will usher in the coming Golden Age: “The day when every town in America produces its own distinctive lacto-fermentation brew, made from the local products of woods and fields, will be the day when Americans see the dawning of a new age of good

tradition echoes through other contemporary North American food movements – including so-called “paleo” and “primal” diets, which cast their anachronistic lines even further back, into the stream of prehistory. All of these movements sift through Indigenous, “ancestral,” and non-industrial foodways in search of holistic well-being and social healing. They rarely acknowledge that this move to Indigenous wholeness takes place on stolen land.

### Radical Healing

Sandor Katz’s engagement with aesthetic wholeness and Indigenous knowledge is more complex. Like Prentice and Pollan, he proposes vernacular food practices as a remedy for the fragmented and abstracted quality of our engagement with daily sustenance. The social division of labour – generalized to a separation between humans, other species, and the land – breeds a longing for connection. As he writes, “The mass disconnection of human beings from the harvesting and cultivation of our own food reflects a broader disconnection from the natural world, our physical environment, the land, wild plants and animals, the cycles of life and death, even our very own bodies. This disconnect is a source of spiritual longing, leaving us searching for reconnection and yearning for meaning” (*RWN* xviii). But while the yearning may be spiritual, Katz’s struggle is material and political. *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved* discusses commons and enclosures, and engages with Winona LaDuke and the White Earth Land Recovery Project’s work to revive the Anishnaabe harvesting of wild rice. Katz is explicit about the need to struggle against the commodification of life, which turns folk modes of sustenance like seed-saving into corporate property. Commodification and capitalist regimes of property breed abstraction, mystification, and one-sided degradation: “Food in the supermarket is anonymous, detached from its origins, lacking history, nutrient density, and life force. It is food as pure commodity, and we need better food than that”

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health and well-being, as well as a new era of economic vitality based on small-scale local production rather than on large-scale monopolistic control of the food-processing industry” (585). Since *Nourishing Traditions* was published, there has indeed been a surge in the United States of small-scale producers of ginger beer and kombucha, fizzy fermented drinks that offer a healthier alternative to sugary sodas. But as Sharzer points out, such small producers occupy market niches and are no threat to the dominance of large-scale food companies, let alone to an exploitative social system as a whole.

(RWN xix). Fermentation is one way to unlock the “life force” in our food. But Katz reminds us that there are others, such as acting in solidarity with farmers and migrant workers, and joining in alliances with Indigenous struggles for land.

On the other hand, Katz’s position as a compiler of global fermentation traditions gives his cookbooks a certain colonial relation to Indigenous knowledge. This is especially notable in *The Art of Fermentation*, which, unlike *Wild Fermentation*, has the ambition to be comprehensive and encyclopaedic (its subtitle is “an in-depth exploration of essential concepts and processes from around the world”). Drawing on remarkable archival and field research, and incorporating writing from many practitioners of the U.S. revival movement, *The Art of Fermentation* gathers global modes of daily fermenting practice into a compendium. Katz is like Hegel’s young girl following the Muses, picking up the fallen flowers of tradition and weaving them into new garlands (Hegel 455; see Nancy, *Muses*). He positions both himself and his readers outside specific fermentation traditions, free to combine, invent, and rework them into new forms. This includes the ritual practices that accompany many traditional ferments. Katz offers a telling description of the brewing of *baälche*, an herbal mead made by the Lacandon people of Chiapas:

Like all traditional fermentation processes, *baälche* production and consumption are practiced with elaborate ritual. The *baälche* makers mark the removal of foam from the active ferment by holding kernels of special sacred symbolic corn in their palms over the *baälche* while moving their hands over it in a clockwise circular motion, and then they similarly bless the utensils and cups used in drinking. Finally, they place the corn kernels with the skimmed-off foam in a plantain leaf with other sacraments, and the *baälche* maker folds the leaf into a package, goes into the forest, and buries it as an offering to the deity of death. Indigenous fermentation practices are thoroughly enmeshed in broader understandings about death, life, and transitions. *Those of us who have no such received tradition have to discover and reinvent those practices and give them meaning as best we can.* In reclaiming fermentation, we can take back more than the mere substance of our food and drink. Through fermentation, we can

reconnect ourselves to the broader web of life, in spirit and in essence, as well as the physical plane. (*AF* 75-76, italics added)

Elsewhere in his writing, Katz roots himself in a particular fermentation lineage – that of Eastern European Jewry, with its brined cucumber pickles (*WF* 50-51, *RWN* 153-156, *AF* 123). Yet here he seems to suggest that this received tradition lacks precisely what Indigenous peoples have: a ritual structure that links fermentation to a broader cosmology of life and death. *The Art of Fermentation* invites its readers to dip into that ritual structure, to “discover and reinvent” Indigenous fermentation practices “and give them meaning as best we can.” It is hard not to see this spiritual bricolage as a kind of “playing Indian,” in Rayna Green’s phrase, in which subjects of settler society search for authenticity by taking on the trappings of that society’s dispossessed.

Katz’s relationship to Indigenous practices could be connected to the queer community that for many years hosted his fermentation experiments: Short Mountain, a radical faerie commune in the hills of Tennessee. The radical faerie movement was founded in the late 1970s by gay activist and writer Harry Hay, who drew on the colonial construction of the “berdache” to suggest a link between contemporary (white) gay men and Indigenous two-spirited sexuality. Radical faeries secured rural spaces as “sanctuaries” where an “indigenous gay nature” could be freed for experimentation (Morgensen, “Arrival” 68). Hay’s was one of a number of post-1960s countercultural movements that sought what Elizabeth Povinelli calls “a genealogical solution” to liberal society’s demands for self-rule, turning away “from normative Judeo-Christian theologies” and embracing “as antidote, a pan-pagan/indigenous spirituality” (*Empire* 107). Ritual practices like the “heart circle” were loosely adapted from imagined pagan and Indigenous traditions. Radical faerie culture has been critiqued as “neo-primitivism,” a refuge for gay urbanites looking for a temporary escape (Herring). But it could more helpfully be understood as a complex operation whereby, as Scott Morgensen writes, “nonnative gay men in the radical faeries” find “in rural spaces and in tales of indigeneity a self-acceptance and collective nature that also grants new belonging on settled land” (“Arrival” 69). Like all inhabitants of liberal settler colonies, radical faeries are caught in a

matrix of discourses of “genealogy and autarchy” (Povinelli), which they enact and struggle against in varying ways.

