

**ATTUNING TO SITES OF VIOLENCE:
PERFORMING SPECTRAL RELATIONALITY ACROSS NORTH AMERICA**

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ABSTRACT

Attuning to Sites of Violence: Performing Spectral Relationality Across North America foregrounds the agentic liveliness of disappearance and focuses on often unseen elements as active collaborators in non-forgetting. This dissertation argues that disappearance itself can perform and reveal significant insights if attuned to. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, this research navigates theatre and performance studies, contemporary visual art, embodied practice, and critical memory studies. Methodologically, it includes conversational interviews with artists and community activists, personal observations, archival research, and site visit analyses. The dissertation emphasizes a relational and intuitive method, drawing on associative poetic reflections and speculative knowledge sharing, alongside an auto-theoretical approach that intertwines personal narrative with critical analysis. The writing adopts a curatorial perspective, combining case studies and ideas that might not otherwise converge, creating connections and interactions that provide new insights.

By attuning to site as performer, the dissertation expands ideas of site specificity. It weaves together artistic practices and theoretical frameworks to reveal how disappearances, erasures, and sites of violence communicate and relate across space and time. This work underscores the importance of attuning to the spectral and relational dimensions of violence and ecological kinship, advocating for a more just and interconnected world. *Attuning to Sites of Violence* acknowledges the persistent presence of past violence, engaging with the traces left by historical and ongoing acts of violence and disappearance, and explores the complex ways these forces shape our understanding of the present. Instead of mapping or directly connecting the disparate case studies, it examines the shared relationalities touched by absence, and the complex ecologies of violence operating through space and time. The project explores broader social

processes that enable, conceal, and frame our thinking about disappearances and other violent forces that occur out of sight. By examining what these artistic case studies reveal about specific sites of nonappearance, the dissertation focuses on cultivating practices of attunement with the more-than-human world, embodied care, grief, and spectral relationality through deep time. Here, the elemental traces of violent disappearances and erasures persist, continuously haunting the present, and compelling us to take action.

DEDICATION

For Marlow, without whom I would disappear.

And for all those who have disappeared ~ may they always remain.

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INTRODUCTION

Tracing Disappearance: Performance, Hauntology, and the Politics of Invisibility

disappearance

vanishing

ephemeral

leaving no trace

at the point of vanishing

erasure

that which does not remain

refusal to remain

forgetting

ghosting

ghosts

lost

unseen

invisible

loss

lingering

annihilation

absence

remains

haunting

hauntologies

trace

death

passing

ceasing to exist

take flight

disappear

These are words I have gathered from various theatre and performance studies texts over the years. They have been used to describe performances, explain the affects and impacts performances have created, or to illustrate how performances have acted upon individuals and audiences in ongoing ways. Ephemerality and disappearance in live performance have been at the centre of long-standing theoretical debates and discussions surrounding the art form; namely questions like: does performance inherently disappear? Or does it remain, through trace and evidence? If the artist is *not* present, can performance be preserved, and if so, how is it archived? How do we think about the material ‘stuff’ performance leaves in its wake? (Cvetkovich). Throughout this dissertation I pose similar questions, but I also think through disappearance *itself* as agentic—as having the ability to perform, and to *do*. If we are able to attune to it, what does disappearance *reveal*? This dissertation foregrounds the agentic liveliness that disappearance continues to possess and pays close attention to elements often unseen as active collaborators in non-forgetting.

Fossil-like, disappearance imprints its remains into that which can be sensed, attuned to, and felt. The question and the work lie in how we tune in and notice these lingering social marks. In the following pages these lively impressions are explored through case studies, performances, exhibitions, and community activations engaging materially and immaterially with water, air, soil, microbes, earth, and ancestral wisdom probing constellations between bodies, and bacterial cultures. These provocations foreground the necessity for deeper attunement to the ongoing yet often invisible processes of erasure, violence, displacement, extraction, and environmental destruction. Speculatively, my work asks, how are disappearances and invisible forces connected relationally across time. I theoretically grapple with disappearance and violence from an ecological point of view (thinking about the relationships between living entities and their

environments)¹ as a possible mode for making clear how systems of violence across the Americas are connected, and interdependent. I have attempted to tune in to various expressions and articulations of violence and disappearance *at* and *as* site, attuning to spaces of absence to elucidate some of the ways that we (humans and non-humans) are enmeshed within its atmospheric web.

Foundations

Long before engaging with these ideas through books, I observed firsthand on a very basic level, how some people seem invisible while others are marked for success. I have always been interested in the concept of legibility—how people are seen or not seen, recognized or not recognized. Growing up in a small predominantly white rural town in Southwestern Ontario, my mother, the youngest of ten children, was only 14-years-old when I was born. By way of intergenerational trauma, her family struggled with poverty, relying on welfare cheques and food banks, and was affected and marked by alcoholism, violence, abuse, addiction, incarceration, and severe mental health issues. Because of this, I realized early on that there is a constructed social hierarchy of mattering in our social worlds—a knowledge I felt keenly in my body as a young person. As I grew older and left this town, my understanding of this hierarchy of visibility and mattering became more complex, recognizing how various factors—such as class, race, gender, sexuality, geography, and age—contribute to systems of visibility and importance.

Due to her young age when she became pregnant, my mother completed her schooling only up to the summer after eighth grade. I once overheard her tell a story where a teacher had told her that she would never amount to anything more than a janitor due to her “poor life

¹ Merriam-Webster Online

choices.” Ironically, my mother did become a sanitation worker and continues to clean rooms and toilets in a nursing home in that same small town. Most of us have seen how the work of janitors, sanitation workers, and garbage collectors, whose work is crucial in a society that produces waste rapidly, are socially perceived as undervalued—despite doing essential work. Their work receives little recognition, cultural capital, or financial security. While walking the halls of places like universities, museums, or art galleries, the cleaners of these spaces have always stood out to me. They are expected to blend into these pristine environments as invisible workers—restocking toilet paper, scrubbing floors and toilets, emptying trash bins, touching waste, and maintaining infrastructure. These laborers are often people of colour, or first-generation immigrants, and almost always part of the working poor. Their contributions are often overlooked.

During the pandemic, my mother was briefly hailed as an “essential” worker and heralded as a “hero.” This period in time highlighted how workers, often undervalued and unseen, could suddenly be elevated to the status of essential heroes—that is, when they were needed to do the worst work on the front lines under the most vulnerable conditions. This rapid transformation in how we perceive such workers underscores themes of visibility and legibility that are central to my research. This concern around how perceptual changes of social visibility and recognition can swiftly shift under specific conditions, informs my work and positions me within a broader discourse on social visibility and recognition. I share this background information to illustrate how these experiences have not only shaped my worldview, but also directly influenced my PhD research and methodology.

Writing Amidst Crisis: Reflections on Context and Impact

I began writing this dissertation during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, a few weeks after the birth of my first child, amidst Toronto's strict lockdown measures. Like everyone, I navigated the overwhelming emotions of living through a global crisis. To cope with my anxiety, I often went for long walks with my newborn baby, listening to Robin Wall Kimmerer's soothing voice reading from *Braiding Sweetgrass* on my audiobook app. On my route, I would pass by artist Mark Reinhart's fluorescent duct tape word art on the Queen Street West PARC² building in Parkdale, proclaiming: "See Me," "Hear Me" and "I Am Essential." These visual declarations were strikingly significant to the time and place, resonating with the ideas of visibility and attunement I had begun developing for this dissertation. As part of Reinhart's temporary installation, entitled *Health & Safety Notes*,³ statements developed in collaboration with community organizations and local residents were displayed throughout Toronto during the pandemic. Even now, remnants and remains of these statements can still be seen adhered to the sides of many buildings across the city. They were not passive statements but urgent demands, reminding the public to acknowledge those who might otherwise feel invisible: *See Me. Hear Me.* In the still early days of the pandemic, philosopher Paul B. Preciado wrote,

That wage labor is itself an institution of confinement has never been clearer than now, as we witness 'essential' workers as de-munized bodies brutally forced into spaces of lethal risk. The subways of New York are as crowded as ever because the transit authority has

² PARC (Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre) is a community hub that plays a vital role in supporting marginalized individuals in the West Toronto neighbourhood. Located in the heart of Parkdale, PARC provides a wide range of services and programs aimed at enhancing the quality of life for community members, particularly those facing mental health challenges, homelessness, poverty, and social isolation.

³ *Healthy & Safety Notes* were presented by SummerWorks and Artworx TO, 2021-22.

severely cut back on the number of trains. The essential workers forced to ride are disproportionately low-income, disproportionately migrants, disproportionately racialized bodies. (*Learning*)

This stark pandemic reality further highlighted the themes of attuning to invisibility, vulnerability, and systemic violence that are central to this dissertation. It is crucial for me to carefully consider who is being asked to undertake the work of attuning. Most often, those most immediately affected by violence are simultaneously rendered invisible and burdened with both literal and symbolic labour. This dissertation underscores the necessity of examining *who* should bear the responsibility of attuning, asserting that the call to attune should be directed towards benefiting communities impacted by violence, rather than serving those who perpetuate it.

The national narrative at the time heralded “essential workers” as heroes and marked a newfound recognition of previously invisible working classes. Every night at 7 PM, a ritual of balcony and window applause honoured frontline workers with clapping, singing, and clanging cowbells. This nightly noise, however, woke my newborn daughter, adding to my stress and panic as I dealt with postpartum depression and the seemingly endless pandemic. The crashing pots, resounding pans, and screeches from our neighbour’s electric guitar, were sounds that became part of my new reality, providing a somewhat dystopian emotional landscape for early writing.

Several significant world events also played out through the course of this work that have profoundly influenced my dissertation writing. These include but are not limited to Donald Trump’s presidency which was marked by various attacks on reproductive health, queer, and migrant life. The Women’s March on Washington, #METOO movement, the rise of the Stop Asian Hate movement, the resurgence of the climate justice movements led by young activists,

and the global push for LGBTQ+ rights and recognition. Additionally, No Borders resistance, Indigenous land-based struggles including the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests, Wet'suwet'en Pipeline Protests in Canada, Indigenous activism in the Amazon Rainforest where groups have been actively resisting deforestation and illegal mining that threaten their territories. In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement gained global attention after the murder of George Floyd, sparking widespread protests against racial injustice. Amidst these movements, financial instability and inflation increased, particularly impacting the arts and culture sector. Additionally, during this time, the Israel-Gaza conflict continued its cycles of violence and political tensions, and in 2022, the war in Ukraine escalated with Russia's full-scale invasion, contributing to a complex global context. These forces and movements had significant impacts on this work. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 by the U.S. Supreme Court had significant impacts across the United States, and happened while I was researching in Georgia. This overturning effectively ended federal protection for abortion rights marking a major setback for women. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns altered my research plans, underscoring the critical role of invisibility in our interactions with the world. As we contended with the transmission of the virus—a process invisible to the naked eye but with profound impacts on thousands of bodies—this viral phenomenon emphasized the hidden yet powerful forces that shape our lives.

