

MANY FORMS  
OF LEARNING  
*YEAR FOUR*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	05
THEIR WORK	
<i>ALICIA LUZ RODRÍGUEZ DÍAS</i>	06
<i>BRETT SMITH</i>	12
<i>LOVÍSA ÓSK GUNNARSDÓTTIR</i>	22
<i>MICHELLE SAENZ BURROLA</i>	34
<i>SARA MIKOLAI</i>	44
<i>SVANHVÍT JÚLÍUSDÓTTIR</i>	58
<i>VALA HÖSKULDSDÓTTIR</i>	64

# MANY FORMS OF LEARNING

## ALEXANDER ROBERTS

For the 2019/20 cycle of the Master in Performing Arts' programme, there are seven artists graduating. Each of these artists has developed work over the last twelve months according to their own questions and distinct artistic practices. Works developed in conversation with a vast range of artists, thinkers and curators from across the disciplines, within and beyond the arts, from both here in Iceland and from around the world. With support in the form of residencies, mentoring, peer-to-peer feedback, workshops, labs and seminars. They now graduate together at the end of August 2020.

It has been a testing and troubling time – COVID-19 stopped life and work as we know it and this group of studying artists have been grappling with how – and what it means – to carry on as artist in this context. In implicit and explicit ways this question appears in their writing and in their work. And undoubtedly as the works are shared and the University begins a new academic year this question of how – and what it means – to continue is no less with us.

Together they have composed a programme of performances, events and situations that invite us with them into their practises. It is a week for sharing their work, but also a week for more learning. We are invited over these days to think, experience and learn together with them and their work – through the art they share, through the talks, discussions they host, as well as through this book.

This publication acts as a satellite to their works. Not so much designed to defend or explain their choices, but to bring added insight into certain aspects of it. We invite you to take time to be with it – and roll softly and tenderly in their ideas with them.

Thank you for being with us,  
Alexander Roberts

Programme Director  
Master in Performing Arts  
Associate Professor at  
Iceland University of the Arts

# BIOGRAPHY

Alicia Luz Rodríguez Díaz was born to become a retired Chilean actress, which she achieved at the young age of 26, leaving behind her past and baggage to pursue new challenges. She's fit a lot of things into her life, career and suitcase. From publishing a zine about abandoned Christmas trees to committing to a year of pink, Alicia does not allow the bounds of genre to restrict her. Now at 28, this Gemini free spirit is approaching the next interdisciplinary phase of her life: graduating from the Master's in Performing Arts programme at the Iceland University of the Arts, where everything is coming together as a practitioner of her creative world.

# EXPOSURE

## AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DEVICE

ALICIA LUZ,  
RODRÍGUEZ DÍAZ

"USUALLY, IF A PART OF MY LIFE IS CONSIDERED 'TOO PERSONAL' TO SHARE, I TRY TO THINK ABOUT WHY THAT SPECIFIC PART HAS TO BE KEPT SECRET AND WHO THAT SECRECY IS PROTECTING". — AUDREY WOLLEN<sup>1</sup>

1. Ava Tunnicliffe, "Audrey Wollen On The Power of Sadness," Nylon (Nylon, July 20, 2015), <https://www.nylon.com/articles/audrey-wollen-sad-girl-theory>.

2. Näkki Goranin, "The History of the Photobooth," The Telegraph (Telegraph Media Group, March 7, 2008), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/donotmigrate/3671736/The-history-of-the-photobooth.html>.

In September 1925, the first Photomaton Studio was opened in New York City by Anatol Josepho, a young enthusiast from Omsk, Siberia who dedicated his life to invent this special machine that would bring photography closer to the people. And it certainly did, it brought crowds every day, people with different purposes would go there to have their picture taken for twenty-five cents. After just a few years, the Photomaton patent was sold in the United States, and later on to Europe, it started to become more widely available.

People would do all sorts of stuff inside the booth, such as squeezing in with friends, kissing, pulling faces, as well as stripping off their clothes and getting 'adventurous' behind the curtain. The stripping was mostly women and after a few complaints, the curtains were removed to discourage such behaviors.

In the year 2018 I had an encounter with a vintage photo booth machine; this cabin was calling me in somehow. I paid for the photo and there was no time to think how I wanted this picture to be. I flashed. I wanted to and felt free to do so and repeated this as a task at different places and times. I thought of it as a small performance, mostly for myself, but also for anyone who would stumble upon this machine at the time I was inside. It became a space for exploring my body and

also produced a very beautiful collection of photos. As journalist Näkki Goranin puts it: "there just seemed to be something about the booths that brought out the exhibitionist in people, a phenomenon that continues to hold true."<sup>2</sup> It certainly holds true for me at least. This short story became the beginning of a research I've been involved in for the last year in Iceland.

There have been months of experimenting and seeking for the feeling I had two years ago in that booth. And since there is not a vintage photo booth in Iceland, I had the challenge and opportunity to abstract the experience and search for other formats and situations which could bring me close to that photobooth reality. After some time I realized this research is not only a body exploration, but also about finding a voice and a practice as an artist and practitioner.

At first, I thought of an archive of photo strips from other women who could have access to photo booths. I was interested in the possibility of gathering a collection of their experiences exploring their bodies inside the booths. They would find booths near where they live and mail the images to my home in Iceland. My personal collection would then become a part of this archive. I learnt, sadly, that one of the women collaborating with me on this action had been harassed by a man that was close to the booth. She felt so empowered having the agency to be

3. Spencer Cox, "What Is Exposure? (A Beginner's Guide)," *Photography Life*, July 19, 2019, <https://photographylife.com/what-is-exposure>.

4. "Exposure," *exposure noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearners Dictionaries.com*, accessed June 16, 2020, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/exposure?q=exposure>.

doing what she wanted to do that she cut him off. But after this incident, I didn't want to take any other risks exposing more women into this experiment and took the decision to pause this activity. At the same time it was clear for me that I wanted to continue this research into acts of exposure, and the potential power in it for women to decide when and what they want to show of themselves.

"In photography, exposure is the amount of light which reaches your camera sensor or film. It is a crucial part of how bright or dark your pictures appear".<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, exposure is "the act of showing something that is usually hidden."<sup>4</sup> It is this latter understanding of exposure that this research is concerned with.

As my background is acting in films and all that that entails, I know *Exposure* from that point of view, but never really analyzed the impact that this was having on me. Although I always thought of myself as a shy person, I learnt how to deal with being surrounded by people and had to interact with them in a professional context from the age of fifteen. Sometimes thrilled by all the hustle, and some other times really freaked out by having to expose myself. Being this young, and my work coming from such an inexperienced yet intuitive place, I would question the value of my own voice or creativity. I experienced some kind of impostor's syndrome, because I wasn't professionally trained. This messed up my confidence as an artist, and it has taken me some time to realize that and heal.

In the last two years, I've been trying to shift my relationship with the camera from being a subject with no agency to take control over what is portrayed, that's why this research has predominantly involved photography and in the last year it has also involved video. As the artist Zoë Leonard says in conversation with art history professor Huey Copeland ...

... photography is such an immediate way of showing you my point of view: this is how I saw it, I took this picture and what I'm showing you is literally my perspective on something. For me, these questions—'Where do you look from? What's your process of looking?' — are inherently political. They are feminist questions because they are about power and agency, about where you stand in the world and what you can see from where you stand. I think this is a contemporary concern. Although I understand the relevance of the critique of the male gaze, I'm more interested in my own gaze, in considering the potential of the feminist gaze, the individual gaze, the queer gaze.<sup>5</sup>

I take this approach with *Exposure*. I am exploring my relationship to the gaze of the camera and the relationship of my gaze to the camera. How it looks at me. How I look at it. And further to that, I am expanding this enquiry – and thinking about the stage space and the gaze of the audience on me in that environment. Experimenting with the different ways that I can expose myself, different ways I can allow myself to be seen and heard. On a content level, the work has become quite specific in terms of what I am sharing through the acts of exposure. I am interested in sharing very vulnerable, lonely and solitary images of myself. Daily situations of what it entails to be a woman in society such as shaving in the bathroom alone,

6. Ava Tunnicliffe, "Audrey Wollen On The Power of Sadness," *Nylon* (Nylon, July 20, 2015), <https://www.nylon.com/articles/audrey-wollen-sad-girl-theory>.

7. Ava Tunnicliffe, "Audrey Wollen On The Power of Sadness," *Nylon* (Nylon, July 20, 2015), <https://www.nylon.com/articles/audrey-wollen-sad-girl-theory>.

8. Melissa Broder, "'I Took the Internet Addiction Quiz and I Won,'" in *So Sad Today* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2018).

9. Trisha Tongco, "Huffpost", *Huffpost.Com*, 2015, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/audrey-wollen-the-feminist-art-star-staging-a-revolution-on-instagram\\_n\\_5660ddd4e4b079b2818e0993?guccounter=1](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/audrey-wollen-the-feminist-art-star-staging-a-revolution-on-instagram_n_5660ddd4e4b079b2818e0993?guccounter=1).

excerpts from my diary, description of my bedroom and so on. I have interest in sharing the aspect of myself that sits on the border of vulnerable and banal. A lot of my thinking in this area has been informed by the sad girl theory of artist and writer Audrey Wollen.

Wollen promotes the idea of women allowing themselves to be vulnerable and use vulnerability as a strength. I am experimenting with this and exploring how this can be staged and shared with an audience. The work is developing into a live stage performance, but the use of Instagram as a platform has been playing a big role in my research. Analysis of social media culture, and Instagram in particular, has also been a central concern of Wollen. Wollen's theory posits that "female sadness and self-loathing is not a singular experience to be ashamed of, but actually a form of empowerment that can ultimately unite women."<sup>6</sup> This is something I aim for in the work. I want to create work that positions my sadness and vulnerability as relatable to the audience and holds a space for this unity that Wollen speaks of. As Wollen puts it ...

... Instagram gave a lot of young girls a way to control how they represented themselves, to play with their own performance, to construct an identity, alternate identities, and then tear down everything they had just built with a click. I like the little territories of female image-making that popped up. Sometimes they honestly feel like actual neighborhoods or campgrounds, a corner of digital space that girls

managed to claim as their own. Plus, I kinda like that Instagram has boundaries that we can push up against. It's not a utopia—it has obvious censorship problems, it has corporate bias, it profits off of people's personal work and information. We can critique those issues from within the medium itself, and that's exciting for me.<sup>7</sup>

The internet is a limitless space that can be extremely overwhelming exactly for that reason, but at the same time can act like a shield for many people that are more comfortable in a virtual space. Melissa Broder puts it perfectly in her book *So Sad Today*:

The internet has given me the dopamine, attention, amplification, connection and escape I seek. It has also distracted me, disappointed me, paralysed me, and catalysed a false sense of self. The internet has enhanced my taste for isolation.<sup>8</sup>

There is a lot to be learnt from these image-making communities. And Instagram has been providing my research with a space for experimenting with different modes of image-making – as well as a specific aesthetic.

Central to this aesthetic is the acceptance that there is no identity online that can be interpreted as authentic, this places everything shared online in a state of performativity. As Wollen writes: "Everyone that exists online is part of a performance or is being performative. I don't think [a strict version of] authenticity

10. Hannah Williams, "The Reign Of The Internet Sad Girl Is Over- And That's A Good Thing," Medium (The Establishment, August 24, 2017), <https://medium.com/the-establishment/the-reign-of-the-internet-sad-girl-is-over-and-thats-a-good-thing-eb6316f590d9>.

exists—we are mediated by technology and language.<sup>9</sup> This glaze of inauthenticity, where everything is assumed to never be quite what it seems, opens up different modes of sharing sadness, vulnerability and solitude, which have been very influential to my work. Another example of an online platform I have been experimenting with is Cam4, which is usually used for cyber sex. For this work I take it out of that context to explore reactions with a virtual audience. I have then been transferring these spaces of experimentation in different ways into live performance.

While the ideas of Wollen and Broder have been influential in my work, it is important to note that the Sad Girl movement doesn't sit entirely easily with my work. Author Hannah Williams insightfully questions the validity of the Sad Girl Theory saying that ...

... the movement fetishizes bad relationships, in there being something glamorous or romantic about being treated shittily by men, and to keep wanting them all the same. Of course, this is reality: People can and will lust after those who have treated them badly. There is a certain luxury in longing for something you cannot fully have. But it's that this, again, is championed as something that is a core tenet of being a girl, that womanhood is defined by sitting and waiting and yearning. That this is normally expressed as waiting for guys to text you back, or give you the time of day at all, not only seems to

reinforce sexist ways of thinking about how men and women should communicate, but also emphasizes the heteronormativity behind the movement. Just as Lana Del Rey's songs and videos pine over daddy figures and emotionally-unavailable bad-boys, the Sad Girl movement seems to define the female experience as something that hinges on male interaction, a subtle exclusion of girls who don't date men.<sup>10</sup>

As an artist that identifies as queer woman, I relate to Williams. I find power and potential for solidarity in sharing negative effects, like sadness, depression, anxiety, and loneliness, without pairing that with a narrative that I long for a guy to hold my hand. This sadness is many things, but central to it as a unifier is a longing to feel comforted in a world that is made mostly for men, and where women are in a lower level of importance. Consequently, it is of the utmost importance that the work doesn't uncritically repeat those patriarchal tropes.

It is a very personal work, with a very personal urgency. Directly put, I'm interested in modes of representation that allow me to share aspects of myself that can enable me to feel less alone. And hold a space for others to feel less alone too. The world I am building should be a space for a fictional me that is still very much me. A space to be with others - both present and virtual audience - in which filtered images of an exposed me that I control provide a ground for us to be together and feel connected. It will be me, it's just I won't settle on one single version of myself.

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# BIOGRAPHY

Brett Smith lives and works in Reykjavík. He is an artist, composer, sound designer and performer currently exploring the threshold into the unknown. His work entangles music composition, live performance, mixed-media installation and improvisation as a way to engage with the unknowable and see, hear and feel it in a new way.

Originally trained as a jazz saxophonist in Australia, Brett gained experience performing in a variety of ensembles before a period of detachment and discovery completely changed his way of creating. Brett is actively engaged with interdisciplinary practices and unravelling the audience-performer relationship in music performance practice. A frequent collaborator with a wide range of musicians, theatre-makers, choreographers and visual artists, Brett continues to act as a creative co-conspirator while cultivating new solo works.

# rites of presence. MUSIC REHEARSAL AS PERFORMANCE

WHEN WE LISTEN TO MUSIC, WE MUST REFUSE THE IDEA THAT MUSIC HAPPENS ONLY WHEN THE MUSICIAN ENTERS AND PICKS UP AN INSTRUMENT; MUSIC IS ALSO THE ANTICIPATION OF THE PERFORMANCE AND THE NOISES OF APPRECIATION IT GENERATES AND THE SPEAKING THAT HAPPENS THROUGH AND AROUND IT, MAKING IT AND LOVING IT, BEING IN IT WHILE LISTENING. — JACK HALBERSTAM

For Wency D'Souza and Dr Robert Faulkner, without whom, I wouldn't have had the courage to be and become myself.

# BRETT SMITH

On the morning that my mentor, hero and dear friend Wency D'Souza died, Iceland began its first day of strict social isolation laws in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a strange and fortuitous event, I'd woken up from a dream about a visit to his childhood home in India and moved to the couch, mindlessly flicking through old photos at 3 am. It was unusual. At that stage, I was unaware of Wency's death and am rarely able to recount dreams. When I do, it's usually a result of an evening dancing toe to mouth with a bottle of red wine.

The last time I spoke with him was months earlier on a spontaneous adventure with my girlfriend, enjoying the rare but generous Icelandic sun. Lost and trying desperately to find a farmer's market that we later discovered is more or less unreachable without a car, it was evening in Australia and Wency's 80th birthday. He had resigned to the couch to continue drinking brandy, and we traded thoughts about Narendra Modi, cricket, Portuguese fish, Tony Bennett and the cars people drive in Iceland. "Fjords", of course.