The AIDS epidemic also provides an important background to both radical faerie culture and Katz’s fermentation practice. Radical faerie sanctuaries such as Wolf Creek and Short Mountain emerged in the epidemic’s early years, and exist as permanent memorial sites to radical faeries who died of AIDS (Morgensen, “Arrival”). The “heart circle” is a mode of accommodating grief, which was blocked by metropolitan heteronormative culture (Crimp). The move to indigenous spirituality is tied up with the need for shared spaces of mourning. As Morgensen writes, the sanctuaries “became privileged sites where radical faeries could return to recommit to collective survival and sanctify the memory of lost friends, now imagined as part of the spiritual power of radical faerie lands” (“Arrival” 83-84). Katz’s willingness to experiment with Indigenous healing practices is surely grounded in his daily experience with radical faeries at Short Mountain, where he lived for nearly two decades, as well as his own experience living with AIDS. His fermentation practice began through a desire to maintain health and vitality without resorting to AZT and other damaging medications. He still credits live-culture foods for maintaining his strength. But after a brush with death he now takes anti-retroviral drugs, and has little patience for purists who fault him for his “fall into pharmaceuticals” (*RWN* 195). He has since left the Short Mountain sanctuary and moved into his own house down the road, complete with a large experimental kitchen. Still, the spirit of the radical faerie reimagining of tradition, with all its ambiguities, carries over into his practice and his writing.

Before moving to Short Mountain, Katz was also an active member of a more explicitly political collective, ACT UP/New York. Based on that experience, he credits collective activism, and not just fermented foods, with healing power. As he notes, “In the AIDS activist group ACT UP that I was part of in the late 1980s, we saw that expressing rage, feeling solidarity, and believing in the possibility of change were all therapeutic cofactors that helped people stay healthy” (*RWN* 197). In a video interview for the ACT UP Oral History Project, Katz (while milking one of Short Mountain’s goats) describes the “feeling of incredible devotion” that came from immersing oneself in that activist community. The etho-

poetic commitment that ACT UP encouraged went beyond organized actions, and extended into the life practice of each individual activist. “I feel each of us sort of became an action waiting to happen, should we stumble upon the right situation,” he says (Interview). Like the fermentation revival, ACT UP denounced the cult of the expert and promoted the collective redistribution of knowledge. It might seem like a long way from ACT UP’s media-savvy actions to raising goats and fermenting radishes on a Tennessee commune. But a similar devotion marks Katz’s writing on fermentation, along with a similar readiness to experiment and build alliances. Rage, solidarity, and the belief in change still drive his folk practice. Those affects might not show themselves in every crock of kraut. But cumulatively, they offer a path toward radical healing that goes beyond self-care, borrowed spirituality, or even inter-species intimacy – toward an attempt to heal social wounds through political practice in the world.

### **Political Ferments**

The move to radical healing through everyday practice can be seen in other “grassroots modernist” movements, such as the revival of folk herbalism. Herbalism draws on everyday plant “allies,” including weeds and so-called invasive species, in its healing work. For politically-oriented practitioners like Dori Midnight, otherwise unwanted plants – mugwort, dandelion, burdock – can help work through colonial histories held in the body, and aid in “healing the land and healing ancestral patterns.” Brought over with European colonizers, thriving in the cracks of urban concrete and disturbed industrial landscapes, weeds contain powerful medicine for healing past and ongoing colonial violence. For Midnight, opportunistic weedy plants like mugwort can help heal personal and ancestral wounds, especially for “shapeshifters and edgewalkers” – those who are gender non-normative, sex workers, and activists. Weeds are part of the toolkit of witchcraft – which, as Midnight reminds us, is a craft, not a supernatural ability. Plants can be used as needed, along with other everyday magical things: “household objects like spoons and brooms, and cheap objects like rocks and sticks and bowls and pots” (qtd. in Badger).

Using whatever is close at hand – in this case, common weeds – is a key element of what Midnight calls “folk practice.” Sandor Katz’s watchword is similar: “Use what is abundantly available to you, and be bold in your fermentation experimentation!” (WF 59). As herbal practitioners like to say, “medicine is everywhere”; you just need to look.<sup>204</sup> Midnight believes that daily work with nearby materials can open up onto political action, and that reviving everyday healing folk practices can have powerful consequences. “There’s work for people to do,” she says. “Going back into their history, dreaming, or writing, or doing rituals, or eating certain things – daily ways for people to do healing work themselves to free their ancestors, or free the land” (qtd. in Badger). None of this poses an imminent threat to structures of capitalist and colonial power. But such forms of grassroots modernism – intimate with weeds, worms, dirt, and other human and non-human organisms – can ally themselves with broader social movements, and lend them a collective healing force.

While the fermentation revival tends to share this perspective, in recent years the politics of its healing practice have become “gentrified” or “domesticated,” to use Slavoj Žižek’s language (“Neighbors” 162). Fermentation engages with beings that are uncannily close at hand, “nearer than breathing, closer than hands and feet”: the intimate strangers with whom we share our bodies and our surroundings. But as the fermentation revival has gathered steam, the inhuman, faceless, or even monstrous dimension of the strange stranger has given way to familiarity. In Katz’s writing, the balance has shifted subtly from radical and experimental hospitality (*Wild Fermentation*) to deep and comprehensive knowledge (*The Art of Fermentation*). Katz is now, despite his professions of amateurism, a fermentation expert: he advises a range of high-class chefs such as David Chang of Momofuku on microbial matters, and travels around the world to speak at food conferences. *The Art of Fermentation* includes “Considerations for Commercial Enterprises” meant to assist those fermentos who have set up their own cottage industries and who hope to establish a niche market for their products. Berkeley’s Cultured Pickle Shop, the most celebrated of these enterprises, avoids industrial homogeneity by producing small-batch ferments in their laboratory-style shop and selling them to local foodies. Their products are exquisite, though it would be a stretch to give

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<sup>204</sup> See, for example, the *Activating the Healers Infobook* by the rootmedicine collective (Abbott-Barish and Murphy).

them much political significance. The fermentation revival seems to have ended up gentrifying itself, in addition to acting as a convenient stand-in (or punching bag) for the gentrification of urban neighbourhoods. It, too, is subject to what Sarah Schulman, describing the mainstreaming of gay culture in the 1990s, calls “the gentrification of the mind.”