The temporal blurrings and spatial restrictions brought on by the pandemic, environmental crises, and several major wars contributed to a profound sense of grief, and vulnerability throughout writing this dissertation. This affective and socio-political landscape influenced my research and prompted me to consider a genuine ethics of care, extending beyond the performative care often seen in cultural and political settings. This shift in perspective shaped

my early writing and other creative endeavors. For instance, early in this dissertation, I curated an exhibition at Toronto's Vtape titled "love as rupturous as I know it to be,"⁴ which explored caring otherwise, prioritizing action, and envisioning radical, unbounded love.⁵ This exhibition was a seed that grew my thinking around topics of care and violence. On a more personal level, conducting research during pregnancy and motherhood attuned me to biological time, organic systems, and the nuances of hosting, holding, and caring. These embodied experiences informed my understanding of the research materials in this dissertation, opening me to more fluid, swollen, embryonic, and dynamic temporal, spatial orientations.

Grounding: Acknowledging Historical and Ongoing Injustices

Grounding this research in reality rather than just theory, I also refer to a significant Canadian event that occurred in the early days of writing this dissertation in 2021. The remains of hundreds of children were discovered at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in southern British Columbia, one of Canada's largest residential schools run by the Roman Catholic Church. These remains were found using ground-penetrating radar, and the announcement by Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Kukpi7 (Chief) Rosanne Casimir quickly reverberated across the country and the world. Social media ignited with cries for justice and demands for action. Indigenous leaders and community members emphasized (again!) that this

⁴ www.shalontwh.com/curation/the-curatorial-incubator-v-16-living-in-hope

⁵ The title of this series is an excerpt from an essay by Cree scholar and artist Karyn Recollet called "Kinstillatory Gathering" that imagines cosmic kinship and the potent magic of dark matter—the vibrant power of imagining otherwise. The term kinstillatory merges "kinship" and "constellatory," suggesting a form of gathering that emphasizes relationality and connectivity, similar to the interlinked points of light in a constellation. Recollet's notion extends beyond biological or traditional notions of kinship to embrace a more expansive understanding of relationality that includes humans, non-human beings, ancestors, and the land.

discovery was only the beginning of an important but painful national reckoning. In the following weeks, Canadians witnessed what many Indigenous peoples and families had long known: hundreds more unmarked burial sites were found across the country, revealing the remains of more Indigenous children on and near former residential schools. More unmarked graves were publicly revealed, with many more still unfound, according to statements by the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan.

The existence of unmarked graves and undocumented children is something that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) had highlighted in the early days of their work (which began in 2008). Despite the TRC's efforts, the federal government twice rejected their calls to include these findings (Casimir 1). The TRC's Memorial Register has confirmed the deaths of over 4,000 Indigenous children associated with residential schools but notes that its register is incomplete due to a large volume of yet-to-be-examined and destroyed records: this is disappearance. The TRC has issued Calls to Action, numbers 71-76 in the report under "Missing Children and Burial Information," highlighting the urgent need for further research, investigation, and action to make visible these disappearances:

73. We call upon the federal government to work with churches, Aboriginal communities, and former residential school students to establish and maintain an online registry of residential school cemeteries, including, where possible, plot maps showing the location of deceased residential school children.
74. We call upon the federal government to work with the churches and Aboriginal community leaders to inform the families of children who died at residential schools of the child's burial location, and to respond to families' wishes for

appropriate commemoration ceremonies and markers, and reburial in home communities where requested. (Canada 8-9)

Recognizing these haunting realities, the TRC seeks to address these ghostly echoes of the past through their recommendations. As sociologist and feminist scholar Avery Gordon states, “to study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it” (7) and evidently the TRC aims to do just that. The TRC’s research found that thousands of Indigenous children sent to residential schools never made it home, with many dying of disease, neglect, physical and sexual abuse, or accidents. It estimated that around 6,000 children may have died in residential schools, with many buried in unmarked graves. Across Canada, ceremonies and vigils were held to honour the unmarked dead, as the country grappled with the horrific revelations. I continually return to the assertion that such invisibility is often deliberate. It is precisely *forgetting* that the representative powers would have us *remember*: that colonialism is a historical issue.

Vernacular memorials, including rows of children’s shoes lining the exteriors of legislative buildings and churches became a common sight across the country. Stuffed teddy bears placed on front lawns with porch lights left on, haunting the present moment with undisclosed histories—but histories that have been there all along. Orange t-shirts, a symbol of the Every Child Matters movement, fluttered in the breeze. During this time, these performative objects seemed to communicate with each other, their fabrics blowing in the wind and reflecting a haunting absence. They evoked a profound sense of something missing, absent⁶ and actively

⁶ These memorializing gestures bring to mind Sara Ahmed’s investigation of the political implications of “unhappy performatives”—a concept originally introduced by J.L Austin to describe utterances that fail to achieve their intended action due to unmet conditions (“The Non Performativity” 4). Ahmed extends this notion, highlighting how context, power dynamics, and individual experiences can influence the effects of our expressions. She demonstrates that actions intended to assert individual agency or express genuine concern can become “unhappy” when they conflict with the normative expectations of happiness, belonging, and social cohesion,

performed the function of memorializing the lost lives of Indigenous children in residential schools, making visible a tragic and often overlooked part of history. They disrupted the everyday landscape and the usual expectations of public spaces that are often designed to convey neutrality. These everyday displays underscored the importance of acknowledging and remembering the hidden and invisible histories of these children, insisting that what we cannot see deeply matters.

The significance of these “unseen” histories became even more apparent with the 2021 discoveries which sparked widespread outrage, grief, and calls for justice. This led to renewed demands for accountability, reconciliation, and redress for the historical traumas inflicted upon Indigenous peoples in Canada. In response, the Canadian government has announced plans to investigate and commemorate these sites, provide support to affected communities, and work towards meaningful reconciliation—perhaps impossibly. In 2022, the “Search the Landfill” protests began following the tragic deaths of Indigenous women Mercedes Myran, Morgan Harris, Rebecca Contois, and an unidentified woman named Mashkode Bizhiki’ikwe, or Buffalo Woman, a name given by Indigenous elders. They were believed to be victims of accused serial killer Jeremy Skibicki, who allegedly preyed on vulnerable women at homeless shelters in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Skibicki has been charged with the murder of the four women and explained that he disposed of their bodies in a landfill north of Winnipeg (“Ottawa”).

Authorities believe that Rebecca Contois’ partial remains were found at the Brady Road landfill, while the remains of Myran and Harris are suspected to be in the Prairie Green Landfill north of Winnipeg. However, despite these suspicions, the Winnipeg police and city officials

instead bringing to the forefront discomfiting or tragic realities. Embodying the concept of “unhappy performatives,” the vernacular memorials altered the emotional and narrative landscape, urging societal engagement with histories often silenced or ignored.

initially refused to search the Prairie Green Landfill, citing logistical difficulties and safety concerns (The Canadian). These reasons included the size of the landfill, the time elapsed, and the presence of hazardous materials, all of which complicate the recovery process. This refusal to search the landfill led to outrage among the victims' families, Indigenous communities, and advocacy groups, who organized protests under the banner "Search the Landfill." Demonstrators have continued to demand a comprehensive search for the remains of these missing women, calling attention to systemic issues around the treatment of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. In 2023, the Canadian federal government agreed to fund a feasibility study to assess whether a landfill search could be carried out safely and effectively. However, no full search has been initiated, and the controversy continues, with activists and families continuing to push for action in honor of the missing women.

I highlight these stories here because they exemplify why this research is crucial and illustrate the critical need for research on attuning to sites of violence and disappearance. We are still searching for people in garbage dumps and buried under churches. This dissertation centres on what has been systemically buried, hidden, disappeared, made invisible, and illegible, arguing for the significance of following what remains in the aftermaths of these violences. By focusing on the material and immaterial realities of these sites and the profound impact of these injustices, this research aims to contribute to ongoing efforts for justice, healing, and meaningful reconciliation.

A Student's Question: Unveiling the Unseen

Several years ago an event happened which ignited my pursuit of following hauntings and ghostly matters in my research. This was a peculiar and pivotal pedagogical encounter that

occurred while I was working as a Teaching Assistant at Queen's University during the completion of a Master's degree in Cultural Studies. In 2015, I was leading tutorials for an undergraduate Gender Studies class—a course exploring gender from feminist and anti-racist perspectives. One week of the course was dedicated to addressing issues surrounding Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) in Canada. The syllabus provided a foundational understanding of systemic gendered colonial violence, including topics like the history of the Indian Act,⁷ the 60s scoop,⁸ Bill C-31,⁹ residential schools and forced assimilation.

During this week, I was faced with a challenging, yet revealing teaching moment. Most of my students, primarily middle/upper-class white individuals, were completely unaware of the phenomenon of MMIWG and had made it to their university years without ever having to encounter these startling truths. During our tutorial, a young woman in the class raised her hand and slowly asked me the following question with complete bewilderment: she asked me, “*but... where do they go!?*” Her question struck me deeply. It was impossible for her to fathom the

⁷ The Indian Act is a Canadian federal law enacted in 1876 that governs the relationship between the federal government and Indigenous peoples. It defines “status Indians,” regulates the administration of reserves, and controls aspects of Indigenous governance and land use. Historically, the Act has imposed restrictions on Indigenous cultural practices and autonomy, making it a contentious and criticized piece of legislation due to its paternalistic and assimilationist nature.

⁸ The 60s Scoop refers to the unauthorized mass apprehension of thousands of Indigenous children from their communities, who were then placed in the foster care system or adopted by non-Indigenous families throughout Canada from the 1960s to 80s. Those affected lost contact with their families and critical connections to their language, culture, and identity, and in many ways this process continues to this day through various child apprehension practices. One such example of this continuation is the practice of “birth alerts” which involves hospitals and social services flagging expectant mothers, particularly Indigenous women, deemed high-risk, often leading to the seizure of newborns at birth. This practice has disproportionately targeted Indigenous families, further perpetuating the legacy of state-mandated family separations.

⁹ Bill C31 reinstated status to women who lost it due to marrying a man without status. The bill posed problems not limited to: gender discrimination, and children of women who had regained their status did not automatically gain theirs. This bill also contributed to a hierarchy of Status Indians with different rights and benefits, and excluded those with mixed ancestry.

scope of this new revelation and its far-reaching implications. Her question continues to haunt me as it encapsulates a profound and complex inquiry—*Where do they go?* While we may know the answer in a general sense, this question opens up broader inquiries: Who disappears? From which spaces? Who is permitted to vanish without a trace? How can we trace these disappearances to uncover larger systemic truths? Who remains un-attuned, or tuned out entirely? What structures enable such disappearances to occur with little notice or consequence? What does this tell us about our societal values and who is deemed worthy of visibility? These questions demand a deeper exploration of the mechanisms and implications of disappearance.