Wency was an incredible human. He was first and foremost a man of rhythm, a drummer born in the tropical climate of Goa and practised in the hallway of an intensely overcrowded apartment complex in Mumbai. He had enjoyed great success in life, writing music for Bollywood films and touring the

globe performing with some of the world's most renowned musicians. He had also endured great hardship, moving to Australia to focus on family and finding himself homeless, broke and eventually with constant back pain that made it increasingly difficult for him to do what he loved most - playing drums.

Eventually, he managed to "fight his way through the qualms and traumas of life"<sup>2</sup> and found a rhythm in his life that gave him time and space to focus on what he loved, and there was no time for anything with which he wasn't ardently consumed. He had time for music-making, cooking, cricket, awful (I mean truly awful) Bollywood soap operas, friends, puns and brandy. Time was central to everything that Wency dedicated himself to. The importance of phrasing in music, when to add spices to curry and importantly, the timing of a joke, no matter the quality. Wency's passion and awareness of time was infectious. It permeated every aspect of the world around him, that coloured and cultivated a community of musicians, dancers and creative folk and became a lens that continues to infuse the world around me.

In the time since his death, I have had an abundance of time. The first time in a long time. Enforced time. It has been a once in a century kind of time. Time to grieve. Time to think. Time to observe and time to cook. This pandemic has forced a literal halt to life as we've

1. Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, and Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons," in *The Undercommons Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013), 2-13, 9.

2. *Sinatra at the Sands with Count Basie and the Orchestra* (Sands Hotel and Casino, Las Vegas, April 1966).

3. Olga Tokarczuk, "A New World Through My Window," ed. Chris Adrian and Rebecca Mead, *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2020, [www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-new-world-through-my-window](http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-new-world-through-my-window).

4. Meredith Monk and Bonnie Murrain, *Conversations with Meredith Monk* (New York, NY: PAJ Publ., 2014), XI.

known it. In Iceland, there has been a ban on gatherings, schools and universities closed, jobs lost, people learning to work from home, the sick and potentially sick are in quarantine, and many more have to isolate physically. Personally, I lost my job, felt abandoned by the University that I ventured across the world to attend, indefinitely postponed the project that I had invested the last year developing and have no way physically or financially of returning home to Australia.

It has been a lonely and distressing time. And my struggles are by no means comparable to those of the resilient people working tirelessly in medical fields risking their lives, to those who have lost loved ones, others who have lost work and those who are without help or support in any way or form. The coronavirus has spread fear and helplessness, and I have considered myself fortunate to be where I am – far from the real depth of pain and suffering that it's caused. This time, this pandemic, has been a stark reminder that ...

... we are delicate creatures, composed of the most fragile material. That we die—that we are mortal. That we are not separated from the rest of the world by our "humanity," by any exceptionality, but that the world is instead a kind of great network in which we are enmeshed, connected with other beings by invisible threads of dependence and influence.<sup>3</sup>

The world is in a place of undetermined time, and we are venturing into uncharted territory, whether we like it or not.

It is impossible to comprehend

the magnitude of what is happening at the moment, and I have been searching for how to proceed. How will this interruption shape the future? What does this virus mean for the human race? What will life look like once this has passed? When will this pass?! I am, we are, in a time of an unmitigated and unadulterated unknown.

Before this disruption in time, I had become occupied with the intersection between music and the unknown. What we don't have the capacity to fully understand as humans – death, love, the experience of ageing, climate change – a deadly virus? How do you create an experience for people that allows them to engage with the unknown and see, hear and feel it in a new way? How do you open up the possibilities of perception, so that when you go back into your life you might be more open to the moments of life, and see things you haven't been aware of before?<sup>4</sup>

Like falling on black ice for the first time, sliding in slow motion towards the pavement – here I am suspended. Ungracefully flailing my arms grasping for support and desperately hoping that the recovery won't be too difficult. Existing inside a threshold, discovering a different rhythm and a new experience of time.

For the philosopher Henri Bergson, the scientific notion of time, or "clock time", didn't address what he understood to be the inner or lived experience of time. He believed that thought and language weren't capable of describing the experience because it's an accumulation of sensations, emotions, and perceptions that are in a constant state of change. In his early work, *Time and Free Will*, Bergson sought to articulate the lived experience of time as a concrete, material, and actualised phenomenon that he called 'pure duration'. He said: "Pure duration is the form taken by the succession of our

5. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. Frank Lubecki Pogson (London, UK: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1957), 100.

6. Adrian Heathfield, "Durational Aesthetics," *Adrian Heathfield*, 2012, <https://www.adrianheathfield.net/project/durational-aesthetics>, 140.

7. Damon Linker, "When Time Stops," *The Week* – All you need to know about everything that matters (The Week, April 17, 2020), <https://theweek.com/articles/909137/when-time-stops>.

8. Damon Linker, "When Time Stops,"

9. Ruth Little, "Thresholding," *Animated: Current Issues and Practice in Participatory Dance*, 2019, file:///Users/brettsmith/Downloads/Ruth%20Little%20(1).pdf, 40.

10. Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham, UK: Duke University Press, 2018), xii.

11. Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World* (London, UK: Routledge, 2008), 50.

12. Cassie Tongue, "Livestreamed Play Readings Instead of Theatre? It Just Reminds Me of What We've Lost," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, May 29, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/may/30/livestreamed-play-readings-instead-of-theatre-it-just-reminds-me-of-what-weve-lost>.

13. Nicholas Berger, "The Forgotten Art of Assembly," *Medium* (Medium, April 4, 2020), <https://medium.com/@nicholasberger/the-forgotten-art-of-assembly-a94e164edf6f>.

inner states of consciousness when our self lets itself *live*, when it abstains from establishing a separation between the present state and anterior states."<sup>5</sup> Meaning for us, as human beings living our lives in time, the experience of the present is continually evolving. With "no sensation ever being the same as a previous sensation; duration is a continuous movement of differentiation".<sup>6</sup>

Maybe this experience of stillness or 'lack of' differentiation is why this time feels so significant and challenging? Uncoupled from the future and an unforgiving landscape of productivity, we're stranded in the present and unable to ignore the feeling of futurelessness and ourselves. In writing about the extensive shutdowns during the pandemic, U.S political science reporter Damon Linker suggested that "our sense of ourselves is partly who we're trying to become".<sup>7</sup> As futural creatures, we are always looking forward, trying to find meaning through our accumulative experience", which dances intimately with Bergson's theory of pure duration. Linker proposes that ...

... our sense of ourselves in the present is always in part a function of our remembrance and constant reinterpretation of our pasts along with our projection of future possibilities. *We live* for the person we hope to become. *We look forward to who we will be a month or a year or a decade or more from now* – and we commemorate the transitions from present to future with rites of passage celebrated in public with loved ones and friends.<sup>8</sup>

It's in these transitions or inside

this transitive stillness that I want to explore. The rites and commemorations that create community and connection in ways that thought and language aren't able to express. Experiences where familiar cultural hierarchies and barriers to inclusion don't apply and incorporative gestures that move beyond what Dramaturg Ruth Little views as "an increasingly distributed, screen-based, static and synthetic experience of the world"<sup>9</sup> to create what Fred Moten calls "differentiated presence".<sup>10</sup> Or, if we are to look through Anne Bogart's lens: "We are meant to be in the room together, undergoing ideas, undergoing other people, undergoing experience, undergoing metaphor, undergoing history, and undergoing life".<sup>11</sup> Creating not rites of passage but perhaps rites of presence? So what happens when you're unable to undergo other people, undergo living because it's unsafe to undergo each other together? What kinds of community and presence can materialise at a distance?

In the immediacy of physical distancing, there was a real sense of urgency to address this question. Notably, and somewhat unsurprisingly, from performing artists. As an overwhelming amount of hurriedly produced content cascaded onto computer screens, it became increasingly clear that the simulation of live performance would not fill the void of 'liveness' that exists when attending something in person. The fragility of the air that exists between the performer and the "irresistible, irreplaceable community that springs up every night"<sup>12</sup> is central to the allure of a *live* performance. Online re-creations satisfy a momentary gap but ultimately "become a reminder of the irreplaceability of the very art form they are so desperately trying to recreate".<sup>13</sup> The act of assembling for a performance is a manifestation of the invisible, indispensable need to be present with each other.

14. Ruth Little, "Thresholding," 40.

15. Christine Kearney, "Italians Sing Patriotic Songs from Their Balconies during Coronavirus Lockdown," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, March 14, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/14/italians-sing-patriotic-songs-from-their-balconies-during-coronavirus-lockdown>.

16. Vanessa Thorpe, "Balcony Singing in Solidarity Spreads across Italy during Lockdown," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, March 14, 2020), [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/14/solidarity-balcony-singing-spreads-across-italy-during-lockdown](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/14/solidarity-balcony-singing-spreads-across-italy-during-lockdown).

17. Vanessa Thorpe, "Balcony Singing in Solidarity Spreads across Italy during Lockdown,".

18. David Byrne, *How Music Works* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2017), 9.

This community, this sense of togetherness requires presence and presence is extremely difficult to cultivate when the only real requirements are a computer and a functioning internet connection. "When performance makers ask an audience to attend, they don't only mean to turn up. They mean a-tendre – stretch towards, be present with all our senses, pay somatic attention".<sup>14</sup> Our devices are incredible inventions that enable us to see, hear and network from all over the world, but they cannot replace the transcendent act of experiencing together.

We need *liveness*. We need to feel the space around us. We need to be connected with and to other people to become present. To become. This need became of its own volition as impromptu concerts and happenings appeared like melodious spot fires during some of the most challenging moments of the pandemic. In Italy, musicians, amateurs and professionals alike, began playing and singing from their balconies across the country, "harmonies echoing down narrow streets as residents ... joined together in song".<sup>15</sup> From the "southern cities of Salerno and Naples, and the Sicilian capital Palermo to Turin in the north, residents of apartment buildings and tower blocks, continued to sing or play instruments, or to offer DJ sets, from their balconies in a trend that spread from Italy across Europe".<sup>16</sup> In Vanessa Thorpe's *Guardian* article about the performances, she interviewed locals about an invitation to people who can play an instrument to go to their window and perform:

In the flat in front of me, a couple with a small child appeared, the mother carried him in her arms while the father played a children's musical toy. They waved over at us and we

waved back. We've never met ... A little later I heard the sound of people using pans to beat out a rhythm. It turned out to be two elderly women, both small and physically frail, who were testifying in this way to their love of life and of the city. I took two pans myself and followed their beat. Then we said goodbye to each other and closed our windows as it was getting too cold to carry on.<sup>17</sup>

Reverberating between walls, winding through the streets, maintaining the necessary physical distance needed to keep each other safe while fostering social harmony. People being and becoming together, connecting through sounds, expressions from and to one another's bodies.

Sound and music have a unique way of creating togetherness. Sound as a tangible element doesn't exist; it's an abstract concept. What we hear is one matter colliding with another, generating movements through the air that are picked up by our ears. It's felt by our bodies, fills space, moves with and through time, becomes a language accessible to all people and can "profoundly alter how we view the world and our place in it".<sup>18</sup> What's more, if we look through Bergson's magnifying glass, when we listen to music, we're not listening just to a succession of detached, independent sounds. For us, each sound infuses into the next; melting into each other. They become so enveloped in one another that we form the complete song. During this pandemic, music has become a way of being together at a distance; travelling between people, providing literal bridges of sound.

In her poem "Somewhere there's a nothing I'm a Part of",

19. Elaine Kahn, *Romance or the End: Poems* (New York, NY: Soft Skull, 2020), 114.

20. Lutz Jäncke, "Music, Memory and Emotion," *Journal of Biology* 7, no. 6 (August 8, 2008): 21-21.5, <https://doi.org/10.1186/jbio182>, 21.1.

21. Margulis, Elizabeth Hellmuth. "Music Is in Your Brain and Your Body and Your Life - Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis: Aeon Essays." Aeon. Aeon, November 2, 2017. <https://aeon.co/essays/music-is-in-your-brain-and-your-body-and-your-life>.

22. Pauline Oliveros, *Software for People* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1984).

23. David Byrne, *How Music Works* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2017), 9.

24. Non Zero One, "DAWNS," DAWNS (Non Zero One and James Bulley, 2020), <https://dawns.live/>.

25. Pauline Oliveros, *Software for People*, 180.

Poet Elaine Kahn considers music as a way to foster connection and intimacy through its ability to tap into known and unknown memory:

*if I listen carefully  
to certain music  
I can just remember what  
it's like to live  
inside the perfect  
closeness  
of another's breath*<sup>19</sup>

While Kahn's interpretation is far more romantic, she is alluding to aspect of music that neuroscientists have claimed regarding music and connection. The direct act of hearing music "activates the entire limbic system, which is involved in the processing of emotions and in controlling memory".<sup>20</sup> However, music goes beyond a merely neurological encounter. It is a "deeply culturally embedded, multimodal experience shaped by nearly all other aspects of human experience: how we speak and move, what we see and know".<sup>21</sup> It affects our bodies, creates sensations, evokes emotion and connects through sound. Music is what composer Pauline Oliveros called "software for people"<sup>22</sup>; it pushes beyond the screen and points to the world around us and the world inside us. It can "get us through difficult patches in our lives by changing not only how we feel about ourselves, but also how we feel about everything outside ourselves".<sup>23</sup> Creating connection, creating community, creating commons, creating commonality.

UK Composer, James Bulley and Non-Zero One's work DAWN, is a sound experience that was created as a response to a UK National Trust commission to make a live artwork marking their 125th anniversary. The work was adapted for accessibility and safety during the pandemic and is a celebration of togetherness, difference, nature and light.<sup>24</sup> Logging

on to the website at 2:43 am (3:43 am UK time), I sit alone with the unfamiliar hue of the Reykjavik morning bleeding through my window and a provocation to consider my relationship to time, nature and my community. The scratch of the bow against a violin string from North Yorkshire wakes up the back of my neck, and the soothing voice of Cat Harrison speaks to me from Caithness, Scotland as I notice the chirping of the obnoxiously loud birds outside. Slowly, as the sun rises, I become increasingly aware of the vast network in which we are enmeshed, connected with other beings by invisible threads of dependence and influence. Across localities, across time, all of the participants are asked to take a photo at 4:49 am, capturing a singular moment from their perspective, a collation of differentiated experience. Experiencing liveness, experiencing togetherness, experiencing presence, creating ritual and becoming community from isolated space.

To engage in transitive stillness together, to create rituals and rites of presence, whether isolated or not, we need the agency to partake, participate and assemble. No matter how diverse our lifestyles, histories or tastes in music, commonality might be found in the way that we engage in music together. For Oliveros, "It is no longer sufficient to solely dwell on the music; the perceiver must be included"<sup>25</sup>, a sentiment that resonates deeply in light of social distancing and isolation. What kinds of presence, connection and encounter become possible when we incorporate the audience into the music and the making of music? What might happen if we try to think of rehearsal as the heart of the practice, or as the performance itself?

A musical rehearsal is a time of preparation used to craft a composition or develop a performance for public presentation. It is a dynamic space that welcomes mistakes in

search of the magnificent. The etymology of the word 'rehearse' comes from the 13th Century French "rehearsier", meaning "to go over again, repeat".<sup>26</sup> The act of rehearsing then is one of repetition. Deconstructing, analysing and "exploring the numerous dimensions that are packed into what appears to be a single possibility".<sup>27</sup> In her book "On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind", music researcher Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis identifies that "repetition is not an arbitrary characteristic that has arisen in a particular style of music; rather, it is a fundamental characteristic of what we experience as music ... Not only is music found in all known human cultures, but also musical *repetition*".<sup>28</sup> For many artists, the conscious inclusion of repetition within their work was the most authentic expression of human experience. Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson, who is renowned for his repetitive musical performances, discusses this in an interview with himself plainly observing that: "IT'S ABOUT ME! All religions are kind of based on the repetitive. I think it just always has a calming effect on the human psyche. It's all this repetition that soothes us".<sup>29</sup> Repetition is what biologist W. Tecumseh Fitch called one of music's basic "design features"<sup>30</sup> and is an "important component of music's shareability, of its social and biological role in the creation of interpersonal cohesion".<sup>31</sup> As Margulis puts it, "repeatability is how songs become the property of a group or a community instead of an individual, how they come to belong to a tradition rather than a moment".<sup>32</sup>

The act of rehearsing is itself an inclusive gesture that operates through shared dedication, becoming ritual. It is founded on the repetitive practice and practising of music and is an invitation to participate; to partake, to share and share in.<sup>33</sup> It insists on open collaboration and requires communication and collective action.