Some critics would undoubtedly go further, and argue that even the more radical strands of the fermentation revival are engaged in narcissistic ethico-aesthetic practices that make no universal political demands. Fermenting cabbage in your kitchen is a domestic affair that has no direct impact on the business of capital and the state. Murray Bookchin once critiqued a certain “lifestyle anarchism,” which treats everyday ways of living as more significant than building social movements. Such critics would see fermentation as just one more lifestyle choice, and politicizing it as energy misspent. For Pierre Bourdieu, as for Sharzer’s *No Local*, the fermentos’ politics of the everyday is essentially petit-bourgeois. As Bourdieu writes, “the new petite bourgeoisie is predisposed to play a vanguard role in the struggles over everything concerned with the art of living, in particular, domestic life and consumption” (*Distinction* 366). Bourdieu is correct, in a sense. Even if a home fermentation practice is not strictly “consumption,” it is concerned with the art of living. And even wild fermentation, if not quite domesticated, is certainly domestic.

However, such a critique of “the domestic” and “domestication” is all too easy, and has strong patriarchal overtones. As many feminist writers and activists have demonstrated, what goes on in private or domestic space can be brought into public and made political. The domestic is a site of social reproduction, commodification, power and resistance. It is a place where we gather strength, or where we lose it. It is also a shared site, a place where species meet. As Donna Haraway describes it, domestication is not a simple affair, but a complex inter-species process of co-evolution and co-creation. “Domestication,” she writes, “is an emergent process of co-habiting,” a set of opportunistic prehensions between beings in a process that carries historical traces (*Companion* 30). Even the most domestic of species like *S. Cerevisiae*, perhaps the first species domesticated by humans, is an uncanny neighbour – as are Haraway’s dogs, or Katz’s goats and *Lactobacilli*. Such bearers of “significant otherness” should not be barred from the realm of the political, pushed across the gulf that separates



humans from non-political animals or speech from noise (Rancière, *Disagreement*). As we move through the Anthropocene together, we need to build larger experimental collectives that include these and other stranger strangers in “matters of concern” (Latour, “Why Has Critique”). Ultimately, we all share the same home, the same *domus*. What we need is to figure out a way to live in that place together.

Why not begin, as folk practice does, with the domestic – with nearby materials, people, and other organisms – as a way to experiment with what resources are there? Simon Critchley suggests as much in *Infinitely Demanding*, which conceives of “the local” not as a limiting boundary but as a point of departure. Critchley writes: “Perhaps it is at this intensely situational, indeed local level that the atomizing, expropriating force of neo-liberal globalization is to be met, contested, and resisted. That is, resistance begins by occupying and controlling the terrain upon which one stands, where one lives, works, acts and thinks.” This need not be an immediately revolutionary or large-scale practice: “Resistance can be intimate,” he writes, “and can begin in small affinity groups.” What matters is that small-scale resistance open onto universality – that intimate practices can be bonded by the “hegemonic glue” of universal ethical demands for justice and equality (114). Perhaps these universal demands can gather their formulators into a Gramscian fighting force, “compact and self-aware” (if not “ever more homogeneous”) (qtd. in Critchley 88). Again, ACT UP provides an interesting example of this kind of structure. In its heyday, it gathered affinity groups across social boundaries into a focused movement that allowed for anger and joy, intimacy and publicity, a way of living and a way of fighting back. Such movements puncture fantasies of autology and autonomy. They practice “disidentification,” as Rancière calls it, taking us out of predefined social roles and into new forms of shared dependence and collective political life. And they begin not by separating themselves from the domestic, but by opening it up toward universal concerns.

In 2011, as I was formulating this research project, the glimmers of this vision burst into life again in the movements of the squares, which gathered “bodies in alliance” into local configurations of universal significance (J. Butler). In public spaces at multiple points on the globe, confronting varying forms of capital and the state, and with divergent revolutionary,

reformist, or reluctant demands, humans tried once more to work out practices of shared survival. Many of these movements engaged in various kinds of “folk practice,” like the clanging casseroles of *indignados* and Québec students, which reprised the “rough music” of the European medieval *charivari* (Sterne). Others of the same moment, including Idle No More, drew on Indigenous histories of dispossession, struggle and continuance. All worked opportunistically with whatever was at hand – pots and pans, laptop computers, food, tents, drums, cardboard signs, camera phones, voices. The reverberations of their concrete or singular universals continue to echo through our contemporary political darkness.

Critchley is at pains to point out (along with political theorists such as Badiou and Rancière) that politics has no ontological foundation, that it is an interruption in the order of being. Even less, presumably, would politics have a biological foundation. Nonetheless, the fermentation encouraged by microorganisms has proved an irresistible metaphor for the political ferment that can spread among humans. Fermentation, in food and politics, is the slow process that prepares the ground for more dramatic action. Peter Schumann of the Bread and Puppet Theater used this metaphor in a broadsheet for the Radical Cheese Festival, a 2002 gathering of anti-globalization activists and puppeteers that featured a kraut-fermenting workshop by Sandor Katz. Schumann, connecting his own practice of sourdough bread-baking to insurrectionary activity, writes: “The call for fermentation is prior to the call for uprising because uprising needs all the wild yeasts of the moment to be what it is.” For Schumann, the substrate – people or grains – must first be “corrupted” by what he calls “the ecstasy of nature.” We need some kind of outside starter, some ec-static sourdough to break down our propriety, complacency and resignation. “Only by the spread of such corruptions caused by fermentation can uprisings occur,” Schumann writes.<sup>205</sup> Even given the perfect conditions, people (and loaves of bread) will only rise up if fermentation has first done its corrupting work.<sup>206</sup> For Derrida, this is a risky but necessary process: “The stranger is a

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<sup>205</sup> Schumann’s broadsheet is reproduced in Katz, *AF* plate 31.