Pursuing the student's spatial question of *where they go* also leads to a question of *where they are not*. The indeterminacy of the question *where do they go?* makes it vast in its simultaneous unanswerability and in its epic reveal. What does absence make known? How can absence itself be read as systemic forgetting and as an unwillingness to recognize disappearance as acts of violence? Can the repetition of artwork and performance dedicated to nonappearance and, by extension, to not forgetting, be inscribed into the spaces of the disappeared and challenge the logic of the archive? Within the context of marginalized communities who experience ongoing erasure and disenfranchisement, absence stands as a stark indictment of societal neglect and complicity. For the loved ones and communities of the disappeared, this absence is felt acutely and personally, underscoring the profound emotional and personal dimensions that may differ from more abstract or systemic interpretations.

When I question how absence can be read or perceived, it inherently assumes a specific positioning—one that can critique systemic structures but may not fully grasp the immediate, visceral experiences of those directly affected by disappearances. It is essential to acknowledge my own positionality as a white, educated, able-bodied, cis woman living in an urban core.

Recognizing this is important for an understanding of the impact of absence and the varied ways it is interpreted and addressed. This self-awareness allows for a more nuanced and respectful engagement with the complex realities of those who live with the consequences of systemic violence and disappearance.

The Politics of Disappearance in Performance Studies

Disappearance has long been a topic of interest in performance studies, and performance studies is uniquely situated to deeply engage this topic. Many performance scholars like Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, Diana Taylor and José Esteban Muñoz and others have emphasized the importance of studying performance, presence, and absence. Following my initial encounter with Phelan's infamous theoretical insistence in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* that performance is that which occurs always "at the vanishing point" or that which "cannot be saved, recorded, or documented" and is always and only in the present (146), I have not been able to get this idea out of my head—that invisibility can operate as a political power. I began this project with an almost obsessive questioning about the significance of disappearance within live performance and within the field of performance studies more broadly.

The thought that live performance disappears into memory and the realm of invisibility and the unconscious has plagued me. If performance is destined for disappearance, then by this logic, is not disappearance, too, a performance? An elemental question that started and sustained my inquiry, was what does performance studies do with actual disappearance? The veritable act of disappearing troubles the notion that performance can be only once occurring—that it is lost, un-archivable, vanished. Delimiting the life of performance to the present Phelan states, "performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation

of representation... performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance" (5). Influenced by Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*), Phelan understands performances' disappearance and ephemerality as its power and significance: what is not represented?

With its temporary nature, Phelan argues, performance can never be fully captured or reproduced making it all the more impactful and memorable. Phelan questions, "if we think of performance as the antithesis of preservation, do we limit ourselves to an understanding of performance predetermined by a cultural habituation to the patrilineal, West-identified (white) logic of the archive?" (97). Phelan questions whether greater visibility of the hitherto under-represented necessarily leads to enhanced political power and probes the complexities of visibility in political and cultural contexts. She argues that we pay more attention "to communicating nonvisible, rhetorically unmarked aspects of identity" (26). However, full withdrawal from representation also poses problems, especially because, for marginalized people and groups, "that is the position assigned to [them] in language with such ease" (28). Phelan's proposal—to consider the place of identities as being beyond the sole denominator of visibility in artistic practice—remains relevant and largely unresolved.

Throughout *Unmarked* Phelan grapples significantly with a psychoanalytic lens on the theme of disappearance, particularly focusing on how women are rendered structurally invisible within a phallogentric symbolic order that predominantly reflects white male norms (and creates everything in the image of these norms).¹⁰ Through her analysis, Phelan illuminates the ways in

¹⁰ Phelan's methodology in *Unmarked* is deeply informed by psychoanalytic theories. She particularly draws on Freud and Lacan, to explore identity in performance art. Her focus is on concepts of the "unmarked"—elements of identity and experience that evade traditional forms of representation. Phelan argues that the ephemeral nature of performance art, its ability to avoid permanent capture by cameras or archives, challenges phallogentric and patriarchal

which language and representational systems contribute to these invisibilities, suggesting that performance art holds the potential to make such structural invisibilities visible.

Theatre and performance studies scholar Laura Levin, in her book *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In*, expands on the concept of invisibility by examining how artists use blending in and camouflage as performative strategies, explored further in Chapter 1. Levin theorizes that blending in involves a dynamic interplay between visibility and invisibility, challenging normative structures by refusing permanence and fixed meanings. Levin questions what meanings are produced when artists deliberately seek to “blend in” to their spaces and environments, and encourages “reading camouflage as a *performance strategy*, as a theoretical frame for analyzing contemporary performance practices and the performance of self in everyday life” (5). The act of blending in which requires a process of “embedding oneself, or becoming embedded” into an environment (4) might be understood as “a performative strategy used by artists to work *against* a dominant perspective and the obfuscating frames produced by the media and the state” (141).¹¹ Levin argues that by blending into their

representations. This psychoanalytic lens highlights how performance expresses the invisible and marginalized, using transience as a form of resistance against established power structures.

¹¹ One artist who employs camouflage as aesthetic strategy is Widline Cadet. For example, her work “Nou Fè Pati, Nou Se, Nou Anvi (We Belong, We be, We Long)” uses camouflage to explore visibility and invisibility, aligning with Levin’s theories of blending in. Cadet’s work highlights the negotiation of space and identity, and uses camo as a form of resistance and empowerment. Cadet employs blending in within her work with layering, masking, doubling, and patterning techniques and uses the medium of photography to communicate the often-intangible feeling of being an immigrant, memory, and erasure. Digital manipulations produce an otherworldly effect to signify the multiplicities of past and present, those who leave, and what remains. Elsewhere, Nicholas Galanin’s “The Imaginary Indian” uses camo to critique cultural appropriation and misrepresentation of Indigenous culture, encouraging viewers to reconsider their assumptions about Indigenous art. Additionally, one of the examples I had originally chosen to include in this dissertation, but decided in the end not to, was Susan Harbage-Page’s performance photograph *English Garden Toile* from her “Postcards from Home” series, which uses camouflage to illustrate how racial violence operates. The photo features a person dressed in a Ku Klux Klan costume made from toile de jouy fabric, blending seamlessly into a wallpapered

environments, performers can highlight issues of visibility and identity while creating temporary zones of autonomy and resistance. Levin's analysis complements Phelan's by showing how invisibility and blending in can be used strategically to navigate and subvert power dynamics within various spaces.

While Phelan largely employs a psychoanalytic approach to explore these themes, my work diverges by emphasizing attunement, affect, embodiment, and the sensory dimensions of performance and tuning in to unseen elements at and beyond the physical site. This focus shifts from a psychoanalytic engagement with invisibility to a more embodied and experiential exploration. By highlighting how performance engages the senses and fosters a deeper emotional and physical resonance, I argue for the transformative potential of performance not just to expose but also to expand perceptions.

In her book *How to Disappear: Notes on Invisibility in a Time of Transparency*, Akiko Busch explores the concept of invisibility in a contemporary society obsessed with transparency and visibility. Like Phelan, Busch examines disappearance as a means of resisting oppression, control, and conformity. She argues that in a culture of oversharing and constant surveillance, invisibility can be a powerful tool for individuals to reclaim their autonomy and privacy. However, Busch also complicates this claim by reminding readers that invisibility is a form of privilege. Some individuals can choose to disappear or remain invisible, while others, such as undocumented workers, the homeless, and criminalized communities, must remain invisible out of necessity. For these groups, invisibility is not a choice but a survival tactic in a system that

background of the same design. Many viewers did not notice the figure at all when I observed it at the Atlanta High Art Museum, merely glancing at the photo and moving on. This familiar domestic fabric camouflages the KKK costume, creating a powerful commentary on how racial violence can be hidden in plain sight.

hyper-visibility and marginalizes them. Thus, Busch highlights the unequal distribution of the ability to remain invisible, contrasting those who can opt for invisibility with those forced into it by systemic forces. I kept coming back to this question of disappearance. What aesthetic power does disappearance itself hold, and how does it operate, and act?

José Esteban Muñoz contends that disappearance can be a powerful aesthetic strategy. He defines disidentification as the process of identifying with and through dominant ideologies, while also resisting and subverting them. Muñoz elaborates that this strategy of disidentification, much like disappearance itself, can disrupt the dominant gaze and create a sense of opacity with respect to what is being visually accessed. This connection underscores how both strategies can serve as forms of resistance, enabling marginalized individuals to navigate and subvert oppressive systems. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz also argues that ephemerality holds significance in queer performance, highlighting how fleeting moments and traces hold utopian potential and challenge normative structures. Muñoz suggests, “Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor” (225), and that these fleeting experiences offer a different way of being in the world. Several scholars complicate the narrative that performance is inherently connected to loss. They propose reinterpreting or subverting traditional forms of evidence by connecting them to ephemera, arguing that performance persists and transforms through its “messy and eruptive re-appearance” (McMillan 15). In this way, disappearance and reappearance are not just phenomena to be documented but powerful acts that challenge the very foundations of visibility and representation.

Many have critiqued Phelan (namely Auslander), and elsewhere built upon Phelan’s ideas about performance and its disappearance or continuance. Some notable examples include Rebecca Schneider who has challenged Phelan’s notion of disappearance, arguing that

performance leaves behind material traces and remnants that continue to circulate and have meaning (*Performing Remains*). For Schneider, it is what *remains* that can and should be engaged with continually as a charge to remember: memory, history, preservation, and live performance (26). Remains, she argues, perform their materiality, resisting the temporal logic of the once occurring. Particularly important to this dissertation, Schneider theorizes nonappearance as “resiliently eruptive, remaining through performance like so many ghosts at the door marked ‘disappeared’” (102). Performance becomes itself through an “eruptive re-appearance” as we will see throughout these pages. For Schneider (and for me), performance remains, but remains *differently*. Harvey Young contends that remains serve as crucial reminders of the violent nature of disappearance (189) and activate various embodied experiences. Throughout this dissertation, the ongoingness of remains and the quest to locate or identify them are central themes. Young has written about literal bodily remains in *Embodying Black Experience*, and the ongoing aftermath of racial terror against Black bodies, emphasizing how these remains act as both physical and metaphorical reminders of violence and disappearance. He argues that remains have a persistent presence, impacting and resonating with those who encounter them.