Sociologist and music enthusiast Richard Sennett's observations of rehearsals highlights this idea, noting that "unless the musicians are playing in unison, they have to sort out differences and inequalities, loud against soft parts, or soloists and accompanists working together".<sup>34</sup> The playing of music with others is a living, expanding encounter with empathy and respect. Conscious intentionality and presence, crafting music and creating social value; the repetitive rituals of music can "draw out the signature of the individual as well as his or her connection to the surrounding community".<sup>35</sup>

In considering the presentation of music, Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino identifies two styles of music performance<sup>36</sup>: the presentational, such as symphony orchestra or popular music performances, and the participatory, such as folk jam sessions or Icelandic *tvísöngur*. Rehearsals exist as part of the development of the two constructs, in that the music requires preparation in order for the performance to exist. However, the invitation to participate only occurs in one, often with the fundamental requirement of knowing the music. If the rehearsal becomes a participatory gesture without a dedicated presentation, with an 'audience', it has the potential to create a third space, an in-between. An expanding space of potentiality suspended between composition and performance. A demonstration of Bergson's theory of "pure duration"<sup>37</sup>, what Ruth Little calls an "act of thresholding"<sup>38</sup>, an expression of the space that I experienced in the moment between slipping and 'landing' on black ice and the collective sense of futurelessness experienced throughout the pandemic. It lives in a heightened space of the present and becomes a communal somatic experience. The inclusion of an audience has the potential to transform both the private and public

experience of a work, creating a unique space, living in and feeling the music together. The rehearsal can liberate music away from the goal-directed purpose of a performance, yet still include its observers in a way that doesn't force participation but gives agency to it.

The significance and value of rehearsing coalesced for me in my migration to Iceland. I learnt very quickly that playing music with others was something I needed for happiness as much as stability. Removed from friends, family, and a known musical network, migration is a straightforward method in identifying nostalgia. Iceland is renowned for so much of its musical enthusiasm and output that finding people to play music with didn't seem unachievable. The choral community in Iceland is so prevalent that the Bradt Travel Guide suggests that "Icelanders will form a choir at the drop of a hat".<sup>39</sup> This seemed like the right place to start. Grieving the loss of my 'comfort zone', I began searching for choirs. Feeling a distinct kind of nervousness, one reserved for trips to the dentist or first dates, I found an audition and attacked a 'necessary' shot of whisky before my girlfriend forced me out the door. One successful and sympathetic audition later, I would become a member of the choir *Ægisif*.

After a few rehearsals and weeks in Iceland, it came of no surprise to learn that the Icelandic word for choir is 'Kór'. Sounding 'core', the action of singing together is in the purest sense the meaning of the word: in most part or heart.<sup>40</sup> Singing connects you directly to your body and your identity, or as musicologist Dr Robert Faulkner wrote: "a vocal construction of self, a song configuring personal and social life through which 'we celebrate ourselves and sing ourselves'".<sup>41</sup> While listening to a choir can be a beautiful aesthetic experience, singing in a choir is like an out of control somatic fireworks

display. The more rehearsals I attended, the more I *looked forward* to the experience, *lived in* the repetition of the music, *lived with* the people around me and *lived through* my voice. The rehearsal is a living 360-degree immersion, the participant becomes both performer and audience, every detail encountered as individual and whole. The joy of rehearsing is one that I have had since I was ten years old, a privilege afforded to me through fortunate timing, the hard work of my parents, and an abundance of scattered passion. The rehearsal time is where I met, and continue to meet, many of my closest friends, including Wency, and the rehearsal was hardest space to leave when voyaging to Iceland. Across time zones, across hemispheres, rehearsals have connected me to context, culture, community and core.

The rehearsal is a space of differentiating time. It is an open space that gives time to discovery, creation, learning, appreciation and unabashed imperfection. It's a space where time slows, friendship develops, community is actualised, and life is shared. A time for embodied encounter and a space that cultivates language, community and understanding. It is a formative time where artists process and the exquisite space where art becomes. It is space in motion and time in momentum that celebrates the miracle of our simultaneous existence and restores our capacity for collective joy. If we have to "abstain from taking hold of the hands of strangers and dancing in the streets",<sup>42</sup> then let's take hold of music, open our windows, stand on our balconies and sing together, rehearse together, undergo together, be and become together. Let's assemble and dissolve into music together to create presence – an antidote to isolation and a remedy that empowers us to pay closer attention to ourselves and each other.

26. Douglas Harper, ed., "Rehearse (v.)," Online Etymology Dictionary, 2000, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/rehearse>.

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39. Andrew Evans, *Iceland: the Bradt Travel Guide* (Chalfont St. Peter, Bucks: Bradt Travel Guides Ltd, 2017), 41.

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# BIOGRAPHY

Lovísa Ósk Gunnarsdóttir has danced her whole life. She started doing dance performances in her living room at the age of four and was a full time member of Iceland Dance Company for sixteen years. She has toured all over the world with the company, as well as independent dance groups, constantly performing and creating and has worked with a wide range of wonderful artists.

She is the co-founder of the dance company Samsudan&Co with friend and artist Halla Ólafsdóttir and has worked with the Shalala dance company (Erna Ómarsdóttir and Valdimar Jóhannsson) numerous times. Lovisa is also one of the founders of Reykjavík Dance Productions, a group of artists that created the piece Journey at Harpa, Concert Hall in Reykjavik, in a collaboration with the band GusGus and later travelled with the piece to Denmark, Russia and Siberia. She now works as an independent choreographer and a stage artist and has created works for Iceland Dance Company, Reykjavík Dance Festival and Reykjavík City Theatre.

Lovísa is fascinated by the body and is interested in finding ways to connect to its deeply embedded knowledge, history and experience. As a woman in her forties, Lovisa has recently become fascinated by menopause and middle-aged women and the excruciating silence that seems to engulf that topic and this group. In her project she brings these two things to the stage in an effort to give voice to different middle aged women by inviting them to share their stories using the body as their medium.

# WHEN THE BLEEDING STOPS

## LOVÍSA ÓSK GUNNARSDÓTTIR

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### *I AM LATE.*

Now I am forty-one years old and I am at crossroads. The reason for me being late could be that I am pregnant, but it also could mean that my menopause has kicked in early.

A couple of years ago, my partner and I were thinking about having another child. I went to see my gynecologist to see if everything was ok. My period had been a bit off and my doctor started to ask me when the women in my family hit menopause. I realised I had no idea. When I asked him if he thought I had started menopause his response was very vague, like he was avoiding the question. He used the words "lets not talk about it", even though he wanted to check the status of my hormones, "just to be sure".

Coming home I was a bit shaken and shocked to realise that I knew hardly anything about menopause. I started to think about all the women around me that had probably reached menopause. I had never had a real conversation about it with anyone, not even my mother or my sister. There wasn't any kind of dialogue going on in society that I knew of and now even my doctor didn't seem to want to discuss it.

I went online to try and find some information, but what I found left me feeling panic and shame. Menopause seemed to be some

kind of a shameful disease and the symptoms nightmarish if you were unlucky. Most of the remedies included the intake of hormones, which according to some research increase the risk of cancer and heart disease.<sup>1</sup> The more I read the more I got the feeling that being menopausal meant that your purpose in life was done. And the only thing left to do was to crawl into a corner, curl up, fade and die.

I procrastinated for as long as I could before calling my doctor to get the results. If I didn't know, I didn't have to tell anyone. I felt like my identity was on the line. My friends, family and the society would think less of me - would see me differently.

Time passed and when my menstruation was back to normal I decided that I was going to prepare myself. Prepare myself for becoming middle aged. I felt the urge to address this excruciating silence somehow and understand where this shame I felt was coming from and how come Western society in particular is not having a conversation about something that happens to half of the population. We have all heard of the mid-life crisis that men go through, but how come there is this lack of knowledge about menopause?

*WHEN THE DANCING STOPS*  
I have danced my whole life. At the

age of three months I had a chronic ear infection and the only thing that would soothe my crying, according to my parents, was if they would take me in their arms and dance with me to the beat of the music, preferably music by Boney M.

At the age of four I started to do dance performances in my living room. I would gather my family around, and my favourite tune to dance to was "Words don't come easy".

At the age of six, after my family got a bit tired of these repeated dance performances, my parents offered me to go to dance school.

To make a long story short, for the next eighteen years or so, I showed up to probably 99 % of all my dance classes.

At the age of twenty-three I became a professional dancer.

At the age of thirty-nine, after a very active and successful career as a dance artist, I suffered from a serious injury and for the first time

in my whole life I had to stop dancing for a long period of time.

This was a total shock to the system. At the time I already knew how much of my emotional and physical issues I process through my dancing, so it was not surprising when I started to feel all these physical symptoms connected to stress and anxiety. I was stuck in an injured and physically limited body, it felt unfamiliar, like I had been disconnected.

One day I went out for a walk and when I came home I felt restless in my whole being and this strong urge to dance. A song came to my mind and without thinking I pulled down the curtains in my living room, moved some chairs, played the song and with great respect for the state of my body I danced. Afterwards I felt a bit better so I started doing this on daily basis. I went for a walk, scanned how I was feeling and thought of a song that somehow resonated with my state of mind and body. And then I

danced to it, alone in my living room. I slowly started feeling better and more connected and after a while this became my practice and therapy at the same time.

Not only did this practice of mine turn out to be very healing, it also gave me a chance to connect to the dance history embedded in my body. All these old steps and dance styles started to emerge in my dancing very softly and effortlessly. Skipping the conscious, critical thinking part of my brain, I was able to connect to the history of my body through this dancing practice. This was a very empowering experience. In my life I have often experienced situations where I know something with my whole body, but when I start to articulate it I often fall short. And I guess ever since "Words Don't Come Easy" was my favourite tune, I have spent a lot of time being frustrated by the hierarchy between dance and the spoken word, trying to find ways to tap more into the wisdom of my body.

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### PREPARING FOR MENOPAUSE /MY RESEARCH

After I started to read more about menopause and ageing I soon found out that treating menopause like a shameful disease is a very "Western" way of dealing with it. In other cultures, women gain respect and freedom and even dress up for the part. One study reported that Mayan women looked forward to menopause despite the uncomfortable symptoms.<sup>2</sup> I also learned that women experience the symptoms very differently. When I started to read more about them, I realised that some of the symptoms mirrored what I had experienced after my injury. The consequences of my injury had caused me sleep problems, weight gain, hair loss, hot flashes and mood swings. And on a professional level I was considered old, an ageing, injured dancer. At that time my practice was born out of need and through its healing powers and the empowering connection to my body's history, an idea was born. I wanted to invite middle-aged women to try my practice, film themselves while doing it and share their daily solo with me if they felt like it. Share their stories through their body, without the interference of the critical thinking part of the brain. I was curious to see what would emerge if these women were given the stage; empowered by softness, with great respect for their bodies, on their own terms and in full control of the gaze of the camera. I wanted to understand better what it was like for them to live in a middle-aged body.

I started to reach out to women, first it was few women in my closest circle. We had long conversations and they shared their experience on menopause and ageing very generously. I realised that they weren't reluctant at all to talk about this, I just had never asked before. They started to send me solos, performed in their living rooms. These

very different, dancing middle-aged bodies, packed with knowledge and experience, bodies that were changing and transforming into the next era of their lives, put me to tears on multiple occasions. The solos were very different from day to day, and different between women, but in all of them I could see a lot of strength. And at the same time, a sense of loneliness and a subtle need to be seen and heard. One of the dancers invited me to join an Icelandic menopause group on Facebook. All of a sudden I was introduced to a big network of middle-aged women. They were having intriguing conversations and sharing advice and experiences online, trying to navigate and help each other through this period that modern Western medicine still has not figured out.<sup>3</sup> I decided to post an open invite to my project in the group and instantly I started to get positive answers. It wasn't long before my inbox was filled with videos of women doing dance solos in their living room.

*MATERIAL:  
AN AGEING BODY, MUSIC, CAMERA.*

*PREPARATION:*

1. Take a walk alone, preferable in nature and give yourself a chance to connect to your body.
2. After the walk, in your home/a safe space, scan how you are feeling and think of a song that resonates with your state of being.
3. Use the first song that comes to mind, set up the camera and start filming.

*TASK:*

1. Introduce yourself and tell us the time, date and your age. If something else is on your mind that you feel like sharing by using words, please do so.
2. Listen carefully to your body. How does it want to move today? Let your body lead and dance your personal solo of the day to your chosen song.

NOTE: REPEAT THE TASK ONCE A DAY/WEEK FOR AS LONG AS YOU LIKE.

EXTRA: SHARE YOUR SOLO WITH WHOM YOU LIKE.

4. Jane Ratcliffe, "Brokenness and Holiness Really Go Together": Darcey Steinke on Menopause," ed. Dana Snitzky, June 14, Longreads (Longreads Members), June 14, 2019. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://longreads.com/2019/06/14/darcey-steinke-on-menopause/>.

*MANY MIDDLE-AGED  
FEMALE BODIES*

This project has given me the opportunity to have a conversation with many Icelandic middle-aged women who have very generously shared their experiences and thoughts on living in a middle aged female body. A significant part of the project has become about placing these different women and their experiences alongside each other, in ways that highlight both what they have in common as well as their differences. The closing chapter of this text takes the shape of a fictional dialogue, heavily inspired by real conversations – which explores this meeting point through writing. The dialogue brings together voices of the different women I have been in conversation with and imagines how these different voices might talk together. I have also added Darcey Steinke to the conversation. Steinke is an author and an educator and became my thinking partner through her book *Flash Count Dairy*.

Me: When I thought I had entered my menopause I was so surprised to experience all this shame I felt. How is it for you to live in a middle-aged body?

K: I have been working every day to get rid of the shame and be less judgmental, mainly towards myself. I am trying to get rid of this burden of feeling guilty over everything. I have gained more confidence, I am more care-less and other people's opinion of me, does not influence me anymore. But it has taken time and effort.

DS: "I think that women are mostly valued for their sexuality and their motherhood abilities. Once you're outside of that, there's a lot of shame, because we're made to feel that our bodies are kind of useless.

That we're somehow damaged. A lot of shame comes from the idea that after the phases that the world values, we're just kicked to the sidelines."<sup>4</sup>

A: I feel great about getting older, it's a privilege in fact. Perhaps it is because my little brother only lived to be 23 years old. In my case ageing is accompanied by increased maturity, more freedom in all areas and despite the hot flashes, hormonal fluctuations and the frustration that come with those things, they are nothing compared to the insecurity and herd behaviour of the younger years. My motto is to try to enjoy life, not take it too seriously and dance through difficult times.

S: Menopause has been a tough time for me. The symptoms hit me hard, but I didn't realise I was in my menopause until much later. I have to admit that I broke down in tears when I finally got an explanation what was going on. But I also cried for not being prepared, for not knowing all of this was normal, maybe unusually strong symptoms but normal. In my case my brain shut down. I couldn't remember a thing, I couldn't think. For the first time, I understand why women were put in asylum in the old days and did not fight. I would have been glad to get the rest and not have to think about home, being a single mother of three children, alone with all the responsibility, with a brain that didn't function! It was quite an awful time, but shortly after I started taking hormones, everything became better. But my self-confidence has taken a big hit that I am still struggling with, a few years later. I started exercising again and have been enjoying myself.