<sup>206</sup> For the Microcultures Collective, fermentation is all about setting up those good conditions: “The practice of fermentation, whether it be culinary fermentation or the social or artistic practices inspired by it, is the practice of creating the ideal conditions for a transformation to take place” (Kruglanski, Ramujkic, and Robas).

digression that risks corrupting the proximity to self of the proper.” And as Whitman noted, powerful and sweet things can grow out of such corruptions.

Transformations don’t just happen miraculously. Fermentation is a slow process, one that requires patience. Its work is often invisible: only a quiet bubbling reveals the complex degradations that are taking place beneath the surface. In *Wild Fermentation*, Katz contrasts the gentle, slow and steady change of fermentation with the rapid transformations of fire, which burns quick and bright. “In the realm of social change,” Katz writes,

fire is the revolutionary moment of upheaval: romantic and longed for, or dreaded and guarded against, depending on your perspective. Fire spreads, destroying whatever lies in its path, and its path is unpredictable. Fermentation is not so dramatic. It bubbles rather than burns, and its transformative mode is gentle and slow. Steady, too. Fermentation is a force that cannot be stopped. It recycles life, renews hope, and goes on and on. (*WF* 166)

In times of rapid change, it is easy to be transfixed by the fire and miss the slow ferment that precedes it. Sparks now fly around the globe at terrific speed. A vegetable seller sets himself on fire in Tunis, and revolt breaks out across the Eastern Mediterranean. What fermenting work – slow, patient and invisible – allowed those epochal flames to spread so quickly? In the long run, given the persistence of the old regimes, might gentle fermentation prove more transformative and more durable than the ravages of fire? These questions may be answered decades from now, if ever. In the meantime, we resume our patient work, playing between life and death, using what is close at hand, and hoping that bubbling activity will rise again.



## CONCLUSION

### Projects of Undoing

Throughout this dissertation, I have used the word *project* to describe a number of performative experiments with vernacular practice. Each chapter has focused on one collective project – whether that takes the form of a yearly celebration (Chapter 1), an ongoing musical group (Chapter 2), a workshop held each summer (Chapter 3), or a repetitive series of experiments and texts (Chapter 4). I have used the word “project” advisedly, drawing on the meaning that the term has accrued in contemporary artistic practice. As Gratton and Sheringham write in *The Art of the Project*, the term “project” conveys a shift in twentieth-century art from a singular “work” of art to an extended process (often occurring outside of the studio). It has increasingly been used to describe “instances of site-specific, or more broadly site-sensitive, cultural research that regularly shift our attention from art to life, from the aesthetic to the extra-aesthetic, and from the personal to the collective” (2). “The art of the project,” they argue, embraces amateur knowledge (or “deprofessionalisation”), along with “a spirit of open-ended enquiry articulated in formal and existential experimentalism” (9).<sup>207</sup> A shift to the collective, a valuing of amateur practice, an emphasis on open-ended experimentalism: while the projects I have examined in the preceding chapters may not be situated in art-world contexts, they share many of these aesthetic tendencies and qualities.

More broadly, Gratton and Sheringham point out that the word “project” has a complex semantic relationship to time. A project, they write, “may designate something envisaged, something ongoing, or something completed.” The word’s etymology suggests a prospective, forward-looking anticipation: a “temporal *pro-jection* into an as yet unrealised

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<sup>207</sup> *The Art of the Project*, as its subtitle indicates, focuses on “projects and experiments in modern French culture,” tracing a lineage from Man Ray through Georges Perec, Sophie Calle, Agnès Varda and many others.

and open future” (17). This anticipatory meaning ties the project to futurity, even when it refers to something in the present or past. Used in the present, “project” suggests an activity that is extended over time and continuing into the future. And used to describe a completed undertaking, “project” retains traces of vanished anticipation and processual duration. (As Gratton and Sheringham note, many artistic projects resist any sense of completion, presenting themselves as still in progress or temporarily suspended.) “Project,” like the grammatical present participle, suggests an activity that is open, repetitive, reflexive, ongoing, and immediate.<sup>208</sup> More than this: “project” also carries a certain confidence about the future, implying that an envisaged activity will eventually be accomplished, that a dream will be brought to fruition.

Claire Bishop has remarked on the historicity of the term “project” in artistic discourse, locating it in the post-1989 era. As she writes:

A project in the sense that I am identifying as crucial to art after 1989 aspires to replace the work of art as a finite object with an open-ended, post-studio, research-based, social process, extending over time and mutable in form. Since the 1990s, the project has become an umbrella term for many types of art: collective practice, self-organised activist groups, transdisciplinary research, participatory and socially engaged art, and experimental curating. ... My key point, however, is less to define a new tendency than to note that the word chosen to describe these open-ended artistic activities arrives at a moment when there is a conspicuous lack of what we could call a *social project* – a collective political horizon or goal. (*Artificial Hells* 194, emphasis in original)

As Bishop observes, the prevalence of “the project” in art emerges out of the disintegration of twentieth-century social projects. Although she rejects any simplistic relation between artistic and political projects, Bishop does suggest that the surge of “project art” after 1989 is symptomatic of the absence of any “collective political horizon or goal.” Certainly “the art of the project” has a longer pedigree: as a “procedural as opposed to substantial approach to art,” it is traceable at least as far back as Duchamp (Gratton and Sheringham 8). But as a resurgent

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<sup>208</sup> See my discussion of Samuel Weber on Kierkegaard’s “experimenting,” in the Introduction above.

concept and term of self-designation, the artistic project is contemporaneous with the failure of the twentieth-century Communist project – its petrification in repressive, authoritarian and violent state forms, and its eventual collapse. That catastrophe tarred the language of universal emancipation, and shattered faith in large-scale social projects. Reckoning with that history remains essential to the future of any collective project that hopes to divert capitalism’s exploitative and destructive drive.