Remains compel individuals to engage physically and emotionally with the evidence of past violence, through a bodily activation (explored further in Chapter 2). This engagement with remains, particularly lynching remains in Young’s work, brings the past into the present, linking historical events with contemporary experiences. They provide tangible evidence of lives lost and the violent acts that caused their disappearance, demanding acknowledgment and reflection. Young employs a phenomenological approach to interactions with remains, focusing on how these encounters affect individuals on a sensory and emotional level (seeing, touching, feeling). He explains that when popular connotations of blackness are mapped onto or internalized by

Black people, the result is the creation of “*the black body*” an abstracted and conceptual figure that shadows or doubles the real one. This “black body,” rather than the actual flesh-and-blood body, becomes the target of racializing projections (7).¹²

Applying a phenomenological lens, or what Young calls “phenomenal blackness,” allows for deeper considerations of how memory, history, and the process of racial mythmaking operate. For Young, this approach elucidates the tension between the visibility of Black bodies as objects of racial projection and their invisibility as individuals with unique lived experiences. The remains of past violence make the Black body hyper-visible as a symbol while simultaneously rendering the individual’s personal experience invisible. Through this framework, Young demonstrates how remains not only recall historical violence but also shape the contemporary lived experiences of Black individuals by perpetuating the presence of this racialized figure.

Building on this framework, this dissertation expands understandings of the agency of nonappearance by exploring its relationship to sites of disappearance and violence, or the physical and metaphysical locations where these things play out, across time and/or into the future. Several scholars have analyzed the politics of trace—that which is left behind and the ways in which social protest and activist movements that respond to disappearances and violence against oppressed groups perform through cultural repertoires of embodied resistance. They have argued that ephemeral traces (like remaining signs, objects, and affects that linger after an event)

¹² Conceptual artist Glenn Ligon’s *Runaways* series, which utilizes text to recreate advertisements for escaped slaves, similarly compels viewers to engage with historical violence. By juxtaposing descriptions of contemporary Black individuals with the format of runaway slave notices, Ligon brings historical events into the present, prompting a reflection on the persistent racial stereotypes and the “black body” as a site of racial projection. Of the project, Ligon states, “*Runaways* is broadly about how an individual’s identity is inextricable from the way one is positioned in the culture, from the ways people see you, from historical and political contexts” (*Runaways*).

have import for performance studies and beyond (De León 2015; Fusco 1994; Muñoz 1996; Nagam 2017; Schneider 2011; Taylor 1997). Taylor considers embodied forms of cultural expression through privileging what she terms “the repertoire” rather than the archive—including “all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (20).¹³ Others have examined the power of public gatherings and protests in the context of contemporary political and economic conditions (Butler 2018, Taylor 2003), or identifying what apparatuses, non-metaphorically and daily, choreograph subjection, mobilization, and arrest (Lepecki 15). Further still, many have expanded the notions of performance beyond human presence to include objects, landscapes, and affects (Bennett 2010). These theories invite a deeper exploration of the hidden forces at play within our material (and immaterial) world.

In *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx discussed the vanishing trace of human labour in commodities and the animism of the object. Marx’s idea that social relations are concealed within objects, with the invisible trace of labour still present despite being unseen, is significant for understanding disappearance. Social relations are concealed within the object. The invisible trace is still present despite not being able to see it. Under capitalism for example, labour is hidden from view in the commodity, allowing exploitation as the worker’s effort and time are reduced to abstract value, the wage. This concept relates to my study’s focus on what is held in the

¹³ Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor, in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, argues that Phelan’s emphasis on disappearance overlooks how performance serves as a mode of preserving and transmitting cultural memory and identity, particularly within marginalized communities. Similarly, feminist theatre critic Jill Dolan, in *Utopia in Performance* challenges Phelan’s ideas by asserting that performance can bring visibility to what was previously unseen or absent, expanding the role of presence in performance. African Diaspora Studies professor Hershini Young, in *Illegible Will: Coercive Spectacles of Labor in South Africa and the Diaspora*, critiques Phelan’s notion of disappearance as being too restrictive, arguing that it fails to account for how performance can facilitate re-appearance and the re-emergence of marginalized identities and histories.

“vanishing.” Marx’s ideas around the vanishing trace of human labour relate to the questions I had been asking myself: Who gets to be worked to death? Who is essential and when? I came to studying disappearance by following an interest in disposability.

For this dissertation, my interest lies not in critiquing Phelan, but on expanding the frames of visibility to deconstruct the binary between disappearing and remaining. Expanding on this deconstruction, Butler’s *Frames of War* introduces the concept of a “grievable life,” highlighting how societal norms determine which lives are recognized as worth grieving. Butler argues that lives are framed within a “field of perceptible reality” which determines whose suffering is visible and whose is ignored. Butler states, “the differential allocation of grievability.... operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human” (38). These frames, often invisible and unspoken, act as a forcible dramaturgy of the state that is typically unrepresentable. As a result, there are always “absent organizing features” within the frame. The framing of spaces of disappearance and the language used to describe them work together to produce an “interpretive matrix” for what is seen (79). Similarly, Jacques Rancière, in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, explores regimes of visibility, which determine what becomes visible or invisible in specific social and political contexts. These regimes shape sensory experiences and power dynamics by defining who can participate in society and who remains excluded. Rancière argues that challenging these regimes has emancipatory potential, as reconfiguring visibility can empower marginalized groups and lead to new forms of political and social organization, ideas I expand on in Chapter 1. These scholars illustrate the complexities of disappearance and visibility, providing the theoretical groundwork for my thinking.

This dissertation is significantly influenced by the work of Saidiya Hartman (*Lose Your Mother, Scenes of Subjection*) and Christina Sharpe (*In the Wake, Ordinary Notes*). While scholars in Performance Studies have already engaged with the work of Hartman and Sharpe, my project seeks to push these theoretical interventions further by examining how their concepts of disappearance, haunting, and the afterlives of violence can be reconceptualized through a performance lens. By placing these theorists in dialogue with Performance Studies, I aim to reshape binary understandings of disappearance, not merely as an absence but as an active, ongoing process of erasure and re-emergence. My intervention explores how performance and attunement, as temporal and embodied practices, engage with these lingering absences and creates new possibilities for presence. In doing so, this project offers a new framework for how disappearance can be understood as both a historical condition and a generative site of speculative possibility within Performance Studies.

Hartman's research delves deeply into the lived experiences of enslaved people and the lingering effects of slavery; she explores how performance and disappearance are intertwined in the lives of Black people. By introducing critical concepts such as 'redress' (in *Lose Your Mother* and *Scenes of Subjection*), Hartman underscores the pivotal role of performance in addressing and potentially healing the historical trauma and violence inflicted upon Black individuals by slavery and its enduring legacies. Performance, in this sense, is not merely a mode of expression but an active process of reckoning with history, a method of bearing witness to the ongoing effects of racial violence. Hartman's concept of "speculative possibility" (*Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* 14) is central to this work, where performance becomes a vehicle for imagining new futures for marginalized people that might otherwise seem inaccessible or impossible within dominant historical narratives. Throughout this dissertation, speculative

possibility is not only a critical concept but also a methodological tool and an experimental framework that is sampled throughout. By engaging with speculative thought, the dissertation itself becomes an act of imagining what lies beyond the visible and material constraints of the present. This approach challenges the reader to consider how performance as speculation opens up spaces for re-imagining life beyond the historical limitations imposed by colonialism and systemic oppression. In this sense, speculative possibility is both an intellectual experiment and a performative methodology.

Sharpe's work complements and extends Hartman's theories by focusing on the concept of "the wake," which refers to the ongoing effects of slavery and racial oppression on Black lives. Sharpe examines how the legacy of slavery continues to shape the present, creating what she terms "wake work" which involves engaging with the persistent impacts of historical traumas and addressing them through creative and performative means. Sharpe's analysis of social hauntings highlights the continuous entanglement of the past with the present, underscoring the need to confront and work through these reverberations. Together, Hartman and Sharpe's writings on ongoing aftermaths of violence reveal the importance of performance as both a tool for addressing and redressing these traumas, and a space for imagining alternative futures. In their frameworks, performance does not simply represent past traumas but actively stages a re-engagement with what has been lost or rendered invisible by historical violence. Turning to the work of Hartman and Sharpe enables this dissertation to explore how performance can disrupt conventional understandings of disappearance by foregrounding re-emergence and reclamation. Their concepts of redress, speculative possibility, and wake work provide critical frameworks for understanding how the past shapes the present and how creative practices can

offer transformative pathways for healing and reconfiguring historical narratives, as explored in Chapter 2.

Clearly, ephemerality is a political issue and this brief genealogy of theories of disappearance frames my exploration of agency and nonappearance and the significance of traces left behind in sites of disappearance and violence. In the following pages, I investigate how artists, community activists, and performers use disappearance and unseen forces as aesthetic strategies to challenge dominant power structures and highlight issues of erasure. By attuning to sites of disappearance, this work aims to uncover how such attunement can be used to conjure and re-member the disappeared.

Hauntology and Inheritance

The concept of hauntology, initially theorized by philosopher Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*—where he famously draws on the ghost of King Hamlet in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*—and later expanded by cultural theorist Mark Fisher (*Ghosts of My Life*) and Avery Gordon (*Ghostly Matters*), provides a critical framework for understanding historical traumas that extend beyond the conventional boundaries of past and present, or the living and the dead. In *Hamlet*, the appearance of the ghost signifies how unresolved injustices and unfinished business from the past continue to shape the present. Hauntology, building on this idea, posits that the past haunts the present, influencing contemporary cultures, languages, and collective memories. Gordon describes this phenomenon as a “seething presence” (8), emphasizing the persistent influence of past events on current realities. Fisher, on the other hand, views hauntology as a crisis of social imagination resulting from the collapse of late capitalism, therefore haunting lost futures. Derrida’s notion of hauntology, which combines “haunt” and “ontology,” fundamentally

addresses the presence and influence of specters. According to Derrida, following ghosts reveals injustices, making it an “ethical and political imperative” (36), prompting us to acknowledge and address historical wrongs, offering an entry point into ethical future-building. For Derrida, the ghost’s arrival signifies a rupture in time, as it embodies the past, present, and future simultaneously. This concept underscores a practice of “being-with ghosts,” involving a politics of memory, inheritance, and generational responsibility, aiming for justice that transcends the living present (xix). The concept of hauntology not only challenges our understanding of time and presence but also calls us to a profound engagement with history and memory, urging a reimagining of justice that honours the spectral influences shaping our contemporary world. Performance, as a temporal and embodied medium, resonates deeply with hauntology, as it engages with both absence and presence. It becomes a method through which the past is reanimated, demanding an ethical response from the present, thereby creating space for the possibility of transformation and redress.

Similarly, Gordon asserts that ghosts are not merely supernatural entities but social figures that draw attention to enduring social violences demanding acknowledgment. Gordon explains that investigating ghosts can lead to the dense intersections of history and subjectivity that shape social life (8). The affective remains of violent colonial disappearances, marked by systemic erasure and the failure to care, transmit a troubling knowledge of historical injustices. These invisible actions, performed by systemic forces through repeated patterns, often go unnoticed yet profoundly impact daily life, leaving residual traces. Understanding these absences as systemic forgetting and recognizing disappearance as acts of violence is crucial. Art and community engagement play pivotal roles in re-inscribing and remembering these erased

histories. Attuning to these interlocking climates of violence can reveal the underpinnings of the current moment, potentially guiding us towards a more just and equitable future.