5. Geraldine Bedell, "Sex and the over-60s," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media), January 12, 2012. Accessed May 28, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/jan/12/sex-over-60s-older-people>.

I find that although it takes a little longer to train the muscles and get in good shape, it is possible! I just need to go slow and be careful, because my body is getting older and I want to respect that. But I can run, climb, jump and yes, even dance, just like I always could.

P: My mantra has been: "I am not going to be a bitter old lady." I have never experienced these difficult physical symptoms that many women describe. For a while, I sweated considerably at night. But it comes in waves. I feel increased awareness that my happiness is my own responsibility. Somehow when I look back, those years have been a spiritual baptism. Today I am 54 years old. I feel like a phoenix rising from the ashes.

Me: This reminds me of a quote I read from the feminist and social-political activist Gloria Steinem: "What we lose in those menopausal years is everything we needed to support another person," she argues "What we keep is everything we need to support ourselves."<sup>5</sup> This makes a lot of sense to me.

On a personal note, during my fertility years my body and brain have been dedicated a big part of the time to the process of having children, supporting them and taking care of them 24/7. Their happiness has been my responsibility. This experience has taught me a lot. Now that my children are becoming more independent and the option of having another child is slowly fading out I guess my role is changing, the focus is shifting. It is a scary feeling, full of all sorts of emotions but at the same time I have more time and space to focus on my own

needs and reflect on how this experience has changed me.

Another feminist and professor, bell hooks, talks about how ageing allows women to move from object to subject.<sup>6</sup> The idea of being free of the sexual objectification, probably all women experience at some point in their life, sounds very refreshing.

R: What happened to me is that I felt I became invisible. Normally when I would enter a coffee shop or the classroom people would look up and notice me and then get on with whatever they were doing. When I was teaching I even sometimes experienced innocent flirting from time to time but all of a sudden this all stopped. I would enter the room and people would maybe look up but they didn't see me anymore. It was like I had become invisible, not of interest any more.

Me: One of the women participating in this project talked about how she has to speak louder now in her workplace in order to be heard. This invisibility seems to be a common feeling and that is heart breaking. Women experience it in their daily interactions, and as bell hooks says, "movies are still struggling with how to create images of smart, vibrant, powerful, and intelligent older females."<sup>7</sup> I like the visibility that the camera in the solo of the day gives me. I like the control I have over the gaze of it. Some days I like to imagining someone is there watching or will see this and sometimes I even flirt a bit with the camera, but other days I don't feel like being watched at all and then I know I always have the option not to share it with anyone.

It is just for me, it's a good feeling to have that power. How has it been for you to participate in this project, to dance a daily solo?

K: For me this has been like a dance therapy, it is equal to a good session at my psychologist. It is definitely something I am going to keep on doing.

Ó: Doing "today's solo" has been a very enjoyable experience. It is an invitation to let the body speak on its own terms, while connecting to music and emotions. While dancing I was reminded of all the skills and knowledge accumulated and residing in the body through my life, rising to the surface in moments like this, to be enjoyed and cherished.

So: I was so grateful to be included in this project during my Covid isolation and despite the loneliness I opened myself up like a Christmas package, all alone with my cat Porkell. I often dance alone at my house, tapping my toes and stretching them. Age seems relative when it comes to my dance needs. I intend to use the handrail in the old age home corridor for plie and grand batma. I am sure more people will join me. The retirement home would sure come to life if people were to break into dance, maybe the Swan Lake on the way to the dining room.

S: I was in a difficult place emotionally when I did the first recording and when I started to listen to the music and dance I just started to cry. But crying is as natural as laughter, so I just went ahead and sent the recording anyway. Since then I have done a few

more and it is easier for me each time. The thought of someone else watching this made it hard at the beginning. I suddenly became shy and insecure. But, I'm trying hard to overcome such thoughts and feelings and this dancing has helped a lot. I have never thought much about how I dance and of course I am a complete amateur, but because of this project, I have realised that I dance in sync with what is going on inside. When I am happy and not worried I choose fast and uplifting music that makes my butt shake, my heart starts to pump and the blood runs faster. It is such an affirmation that I am alive. And when the song is finished I just want to go on dancing "like the wind" like we say in Iceland. But I understand now that this also applies when I'm not feeling good, when life is more difficult and I am worried. Then I also like to listen to music and move, just maybe slower and heavier. This is a great way for me to let go of the emotions, cry a little, and maybe scream a little by singing loudly with the song. So however I am feeling this is a great outlet for me, the emotions I am feeling start to move and I become more aware and that makes it easier to deal with them.

Me: These changes in how we feel, make me think of a conversation I had with a woman the other day who is a shaman. She had such a nice way of explaining the mood swings during menopause. She compared it to superpowers. She said that during the hormone changes women often feel more and to be able to feel more is a super power. If you are in a bad marriage, for example, you will feel it more, you become more aware of

6. bell hooks and Emma Watson, "Emma Watson and Bell Hooks Talk Feminism, Confidence and the Importance of Reading," *PAPER*, June 15, 2020. Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://www.papermag.com/emma-watson-bell-hooks-conversation-1609893784.html?fbclid=IwAR1kN04zCApoPbMIvKBgDzOdw2Fp-NJrAGamzi5wCco0vI8UTHALt0io>.

7. bell hooks and Emma Watson, "Emma Watson and Bell Hooks Talk Feminism, Confidence and the Importance of Reading," *PAPER*, June 15, 2020. Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://www.papermag.com/emma-watson-bell-hooks-conversation-1609893784.html?fbclid=IwAR1kN04zCApoPbMIvKBgDzOdw2Fp-NJrAGamzi5wCco0vI8UTHALt0io>.

8. Hannah Devlin, "The Menopause: Why so Little Research on the Middle-Aged Ovary?" *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media), August 26, 2019. Accessed May 29, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/aug/26/the-menopause-why-so-little-research-on-the-middle-aged-ovary>.

9. Jane Ratcliffe, "'Brokenness and Holiness Really Go Together': Darcey Steinke on Menopause," ed. Dana Snitzky, *Longreads* (Longreads Members), June 14, 2019. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://longreads.com/2019/06/14/darcey-steinke-on-menopause/>.

it and that is a superpower. Have you experienced more mood swings or superpowers during this period?

P: I relate to this talk about superpowers. The good thing about this period is that it comes with some internal power for transformation. To make dreams come true. Courage and intolerance for any nonsense. I began to do more of the things that made me happy, but to be able to do so I had to confront difficult things in myself and go through a lot of pain. I cried myself through several periods, but it was necessary and very cleansing.

K: Sometimes I wake up full of sadness or anxiety. Sometimes I wake up and feel everyone is an idiot. Sometimes I wake up so lonely I don't know how to be. But when I remember that I am going through menopause, these feelings evaporate.

S: In my case my brain just stopped responding to me. I couldn't remember anything and I got so tired at least once a day that I had to quit whatever I was doing. I just had to go to bed right away. I could sleep up to 20 hours a day, some days, but still wasn't rested when I woke up. For a while I thought I had a brain tumour. I went to see my doctor many times, was given all kinds of antidepressants and went through various researches. It wasn't until I went to my gynecologist that I found out. After I described my symptoms she knew immediately what was going on, took a blood test and confirmed this in 15 minutes. There was nothing "wrong with me" really, my body was just changing and ceasing

to produce certain hormones.

Me: It is disturbing how often I have heard similar stories. It is 2020 and women are still being misdiagnosed and grounded information seems to be hard to get.<sup>8</sup>

DS: "Yeah. I have to say, I interviewed a group of about 100 very diverse women, not one of them told me that they knew very much about menopause other than seeing characters on TV having hot flashes as a joke. What I knew of puberty came from health class basically. There's no health class when you're 50. I have a good doctor whom I like, but she wouldn't even admit that I was going through menopause. She kept saying, "Oh, these symptoms must be something else." I'm very frustrated with this, because I feel like on the one hand, big pharma and the hormone companies are more than ready to rush in and say, "Here's what menopause is. Here's what you should do about it."

On the other hand, just a certain amount of information about the body, about what we're going through, understanding about the changes psychologically and whatnot would be helpful. That information is very hard to get, right? Not hysterical, just grounded information about what's happening to our bodies. I did a thorough search of the books out there and they aren't that great".<sup>9</sup>

S: Exactly. It is absolutely horrible that this is not common knowledge. For 10 years now my doctor has been talking about how I have to make sure to have a colonoscopy when I turn fifty. But never a single

10. Sabin Russell, "Big Study Finds No Rise in Death Risk among Women Who Took Hormone Therapy," *Fred Hutch*, September 12, 2017. Accessed May 15, 2020. <https://www.fredhutch.org/en/news/center-news/2017/09/death-risk-menopausal-hormone-replacement.html?fbclid=IwAR0hMDa36KB3Q1sRIAjiYvz3iL08BI2rJvUX-GN8t65zY3M9AAzTpK4Xfto>.

11. Jane Ratcliffe, "'Brokenness and Holiness Really Go Together': Darcey Steinke on Menopause," ed. Dana Snitzky, *Longreads* (Longreads Members), June 14, 2019. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://longreads.com/2019/06/14/darcey-steinke-on-menopause/>.

12. Darcey Steinke, "Night on Fire," in *FLASH COUNT DIARY: A New Story about the Menopause* (Edinburgh, Scotland: CANONGATE BOOKS LTD, 2019), 9-10.

13. Cecilia Dintino, "Menopause: A Passage in Search of a Story," *Psychology Today* (Sussex Publishers), April 5, 2018. Accessed April 24, 2020. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/midlife-matters/201804/menopause-passage-in-search-story?fbclid=WAR1du6tRY5g4yY81xY90WCZxY0nn5YkVes8TM-s9rpl1tmygd4ERHz0fePd8>.

word about menopause, how it can take over your body and brain. Of course, this is not the same for all women, but we all need to know this to be able to support women going through this. After I started to talk about my symptoms, I have heard so many stories from women who got these serious symptoms and their lives collapsed, their partners divorced them and they lost their jobs all due to the lack of understanding and knowledge about menopause.

Me: And even conclusive facts about the impact of hormone replacement therapy and whether or not it is good for you seem to be lacking.<sup>10</sup>

DS: "I do think hormones have been sold to us as a way to stay young and keep your vagina pliable. Stay conventionally appealing in a patriarchal world. It's disheartening."<sup>11</sup>

Me: To ignore menopause and pretend it is not happening?

DS: "Though no one wants to say it out loud, menopause is about loss; it's about departure — each flash reminds me of my corporality, my mortality. With every flash, my psyche is pushed to grasp what it does not want to let itself know: that it is not immortal. This is terrifying. It's also a rare opportunity, if faced directly, to come to terms with the limitations of the self."<sup>12</sup>

Me: I was reading this article by Cecilia Dintino (PsyD) where she talks about how we are lacking a story in order to define this period, universal for women, to give it meaning. She has created her own ritual every time she gets a heat flash, to give

it meaning and purpose.<sup>13</sup> When the time comes, I think my ritual through menopause is going to be this daily solo. And each time I dance I will hopefully understand and learn more about myself and my body and grow stronger. In a way I think that this search for a universal story for menopause is what this project is ultimately about. And to search for that universal story in such a way that it takes all of these different bodies, voices and experiences into consideration.

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# BIOGRAPHY

Michelle Saenz Burrola (Mexico-USA, 1992) is an artist who uses media such as video, photography, text, dance and drawing in installations, performances and editorial publications, exploring a common platform between visual and the performing arts. In her work, she deals with questions concerning the construction and representation of the female body and its relation to its context, where no place, circumstance, or situation is isolated from each other. Michelle has a BA in Visual Arts from ENPEG La Esmeralda in Mexico City with an academic exchange in L'École de Recherche Graphique of Brussels and an MFA in Performing Arts from the Iceland University of the Arts in Reykjavik. Since 2012, she started collaborating in different geographical points such as México, Colombia, Belgium, Iceland, United States and Austria participating in art exhibitions, artistic researches, documentary theater projects and educational mediation programs for contemporary art. In the last years she has been developing different cultural platforms in collaboration with cultural agents in Mexico City for example PLU Peatones Lectores Unidos, a nomadic reading circle as well as the collective of Maleza together with Santiago de Conde. Maleza is a union between exhibitions and the production of different cultural processes beyond the result as a mere object.

# APPEARING IN THE MOVEMENT OF WATER

## MICHELLE SAENZ BURROLA

In this performance you are surrounded by an apparently empty space. In the space, you realize there are three-dimensional bold color lines drawing a mountainous scape. The fluorescent lines are in fact electric wires which hold a small and autonomous movement. The wires are moving all in different directions until they start to stay still. After a while, I arrive almost in camouflage with the space. In silence, I start twisting the wire from one of its points. When I do that, the wire marches as ocean waves, going forward and forward. Then the line starts to go up on my body. I go in between the lines passing underneath and over them. We both start to create a dialogue in motion giving space to one another.

In the landscape, each line is a color that has its own place. There is a possibility that all colors come together; appearing with the quality of a kaleidoscopic multicolored pencil drawing taking over the space. Together, bodies and lines are always in motion.

Mobile platforms arrive to the space, each of them with their own individual shape. Some are longer, some are broader. One by one, they are brought into the space with particular items on top of them. The platforms begin to come together. When the platforms are assembled a geography appears. From the abstraction

they create the representation of a territory. The geographical platform becomes a land that is somehow floating in the space.

Over the tables there are different everyday life elements such as ventilators, balloons, buckets with soap, and lemons. As the wires tangle, the elements start tangling with each other activating in a diversity of ways. One of the ways of activating the elements is when I start blowing transparent balloons and later putting them on the ventilators. As a consequence, the balloons start floating showing their round movement. Another way in which I activate the elements is when I get close to the ventilators and start creating sounds with my voice. The ventilators in some way distort and create vibration effects from my voice. In the ventilator, I repeat words such as *agua* which in my mother tongue means water. With this word, I start creating a soundscape while the elements are appearing, floating, rolling, or disappearing.

The work described here is called *Appearing in the movement of water*.

1. Erika Balsom, "There Is No Such Thing As Documentary": An Interview With Trinh T. Minh-Ha", *Frieze*. Com, 2018, <https://frieze.com/article/there-no-such-thing-documentary-interview-trinh-t-minh-ha>.

2. Trinh T Minh-ha, *Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Entrevista*, video, 2011, <https://vimeo.com/28093375>.

### TO SPEAK NEARBY

The theorist, writer, artist, musician, and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha mentioned in an interview<sup>1</sup> that in her movies she preferred TO SPEAK NEARBY rather than speak about because this allows a possible gap in between her and those who populate her films. For her, this gap prevents from closing the representation according to her eyes and knowledge and instead permits leaving a gap in between her and the work. With this gap she allows the person or elements she films to come in and fill the space as they wish. With this approach Trinh T. Minh-ha is allowing the possibility of auto-representation which is a political statement. Representation has been a problematic topic within the arts because representing could mean that one is doing or speaking on behalf of others. The representative could have completely different interests, needs, experiences, and privileges to the one who is representing. Therefore, leaving a gap between her and the world she films is making a statement where the elements that are filmed can represent for themselves. At the same time, Trinh T. Minh-ha films and makes visible things that she doesn't completely know or understand, and that's why she seeks that the world she films speak from its own voice.

In a similar way that Trinh T Minh-ha approaches the world she films, I would like to approach my questions and working materials for the performance. By approximating these topics and questions I'm accepting the limits of what I know, I can get closer with curiosity and listen carefully to the world that surrounds me with the capacity to be receptive and respectful to it. In this performance process, I'm approximating questions and listening carefully to what they share with me.