Without a universal “collective political horizon” to guide them, the four aesthetic projects that I have examined must orient themselves by their own lights, or by the sparks thrown by the activist movements with which they are allied. As experiments with tradition between politics and performance, they are “radical prototypes,” “figures on a horizon of possibilities” (Rodenbeck 28). While these four experiments are not, strictly speaking, political projects, their creative translations of tradition have intriguing correspondences with contemporary political movements. Experimenting with tradition seems necessary for a political left that is working through its relationship with its own history. And new figures on the horizon are necessary to guide a left that, following the catastrophe of state communism, seemed for some time to have lost its bearings entirely. In these concluding reflections, I address the conformist dangers that threaten these four experiments with tradition – dangers that are similar to those courted by contemporary grassroots activist movements. But first, it is worth surveying the cloudy and sometimes melancholy political landscape in which all of these projects must find their way. Launching a collective aesthetic or political project requires projecting an idea, with confidence, into an open future. This collective ability is what Hannah Arendt calls “the promise of politics”: “the spirit of starting an enterprise and, together with others, seeing it through to its conclusion” (*Promise* 45). Yet for some decades, that ability, promise and spirit have been lacking on the political left, which some critics have portrayed as sunk in a brooding melancholy.

This melancholy is more than just an atmosphere or mood: political theorists have not hesitated to use the psychoanalytic language of *melancholia* to describe the left’s disarray following the catastrophe of the twentieth-century Communist project. In 1999, Wendy Brown’s “Resisting Left Melancholy” drew on Freud and Benjamin to critique certain Marxist

thinkers who clung to antiquated political forms and concepts in the face of epochal change. This old guard, she argued, refused to abandon the language of communist revolution, often viewing “identity politics” and post-structuralist theory as a dangerous enemy. Brown castigated “a Left that has become more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness, a Left that is most at home dwelling not in hopefulness but in its own marginality and failure, a Left that is thus caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing” (26). Brown argued that this left needed to let go of melancholy attachments to failed revolutionary theories and projects. It had to turn its gaze away from the past, and abandon its self-punishment, so that new ideas and movements could emerge.

Jodi Dean’s “Communist Desire” – a critique of Brown’s argument published well over a decade later, in 2013 – shifts the diagnosis of melancholy to the post-communist, activist left. In Dean’s view, the melancholics are not the die-hard Marxists, but rather those who have turned away from “the communist horizon” and contented themselves with micro-projects and specific issues and campaigns. Using Lacan’s language, she claims that this activist left has given up on its “communist desire,” instead preferring to wallow in melancholy impotence. In her view, “such a left enjoyment comes from its withdrawal from power and responsibility, its sublimation of goals and responsibilities into the branching, fragmented practices of micro-politics, self-care, and issue awareness.” It has found melancholy pleasure in its very lack of a project: “Perpetually slighted, harmed, and undone, this left remains stuck in repetition, unable to break out of the circuits of drive in which it is caught, unable because it enjoys” (11). For Dean, the revival of the language of communism, at least in intellectual discourse, is a healthy sign that “the period of guilt is over” (Douzinas and Žižek, qtd. in Dean 12). The resurgence of communism as an intellectual watchword, especially when set alongside the re-emergence of large-scale political action since 2008, suggests to her that post-communist melancholy is giving way to a new collective political desire that is oriented to the future.

Perhaps we can clarify these conflicting diagnoses of political melancholy by drawing an image from a text that inspired them both. In “Left-Wing Melancholy,” published in 1931,



Walter Benjamin uses the image of a plundered department store to illustrate the melancholy that had overtaken the “intellectual elite” of his day. The humanist gestures and feelings of that class, Benjamin writes, “have long since been remaindered. What is left is the empty spaces where, in dusty heart-shaped velvet trays, the feelings – nature and love, enthusiasm and humanity – once rested. Now the hollow forms are absentmindedly caressed.” In Europe between the wars, Benjamin sees humanist intellectuals lingering over the empty trays where their cherished values were once displayed. But even worse than their melancholy caressing, in Benjamin’s view, is a “know-all irony” that rejoices in those empty display-cases. This irony takes failure for success: it “makes a great display of its poverty and turns the yawning emptiness into a celebration.” This was Benjamin’s critique of Erich Kästner and the New Objectivity: that it offered the melancholy remnants of political affects – the “traces of former spiritual goods” – as objects for sale on the market, demonstrating a comfortable nihilism that was utterly disconnected from ongoing social struggles (SW2 425).

It is tempting to translate Benjamin’s figure of the empty display-case of political feelings into the post-communist era. For the feelings of “nature and love, enthusiasm and humanity,” we can substitute socialism and revolution, communism and universal emancipation. With this in mind, we can see two kinds of “left-wing melancholy” operating in the West since 1989. The Marxist old guard absentmindedly caresses the empty forms of political struggle, unable to let go of its attachments to a vanished revolutionary project and the feelings that it carried. Meanwhile, a new guard turns that emptiness into a celebration, embracing the shopworn fragments of postmodern culture with a “know-all irony.”