In her book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Gordon has theorized that hauntings are a way to understand the lingering presence of historical violence and disappearance. This concept is central to my dissertation, which examines the persistent presence of past violence and disappearance.¹⁴ Gordon, alongside other scholars and artists¹⁵ engaged with in this dissertation, argues that hauntings reveal how the past continues to inhabit the present, especially in the contexts of colonialism, slavery, and ongoing state violence. For Gordon, hauntings embody the experiences and memories of those who have been disappeared, marginalized, or silenced, providing a way to understand the interplay between the visible and

¹⁴ This idea resonates with various philosophies of time, such as those by Henri Bergson, who challenges linear understandings of time and investigates temporal concurrence. Bergson's notion of *durée*, or lived time, as discussed in *Time and Free Will*, posits that the past is never truly absent but coexists with the present, influencing and shaping it. Similarly, in *Matter and Memory*, Bergson explores how memory actively shapes the present moment, further enriching the understanding of hauntings as not just remnants of the past but active presences that continually affect the present. This perspective complements ideas of haunting by emphasizing the persistence of the past within the ongoing flow of time.

¹⁵ The topic of ghosts and hauntings has been explored by numerous scholars and artists. In 2017, an issue of *MICE Magazine*, co-edited by Sophie Le-Phat Ho and Ronald Rose-Antoinette and titled "Ghost Intimacies," posed questions about the practices and hauntologies necessary to give voice to silenced ghosts and critique the exclusionary impacts of racism, ableism, patriarchy, transphobia, and homophobia. Cultural theorist Fred Moten, in his work *In the Break*, discusses ghosts in the context of Blackness, performance, and resistance, analyzing how Black cultural practices propose alternative modes of knowledge and existence, framing the spectral as a realm of both loss and possibility. Alice Rayner, in her book *Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre*, examines how ghosts disrupt the usual temporal and spatial dimensions of performance, with theatre inherently engaging with ghostly presences through repetitive acts and the resurgence of past performances. *Theatre and Ghosts* by Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin explores the intersection of theatre and ghostly phenomena. The book examines how ghosts are represented and experienced in theatrical performances, delving into themes of haunting, memory, and the supernatural. Marvin Carlson's *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* considers the theatre as inherently haunted, with each performance layered with echoes of previous shows. Carlson offers practical insights into how these ghostly presences shape the phenomenological experience of theatre for both practitioners and audiences.

invisible, the material and immaterial. In my research, I frequently return to the notion of ongoingness, questioning how we grapple with these hauntings and the responsibilities they impose on us. By attuning to these hauntings and lingering traces, uncover new forms of knowledge production that incorporate the affective and create space for new imaginings. Like Gordon's hauntings, the case studies, performances, and texts I engage with insist that the past persists into the present, refusing to be forgotten.

This dissertation engages with the traces left by historical and ongoing acts of violence and disappearance. As a white settler, I write from a position of entanglement and complicity in colonial violence. Acknowledging the high stakes of discussing disappearance as a form of performance, I reflect on my own responsibilities within these colonial realities and ongoing legacies. By focusing on these hauntings, my research aims to highlight the enduring impact of historical injustices and explore how performance and cultural practices can offer means of redress and possibly healing. Through this lens, my work aligns with Gordon's idea that hauntings are not just about what is absent or invisible but also about what continues to affect and shape the present. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which past violence and disappearance reverberate through time, challenging us to confront and address these legacies in meaningful ways. Drawing on Gordon's work, feminist scholar Amber Dean argues that "the following of ghosts is a practice of inheritance that requires a different approach to doing academic research" (59), one that draws our attention to the affective relations produced by injustice, disappearance, and violence.

The figure of the ghost is somewhat fraught in popular consciousness especially when applied to historical violence and disappearance. Talking about "ghosts" becomes particularly troubling when discussing Indigenous and Black cultures, who have been historically subjected

to erasure and invisibility. As I elaborate further in Chapter 1, there is a significant risk of ignoring the material and political realities of disappearance and violence by focusing solely on the immaterial aspects, such as traces. It is crucial to constantly bear this in mind to avoid reducing the existence of those who are no longer physically present to mere spectrality.

Spectral Relationality

Throughout the dissertation, I use terms like “absence,” “trace,” “remains,” or “haunting” to acknowledge the complex and nuanced ways in which the past and the absent continue to shape our understanding of the present. I apply a concept of “spectral relationality,” putting these two words together because I am interested in the relationships between these historical hauntings asking, how is one haunting related to another? This approach enables an exploration of the interconnectedness of historical and contemporary forms of violence and disappearance, ensuring that the material and immaterial aspects are considered. Highlighting this concept, a recent call for papers in *Performance Research* Journal on the theme “On Ghosts” quoted Jane Bennett, emphasizing that “through a colonial habit of mind, which subjugated, silenced and ignored the suffering of those less-than-humans, we are now ghosting also the ‘vibrant matters’ that are full of life and agency on this planet” (xvi). The editors of this issue (Felipe Cervera, Kyoko Iwaki, Eero Laine, and Kristof van Baarle) caution that if we continue to focus only on human-centric presence, legibility, and visibility, we will neglect the many precarious individuals affected by invisible and incalculable ghostly matters and spectral influences. This viewpoint underscores the importance of transcending the traditional binary between the material and immaterial aspects, acknowledging that both are intricately linked in the contexts of disappearance, violence, their consequences, and aftermaths.

This dissertation does not aim to directly map or connect the seemingly disparate case studies it explores. Instead, it is curious about the shared relationalities touched by absence and the complex ecologies of violence that operate through space and time. My project examines broader social processes that enable, conceal, and frame our thinking (or not thinking) about disappearances or things that occur out of sight. While I trace connections between these instances, however spectral, the goal is to uncover a murky constellation. By examining what these artistic case studies reveal about specific sites of nonappearance, I focus on cultivating practices of attunement to the more-than-human world, embodied care, grief, and spectral relationality through deep time. This approach emphasizes the enduring affective impact beyond the physical site, acknowledging the emotional and relational residues that persist and shape our understanding of disappearance.

Much previous work in Environmental Humanities has been done by scholars employing ecological approaches in art and performance, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and non-human realms. The work of Jane Bennett (*Vibrant Matter*), Amanda White (*Ecologies in Practice*), Anna Tsing (*Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*), Amanda Boetzkes (*Plastic Capitalism*), among many others, explores ecological questions by crossing the lines that demarcate human from animal, social from material, and objects and bodies from techno-ecological networks. Humanistic accounts of political representation and ethical recognition are re-examined in consideration of other species.

My work with relationality and attunement to elemental qualities at site could be positioned adjacent to eco-somatics, a field of embodied research and practice that cultivates ancestral technologies and nurtures sensory reciprocity between body and earth. Scholars such as David Abram (*Becoming Animal*) and Petra Kuppers (*Eco Soma*), along with practitioners like

Satu Palokangas, Irmgard Bartenieff, Anna Halprin, Peter Levine, Deidre Sklar, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (*Sensing, Feeling, and Action*), and Andrea Olsen (*Body and Earth*), have deeply engaged with eco-somatic methodologies. Emphasizing the interconnections between body, environment, and the senses, they explore how somatic practices can foster a deeper awareness of ecological relationships, highlighting the ways in which our physical and sensory experiences are intertwined with the natural world. Through their contributions, they have advanced the understanding of how somatic awareness can lead to more sustainable and embodied ecological practices.

With roots in Indigenous knowledge systems, this tradition combines the work of somatics and ecology to create a framework for developing our felt sense of self to include the relational field of our living ecology and cosmos. Eco-somatics encourage people to develop a deep, experiential relationship with nature, emphasizing the importance of immersing ourselves in natural environments and engaging all our senses to connect with the earth, plants, animals, and the elements. This practice involves paying attention to our senses and tuning in to the sensory information that surrounds us. It encourages sustainable practices and a sense of responsibility towards the natural world. My research builds on these perspectives, integrating embodied practices to highlight ecological awareness and sensory attunement.

The elemental traces of violent disappearances, tragedies, and erasures act as relational kin, continuously haunting the present and compelling us to (hopefully) take action. I investigate the relationship between these disparate disappearances across time and space by exploring artworks that engage with them through performance, attunement, memory, and embodiment. It is grounded in thinking more of ecologies of disappearance—networks of absence that communicate through hauntings and utterances, forming a spectral relationality. This concept is

intertwined with sociocultural ecosystems of racial capitalism, slavery and its legacies, current migration politics, and the climate crisis.

Methodology

This interdisciplinary project navigates the crossroads of theatre and performance studies, contemporary visual art, embodied practice, and critical memory studies, embracing a process-based approach that remains dynamic and continuously evolving. My methodological approach includes conversational interviews with artists and community activists, personal observations from performances and artworks, archival research, and site visits. The centrality of site visits for this research cannot be understated, particularly given my interest in exploring how disappearance is articulated through space. In some ways, my strategy of site visits is akin to conducting an ethnography of the spaces themselves. This immersive process involves spending time at site, being present, and attuning to it. I focus on understanding what it means to engage with these sites in ways that open us to their lingering affects and impacts. This approach requires recognizing that the site's influence extends beyond what is visible, encompassing haptic and sensory dimensions that shape our experience and understanding. During these visits, I engaged deeply with each location, not merely as a bystander, but as an active participant in the space. This involves an immersive process where I spend substantial time at each site, returning repeatedly—sometimes over the course of several years. This repeated engagement is essential for developing a nuanced understanding of the space and its multiple layers of meaning.

At each site, I made detailed observations of the surroundings, which included taking extensive field notes, journaling my immediate impressions, and engaging in conversations with individuals who interact with or inhabit these spaces—often this led to fruitful surprises, twists,

and turns. These interactions were vital, as they enriched my understanding of the site's social dynamics and historical resonance. Additionally, I often created site-specific responses such as poems and drawings, which serve both as a form of reflective practice and a way to capture the ephemeral qualities of the space. This site-specific approach is not just about physical presence; it's about attuning to the spirit and the stories embedded within the space. By seeing and experiencing the works firsthand in their intended settings, I gain insights that are inaccessible through other research methods. This firsthand engagement allows me to perceive how the spatial configuration, the ambient environment, and the socio-political context influence the manifestation and reception of the artworks and performances. I incorporate autotheory,¹⁶ a method that merges personal narrative with theoretical analysis. This approach allows me to intertwine my own experiences and reflections with critical theory, providing a more intimate and embodied perspective on the subjects studied. By doing so, I can offer insights that are deeply rooted in both lived experience and academic discourse, thus creating a richer and more nuanced understanding of the topics at hand.