### A POEM IN MOVEMENT

In the performance, I'm interested in the possibility of the audience interpreting the symbolic actions through a POETICAL APPROACH. I find it important to leave open the meaning and not to close it to a single way of seeing, experiencing, or interpreting it. If desired it is possible to approximate my ongoing performance research as a poem in movement that is traveling with questions and topics. At the same time, I'm getting closer to materials that during this year have been speaking to me in a variety of ways. These materials communicate in unspoken languages but also have the poetic capacity to evoke images from the world.

Poetry can be a vehicle to approximate the world, a world that is in a continuous change and that today is collapsing in between with so many sociopolitical urgencies that involves the South and North of the globe. There is no isolation, there is only relation in between bodies and what surrounds them.

Poetry emerges from everyday life, sometimes it is possible to see it for shorter or longer times, even if it later disappears. With regard to time, poetry is in what appears and disappears regard-less of its shape. It could be in the movement of the water that changes infinitely or in the tracing and erasing a chalk line on the board. For me, it is important to bring this poetical approach in what I do as an artist. I find in poetry the possibility to see closely, listen to what is around and with respect compose in space with the elements of the everyday.

For Trinh T. Minh-ha poetry is not a genre or a form, instead poetry is in the fragments of everyday conversations, it is in the environment, in the things that we hear, so for her poetry is mainly the introduction of music and rhythm into language or into images.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, POETRY IS IN EVERYDAY LIFE looking at it

3. Ahmed, Sara, *Queer phenomenology, Orientation, Objects, Others*, USA: Duke University Press, 2006, 54.

through lenses that perceive rhythm, colors or unexpected associations. Then, poetry instead of being a form becomes a way to perceive the world.

A few years ago, I saw a gigantic poster made by the artist Jeremy Deller that was hanging outside of the University Museum of the Contemporary Art MUAC in Mexico City. In the poster was written *Se necesita más poesía* (2015) calling to the streets for more poetry. I interpreted these words as an amplification of an imprisoned desire to look deeper into the everyday life, from where – as Trinh T. Minh-ha stated – poetry emerges.

Our everyday-lives are not isolated from the complexities of the world, and the elements that surround everyday life remind us of this. Elements such as OBJECTS signify different things because of their history, function, or the circumstance where they were produced. The objects are materializations of specific times, ideologies and places. Objects can become voices of a specific context. The objects that make modern life possible, a life which is unsustainable for the Earth, move between production, consumption, use, and waste in a round cycle. The movement implicated in this cycle circulates from a micro to a macro scale and vice versa. It is in this regard that I think about how objects and elements are in constant motion.

MOVEMENT is implied in life as organisms and elements of the world move from one place to another, days move from day to night or from season to season, the natural forces move such as in the ocean tide. The elements I mentioned move at the same time, in parallel. Movement then becomes a complex term if you want to work with it as an idea. Movement is implied in everyday life and therefore poetry is also there. Movement and poetry are implied in each other. Land and bodies, are in constant movement and transforma-

tion and therefore in its traces poetry also emerges. Body implies movement, whatever the context is, poetry in the movement is forever present.

When moving, to be ORIENTED AND DISORIENTED becomes a way of perceiving the space. There is a constant movement of attractions between the objects. Between "orientation" and "disorientation" there is a range of possibilities in movement. Oriented towards what? Disoriented from where? For the theorist Sarah Ahmed in the book *Orientation Objects and Others*, she develops how objects and other bodies takes shape through how they are oriented towards each other. For Ahmed, orientation involves a two-way approach or as a cohabitation of sharing a space that shapes the body and vice versa.<sup>3</sup> Ahmed develops a theory about orientation through a queer perspective where bodies that are placed outside of heteronormative (white and heterosexual) are constantly questioned about their orientation and position. Rather, DISPLACEMENT AND RE-ORIENTATION permits a possibility to experience disorientation to reposition the body and the objects around.

In the process for the performance *Appearing in the movement of water*, I've explored a selection of everyday objects, looking for different functionalities and orientations that the elements normally have. The way I explore the objects is by manipulating their shape, applying a certain force, or creating unexpected relationships in between. The work seeks to produce new realities around these objects through movement—not only stage their functionality but also stage the displacement of their functionality in a performative way.

### LIVING FORM

PERFORMATIVITY is often used to indicate that something is like a performance without being strictly a

4. Butler, Judith, *Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex*, USA: Yale University Press, 1986, 35.

5. Austin J.L., *How to do things with words*, London: Oxford University Press, 1965, 6.

performance in a conventional sense. For the performance *Appearing in the Movement of Water*, I was interested in getting closer to the term performativity by studying the concepts that the theorists Judith Butler and J.L. Austin have proposed.

For the theorist and philosopher Judith Butler, gender is a social construction such as Simone de Beauvoir stipulated before “one is not born a woman but becomes one.”<sup>4</sup> This means that an individual is born with a biological sex but this is raw material that takes shape according to the performative and social practice of gender. Butler states that gender is a rehearsed act that carries a script that has to be interpreted in order to exist. By this, Butler means that the individual from an early age learns to interpret gender in terms of voice, gestures, social appearances, behaviors and all social brands built from the community. These codes place the body in an environment that censors expressiveness and identity outside of heteronormativity.

During this time, I also got closer to this term according to the ideas proposed by the linguist J.L. Austin. Austin introduced the concept of performativity in a conference which occurred in 1955 that later was published in the book *How to do things with words* in 1965 becoming an iconic reference for the arts. Austin proposed the term performativity referring to—saying is also reality-producing. “To utter the sentence (in, of course, appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I’m doing it: it is to do it.”<sup>5</sup>

In regards to my work, when I place my body in the space and perform, my body is evoking the construction of the female body in the gaze of the audience. Through Butler’s concept of performativity, the body is not neutral and therefore

the social construction of the body is intrinsic when working with the body as a material.

Further to that, I’m interested in using the expanded term of performativity that J.L. Austin brings to prominence in the sixties that the arts appropriate. In *Appearing in the movement of water*, the performance is also in the elements not just in the human body therefore performativity is applied in an expanded way.

During the performance, performativity is present through the EPHEMERAL SCULPTURES I build. The sculptures happen when I explore the life that the elements acquire through moving them with my body or by creating relations of action and reaction between them. As activation happens, elements lose their first state in a chain of effects and affects.

#### TERRITORIES

The exploration of objects happens over a symbolic territory which permits the possibility to contextualize on a micro-macro type scale where the body, stories and the present are intertwined. This project proposes an experience to transform and search for alternatives with the ordinary elements that are around. For me, it is important to represent the capacity of the individual immerse into their everyday life scale as an agent of change and transformation in their context.

The shape of the moving platform comes from a former drawing I did around 2016 which is named *Americas por el sur*. In this drawing the American continent is coming together from the south of the continent. The Americas were coming together as a reflection sewed by the south, like in a mirror, simulating the shape of some kind of intestines. A friend of mine called this drawing “La tripa” which actually means the intestines. In the intestines movement remains processing abstraction and

6. Verónica Gago, *La potencia feminista o el deseo de cambiarlo todo*, Spain: Traficantes de Sueños, Mapas, 2019, 97.

vitality for the human body acquiring nourishment and discarding the unnecessary. The land as a vital organ that processes and discards humans as parasites.

This drawing now gets materialized in a moving platform that when it separated it’s abstract, but that when it ensembles gains the recognizable shape of the American continent. The continent floats over the ground in a game of camouflage and movement. The continent moves floating with the elements on top. The continent remains almost invisible as the land, in this sense that we take for granted its existence when walking and living. The platform permits elements that can stand and cohabit.

The way I represented the territory was first as an abstract space, with a shape that is not recognizable. Later, the unrecognizable turns into a shaped representation of the territory as a map. In this sense, I am interested in supporting other projections of territories in maps by dislocating the territory. In the territory I present there is a long history of violent exploitation, extractivism, and colonialism that is still applied in the name of progress and modernization.

In this sense, I am interested in supporting other projections of territories in maps by dislocating the territory. In the territory I present there is a long history of violent exploitation, extractivism, and colonialism that is still applied in the name of progress and modernization.

The moving platform has the shape of abstract borders that actually don’t correspond to the accurate ones. An imaginary trace of the limits of a land, from where to where something starts and where it stops. My desire for this representation comes from an urgency to get closer, to listen deeper to the territory as a carrier of eternal stories of extraction and as carrier of alternatives to generate changes in the relationship between land and bodies.

The compacted term *cuerpo-territorio* [body-territory] proposed by the theorist Veronica Gago makes evident the relationship that exist between violence against the female body and the exploitation of land.<sup>6</sup> In the book *La potencia feminista o el deseo de cambiarlo todo*, Gago points out that the exploitation of the commons, in urban and rural areas, involves violence to both the individual and the collective body. Gago exemplifies the idea with the example of the dispossession of water from a community. The community is deprived of its own resources facing the difficulties of privatization such as forcing the community to make great efforts to travel long distances to access the basic services such as water, all in the name of progress. This example shows the violence that is exerted on both the individual and the collective body. At the same time, Gago points out that the relationship between body and territory is intrinsic. For Gago, the compacted term of body-territory forces the idea that there is no one who lacks body or territory.

Veronica Gago also mentions that a manifestation of colonial violence is the one that is exerted on the body by dividing between “knowing” with the mind in the hands of the elites and “doing” as a modest subordinate resource. The dissociation between knowing and doing then becomes a patriarchal tactic of domination to domesticate the body and the territory as well as to discredit the power of the body as a precise producer of knowledge.

During this time, I’ve been dialoguing with some of the ideas of Gago through an exploration of the representation of territories between the platform with the abstract and concrete shape in relation to the body and the elements around it.

#### GETTING CLOSER

To speak nearby gives space for gaps to be filled outside of me.

These gaps make representation much more open towards the questions I try to get close to. In this approximation things rather than speaking for or about allow elements to come and fill up the space. In this coming in, poetry takes space through elements and composition which allow unexpected relations. Movement is present forever in everything and poetry comes out from it too. Poetry is a way of perceiving the world, there is no one way in poetry, there are infinite ways. As an art form, performance is linked to the term performativity which is also broad in what it means according to authors but in the core, they hold something together. The objects and elements in everyday life represent the time they circulate in, in that sense, creating sculptures in the field of performance is putting a lot of attention to the life the objects and elements acquire. The body is in relation to these objects. There is no body without a territory and therefore the body is also a reflection of the space the body inhabits. At this point, I try to introduce the objects so they touch each other in intertwined directions.

### SCORES

The following are a series of written PERFORMATIVE SCORES which have taken part of the work during different moments of the process. Follow them imagining the steps, or if you want, try them with your body and the elements around you. The elements I use in the following scores are also the materials for this performance research process.

1. On your knees, twist the blue electric wire in slow motion. The movement in your hand is similar to turning the handle of a music box. Then slowly, the wire will transmit the tension all over its length creating the image of ocean waves. The waves appear in the movement of water.
2. In a long sheet of paper where your body fits, put a tangerine wherever you like. Hold a pencil and with it start pushing the tangerine without lifting either of them. The tangerine will manifest its own movement that you have to listen and follow with the pencil tracing a continuous line.
3. Start rubbing the green lime and sense its intense smell that increases with each rubbing. The smell will get very intense and the liquid will start to flow all over your hands. In the open space of the balloon insert the lemon even if it looks like an almost impossible task. When the lemon is inside, blow air into the balloon until you find roundness inside roundness.

4. Turn the ventilator on. Try the air on your face and your body. Blow a transparent balloon and let it float on the air that the ventilator activates. Get closer to the ventilator and start singing in your mother tongue. The ventilator will modify the vibrations of your voice.
5. In front of you there are three platforms with wheels, Each with a different shape. Find the way to ensemble the pieces like a puzzle. Then you realize it has a continental shape. Did you see it? Yes, it's the American continent. Did you get closer to it? From where are you seeing it? Try to see it from another perspective.
6. Inside one space take a piece of chalk and trace a line that occupies three different surfaces, for example a table, the floor and a wall. The line can be as long as you need it to be to create a space in between. Later, with the palm of your hand erase the line of chalk, you will then see the nebulous cloud that once was a line.
7. In front of you, you have a red star with the picture of Lenin as a baby that was popular to use during the Soviet Union. Grab a transparent balloon, insert the star inside of it and start to blow air into the balloon. Later, put the balloon in the ventilator. The star will be floating inside the fragility of a bubble.

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# BIOGRAPHY

Sara Mikolai is a Sri Lankan-German artist, born in Berlin and currently based between Reykjavik, Colombo and Berlin. With a background in the dance practice Bharatanatyam through her mother Diana Mikolai since 1994, she began working in various performance contexts since 2007. Through the mediums of dance and choreography, as well as installation works she engages with the intersections of artistic practice and research. Her work focuses on the epistemologies of dance and unpacking understandings of tradition through decolonial strategies, queer readings and ecological reflections.

After studying Area studies of Asia/Africa at the Humboldt University Berlin, she graduated in Dance, Context & Choreography at the Inter-university-Centre for Dance (HZT) (University of the Arts, Berlin). She also holds a diploma in Bharatanatyam from the Oriental Fine Arts Academy of London. For her Bachelor of Arts and her current enrolment at the MFA in Performing Arts MFA program at the Iceland University of the Arts, she receives a scholarship from the German Academic Scholarship Foundation.

# LISTENING SOUND NARRATIVES OF A DANCE SARA MIKOLAI

Through a practice of listening, I engage with various layers, which inform, influence and shape my approach to dance. Listening more actively and deeply helps to perceive dance not only through the eyes, but through the sense of hearing. By doing this I learn to stay present, unlearn and relearn meanings attached to the sound source, as the practice of listening requires an openness towards what is being listened to.

Not seeking one particular answer, this practice developed from my continued engagement with epistemologies of dance: a field in particular pressured by questions of representation and gaze, as it is an art form dealing with what is closest to us: the body. I am engaging specifically with the dance practice Bharatanatyam, a descendant of the temple and court dances of India.<sup>1</sup> The temple and court dance practice of the Devadasis – the temple dancers –, which is referred to as the origins of this dance, has gone through a complex history of varying local contexts and

realities, to the abolishment through the colonial powers and is today performed as this reinvented form known as Bharatanatyam. After training and performing this form since childhood, I took a break to comprehend the meaning of a form being developed from a ritual dance to what is today called a classical dance and the confusing contradictions it comes with.

In the chapters that follow, this writing addresses how my listening practice enables me to reenter the vocabulary, music, philosophy, mythology and science of the dance, to unlearn and relearn what it teaches about the body, as well as the body's inner and outer relations in dance and everyday life. The writing makes space for thinking about how this listening practice can be understood as a proposal to both critically and openly engage with passed on knowledge through decolonial strategies, queer reclamations and ecological reflections. Insisting on a commitment to this dance and other music and dance practices related and close to it and staying with the trouble,

1. The term India compresses a tremendously wide geographical area with an enormous variety of languages, practices and groups under one national umbrella and it remains a challenge to use one word which simplifies this complexity. I have found the scholars Ruth Vanita's introduction to her use of the term in her writing very useful and shall follow her example: *The term in its current form is of relatively recent origin - the composers of the Vedic hymns (in the period beginning ca. 1500 B.C.) did not think of themselves as "Indians". Like many other terms, such as "Hindu" and "Buddhist," it has been applied with hindsight to peoples of the past who did not apply it to themselves. While we are aware that the term, like all terms, is a historical construct, it would be too difficult, for us and for readers, to avoid it or to try to use, in each case, the labels that the writers of these texts may have used for themselves.*

2. The invention of the terms tradition and progress as words themselves are largely responsible for this dichotomy. This is a critique scholars fortunately have attended to for several decades already. However, I will refrain here from direct quotation, as there is a complex back and forth of well formulated arguments and equally exclusions in this debate, such as indigenous practices.

not only in theory but within an artistic practice, is a response to the prejudiced dichotomies of *tradition*<sup>2</sup> and *progress* and the consequences of past and present day erasures, marginalisation and discrimination of *othered* bodies, approaches to knowledge production and practices. In the chapters that follow, I introduce the different modes of listening central to the work: listening to dance itself as a sonic experience; listening to the sounds of the environment; listening to mythologies as well as stories of close and far ancestors, histories and present-day realities of people in connection to the narrative of this dance. In its entirety this work is in the ongoing process of repositioning, renegotiating, wondering, researching, listening, imagining, dancing, asking, exploring, clarifying, unpacking, insisting, trying out and letting go.