With this in mind, Dean’s critique of the activist left and its issue-driven, anti-statist politics has a certain justice. Although this left does not operate through irony, its rejection of state power turns emptiness – the lack of an explicit revolutionary project – into a kind of celebration.<sup>209</sup> But is it better to claim, as Dean does, that those old revolutionary feelings and values are still present? Should we join her in seeing the empty display cases in communism’s department store as once again bursting with goods? Dean’s argument falls prey not so much

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<sup>209</sup> Interestingly, the proposal of a left politics “at a distance from the state” emerges in the writing of both Critchley and Badiou. See Žižek’s critique in *In Defense of Lost Causes* 402ff, and the exchange between Critchley and Žižek in the *London Review of Books*.

to left-wing melancholy as to left-wing *mania*. Rather than caress the empty velvet trays of communist feelings (or ironically celebrate their emptiness), it loudly denies the very fact that they are empty. It refuses to admit that the idea of communism – as a revolutionary project, if not as a practice – has long since been remaindered.<sup>210</sup>

The oscillation between left-wing melancholy and mania, among what Benjamin called the “left-radical intelligentsia,” continues to express itself in a variety of recent texts. T.J. Clark’s “For a Left With No Future” turns its gaze resolutely and melancholically toward a bloody history which cannot be superseded, urging the left to abandon the “modern infantilisation of politics” that comes from “a constant orientation to the future” (72). By contrast, Williams and Srnicek’s “#ACCELERATE MANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics” argues that the future is precisely what “needs to be constructed.” Instead of abandoning a broken future to the ravages of neoliberalism, their manifesto insists that we need to marshal existing capitalist technologies and forms of knowledge, in order to move “towards a time of collective self-mastery, and the properly alien future that entails and enables.” Despite their conflicting prescriptions, each of these somewhat melancholic and manic texts has its merits. It remains necessary, as Benjamin wrote, to break the spell of the future – to “strip it of its magic” – and to face the catastrophes and lost promise of the past. Yet we also need to break the spell of the past, which can suck present desires and actions into a compulsive repetition of used-up ideas and forms. A resurgent left needs to break both of these spells – allowing the present to emerge as a field of possibility, a *Spielraum* for experimenting with future projects out of the wreckage of the past.

It would be all too easy to lump these various texts together with the writings of other left academics disconnected from social movements. As Benjamin wrote of the left-radical intelligentsia of his day, “Their function is to give rise, politically speaking, not to parties but to cliques; literarily speaking, not to schools but to fashions; economically speaking, not to producers but to agents” (SW2 424). Yet we could more charitably see these alternately melancholic and manic texts, with their opposing diagnoses and accusations, as contradictory

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<sup>210</sup> This is especially evident in Dean’s insistence on the revolutionary vanguard party. Granted, as she likes to say, “Goldman Sachs doesn’t care if you raise chickens.” But neither does it care if you join a Leninist study group.

attempts to work through powerful attachments to a left tradition that has sickened, if not died. What is to be done when confronted with “a sickening of tradition”? As Benjamin reminds us, the important thing to salvage is not tradition’s “truth” but its “transmissibility,” not its definite content but its “way of meaning.” Moreover, as I have argued, tradition can only be transmitted through the fraught process of its translation. Traditions of emancipatory and egalitarian politics are no exception. Despite their opposing prescriptions, all of these authors would agree that if left traditions are to find new life in thought and action, there is an urgent need for them to be re-translated into new, experimental forms.

If we take the psychoanalytic model of mourning and melancholia seriously, the virulence and ambivalence of these various texts should not be surprising. Over the past decades, the left has been engaged in a kind of mourning-work – a slow detaching from the lost object, which in this case could be described as “the classical figure of the politics of emancipation” (Badiou, *Communist* 62). Freud, in “Mourning and Melancholia,” describes mourning as a gradual and painful process of “dissolution” (*Auflösung*), or a loosening or undoing of bonds. As he writes: “To each individual memory and situation of expectation that shows the libido to be connected to the lost object, reality delivers its verdict that the object no longer exists, and the ego, presented with the question, so to speak, of whether it wishes to share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of narcissistic satisfactions that it derives from being alive to loosen its bonds with the object that has been destroyed” (322). In the face of the loss of a loved person or deeply cherished ideal, a sense of reality and the pleasure of living intervene to save the ego from destruction. But it is first necessary to accept that the loved object will not return. From this perspective, the bonds to what has been destroyed can be loosened, one by one.

Freud represents the work of mourning as a conscious project: a kind of “reality-testing” on the part of the ego, whose narcissistic satisfactions persuade it to let go of the lost object. But as Jean Laplanche argues, in a close reading of “Mourning and Melancholia,” mourning is as much an unconscious as a conscious process. Laplanche draws a parallel between Freud’s *Lösung*, or the “detachment” of affective bonds, and the Greek *analuein* – “to undo” or “unweave” (from which we get “analysis”). Somewhat counter-intuitively, Laplanche

reads the tale of Penelope – weaving and unweaving her “resplendent fabric” while waiting for the return of Ulysses – as a story of mourning-work. He emphasizes her work’s careful, repetitive and unconscious qualities: “Penelope does not cut the threads, as in the Freudian theory of mourning; she patiently unpicks them, to be able to compose them again in a different way. Moreover, this work is nocturnal, far from the conscious lucidity with which, Freud claims, the threads are broken one by one” (*Essays* 256). Laplanche sees a parallel, which Freud misses, between Penelope’s “unweaving” (*analucien*) and the practice of psychoanalysis. Both are projects of undoing: “unweaving so that a new fabric can be woven, disentangling to allow the formation of new knots” (257).

With this image in mind, rather than viewing the post-communist left as pathologically melancholic, we might more helpfully see it as engaging in the “unweaving” that is characteristic of mourning. As Laplanche reminds us, the undoing of bonds with the object that has been destroyed is a “nocturnal” process, involving both conscious and unconscious work. It does not mean cutting one’s ties with the shattered past, but unweaving those threads and then weaving them into a new fabric. For the political left, this loosening or disentangling of bonds has come with all sorts of ambivalences, false starts, and awkward misfires. It has meant confronting the tangled past, with all its disappointments, horrors, and lost promise. But it has also been a “disentangling to allow the formation of new knots” – a slow opening to hope, to anticipation, and to the emergence of new projects in the world.