My research draws also from a variety of performance practices and reflections on everyday encounters. Performance studies is an ideal home for interdisciplinary research because it allows scholars to explore the performative enactment of cultural identities in daily life, examining how these identities are constructed and expressed through various practices. Performance studies also investigates the roles and impacts of spaces, objects, elements, and performances, analyzing what they can do in different contexts. This interdisciplinary is

¹⁶ Some of the texts that have influenced my approach to using autotheory as a method include Lauren Fournier's *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021), Christina Sharpe's *Ordinary Notes* (2023), Jackie Wang's *Alien Daughter's Walk Into the Sun* (2023), and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015).

particularly well-suited to my scholarship, as it provides the flexibility to integrate diverse methods and perspectives. It supports the study of embodied practices, somatic techniques, and attunement, which are central to my research. By bridging gaps between theory and practice, performance studies offers a rich framework for exploring complex social, cultural, and artistic phenomena.

Dean notes that tracing absent presence is a “practice that demands both a different way of knowing and a different way of (re)producing or animating that knowledge, one that attempts to account for significant theoretical shifts in the humanities and everyday life” (64). While it could be argued that all critical analysis aims to produce shifts in understanding and ways of knowing, this dissertation emphasizes a specific tradition within the humanities and performance studies: “writing towards disappearance.”¹⁷ This tradition intertwines writing and performing with theoretical inquiry, aiming not just to extend comprehension but to fundamentally animate and reconfigure how knowledge is produced and perceived. By engaging with this approach, my work seeks to contribute to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how we trace and represent absent presence, echoing broader artistic and critical efforts to shift perspectives and challenge conventional ways of knowing.¹⁸

¹⁷ Peggy Phelan and Rebecca Schneider discuss “writing towards disappearance” (*Unmarked, and Performance Remains*). This concept is used to emphasize the ephemeral nature of performance art, advocating for a method of performative writing and documentation that embraces transience rather than fixing it in time. This approach challenges traditional historical narratives, acknowledges the presence and absence in performances, and promotes the creation of alternative archives. Schneider suggests that writing about performance should reflect its fleeting qualities, embracing the complexities inherent in the art form. Jane Blocker also discusses “writing towards disappearance” in *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile*. She emphasizes acknowledging the limits of what can be captured and preserved in performance art, advocating for a historiography that embraces ephemerality and ambiguity.

¹⁸ This also brings to mind Hélène Cixous’s method for writing women into existence which involves developing a new form of writing, what she calls *écriture féminine*, an emergent writing technique that is rooted in women’s bodily and emotional experiences. By embracing fluidity,

Artworks and sites have exerted influence on me, embodying what artist-scholar David Garneau terms “extra rational aesthetic action,” a concept describing artworks that, through visceral and intuitive means, aim to initiate change in individuals, altering their moods, attitudes, dispositions, and sensibilities (2). Emphasizing a relational and intuitive approach, my methodology also encompasses associative poetic reflections as a way of enacting speculative knowledge sharing. Incorporating performative writing into my research, I align myself with a lineage of scholars and practitioners who leverage this approach as a tool to story otherwise. Performative writing, as identified by Della Pollack, “is evocative. Performative writing operates metaphorically to render absence present” (80), minding the gap between the known and the not yet known. As she puts it, “The writer and the world’s bodies intertwine in evocative writing, in intimate co-performance of language and experience” (80). Performative writing, as a practice, allows a writer to engage more holistically with their subject matter, embracing the fluidity between author, text, and reader, and fostering an experiential understanding that traditional academic prose might miss. This method paves the way for a creative synthesis of ideas and experiences.

In a way, I have also approached this writing from a curatorial perspective, deliberately experimenting with combining case studies and ideas that might not typically be paired together. The case studies in this dissertation are meant to be understood in relation to one another; much like the pieces in an exhibition, they collectively contribute to the overall experience and narrative. Applying a curatorial lens, I approach this process with care and tenderness—arranging, handling, hosting, interpreting, visiting, and attending to various elements such as

multiplicity, and non-linearity, Cixous seeks to subvert the patriarchal structures of language and literature, challenging binary oppositions and reclaiming women’s voices. Her work, particularly in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, serves as an example of writing towards intangibles.

visual artworks, memorials, monuments, performances, theories, relationships, and literature. By placing these objects, case studies, and artworks in conversation, I am able to create connections that might not otherwise occur, allowing them to interact and influence each other in meaningful ways. Curators like Maria Lind (*Selected*) and Hans Ulrich Obrist (*Everything*) have discussed how curatorial methodologies can inform research and writing, suggesting that curating can offer new ways of organizing knowledge and foster interdisciplinary dialogues and platforms for exchange, rather than static presentations. Lind, in particular, emphasizes the narrative importance of how artworks and images interact within the context of an exhibition, a pivotal perspective in understanding the dialogue between artworks and images within the exhibition space, allowing for deeper, more nuanced understandings to emerge. Additionally, many other critical curators—such as Candice Hopkins, Tarah Hogue, Wanda Nanibush, Andrea Fatona, Monika Kin Gagnon, Toleen Touq, Liz Ikiriko,¹⁹ Emelie Chhangur—explore the concept of the exhibition as a medium of performance in itself rather than merely a collection of individual pieces. This idea is important for understanding why and how images and artworks “converse” with each other within this dissertation.

Importantly, this work is also shaped by what I have chosen *not* to include. To avoid sensationalizing violent histories and re-depicting trauma, I have chosen to exclude certain

¹⁹ From March 2022 to June 2023, curators Liz Ikiriko and Toleen Touq led a curatorial working group titled “Ways of Attuning,” demonstrating the critical use of attunement in curatorial practice. The group’s focus on curatorial strategies and relational methodologies highlights the importance of attunement as a tool for creating meaningful connections between art, artists, and audiences. Their approach emphasizes relationality, accountability, and a commitment to addressing race, place, class, ability, sexuality, and gender—elements often neglected in traditional curatorial and academic settings. This practice aims to foster a more inclusive and responsive curatorial approach that transcends conventional academic boundaries while engaging with the global contemporary art world. <https://criticaldistance.ca/program/ways-of-attuning-a-curatorial-study-group/>.

details, images, and case studies.²⁰ These omissions are intentional and reflect my commitment to ethical storytelling.²¹ In *Venus in Two Acts*, Hartman asks, is it possible to tell a story about violence “that doesn’t delight and titillate, but instead ventures toward another mode of writing?” (7). In some instances, I made the difficult decision to cut interviews and artist projects entirely that overly emphasize violence, thus avoiding the “terrible spectacle” that Hartman (*Scenes* 1) warns against (discussed further in Chapter 2). I strive for an “attentiveness whenever possible to a kind of aesthetic that escaped violence whenever possible” (“Beauty Is”), an approach for which Black studies and feminist scholar Christina Sharpe advocates.

Attunement: Interconnections of Absence and Presence

In this dissertation, attunement is presented as a methodology that involves tuning in to what site itself bears and reveals. It emphasizes the power of the unseen and attempts to listen and be sensitive to more-than-human forces. In developing a methodology centred on attunement, I draw on the work of various scholars across affect studies, sound studies,

²⁰ In some ways, this aligns with a politics of refusal that several scholars have engaged, which addresses acts of resistance against dominant cultural narratives and power structures. Theorists such as Audra Simpson (*Mohawk Interruptus*), Glen Coulthard (*Red Skin, White Masks*), and Jack Halberstam (*The Queer Art of Failure*) have significantly contributed to this discourse. Their works explore how refusal can be a form of political action, challenging imposed identities and narratives, and creating spaces for alternative forms of knowledge and existence. For me, this is mainly about refusing to re-create trauma and reiterate narratives of violence from sensationalized accounts.

²¹ In “Introduction: Performing Refusal/Refusing to Perform,” Lilian G. Mengesha and Lakshmi Padmanabhan explore the concept of performing refusal. The authors describe how deliberate acts of non-compliance and non-productivity can challenge societal expectations and oppressive systems. This form of performance emphasizes bodily behaviors that reject participation in normative structures, advocating for modes of existence that resist categorization and control. Mengesha and Padmanabhan highlight the potential of non-reproductivity and opacity to subvert the expectations placed on minoritarian subjects, critiquing the commodification of labour and identity within capitalist frameworks (“Introduction”).

environmental humanities, and feminist and Indigenous thought. Scholars like Kathleen Stewart, whose concept of “Atmospheric Attunements” emphasizes responsiveness to subtle environmental elements, inform this approach. Stewart’s book *Ordinary Affects* emphasizes attention to subtle, everyday experiences and sensations much like the method of attunement advocated here—an immersive and embodied engagement with the environment to uncover the underlying dynamics at play. My contribution extends Stewart’s affective exploration to think alongside Sharpe’s theories of atmospheres of violence in what she calls “the weather,” where racial violence is pervasive as climate (*In the Wake* 106), as explored further in Chapters 2 and 4.

I also draw on Erin Manning’s suggestion that attunement can occur between non-human things as well, arguing that “affective attunement need not be solely located on a human scale. If conceived beyond human interaction, affective attunement might well describe the relational environment co-created by movement and sound” (11). This idea of attuning with more-than-human realities is central to my research and is explored throughout this dissertation.

Theorists like Lauren Berlant (*Cruel Optimism*), Ann Cvetkovich (*Depression: A Public Feeling*) and Sara Ahmed (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*), Sianne Ngai (*Ugly Feelings*) have created affective frameworks to explore the emotional and political dimensions that shape sensory experiences. They examine how feelings like depression, boredom, (dis)orientations, numbness, or feelings of personal powerlessness can reflect larger manifestations of political conditions. Building on this, Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson’s concept of “sensory veracity” emphasizes the role of sensory experience in fostering understanding and reconciliation, particularly in the context of intercultural performances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. In these performances, sound and visual art are used to convey the complexities of Indigenous histories and the ongoing impacts of colonialism. Robinson’s approach prioritizes

genuine sensory engagements that reflect Indigenous perspectives, moving beyond superficial gestures. However, Robinson is careful to point out the limitations of affective responses in achieving meaningful reconciliation.

In his article, “Intercultural Art Music and the Sensory Veracity of Reconciliation,” Robinson critiques how intercultural performances often generate strong emotional responses, leading audiences to feel a sense of reconciliation through affect alone. He refers to this as “sensory veracity”—a felt sense of reconciliation that bypasses critical engagement with ongoing colonial histories. According to Robinson, such affective experiences can risk becoming “self-complete,” where the emotional response from the audience stands in for deeper post-performance dialogue or actions addressing colonial history. He writes, “The experience of historical redress intended to take place through post-show audience dialogue... was obsolesced by the self-complete affective reconciliation experienced by audience members in the concert itself” (121). While these performances are undoubtedly impactful, Robinson argues that the feeling that participation alone constitutes having “done something” reduces the encounter to a fleeting emotional experience rather than the continuous, sustained effort reconciliation demands. This is where the distinction between sensory veracity and attunement becomes crucial. Attunement, as I conceptualize it, requires a sense of responsibility and ongoing ethical engagement with the histories of violence and the more-than-human world. Emotional connection alone cannot achieve redress; attunement must lead to ethical action to avoid foreclosing the critical processes required for any hope of reconciliation.