#### ON SOUNDS OF TREES AND TRANSFORMING SKINS

Each time I go for a walk and the wind blows through the branches of a tree, in the urban space with a strangely measured distance to another, I listen to those branches beginning to wave and the leaves clapping against each other. It is my favourite song, my favourite dance. Hundreds of little tingling sounds played by foliage, a collective consisting of single leaf members, reflecting colors of themselves, of each other, of the sun and what is around them. I have noticed that this way of listening pulls me to the present and helps me to breathe. It tingles under my skin, which begins to expand into the space. It begins to feel as if the boundary between my body and the space it is surrounded by softens. I feel how the space breathes through me and I through the space. It makes me feel small and wide at the same time: small as I realize how much more I need this exchange than the tree does and wide as I begin to feel not separate,

but part of it. A blurring of entities in space, recognizing the commonalities while embracing the differences. When stepping into waters it is a particularly vibrant version of space getting in touch with my skin. It, or shall I say she, or shall I just refrain at all from using any human-made pronoun and let water just be, kindly carrying my body, splashing drops into my eyes and eardrums, changing my experience of sound as a child of the city and its constant urban drone. I would take walks in the forest with occasional dips into lakes, listening to organisms I am surrounded by and notice that by listening I could understand better. Not necessarily by defining the sound of what I am listening to and aiming to put it into a human-made word, but by letting be what is and letting me be what I am. And in doing so, the visual sense, which so quickly cognitively links with the habit of defining what is thought to be seen and the judgment it comes with, has changed. This may as well be what the practice of meditation does. If I think of it, I can call this a kind of meditation, that allows movement and activates a certain mindfulness towards the environment, my body and situating one in the other.

It is a way of hitting the refresh button and starting anew with what I think I already know about the body and what it is surrounded by on the foundation of caring for both. While at the same time being present with lived experiences, stories and knowledge archived in these various bodies: the tree's, the wind's, the soil's, the water's *and my body*. It is an attempt to meet on equal grounds and not to put myself, belonging to the species of humans, higher or in control of what surrounds, carries and makes it possible for me to breathe, stand and move in the first place. I know something in me knew this all along. A younger self, a little girl, making various plants her

3. Mudra means to seal, mark or gesture in Sanskrit and are hand gestures used in many Indian dance traditions used for both abstract dance and story telling. Yogic and tantric ritual practices also include mudras to intensify the effects of yoga or meditation, enhancing the flow of energy. Today's use of mudras in dance, yogic and ritual practices are distinct in each practice and a comparison requires a study of its own.

4. The Natya Shastra, a Sanskrit text on performing arts, explains *abhinaya* as *abhi* - towards, and *naya* - to carry: to carry the spectator towards the meaning.

5. "Rasa is an Indian concept of aesthetic flavour and an essential element of any work of visual, literary, or performing art that can only be suggested, not described. It is a kind of contemplative abstraction in which the inwardness of human feelings suffuses the surrounding world of embodied forms." (Britannica)

playfellows and sharing affection, touch and conversation with them. The feeling in my body and skin while doing this practice of listening today guides me not only back to those moments in the garden, but also to mythological stories and a language of the South Indian dance practice Bharatanatyam, which I have been familiar with for so long. Stories and dances my mother has taught me. And so I relate the experience of the forest walks to South Asian myths of gods and goddesses represented as mountains, waters, plants and curious hybrids of beings. Already in the *namaskaram*, a small sequence before each dance, the goddess Bhūma Devi, representing Mother Earth, is saluted, by guiding a touch from the ground to the eyes with the hands. A simple gesture of acknowledgement. Listening to trees may just be something like that.

#### OF SONGS, FLUID BODIES, TEACHINGS OF A MOTHER AND BLURRED BORDERS

lalita lavanga laA  
pariSeelana kOmala  
malaya sameerE

A cool breeze of spring  
season from clove bushes  
is gently blowing.

Ashtapadi, song 3

I remember when my mother taught me the Asthapadi of the Gita Govinda: a poetry work of songs and hymns about Radha, the goddess of love and Krishna, the forest cowherd, composed in the 12th century by the poet Jeyadeva: here I have learned for the first time to not only use the *mudras*<sup>3</sup> used in Bharatanatyam, as single entities and separate movements in order to tell a story, but to move them fluidly through space, depicting for example a leaf going from one, to the next, to another. Connected, not disrupted. This way of fluidly moving through space, even if only with the

hands, within this rather rigid and geometrical form Bharatanatyam has become, has shifted my understanding of *abhinaya*<sup>4</sup> - the emotive telling of a story - and opened up new possibilities of connecting the imaginary (the leaf in the story) and the real (my present body) and blurring the two. This mode of being fluid is something I keep going back to. If I apply it in a *nritta* (abstract dance) moment, even this moment gets filled with emotion. By doing this, I experience that not directly representing or telling a story does not mean that emotion is absent. Using a mudra fluidly rather than rigidly, opens up space in my joints. Space, which is everything other than only abstract or anatomy. Space that is filled with energy and emotion. And so *abhinaya* begins to emerge, even without a direct acting out of a story line, which *bhava* (facial expressions in the performing arts), is often reduced to. I am eager to explore these moments, with all the knowledge and stories my body already carries, by being present through an interplay of moving, listening, pausing, resting and how that transforms, transmits and becomes what is called *rasa*<sup>5</sup>, an intangible emotive space. Even though my first encounter with the Ashtapadi is around 17 years ago, it deeply impacts my practice of today more consciously within an embodied philosophy of being fluid in dance and life. Even Krishna fluidly reincarnates from one body to another, looking like a blue or black prince in one painting and dressed in female clothing in another while seducing Radha. No category seems to catch him for long. I have not directly been taught about this type of body and gender fluidity within our dance tradition, but have very much felt it, not only in my own life, but as well in these danced stories of love, or *sringara*, as we call the state of love in dance. And I have as well seen this fluidity in my male queer friends while dancing, enjoying a moment of allowing themselves

to move in that way before changing back into a more accepted masculinity. Undressing the light cotton textile with pleats waving with each movement, back into the uncomfortable jeans of modernity, restricting fluidity within the bounds of their seams, while we guess the queerness of other dancers, smiling over the edge of an over sugared cup of tea.

The popularity of the Ashtapadi crosses borders and boundaries from the deep South to the North and East of the subcontinent. I imagine that this has to do with the qualities of the narration of love, as well as the sound of the music compositions, which fluidly merge and melt from one tone and word to the next. I wonder if this fluidity is also connected to the local practices of where the Ashtapadi was written, in the north-eastern area of Orissa. In their local dance practice Odissi I observe a sensual fluidity of the body curving through sculptural postures. When I began to let the fluidity learned through the Ashtapadi sink into my chest and hips, it began to curve my spine, which soon felt like throwing a stone into the water - a cause and effect of waves and shifts until it is time to rest. What happens, if I take this into a dance? What does it mean to dance this Ashtapadi as a Bharatanatyam dancer, if it invites me to curve and in a way claim an interplay of activation, relaxation and rest, which also is a way of listening: here to the needs of the body. This reflection has helped me to rethink the boundaries and separations created through the borders of the colonial and neocolonial idea of the nation state, by looking at the commonalities and influences of the different dance practices, while embracing the differences.

#### ECHOES OF CLOSE AND FAR NARRATIVES

In my case the context of those Indian forms is complex: the shared Dravidian, Tamizh culture of Tamizh Nadu

and the island of Sri Lanka, where my mother would fall in love with the dance form Bharatanatyam and like other comrades would bring it passed the forts of Europe to Germany, seeking new hope, which got lost to a war in her homeland. She would pass this dance practice on to me and fellow friends in her school. I remember bending my head down to marvel at my own tiny feet drumming on the ground in kindergartens and public school rooms turned into a dance studio every Tuesday and Sunday afternoon, year after year. And I remember being very proud that my very first dance lessons took place in Sri Lanka: the image that is left in my memory is of small feet adorned with *kolussu*, thin silver anklets with a few bells. I can't recall what this pride exactly was about: perhaps the closeness to the country, which cherished it as an art form, made it more precious to me, than the then quite oblivious German society driving us to remain dancing in our communities. Here, in the Sri Lankan diaspora, it is a very different social scenario compared to its predominantly opulent counterpart in India, where today it is mostly women of the higher class and castes who occupy the performance halls. I remember weekly sharings of potato chips, Vaddais and stuffed vegetable rolls, the parent's nauseating gossip and laments of homesickness outside the dance class, while the children dedicate dances to and about deities sitting in temples, as well as lost lands they have never seen. I did not know then how courageous my mother was to bring me to those lands in person every other year and show me what we translate and shelter in marginal rooms of 1980s and -90s Berlin. In those years I still would not see the temples, which rather were the homes of relatives hosting short-term reunions. For making this happen as a person who could not easily snap a plane ticket into existence, I will

6. Chandralekha. *Reflections on New Directions in Indian Dance*, in *Davesh Soneji's Bharatanatyam, A Reader*. Oxford University Press, 2010, 378.

ever be grateful to my mother.

Another choreographer has become not only an inspiration, but an imagined conversation partner, who has already passed away: Chandralekha had many critical questions towards Bharatanatyam, while staying with the trouble and dealing with each question in each of her works.

I have increasingly been disturbed by current Western critical opinion which so effortlessly glamorizes and valorizes Eastern 'traditions' in an uncritical manner entirely from an orientalist and patronizing perspective. For us, in our Eastern contexts, both our 'traditionality' and our 'modernity' are complex and problematic areas which are not abstract theoretical categories but real every day concerns – both of life and of performing arts.<sup>6</sup>

One of the alterations attributed to the time Bharatanatyam has been declared as a classical dance, was the stiffening of the flexible spine of the temple dance, an aesthetic idea taken from ballet. It is said that this was due to the despised erotic nature of a curved spine and Rukmini Devi Arundale, a key figure in the re-invention of the dance, has replaced the curve with a straight line in order to abstract the erotic nature of the dance, which the Icelander Jón Ólafsson also stigmatised in his influential travel notes. While this modification, amongst other things, has made Bharatanatyam possible as it is today, there too were other dancers who came from the tem-

ple dance lineage, like the dancer Balasaraswati – and the approaches and intentions of Rukmini Devi and her were distinct, starting from their background. However, like the mechanism of the nation state homogenises the uniqueness of various groups of people and communities under one umbrella, these distinctive aesthetic lineages were swallowed up under the name of Bharatanatyam. Chandralekha has dealt with this strategic spine alteration in her work and I am deeply grateful to her critical eye and strength to withstand harsh critiques from close and far. But somehow her engagement with the question of the spine also feels unfinished to me. My practice today inevitably also listens to past and lived on stories, like of those remarkable women close and far and negotiates how much of them are to respectfully be remained in private archives and which to pull out to contextualize single biographies to the broader making of the history of colonies, nations, dances, imagined and real temples, stages, migration, homes and longing. Listening to their stories and understanding their immense capacities of resilience within their times and as well their limitations, informs so much of not only my dance, but also my pause to dance.

#### LISTENING TO DANCE

A ball, inside a ball. Thrusting, stroking, banging, rolling, falling. Standing still. A metal ball, inside another ball of brass. Moving when the body moves and continuing to stroke the coating even if the body pauses. It is like hearing one's pulse in stillness. Or hearing the waves of the water in the distance, when one just quiets down for a moment. Or the birds, or the clapping of leaves on each other on a windy day. Or hearing the absence of it. The bird not present, the trees not present. Other beings – not present.

The *Salangai*, footbells, used in

many Indian dances are a sound signifier of movement. The experience of dance with and without the bells is of tremendous difference. The soundscape created by dance through the bells creates an incomparable sensorial experience, not only to the outside, but already from the interior experience of being the dancer. In early years I have often been disappointed by the rare usage of the footbells being reserved for moments of public performances. But as an instrument I think the Salangai offer more than a mere amplification of movement in hours when a piece has been trained to perfection. The relationship of instrument and body suggests that the dance is not only a dance, but a sonic experience, a music piece in itself, as part of a dance. It expresses that the dance becomes more present and alive, through its sound. This is especially noticeable in northern Kathak dance and its intense footwork creating vast soundscapes. It indeed can be understood as a direct translation of movement into sound, but at the same time it has its own life, resonating back to the body in a way that has its own response, like all acoustic instruments do, in particular those in close proximity to the body. This can be well heard in the use of the northern Thai instrument *phin pia*, a string zither, where the chest is used to resonate the sound. When the body is still, the bells tied around the ankles still resonate to minor movements of the muscles, little cracks in the ankle joints and pulsation of the blood. This tells me tales of presence and absence, of silence and noise, of movement and stillness. What if I do not only dance in set rhythms? What if the way I move the hand mudra in the Ashtapadi resonates into my foot and initiates another movement, another sound? What if a curved spine sounds different in the ankle bells? What are the different volumes at

play: the volume of the body, the volume of movement, the volume of sound, the volume of space? How can I explore the different types of resonances: the resonance of the bells and the resonance of the body? What if a dance is a song and a song is a dance? How does hearing myself dance affect the movement? And why is a dancer in these dance traditions both dancer and musician? The traditional training involves not only dance, but also the study of *sollukattus* - the rhythmic language for dance and percussion-, singing the compositions and understanding the tones and texts in various languages, mostly Tamizh, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada and Hindi. I indeed understand the dance better with all this information, but why is sound and voice in a performance today conventionally given to another person, while I dance? Why have all these entities, being part of one dance practice, been separated in the performance? Why has it become something to remain in studio and study chambers and the musical arrangements fully been given to an orchestra? I understand the beauty of the collaboration between musician and dancer. But is that so that the dancer has more capacity to perfect the form and if so, is this for aesthetic reasons of entertainment as part of the new era of dance from the 20th century onwards, influenced by the ideologies of ballet? If my reasons to dance are not the latter - entertaining -, can I find new meanings within old strategies and practices, which approached all the described layers as a whole? This is not a question of authenticity. But as a dancer I seek to reenter the traditions I have learned in ways which do not copy alterations to the dance I perceive as unnecessary or even violent, while giving space for explorations. And understanding what is traditional about a reinvented form in the first place. When exploring dance within a listen-

7. Salomé Voegelín. *Listening to Noise and Silence; Towards a philosophy of sound art*. The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd. London, 2010.

ing practice, I sense a resemblance to moments in the forest to dancing the Ashtapadi: skin tingling, breath changing, moving, resting, activating, acknowledging, feeling small and wide, being fluid. When I listen, I give up repetitive ways of directing and controlling and negotiate to explore the space with the help of the bells and the sound of movement. This experience expands my understanding of time: set minutes, set rhythms and sequences morph into a rather fluid understanding of time, where the body is given space to find a relation to what the body is surrounded by - space - , through exploring, activity, resting - being. To find out what the movement sounds like and what it tells me about space, as well as time versus timing. The perceived expansion of time can be well heard in the *Dhrupad* and *Thumri* singing practices: both distinct, but having in common durational, meditative and almost trance-like qualities. As a yearlong admirer of these music practices it would be wrong to deny their influence on my listening and dancing, despite the different contexts they come with.