The projects that I have examined in the preceding chapters engage in a similar unweaving of the fabric of tradition, a disentangling and formation of new knots. Compared to the tradition of left politics I have been discussing, they work with a more modest loom: rather than sweeping theories or broad social movements, they propose specific experiments with lineages of vernacular practice. Yet they, too, can be understood as “projects of undoing,” both in their relation to a tangled past, and in their political orientation in the present. Each of these projects unweaves and weaves in its own fashion, and with its own goals. The Purim Ball weaves a new glittery garment out of a Jewish vernacular culture that has been abandoned and destroyed; in the process, it attempts to undo (or profane) the ritual separations that make that tradition vulnerable to xenophobic appropriations. *A Tribe Called Red* takes the

wires that have been cut by the suppression of Indigenous culture and plugs them into an electric circuit; the very term *decolonizing*, which is essential to their practice, implies an undoing and reweaving of historical bonds. The Abandoned Practices Institute experiments with a bundle of threads that have been cut off from present practice; it offers this collection in the service of an “unworking” of individualized subjectivity and work, shifting its participants productively out of equilibrium. And the fermentation revival’s emphasis on degradation and regeneration – along with the encounter it stages between humans and other strange strangers – offers a project of undoing at the level of life and death. As a site for this undoing and reweaving, each of these projects proposes a *Spielraum*, similar to the play-space that Freud describes as essential to psychoanalysis. At times, in these fragile and protected spaces, mourning can give way to experimentation and play. Bonds can be undone and then reformed; matted threads can be disentangled, then woven anew.

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In this dissertation, I have tracked this process of undoing and reweaving through what I have described as four experimental translations of tradition. The translation of tradition, especially across a gulf of discontinuity, also requires picking apart a mass of tangled threads and then weaving them into a new fabric. Translating tradition is always a fraught process: it necessarily involves betrayal, and risks various forms of complacency and conformism. Benjamin, in his theses “On the Concept of History,” stresses that tradition is always vulnerable to the danger of becoming “a tool of the ruling classes.” “In every era,” he reminds us, “the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is about to overpower it” (SW4 391). This injunction to wrest tradition away from the pressing dangers of conformism – or at least to make the *attempt*, to essay, to experiment – is never satisfied; it returns in every era, at every moment. Indeed, this danger threatens each of the projects that I have examined. In each one, the process of undoing is partial and incomplete: the urge to experiment can give way to complacency or self-satisfaction. Each of these projects courts a different kind of conformism, and each succumbs to this danger on

occasion.

In the case of the Purim Ball, the danger is similar to the one that Dean diagnoses in the activist left (with which it is closely linked): the danger of falling in love with its own political righteousness and marginality. As a space for “queer political desire” and for experimenting with Jewish tradition, the Purim party is exemplary and fruitful. Yet its links to specific, issue-driven campaigns lend it a didactic quality that no amount of carnivalization can disguise. At times, the tension between profane celebration and activist politics is deliberately foregrounded and made comic; at other times it is more uneasy. The Purimspiel tries to hold together ribald jokes and political correctness, but when conflict arises, righteousness tends to win the day. Even more dangerously, the Aftselokhes Spectacle Committee sometimes feels forced to take political positions that damage its own goals. This was the case in March 2014, when the collective abruptly cancelled the performance of Shelley Nicole’s *blaKbüshe* shortly before the party, based on that group’s upcoming appearance at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival – the object of a long-running boycott due to its rejection of trans women. As the collective notes, this “difficult and painful” decision was the product of much introspection and internal debate (“Statement”). Yet both the MWM Festival’s policy and the collective’s decision point to the danger that threatens the activist left: a conformism and self-policing that leads to endless internecine struggles. It squanders energy that could be directed against the real enemy, who, as Benjamin observes, “has never ceased to be victorious” (SW4 391).

A Tribe Called Red’s politics are more affective than explicit, allowing their sonic translations of Indigenous resurgence to be transmitted into a variety of settings. The conformism that they face is inherent to the commercial system of popular music in which they operate. Here, the pressures are obvious and inescapable: professional touring musicians need to market themselves, standardize their recordings and live sets, and find sources of revenue in the lean digital age. None of this is exceptional, but it might explain the increasingly streamlined quality of ATCR’s music. The abrasive textures and rhythms of their debut album have given way to smoother sounds; their live sets follow increasingly predictable structures, and Bear Witness has stepped back from the harsh juxtapositions of his

first videos. The group's intense sonic and visual discrepancies have been dialled down, in a process of standardization that is all too familiar. Perhaps the pressure of being Indigenous "ambassadors" has contributed to this smoothing-out of their creative activity. At the same time, the political movement to which they gave voice has also struggled to sustain its momentum. The collective continues to work hard, touring and creating new music, and its professional future is bright. But that moment in December 2012, when "The Road" gave powerful sonic shape to political feelings and actions, has now passed into memory, and must be relayed and retranslated if it is to live again.

Rather than righteousness or standardization, the conformism that threatens the Abandoned Practices Institute is the danger of aestheticism. All of the projects I have examined try to resist what Benjamin calls "a tradition that is catastrophe," by exhibiting the fissures in what has been handed down from the past. Yet the Institute wavers in that goal, gathering "abandoned practices" into an archive that severs those practices from their historical and political contexts. The prompts, directives and structures of the Institute – what we could call its practices of transmission – are highly inventive and productive, and often produce outstanding results. But it is hard to shake the feeling of connoisseurship that it fosters, of the collector lingering over "certain old and lovely things" plucked from their former homes (Barthes, "Lecture" 14).<sup>211</sup> The Institute operates through a process of abstraction that is less interested in abandoned traditions themselves, and more in how that anachronistic material can dispossess us from our dreams of self-mastery and self-presence. This project of undoing offers many helpful lessons and routes forward, but it also runs the risk of complacency. "The path does die," as Charles Olson writes, describing the lost labour struggles of his father's generation. In those cases, we need to find our way back: to "pick up, fiercely and without any easy emotion, traces of the way" (44). The Abandoned Practices Institute brilliantly translates the scattered traces, but risks abandoning the broader way.