Robinson’s work underscores both the power and the limitations of sensory experiences in promoting empathy and meaningful reconciliation between Indigenous and settler communities. Importantly, these theorists collectively caution against prioritizing affective

experiences over tangible political action. They warn of the dangers of equating feeling good with achieving justice, highlighting the risk of substituting affective responses for substantial political engagement.

These critical foundations are crucial for a methodology centred on examining affect in relation to violent histories. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* investigates the texture of emotional experience and its role in identity formation, informing how I think about attunement and its capacity to reveal the interplay of affect in performance. This approach goes beyond just the physical presence at a site to engage with the lingering emotional and affective residues of past events, thereby addressing what remains in disappearance. Brian Massumi, in *Parables for the Virtual*, delves into the immediacy and pre-cognitive aspects of affect, suggesting that affect operates at a level of intensity that precedes conscious thought. This focus on the non-representational aspects of experience emphasizes the importance of bodily responses and the immediacy of sensory perception. Massumi argues that affect is autonomous, operating independently of the narratives we construct, which can make attunement to specific sites and experiences challenging. However, this also supports attunement methodologies by highlighting the significance of non-verbal, embodied interactions with the past. Affect theory sees our world as shaped not simply by narratives and arguments but also by nonlinguistic effects—by mood, atmosphere, and feelings. So, while Massumi's arguments might suggest that affect *complicates* attunement, his theories also underscore the potential of attunement to provide a deeper, more visceral understanding of historical violence.

Sound studies experts such as Jennifer Lynn Stoeber (*The Sonic Color Line*) and Nina Eidsheim (*The Race of Sound*) and sound artists like Raven Chacon²² delve into the politics of listening emphasizing how listening practices are culturally and historically situated. Robinson has significantly advanced critical listening studies by examining how listening practices can be decolonized to respect Indigenous ways of knowing. His book *Hungry Listening* is critical of Western listening modes that marginalize Indigenous sonic practices and suggests alternative approaches that honour Indigenous epistemologies. The exhibition he and Candice Hopkins curated entitled “Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts,”²³ highlighted these listening methods. Curating contemporary Indigenous art focused on the power of resonant sound challenges conventional listening practices and advocates for respectful engagement with Indigenous perspectives. The “Soundings” exhibition influenced me in the early phases of this dissertation by emphasizing listening as an active, sensory, political practice and informed my methodology of attunement.

I have thought a lot about feminist theorist Tina Campt’s call to engage with photographic images beyond the strictly visual, tuning into their affective frequencies. While

²² Raven Chacon, a Diné composer, musician, and artist, has significantly contributed to critical listening studies through his innovative performances. He is the first Native American to win a Pulitzer Prize for Music, awarded in 2022 for his composition “Voiceless Mass.” Chacon’s work often explores the intersections of sound, silence, and noise, using these elements to engage with cultural and political issues. Chacon examines how listening practices can be decolonized to respect Indigenous ways of knowing and emphasizes the need for alternative listening approaches that honour Indigenous epistemologies, offering a critique of Western modes of listening that often marginalize Indigenous sonic practices.

²³ The iteration of *Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts* (2019), curated by Candice Hopkins and Dylan Robinson that I saw in Kingston, ON featured newly commissioned scores by Indigenous artists exploring decolonization through sound. The exhibition included works by artists such as Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Cheryl L’Hirondelle, and Tania Willard. The scores took multiple forms—video, objects, and performances—and were activated throughout the exhibition by performers, musicians, and visitors, creating an accumulative experience of sound and action.

Campt is writing specifically within the context of Black diasporic photographs, her idea of attuning to the affective frequencies has informed my approach to observing performance and visiting site. Campt's method of resonantly listening to images allows for a deeper engagement with the emotional and historical tones that these images carry. This approach is particularly relevant to a dissertation focused on attuning to sites of violence because it encourages a multi-sensory engagement with its material traces, acknowledging the unseen—going beyond the visible to engage with the emotional and affective residues of past events.

By engaging with these ecological approaches in art and performance, this dissertation aims to uncover how attunement to environmental and sensory dimensions can foster deeper awareness. Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, which emphasizes the relationship between human bodies and the environment, and Timothy Morton's dark ecology, which challenges anthropocentric perspectives, provide critical insights into ecological interconnections. These theories are particularly relevant to the dissertation's key concerns, as they provide a nuanced analysis of how these often unseen interconnections impact human experience, a theme explored in greater depth in Chapter 4. Other scholars like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Kim TallBear emphasize relational and ecological perspectives, enriching the methodology with Indigenous knowledge systems and environmental justice considerations. Together, these theorists contribute to a nuanced understanding of attunement by highlighting the significance of emotional and sensory experiences, emphasizing relational and atmospheric dimensions.

Practices of attunement as discussed in this dissertation are grounded in a holistic approach that extends beyond creating participatory social situations. Attunement involves a heightened sense of attention, sensitivity, mindfulness, and receptiveness. It means deeply

listening with one's whole being and relating to the world through our senses, emotions, and bodily experiences in addition to our cognitive processes. While attunement in art historical discourse might best be associated with Relational Aesthetics, which stresses the interactive nature of art involving the viewer, artwork, and the artist, my study proposes a significant departure from that framework. Relational artists primarily create situations rather than objects. Art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational works as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space" (113). He elaborates that relational artworks serve as "ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist" (13). In this tradition, artists create situations—environments for interaction—aiming to cultivate social interactivity and community engagement.

My understanding of attunement, particularly in relation to the works I discuss hereafter, goes beyond merely creating interactive situations. At its core is a process of co-attunement—a reciprocal, entangled relationship between performer and witness. This co-attunement emphasizes the multi-directionality of attention and the mutual exchange of perception and sensation, as both performer (broadly defined) and audience engage in a shared process of heightened awareness. Explicitly naming this dynamic of co-attunement allows for a deeper understanding of how these practices foster not just interactivity, but a more embodied connection between human and non-human entities, as well as between artists and their audiences.

This perspective aligns with Claire Bishop's critique of relational art, where she questions, "What types of relations are being produced, for whom and why?" (65). Bishop challenges the depth of interaction in relational practices, suggesting that they often result in

superficial engagements that fail to confront social norms or power structures. My work takes up this challenge by emphasizing that co-attunement must be more than mere interaction; it requires a critical, embodied engagement that directly addresses the underlying forces shaping social, political, and ecological realities. In this way, my approach to attunement aims to move beyond the “artificial hells” Bishop critiques by fostering meaningful, embodied experiences that are attuned to both human and non-human relations, and that provoke a deeper interrogation of power and inequality.²⁴

This dissertation moves beyond Relational Aesthetics by incorporating the more-than-human world, along with the complex relationships and unseen forces shaping our reality. This broader scope allows for a more inclusive understanding of interconnectedness, acknowledging the agency of non-human actors and the intricate dynamics at play in both social and ecological environments, particularly in relation to haunting and memory. Co-attunement plays a central role here, as the relationships between performer and audience, and between human and non-human, actively shape the unfolding of the work. This dynamic fosters a layered experience in which the performer and the audience become participants in a shared sensory and embodied engagement. Expanding relationality to include ecological and phenomenological dimensions, this study shows how attunement as a methodology involves deep, active engagement with the environment, revealing often invisible dynamics and connections. It uncovers the underlying

²⁴ In *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Claire Bishop critiques participatory art practices that claim to promote social engagement but often fail to achieve substantial social transformation. She argues that such projects can create superficial interactions that do not address deeper social inequalities. Instead of fostering genuine change, these projects can serve to manage social issues under the guise of inclusivity. Bishop highlights how participatory art can be co-opted by neoliberal agendas, prioritizing individual responsibility and tangible outcomes over collective action and social justice, thus evaluating art more for its sociological impact than its artistic value.

forces and interactions within both material and ecological contexts, bringing to light the interplay between history, structural inequity, memory, and the physical landscape, and fostering a more nuanced understanding of sites of violence.

In recognizing this dynamic process of attunement, it is important to acknowledge Heidegger's influential concept of attunement (*Beifindlichkeit*) in relation to the work of art. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger presents attunement as a fundamental aspect of *Dasein's* being-in-the-world. *Dasein*, which translates roughly to "being-there," refers to the unique way human beings exist, where existence is always situated and engaged with the world, not detached. For Heidegger, attunement shapes how we understand and engage with our surroundings, disclosing our "thrownness" (174) into particular moods that influence our receptiveness to phenomena, including art. This dissertation moves beyond Heidegger's framework by emphasizing a more dynamic, embodied process of attunement—one that not only interacts with the world but also engages with social, ecological, and spectral forces.

My approach aligns more closely with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which views perception and attunement as active, embodied processes emerging through the body's direct interaction with the world. Building on these foundations, this project explores how attunement operates within both human and non-human interactions, and how it uncovers hidden forces and histories of violence through a practice of embodied, ethical listening. In this way, attunement is not understood as a passive state of being but rather as an active engagement with the world, revealing complex relationalities and historical legacies.

This work particularly aligns with phenomenology, drawing from Merleau-Ponty's insights in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty asserts that our bodies are instruments of perception, action, and understanding, rejecting the notion that humans are detached observers

of the world. Instead, perception is fundamental to human experience and arises through an ongoing dialogue between our lived bodies and the world we inhabit. In this view, attunement and perception are inseparable, challenging the long-standing tradition that prioritizes consciousness as the sole source of knowledge

An embodied approach to understanding experience resonates with my personal journey and is crucial to my methodology. Throughout my adult life, I have cultivated this awareness through the study of various embodied practices and somatic techniques, including yogic philosophy, Buffon clowning, physical theatre training, meditation, breath work, and practices of contemplative end-of-life care. These practices have taught me to perceive and interact with the world in an embodied, attentive manner. My training in body/mind centring, energy work (including Reiki Master training), martial arts, and intuitive plant communication has further developed my capacity for resonant listening and attunement to the more-than-human world. These experiences profoundly shape my work, informing my dissertation, teaching, writing, and daily interactions.