*INTERSECTING VARIED  
MODES OF LISTENING AS  
A DECOLONIAL STRATEGY*

There are various already existing approaches to listening, which are mainly dealt with from the perspective of sound art, meditation and healing practices. And in this last chapter of the writing I share different voices of researchers and practitioners, who attend to the same and similar topics and respond to them through my own writing voice. The artist Salomé Voegelín writes in her book dedicated entirely to listening:

Seeing always happens in a meta-position, away from the seen, however close. And this distance enables a detachment

and objectivity that presents itself as truth. Seeing is believing. The visual 'gap' nourishes the idea of structural certainty and the notion that we can truly understand things, give them names, and define ourselves in relation to those names as stable subjects, as identities. By contrast, hearing is full of doubt: phenomenological doubt of the listener about the heard and himself hearing it. Hearing does not offer a meta-position; there is no place where I am not simultaneous with the heard. However far its source, the sound sits in my ear. I cannot hear it if I am not immersed in its auditory object, which is not its source but sound as sound itself. Consequently, a philosophy of sound art must have at its core the principle of sharing time and space with the object or event under consideration.<sup>7</sup>

As a dancer, listening to me is a creative practice for the sake of the practice itself: experiencing different qualities of sounds and body and their relation in effect and affect. In that, as a body practitioner, I am interested in how sounds involve me as a listener, move me emotionally, but also physically. And further understanding the body, dance in particular, as the sound source within this practice, while engaging with the sound itself as its own entity as

8. Voegelin, 13.

a result of movement. It is an interest in abstraction, where I leave out narration, in order to stay present with the sounds and refrain from attaching meaning and hence judgment on them, which is where a deeper experience of sound and hence its source, usually ends. I leave it up to an exploration to navigate through an open interplay of movement creating sound and sound bouncing back to the ear: the sound stops (at least in a generalized volume perception) when the body is in stillness. This silence however, I understand as part of the movement and soundscape that explores contractions and expansions of sounds, as well as the perception of time and space it creates. However, as abstract as this mode of listening is, it also is a response to a gaze *othering* from an orientalist point of view. A dance that proposes listening hence asks the listener to challenge their gaze and be present in an audio-sensorial situation.

As Voegelin writes:

Listening, in this sense, is an aesthetic activity that challenges the philosophical tradition of the West, which, according to film theorist Christian Metz, is based on a hierarchy between the senses which positions sound in the attributal location, sublimated to the visual and its linguistic structure. In that position sound is left to describe and enhance but never to do and become. It is a small adjective to the mighty visual noun, furnishing its objects and enhancing its perspective without being acknowledged

in that position.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, this listening is a practice of resistance in a world where the constant drone of the ongoing colonial project of capitalism/modernity drowns voices, narratives and lives of people and different species in a never-ending machinery, in which the body is fully mechanized in order to be part of it: to quiet down and listen with depth and care to subtleties, silences and noises alike and dance, is empowering to me, with or without putting a narration on top. It proposes to be a soft resistance within a harsh world. A softness, which especially in the very recent events of the current global movements is everything but easy to maintain. And when I write of silence I make a difference between a sonic silence within an artistic practice, to staying silent in unjust situations where it is necessary to speak up. The construct of national umbrella languages, inconsiderate of the many local differences of the use and function of the word, is in itself violent. By forcing people to adopt the languages of the colonizer and ideologies they come with (objective, scientific, rational, heteronormative), they play a major role in the erasure of various local epistemologies. Here I propose listening, even before language enters, as a decolonial strategy applying it to various modes of listening, as described in the above chapters. Using this listening practice to spend time with organisms and living beings, listening to mountains, winds, waters, plants and other beings, is my approach to unlearn anthropocentric points of views.

Knowledge of the colonized world, and its increasingly transformed nature, was intrinsic to colonial domination (Pratt, 1992; Drayton, 2000). The production of knowledge was an integral part of the

9. William (Bill) Adam, and Martin Mulligan. Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era. Taylor and Francis, 2012, 4.

exercise of colonial power (Loomba, 1998). The 'Orientalist' discourses of colonialism (Said, 1978; Moore-Gilbert, 1997) took as their subjects both people and nature. Indeed, the two were commonly linked in loosely theorized (and deeply racist) discourses that dismissed as unordered, undisciplined, worthless and uncivilized the 'wildness' of exotic and remote peoples and landscapes. For indigenous peoples, colonialism reached 'into our heads' (Smith, 1999), and it did the same (with very different implications) for the colonizer: colonization changed the very categories within which nature and society were conceived.<sup>9</sup>

To engage with the environment through a mode of active listening, as described in this writing, requires an openness towards what is being listened to in a non-hierarchical way and proposes to assist in dissolving the notions of human and *nature* as separate and the latter being subordinated to the first. It is a practice of love. Even if it does not offer practical solutions necessary to act against the environmental crises, it intends to contribute to the conversations around the issues through an embodied philosophy as part of this listening practice, not only through cognitive, but kinaesthetic learning. Through this mode of listening, as described in the first chapter, a shifted feeling in the body is developed. It is as

simple as taking a walk in a forest or by the sea, taking a deep breath and feeling transformed, even healed. I perceive this as a dialogue between various beings: rather through words, through breathing, being together, listening. Incorporating this into my dance practice certainly informs the dance in form of a new found temporal and physical fluidity.

I link this fluidity further with my own understanding of gender fluidity, knowing it in my own body and the way I live the practice of love in my life. There are many subtle hints in mythology, but also clear evidence in various texts and it is important to note, that my work is not a modern queering of texts but a reentering of abandoned ones under colonial rule. Many precolonial societies and groups of people have embraced queer existences not only in myths, but had their own terminologies and even legal protections. The Kamashastra, the book of love and desire (written between 3rd and 1st centuries BCE), refers to people of third nature, as they were called, as *tritya-prakriti* and it is stated in the Arthashastra, an Indian treatise on politics, economics, the function of the state and social organization (written between 3rd century BCE and 2nd century CE), that nobody can insult or do an act of cruelty against *tritya-prakriti* and if one does that, then there is a specified punishment under law.. It was with the colonizers and the use of religion as part of their colonial project, that the notion of queer identities was perceived as unnatural. And so decolonizing relationships of *natural* and *unnatural*, whether plant bodies or queer bodies, by reclaiming and rereading passed on knowledge is part of my fluid explorations within my body practice. The merger of male and female is not at all hidden in these dances, for example in the Arthana-reeswarar, a piece in the repertoire of Bharatanatyam, Odissi and other

10. Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kirwai, Same-Sex Love in India. Readings from Literature and History. St. Martin's Press, 2000, 58-59.

dances on the subcontinent, where Shiva - male - and Shakti – female - merge into one. This story is well known and normalized to us. How did we never talk about the beautiful queer aspect of this? How could we not relate it to our lived realities, to our own bodies? As queer lives today urgently need to be recognised as just as normal as any other, this decolonial approach to change the colonial narrative, which - like the idea of the nation state - unfortunately people from within our own rows have adopted until today, is absolutely necessary. And for that it is essential to give attention to various epistemologies living in dance, mythology, legal scripts and oral lores. In her writing the scholar Ruth Vanita wonderfully makes sense of queer recognitions as well as interspecies dialogues within precolonial understandings of sharing an ecosystem and life on earth:

The single most remarkable feature of medieval stories of the deities is their multiplicity and variability. Almost any variation that can be imagined exists somewhere. Capable of taking on any form, the divine is made available in multiple ways (..) as infinitely flexible and available – as male, female, neuter; as animal, bird, tree, jewel, river; as present in all elements and all forms of life. The Puranic gods are not just celebrated as omnipresent in a philosophical sense; the stories of their doings represent them as taking on all forms, incar-

nating as different types of creatures (for instance, Vishnu is incarnated as a boar and a fish) including humans of different ages, castes and genders. The absence of any clear-cut philosophical boundary between gods and humans, or indeed gods and other living beings, allows for the deifying of all actions and every way of life.<sup>10</sup>

And lastly, I feel the tremendous healing effects of listening on the body, as various listening practices propose. Here, I want to take this moment to mention the problem of the Euro-Americentric lineage of art. When writing about a practice that can be clearly linked to sound art, the first people one might think of are John Cage and Pauline Oliveros, who undoubtedly are important figures in their contexts. But it is necessary to give balance to an imbalance and misconceptions of a narrative dominated by Euro-America continuously announcing itself as the pioneers of innovation, progressive and contemporary ideas. Hence it is important to clarify that their work has not been influential to mine. It is no surprise to get to know, that Oliveros, who coined the term *Deep Listening*, was influenced by Native American ritual, meditation and music practices, and Cage by the work of Sri Lankan philosopher and historian Ananda Coomaraswamy and the Indian musician Gita Sarabhai, who taught him of the depiction of eight emotions (later nine) in the concept of *rasa* aesthetics in Indian art, as well as Zen Buddhism, having profound influence on his approach to music. I am often being asked how Cage's work influenced my listening practice, rather than for example

11. Swami Janakananda. *Nada Yoga - outer and inner*. yogameditation.com. <https://www.yogameditation.com/reading-room/nada-yoga/> (accessed June 19, 2020)

Chandralekha or even the idea of *rasa*. And I want to answer this here explicitly: not at all! I draw from the idea of *rasa*, trees in forests, waters, the idea of morning and evening Ragas (melodies), diasporic bubbles, the people I have been writing about, as well as wonderful colleagues, Krishna and other hybrids, Thumri songs rupturing my heart, Druphad vocal drones, a lifelong engagement with dance and the food on my plate. And so in my artistic process of the last months I am particularly excited to have come across the practice of Nada Yoga, which deals with the relations of sound and body. The precision already of the description from a practice that thinks about sound from the body and not from an external instrument, of course fascinates me, as this is also what my work reflects about. And probably not as deep as this yogic practice already does.

Nada Yoga is about sounds. It is the knowledge of the quality of sounds and the way they affect people. The word Nada comes from the Sanskrit root, Nad. Nad means to flow. The etymological meaning of Nada is a process or a stream of consciousness. Generally, the word Nada means sound. In Tantra, it is thought that sound occurs in four dimensions – four levels of sound relating to frequency, degree of fineness and strength. 1. The coarse (ordinary audible, material) sound, 2. the mental sound, 3. the visualised sound and 4. the transcendent sound.

According to Nada Yogis and scriptures dealing with Nada Yoga, the original and transcendent sound is the seed from which the whole of creation has grown. The Nada Yogi experiences the macro cosmic universe as a projection of sound vibrations; the whole world as having developed from sound alone.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to recall that a regular practice of Yoga has entered my life simultaneously to connecting the practice of forest walks, listening to sound pieces and in addition cooking, where I contemplate on *rasam*, a digestive soup cooked in many different South Asian areas (and of course diasporas), in connection with *rasa*, the concept of aesthetics, both etymologically stemming from the word *juice* or *extract* in Sanskrit. I have neither experienced nor learned the Nada Yoga practice, but in the spirit of both - exploring practices deepening listening as a bodily experience, as well as decolonizing a Euro-Americentric lineage of progressive (here sound) art, I can't wait to find my way towards this Nada Yoga practice in the future.

The different modes of listening inform each other on essential levels: an abstract moment of a dance equally contains stories, histories and present-day realities experienced by bodies – people – I am listening to. A link I do not intend to delink. Diving into different modes of listening to sounds, stories and dances is a process of learning, staying present, accepting, responding, making sense of, exploring, embodying and giving visibility to them in a process of rethinking a methodology of making visible: rather than proposing a

voyeuristic experience, a situation of sound involving the listener and asking them to engage, be present and reflect on the way they digest the heard. As the body within my personal listening practice is not a sound object (as Voegelin describes the sound sources she writes about), but a living being, completely detaching meaning to a body does not give justice to the various narratives my listening includes. Hence, I shall see the performance work created parallel to this writing as a first chapter of a series of works dedicated to listening.

My heartfelt gratitude in particular to: Isuru Kumarasinghe, for your loving encouragements, for listening and sounding with me; my mother Diana Mikolai, for your support and sharing your dance with me no matter what; Kiran Kumar, for our shared reflections and dialogues on dance; the program director Alexander Graham Roberts and my mentors Haraldur Jónsson and Margrét H. Blöndal, as well as Steinunn Ketilsdóttir, Númi Sigurðsson, Egill Ingibergsson, Sigurður A. Sigurðsson, Helga Dögg and Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes for your advice and sincere support; my grandparents, Sri, Garunya, Nikola, Rodrigo, Stefanie, Oyndrila, Tracy, Nuray, Ahmet, Anna and Michelle for your love and support on my artistic journey.

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Svanhvít's work speculates on alternative ways of being in the world in the present and future. Drawing on a study of philosophical posthumanism, eco-feminism and various spiritual disciplines, her practice is based on experimenting with the dimensions and narratives of everyday life to bring up questions about social power structure, human exceptionalism and earthly survival. She has a degree in industrial engineering, a diploma in contemporary dance and diverse other experiences that have shaped her work so far. Her wish is to collect more experiences towards developing her artistic interests and practice further.

# PRACTICING LOVE WITH PINA AND TONI

SVANHVÍT  
JÚLIUSDOTTIR

This project was born out of a personal need to create a positive connection to someone. Experiencing a sense of depletion by complicated communication in many of my everyday relationships with people, I had a strong desire to have someone in my life to simply nurture. Inspired by a friend that acquired a chicken after his elderly farmer uncle passed away, I got two chickens – Pina and Toni. I am trying to create and sustain a friendship with these chickens living in my backyard and I ask myself what I learn in that process. Exploring ways of nurturing our friendship, I've been researching the concept of love, familiarising with practices of interspecies cohabitation, as well as reading up on the behavioral biology of chickens, trying to accelerate my learning on how they experience the world and behave in it. The remainder of this text takes the form of a diary where I've documented my practices and questions as I reflect on the development of my relationships to Pina and Toni.

1. bell hooks, *All about love: New visions* (New York, NY: William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2018), 4-5.

2. C. Nicol. Sensory Biology in *The behavioural biology of chickens*, (Wallingford, Oxfordshire, MA: CABI, 2015), 15-19.

3. bell hooks, 5.

JANUARY 27TH 2020

Today is my brother's birthday. We had coffee and a nice conversation in the morning. When I got home it was the perfect weather to spend time with Pina and Toni. I opened their house and found a tiny pink egg sitting on the door by the floor. The first one. I don't know whose it is, impossible to say. It was like they didn't know it was there, or at least they didn't care much when I took it. We had a banana together, Toni is still acting very shy, they are so different, her and Pina. I don't want to force Toni, maybe she just doesn't like me and that's fine. I don't think I will eat the egg, let's see if there is another one tomorrow.

P.S. Kobe Bryant died yesterday, a lot of people were very sad. I read an article that said that he had really loved basketball. He even once wrote a love poem to basketball. I wonder what is different in really loving basketball and really loving a person or a chicken.

FEBRUARY 15TH 2020

I've been reading this book, *All About Love* by bell hooks. She is an American scholar, feminist and social activist. In the book she talks about how most people don't know what they mean when they use the word love. To her love is not a feeling, it's more something you practice.

Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth ... Love is as love does. Love is an act of will — namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love.<sup>1</sup>

It feels nice to choose to love. I'm not sure I know what Pina and

Toni need for their spirits to flourish, I need to understand them better.

FEBRUARY 26TH 2020

Me and Pina took a walk today. She was sitting on my shoulder, some tourists took our picture. She always tries to be on the top most part of my body. That's the reason she likes to sit on sticks, she wants to be as high up as possible, it's her survival instinct developed over millions of years. Makes a lot of sense since she can't really fly properly, a way to keep safe. I just realised how her vision works so different from mine. She has her eyes on the side of her head, so she sees all around like 300 degrees. And she also sees ultraviolet waves, all her colors are neon.<sup>2</sup> Although I wonder how we can really know if she sees it that way.

MARCH 14TH 2020

She's not a playful spirit.

MARCH 16TH 2020

I had a conversation with my dad yesterday. He's a biologist and he grew up on a farm, he was helping me to understand some things about Pina. I've been making an effort to find playful activities for us but she's not showing much interest in any of them. My dad said he thought birds in general don't play as much as mammals. That possibly play wasn't an attribute necessary for chickens as they evolved over millions of years in nature, so if there ever were any playful chickens, they weren't the ones who survived for some reason. He also mentioned the possibility that selective breeding by humans might have something to do with it. That people have probably picked the chickens with the most egg producing capabilities to reproduce, in a way steered their evolution.