I have discussed the dangers courted by the fermentation revival, which are again similar to the ones that Dean identifies: its tendency toward self-care, toward becoming

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<sup>211</sup> The Institute's connections to the milieu of the art world foster this attitude of aesthetic plunder; its base in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago also means that many of its students have gone through the professionalization and self-marketing necessary to compete in "enterprise culture."

another “practice of the self” that lacks an engagement with broader social movements. For some practitioners, fermenting is one among many grassroots practices of healing and regeneration, offering resources for souls that have been crushed or defeated. It frames everyday life as a site of struggle – a political perspective that should not be dismissed. And its invitation to an encounter with non-human creatures pushes it into some intriguingly radical dimensions. But fermentation needs to open onto a wider political engagement if it is to live up to the metaphorical promise that Sandor Katz, among other practitioners, identifies. Katz’s own writing demonstrates a move from youthful revolutionary enthusiasm to a more tempered, adult perspective: from the proselytizer of *Wild Fermentation* to the researcher of *The Art of Fermentation*. His recent compendium also steps back from the explicit political commitments found in *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved*, including the alliance with Indigenous struggles, in favour of a collector’s synoptic eye. This might be a helpful shedding of illusions: fermenting vegetables is not going to change the world. But without that radical vision, the fizz of fermentation is bound to evaporate in a series of lifestyle adjustments, unable to put its corrupting energies to work on the substrate of society.

In each of these projects, a danger is that the fissure in what has been handed down from the past will not be preserved – that the discrepant qualities of the past will be lost. Another danger is that the movements of undoing that they initiate will remain incomplete. Their translations of tradition run the risk of not going far enough, of remaining caught within their own comfortable boundaries. Translation, as Judith Butler describes it, is an opening to the “alterity at the core of transmission”: it moves outward across incommensurable gulfs. For Butler, in the ideal case, “the chasm of translation becomes the condition of contact with what is outside me, the vehicle for an ec-static relationality, and the scene where one language meets another and something new happens” (*Parting Ways* 12). This is what Laplanche calls the “anti-autocentric movement of translation,” a movement which displaces the subject from its own centrality (*Seduction* 201). Laplanche describes this de-centred movement as “Copernican,” as opposed to the “Ptolemaic” movement in which everything orbits around the self, ego, or group (*Essays* 53). The danger, as Laplanche sees it, is for Copernican displacements to revert to a more comfortable, Ptolemaic stability (he



describes psychoanalysis as “the unfinished Copernican revolution”). This is a danger that threatens left politics and psychoanalysis, as well as the translations of vernacular practice that I have explored in the preceding chapters.

Against complacency, conformism, and Ptolemaic re-centring, we might counterpose what Benjamin called “the destructive character.” Sometimes translations need to activate a more radical undoing; sometimes the tangled threads of tradition must be cut if they are to be woven anew. Experiments need to be destructive as well as creative, if they are to do more than preserve the historical treasures that weigh us down. “The destructive character stands in the front line of traditionalists,” Benjamin writes. “Some people pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them; others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called the destructive.” Without a dose of this destruction, traditions cannot become situations that are “practicable,” open to use. This process of “liquidation” can be quite playful. Indeed, as Winnicott and other psychoanalytic theorists have noted, play involves an attempt to destroy the object as a way of experimenting with one’s own capabilities. If mourning is a slow process of unweaving, sometimes it is necessary to playfully tear the threads, to clear a path, to make new space. In Benjamin’s words:

The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too, he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Not always by brute force; sometimes by the most refined. Because he sees ways everywhere, he always stands at a crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble – not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it. (SW2 542)

When the way has been cleared, then the crossroads reveals itself as a space of experiment and play. Sometimes a radical undoing is necessary for situations to be made practicable, and for new projects to be formed.

Montréal, a night in April, 2012 – the spring of student strikes. Four of us have gathered in the *champ des possibles*, the field of possibilities, a stretch of waste ground tucked between train tracks, industrial buildings and the wall of a convent. There's a bottle of whiskey, and a pile of homemade boxes overflowing with painted cardboard sets and figures. This is what's left of Le Petit Théâtre de l'Absolu, the puppet theatre company we formed back in the spring of 2001. We build a little mound of paper and sticks, and I strike a match. It doesn't take long for the pile to light; puppetry is an eminently burnable medium. Hoping to avoid a visit from the cops, we try to keep the blaze small. Paint makes the flames glow blue and green at the edges, and a cloud of solvents adds another layer to our intoxication. We burn the characters from our first toy theatre show, the one about the Paris Commune. Arthur Rimbaud's young face looks at us dreamily from the flames. A marching crowd of workers, a crumpled sheet of newspaper that for a moment was filled with the wind of history – *au feu!* Generals, guillotines, soldiers, Situationists – *au feu!* The proscenium stage itself catches fire. Back to where we started, *in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, we go round in the night and are consumed by flames. It's a miniature potlatch with no one to impress but ourselves. We take photos for the archive and sing halting versions of songs from the time of the Commune. Words come back to me slowly, verse by verse. The wind blows smoke and ash in our eyes.

Like John Giorno says, you got to burn to shine. What do you do after the carnival with all the leftover crap? Letting it rot in landfill seems sad – better to bring gifts to be destroyed. Something is released, transmigrated, set free. All that stuff, clogging up our minds and studios and hearts. There's no need to hoard, preserve, museify. We are not going to do these shows again. We each save a little sheaf of papers, a few cardboard figures and battered hand puppets – survivors, *rescapés*. Otherwise, let the past become smoke. Years of work, friendship, love, rivalry, sadness and camaraderie: old stories that need to give way to new ones. We burn it all, down to the last cardboard flat. So many ashes and sparks, gusting about in the high spring wind. There's no water around to douse the remains, so Benoît relieves

himself in the cinders with a satisfying hiss. I make a joke about Gaston Bachelard – “*L’homme, l’eau et le feu.*” We are in elemental territory, a little buzzed, lost in darkness on a patch of ground not yet claimed by condo developers or landscape architects. *Le champ des possibles*, an open space. The field has been cleared. Let’s see what happens next.



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