MARCH 17TH 2020

I was reading more about love today,

4. Donna Haraway, *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness* (Chicago, Illinois: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2015), 205.

5. "Symbiosis | Definition Of Symbiosis By Oxford Dictionary On Lexico.Com Also Meaning Of Symbiosis", *Lexico Dictionaries | English*, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/symbiosis>.

6. C. Nicol, Genetics and Domestication. In *The behavioural biology of chickens*, (Wallingford, Oxfordshire, MA: CABI, 2015), 1.

7. bell hooks., 87.

bell hooks says that "to truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients - care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment and trust as well as honest and open communication."<sup>3</sup> A lot of things to consider.

APRIL 12TH 2020

I've been researching the writings of Donna Haraway, she is an American professor, writer and ecofeminist known for critiquing Anthropocentrism, the idea that humans are the most important beings in the universe. She's written a lot about interspecies relationships. In *The Companion Species Manifesto* she suggests to take a dog-human relationship seriously to learn how to practice more ethical relationships with nonhuman beings. She and her dog, Cayenne, have a game they play together called Agility. It sounds very cool, I would like to have something like this with Pina. In the manifesto she's telling the history of dog breeds and all sorts of dog training stories to make us understand the dog's world better. We need to be aware of these things to know how to treat them respectfully.<sup>4</sup> Pina and Toni have a breed history that I'm not aware of at all, I should do some research. They probably don't have a lot of training stories about chickens though. Chickens have more dark stories.

APRIL 13TH 2020

Why does Easter have a bunny and eggs? Should have a chicken.

APRIL 19TH 2020

Something is up with Pina, she is sitting in her nesting box and she's not moving much. She looks ok, but this is unusual. Could she have COVID? My mother called me yesterday. She said she was watching a film about women with autism. She was wondering if maybe I was autistic. I told her that I thought I wasn't but she said it looked different on women.

I wonder if chickens can be autistic.

APRIL 20TH 2020

I did some research and it seems Pina and Toni are brooding. It's their motherly instincts, they think there are baby chickens inside the eggs, that's why they lay on them all the time. My dad said this could take weeks, it happens every spring. I should make an egg for me to sit on, then it's something for us to do together. Maybe I will learn something.

MAY 17TH 2020

Do animals have love? I've been wondering if Pina has any feelings about me. I feel like my emotional connection to her increases as we spend more time together. But it doesn't really make sense to compare our emotions when we are so different. I think that in nature, practicing love between two different beings like us would probably be called a symbiosis.

Symbiosis: Interaction between two different organisms living in close physical association, typically to the advantage of both.<sup>5</sup>

What is the ecosystem of me and Pina? She gives me fun and eggs. I give her fun, protection from cats and dogs and food. Can we call it a symbiosis? I guess she doesn't really have many choices. I am the only friend that she has, except for Toni she's anti-social. And she doesn't really give me the eggs, I just take them. I think she doesn't mind it, but it feels weird to say that she gives me things when she is so dependent on me for everything.

MAY 22ND 2020

I've been reading about the behavioural biology of chickens. The book I have starts by talking about how many chickens there are in the world. Just in 2013 there were about sixty billion chickens killed.<sup>6</sup> That's almost

ten times the amount of people on the planet now. Imagine how different their lives would be if they didn't have things like eggs and meat that people like to eat. It's really like this sometimes, if you have something people want, they just take it and give you nothing back if they don't have to. I think it's because we don't really know love, we are too busy with having power. bell hooks talks about this a lot, she says we live in a culture of domination, that "awakening to love can only happen when we let go of our obsession with power and domination"<sup>7</sup> and that we need to learn to live by a love ethic "wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet".<sup>8</sup>

*JUNE 5TH 2020*

Pina almost got lost today, I just heard her cluck and ran outside. The thump when I jumped off the bed to check on her made the smoke alarm fall from the ceiling of the neighbour downstairs. Suddenly we were all outside, me, him, Davíð and the neighbour from the house in front. Their giant dog came into the garden when Davíð and Pina were outside. Pina panicked and flew over the fence to the garden beside ours. Davíð caught her fortunately before she got far. What a chaos! Was stressful. Sad that she has to be so scared all the time when she's out in the garden. With all the cats and dogs around she's not safe when I'm not there.

*JUNE 12TH 2020*

I just had an idea. Maybe I can teach Pina to fly.

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Vala Höskuldsdóttir is an Icelandic performance related artist, educated both from the Iceland Academy of the Arts and the Contemporary Performance course in the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow. Born and raised in the town of Akureyri, in the north part of Iceland, in a house by the sea. A close proximity with nature along with her feminist, neopaganist and therapist mother, influenced her interests and views in life at an early age. Her main focus has been on understanding the human individual in relation to society, nature, culture, history, sex, sexuality and more. She has created and directed various community-based performances, with various groups, in collaboration with festivals, theatres and independently. She is the other half of A Band Called Eva, a queer, feminist and slow performance duo and band, who have been performing in the theatre and music scene in Iceland since 2013. Vala is currently on the artistic board of LOKAL theater festival.

# MOSS AND ME AN INTERSPECIES LOVE STORY VALA HÖSKULDSDÓTTIR

## WINTER

1. Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin", *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): 159-165.

2. Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin": 159-165.

3. Donna Haraway, *Staying With The Trouble* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1-12.

I tend to forget facts. I tend to remember feelings. I tend to forget names and numbers. I tend to remember dreams, the big picture and the Ocean. I tend to look at humans, time and space more like a pile of things, rather than something separate, linear and individual. I tend to flow like water. I tend to forget to water myself. I tend to dream a lot. I tend to feel stuck. I tend to feel alone.

I am lonely by nature. I feel lonely in crowds, at family dinners, with my partner, with my best friend, with my child, even sometimes when I'm alone.

I have never felt as alone as I did after my divorce. A divorce is an eruption of the self. Barren lands. Fields of boiling wounds. After my divorce, the only thing that could comfort me, the only thing that would interest me in any way, was moss. I found myself hugging a mossy tree, eyes filled with tears by the starry shape of the mosses growing on it. I found myself lying in a bed of moss singing and wishing to melt into moss, becoming one with the Universe, and to cease to exist in the isolated state of a body and mind.

When I talk about Universe, I am referring to what the thinker and professor in feminist studies Donna Haraway likes to talk about as Hummus or Compost.<sup>1</sup> The whole

of everything. To her (and many others), we humans are no worse nor better than the rest of life. We are one. We are not in any way separated from everything else that lives. We are not even posthuman, she says, we are just pieces of a huge pile of compost.<sup>2</sup> She speaks about the importance of including other species into our lives and stories, in order to change our habit of thinking of ourselves as something separated from the rest.<sup>3</sup> This shift in sight is of no less importance for us humans, our wellbeing and sense of belonging, than other living mechanisms sharing the planet with us. Loneliness is a feeling of not belonging and humans are a lonely crowd. We have been locked in the thought that we don't belong to the rest of life on earth. Haraway claims we need other kinds of stories to feel connected and loved by our community, both human and non-human. And she is not alone in this thought.

Philosophers call this state of isolation and disconnection "species loneliness"—a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship. As our human dominance of the

4. Robin Wall  
Kimmerer, *Braiding  
Sweetgrass: Indi-  
genous Wisdom,  
Scientific Knowledge  
And The Teachings  
Of Plants* (repr. .  
London: Penguin  
Books, 2020), 259.

world has grown, we have  
become more isolated,  
more lonely when we can  
no longer call out to our  
neighbors.<sup>4</sup>

If other kinds of stories are the answer, how does one go about telling other kinds of stories? Stories told in cooperation with other life forms. Interspecies stories. How do plants communicate? Are humans equipped to receive their stories?

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a writer, a biologist and a native American of the Potawatomi nation. She weaves together the viewpoint of science and indigenous wisdom in her writings. She writes: "Sometimes I wish I could photosynthesize so that just by being, just by shimmering at the meadow's edge or floating lazily on a pond, I could be doing the work of the world while standing silent in the sun."<sup>5</sup>

The Potawatomi people have been listening and learning from plants and trees throughout the ages. To them it is evident not only that plants have something to teach us, but more importantly that they have a great deal of care for us. In the words of Kimmerer: "Our indigenous herbalists say to pay attention when plants come to you; they're bringing you something you need to learn."<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, "in some Native languages the term for plants translates to 'those who take care of us'.<sup>7</sup> According to Kimmerer, hearing what nature has to say is no rocket science. You just have to slow down, take time and listen carefully from your center to what the plant or other life form has to say.<sup>8</sup>

So – with some hesitation – I turn to Moss. Finally, eager for something. Eager to tell another kind of story. It is obvious to me that to tell stories of other lifeforms I need a non-human partner with me on the job. I see moss everywhere now. And when I do, I stop to listen to it. Look at it closely. See its green shades. Feel

its softness, its culture of closeness, where every stem relies on the other, forming a vast carpet of soft green cuddle, softening everything. I whisper into the moss on the brick wall of the red house on my way to school: *Will you please be my collaborator?* And I imagine it whispering back: *It would be my pleasure, dear.*

I learn that Moss is a matriarch. A she. Almost every stem is female. Mosses are the healers of the earth. They enter inhospitable places, where no other plant can thrive. They enter open wounds and barren lands, left by volcanic eruptions, and other catastrophes and they start to mend and heal and bring to life what is barren. *No wonder I had turned to moss in my erupted state.* Mosses don't have any roots, so they don't take anything from the land they inhabit but get all they need from the sun and the rain. Moss and water have a wondrous love affair. When watered, the mosses are beaming with life, greenness and generosity towards the atmosphere and all that lives. Without water, moss shrinks, curls up, does not photosynthesize nor grow, but just contains herself in a dream kind of state and waits for her beloved rain. Mosses are a species of closeness like us, a single stem of moss is utterly vulnerable, but in the power of closeness they can survive anything. One of her biggest superpowers is her smallness. Moss embraces her smallness and her nonhierarchical nature, resulting in a culture of acceptance and equality rather than competition. Though mosses are small, they are not afraid of being outgrown, but welcome all migrating species to their lands. Content with living in the moist shades of life around them, mosses make solid grounds for complex and colorful societies of multicultural species.

Little was the might that lifted me  
little did I do with it  
little I came, little I am

5. Kimmerer, *Braiding  
Sweetgrass*, 221-222.

6. Kimmerer, *Braiding  
Sweetgrass*, 342.

7. Kimmerer, *Braiding  
Sweetgrass*, 284.

8. Robin Wall  
Kimmerer, *Gathering  
Moss: A Natural And  
Cultural History Of  
Mosses* (Corvallis,  
OR: Oregon State  
University Press,  
2013).

little I will go from here

Ólöf frá Hlöðum  
(female Icelandic poet 1857-33)

Slowly we start a collaboration. I start my days slow walking, trying to slow down to moss time, imagining I'm walking on moss, melting into moss, becoming one with moss. A human moss, a mossy human, *humoss*. Then I sit down with moss and just listen and observe. Just spending time with my fellow *humoss* collaborator. What should we do together? What kind of a performance does a duo of a human and moss create? Answers come floating to me from the same place as poetry does. Textures, sensations, sentences shooting from below. *It will be modest, it will be soft and tender, it will be about community, and the process, and it will connect species.*

At first, I am worried. How can I know what is coming directly from me and what is coming from moss? Am I humansplaining moss? How can I claim to be some kind of a moss medium?

*This is my head speaking, she says. I'm not supposed to communicate from my head. I lower my attention down, down to my center, my root. From there, the communication becomes clear again, the flow unblocks. There is no me versus moss. Its humoss, its compost, it is the Universe.*

I don't make any decisions without her. Even now, writing these lines I have my jar of Moss open besides me, looking at her, pausing, asking her opinion on where this is going. I made the jar early in the process, after a session with moss. Gathering mosses on the hill outside my house, one of few days in winter where the earth wasn't frozen and hidden with snow. I walk on the hill, gathering small pieces here and there. Asking permission, careful not to take more

than I will use. Thanking for each piece I'm given. I make my moss jar in a kind of sermonic state. Asking Moss where she wants to go, collaborating as best I can. When we are both happy with the beautiful mossy landscape in the jar, I feel there is still something missing. I look around my living room and my eyes land on the small golden goddess statue on my altar. I situate her in the jar. Mossy human, human moss, *humoss*. I get a message:

*I see a human, a goddess representing all humankind, standing with her arms up in the air, in a field of the soft and healing matriarch of moss. She is not lonely, she is being welcomed back to the party she was always invited to, but was too busy to receive the invite.*

We decide that the next step in the process is to help other humans and plants to team up and connect. We are gathering messages from the Universe, from the compost pile, hoping people will find that they have an old but unexpired invitation to a party of old friends.

#### SUMMER

It's summer now and other plants have begun to outgrow Moss in the jar.

*Wild nature is overtaking the structure created by the human. I can't see the moss anymore, I just know she is there, happy in the shades, holding space for everything. You can hardly see the goddess either, only her head and lifted hands stand out at this point. It's not long until nature will have outgrown her. Her head will go under the high grass, where she will deteriorate into a different state of the big pile of compost and become a single stem of moss, or a straw of grass or a drop of rain in the compost pile ... But she will have danced, she will have*

*belonged, she will have lived  
and died well.*

Personally, Moss is telling me that her job with me is about to be done. She has mended my wounds, helped me heal my barren lands, and mend my loneliness, and now it's summer! Time for grass and flowers and herbs and midsummer sun and the ocean and all the diversity of nature. It's time to come out of the soft shades and share. To let our communities, human and nonhuman, in on the game.

# MESSAGES TO HUMAN- KIND FROM INTER- SPECIES COUPLES:

## *BONSAI TREE/HUMAN*

Dear human kind. Hold life with ease. Brush the dust from old branches. Reach out with grace and come to terms with all your glory. Feel my vibration. I am here for you. Look at how I hug myself. How selfstimulatable I am, but still dependent on you watering me. Imagine what I would do for you if we swapped places. You in my pot. I am in your shoes. Your slippers. I love you and I hope you appreciate me. Care. You might think that it is you watching me, but it's me who watches you grow.

## *RUBBER PLANT/HUMAN*

Dear human kind. We will be here long after you are gone. But still we care. And all it takes is to care sometimes, at those kee moments, because what is broken can be fixed. It doesn't take perfection, just a moment of kindness, a moment of shared pain, a moment of empathy, of shared life. We all grow until the wind breaks us. Don't be the wind, be the growth, be with me. Be me.

## *VARIOUS SEEDLINGS/HUMAN*

Dear human kind. Remember to water yourselves, you can water yourselves. Let your water roll down your cheek. Fall from one leave to leave. And finally dig down into your earth. See? Now you are not drying out anymore, See? Now you are not drying out anymore.

## *VARIOUS SEEDLINGS/HUMAN*

Dear human kind, the pot you are living in is too small. You need a bigger pot. Who is going to relocate you? Can you relocate yourself? Your roots are tangled around you, like a fence. Curled up and twisted, running out of oxygen.

## *SPRUCE/HUMAN*

Dear human kind: water is the most important. Clear. The world is clear even though it seems dusty. Dust is also joy though. Dusty joy. Life is growth. Sometimes invisible. It runs in the veins. Ohm! I am the Ohm! In the empty space and go in all directions. Mostly upwards through. It touches. Everything touches.

## *PRUCE/8 YEAR OLD HUMAN*

Dear humankind. The fragrance is what you need. Be yourself. Not something else. Take good care of nature. Be good to me. Don't be around bad people. We will share our story. Moss and me. The story of our interspecies love-affair. And assist others follow in our footsteps and find their own paths to other kinds of stories.

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