Since childhood, I have been fascinated by different ways of understanding human existence and the esoteric. At 13, I serendipitously received a book titled *Behaving as if the God in All Life Mattered* by Machaelle Small Wright, which introduced me to attuning with nature's invisible forces. In the book, the author claimed to see and hear invisible forces of nature and offered methods of attuning with these collaborative spirits. Wright's methods of connecting with these forces resonated with my natural inclination towards whimsy, healing, and transcendence, sparking a lifelong quest to "see" and "hear" the invisible forces of the more-than-human world. This vision underpins my doctoral research and emphasizes the importance of attunement in my methodology.

Attunement involves not only social interactions among humans but also the interplay of objects and non-human entities. Attuning to hauntings requires exploring the subtle space between disappearance and what lies beneath, necessitating an ethics of care, attention, resonant listening, deep embodiment, and sensitivity to what remains present despite being lost. This dissertation argues that practices fostering full-bodied attention to concealments, abuses of power, deaths, and disappearances are vital for engaging in ethical resonant listening and deep attunement. These experimental methods, informed by my personal and scholarly journey, work toward revealing the hidden forces shaping our social and ecological environments.

It is important to recognize the potential pitfalls of these practices, particularly the risk of becoming self-absorbed or letting the focus on the experiential self overshadow broader ethical concerns. Ethical attunement requires a commitment to awareness of both human and non-human interactions, fostering an ethics of care and resonant listening. This ongoing dedication is particularly vital in contexts of historical and social injustices. By attuning to the subtle presences between disappearance and memory, we can cultivate sensitivity to the influences that endure despite being lost, highlighting the need for an ethical stance that uncovers hidden forces in our social and ecological environments. Attunement is not without its complexities and potential dangers. While attunement has the capacity to open us to deeper connections and awareness, it can also be co-opted by neoliberal forces that reduce it to a form of individual self-care, toxic positivity, or personal healing detached from collective, systemic struggles. In such instances, the political potential of attunement can become diluted, transforming it into a consumable experience aligned with market-driven ideologies rather than a radical practice of resistance or justice. It is critical to remain vigilant in ensuring that attunement does not become another tool for perpetuating complacency or reinforcing structural inequalities.

Additionally, and as I stress throughout the dissertation, the ethical responsibility of attunement is not equally distributed. The stakes and implications of attuning to histories of violence fall much differently on white settlers, for instance, than for example on Indigenous survivors of femicide or Black descendants of violence in the U.S. For white settlers, attunement may require confronting uncomfortable truths about complicity and entanglement in ongoing colonial and racial violence, whereas for Indigenous and Black communities, attunement may serve as a vital means of survival, resilience, and reclamation. Recognizing these distinctions is essential for an ethical practice of attunement that remains aware of the different burdens and responsibilities that come with bearing witness to violence and its legacies. Attunement should not be approached as a universal good but as a practice that requires careful, context-specific ethical considerations.

Attunement Sessions: Experimenting with Method

In 2021-22, I developed a year-long interpretive program called the Attunement Sessions at the Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto, Mississauga. This program aimed to help audiences “tune in” to artworks during the Covid-19 pandemic. This work significantly enriched my PhD research by providing a platform to practice and refine methods of attunement with broad audiences. The Attunement Sessions included a variety of contributions ranging from sound baths, food tours, spoken-word poetry, archival love letters, embodied impressions, and tactile engagements with intergenerational photography collections.²⁵ These experimental

²⁵ The artists, scholars and community members whose work I curated to enact these attunements were: Anna Jayne Kimmel, Dana Olwan, Golboo Amani, Howard Tam, Justine Chambers, Kateri Gauthier, Kiko, Rasha Salti, Rijin Sahakian. You can find their contributions here: <https://www.shalontwh.com/curation/attunement-sessions2>

sessions offered performative instructions within specific historical and spatial contexts. They asked questions like what embodied memories do we carry from youth to old age? What knowings do we possess deep in our bones? How can we intentionally remember? What sensations from our past continue to feel into the present and future? By guiding observers through embodiment, perception, texture, joy, meditation, encounter, touch, intimacy, sound, intuition, and other often overlooked senses, the sessions fostered a deep engagement with the material and the senses often overlooked in viewing and archival habits.

The Blackwood Gallery has continued this program, stating that the Attunement Sessions are a continuing platform for investigating “profound aesthetic, environmental, geopolitical, philosophical, sexual, social and technological questions necessary to approach difficult problems about how we live, think, act, build, sense and move together towards an imperiled future” (“Attunement”). These sessions ask how we can attune ourselves to the violences of the past and present and a world to come.

Expanding Site Specificity

Building on this foundation, my research also expands ideas of site specificity, which traditionally considers the location, environment, and context of the artwork as integral to its meaning and experience. Defined by Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel as “artwork in which the work takes part of its meaning and form from the particular location where it is installed” (*Themes*), site-specific art engages deeply with its surroundings. Key theorists like Miwon Kwon (*One Place*) and James Meyer (“The Functional”) have explored how site-specific works challenge the boundaries between art, audience, and space, creating responses to the particular architectural, historical, cultural, or social conditions unique to a site. Kwon, in particular, argues

for a broader understanding of site that transcends physical space to include social, cultural, and ideological dimensions. Her expanded definition recognizes that sites are not static but are dynamically shaped by human interactions and societal structures. In *Off Sites*, Bertie Ferdman also explores performance practices that extend beyond traditional site-specific works, analyzing how these performances engage with their environments concluding that “the outdated theatrical engagement of the term will no longer suffice for its many contemporary variations” (9). These broader perspectives on site specificity form a crucial foundation for my dissertation, which further stretches the concept of site specificity.

In my work, I argue for deeper engagements with the elemental qualities at site, such as soil or water, and examine how these characteristics linger and interact with social and historical contexts, thereby bringing the past into the present. My dissertation posits that site specificity encompasses attunement to water, ground, and voice (Chapter 1), soil, trees, and mineral persistence (Chapter 2), ancestral technologies and atmospheric conditions (Chapter 3), as well as the sensory interactions between audience and performer (Chapter 4). This perspective suggests that bodies co-generate a site through their interactions with these elements, creating a rich experience that transcends traditional physical or social boundaries. *Attuning to Sites of Violence* explores the thresholds between the social, environmental, geologic, and inorganic realms. It delves into the complex entanglements of social violence with both the material and immaterial world. By focusing on art and non-human sites such as trees, land, water, and atmosphere as performing entities, this work views the environment as an active collaborator with artists and communities.

The case studies in my dissertation emphasize spatiality, temporality, and our (in)ability to sense and perceive different forms of media—visual, aural, and tactile—through collaborative

kinships. For instance, it explores the varying temporalities of soil, rocks, minerals, ice, air, and human or non-human felt realms and frequencies. This research investigates how these often-inaudible frequencies and resonances are interpreted and transformed by artists and artworks, and how we can learn to attune to land and its resonances through these experiences. By expanding the concept of site specificity to include these nuanced and often overlooked elements, my dissertation offers a profound rethinking of how we understand and engage with the site of violence, and sites of art and performance.

Chapter Breakdown

Attuning to Sites of Violence: Performing Spectral Relationality across North America is about the various ways that disappearances and sites of violence across North America perform and can be attuned to. It explores how these disappearances, erasures, and invisibilities communicate and are in relationship across space and time, constantly haunting the present. The chapters in this dissertation share an investment in exploring these ideas through various artistic case studies and community activations; examples ranging from land-based video, sculpture, site-specific performance art, historical and commemorative monuments, interviews, cross-border installation, and the body in performance. Each chapter and example focuses on different aesthetic strategies and methods.

I begin in Chapter 1 (“Attuning to Site as Performer: Missing, Murdered, and Freezing in Colonial Canada”) with an analysis of three artworks that each put emphasis on attunement to space, site, land, and disappearance in specific relation to ongoing colonial violence against Indigenous people in Western Canada. The chapter puts Scott Benesiinaabandan’s *Land Memories: Starlight Tours* in conversation with Rebecca Belmore’s memorial ice

sculpture *Freeze*, both artworks inspired by the memory of Neil Stonechild, a Saulteaux teenager who died in 1990 while in police custody in Saskatchewan, Canada. Both of these projects take the practice of “Starlight Tours” in Saskatchewan as source material. The chapter also contends with Belmore’s site specific performance *Vigil*, which took place in Vancouver’s Downtown East side neighbourhood. The chapter asserts that these artworks all engage with similar spatial and temporal strategies that foreground site as performer and foster an attunement to the more-than-human elements present therein.

The artists in this chapter work directly with their working environments as part of their practice in historically and locally material ways engaging with something akin to what Levin has called the “environmental unconscious” illustrating how what we cannot see can be “as much about revealing as concealing” (97). My analysis in this chapter draws on Indigenous ontologies and new materialist thinking while also taking issue with the latter, investigating the ways in which Indigenous communities broadly have always understood space as agentic. This chapter also performs a spatial analysis of Vancouver’s lower east side neighbourhood where Belmore performed *Vigil*. I trace how racialization in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside is produced through histories that also shape particular understandings of a place and its spatial arrangements. When critically examined, these arrangements can reveal larger systemic choreographies that produce the very disappearances that haunt the area.

Chapter 2 (“The Land Cries Out: Activating Legacies of Violence in the Southern United States”) delves into the materiality of soil and its role in memorializing racial violence. Over the course of two years in Georgia, I researched and wrote about the work of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a non-profit organization in Montgomery, Alabama, dedicated to challenging racial injustice and advocating for criminal justice reform. Central to this chapter are the EJI’s

efforts to document and memorialize the history of lynching and racial violence through the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Community Remembrance Project, which involves collecting soil from lynching sites.

Through site visits, attending community ceremonies, seeking out historical markers, conducting interviews, and personal reflections, I examine how the EJI engages with material remains to activate legacies of disappearance and violence. The soil collected at lynching sites emerges as an active and autonomous performing force, haunting the present with a past that lingers. This chapter argues that the soil embodies spectral forces of memory and haunting that occur outside linear time—out of joint, lingering, and unexpected. I draw on Sharpe’s notion of “the wake,” which describes life in the ongoing aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade (9), where the past continually ruptures the present. Sharpe’s assertion that Black death is a foundational aspect of American citizenship, “the ground we walk on,” profoundly shapes the arguments presented herein.

The chapter analyzes the EJI’s National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Community Remembrance Soil Collection Project, discussing how these projects embody haunting through non-linear time and lingering presence. It considers the power of soil as a non-human actant of deep history and explores questions of memory, agency, stewardship, and care. The Legacy Museum’s exhibition, “From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration,” is also analyzed for its vivid narration of racial injustice and its immersive design that highlights the ongoing aftermath of slavery and mass incarceration. In detailing the Community Remembrance Project in Fulton County, Georgia, where local soil is presented as a living witness to racial violence, the chapter underscores the soil’s role in carrying historical legacies and demanding continuous care. Through interviews with community preservationists Ann Hill-Bond and Enoch Demar, the

chapter argues for an attunement to absence and the resonance of what is seemingly not there, recognizing the soil's active presence in non-forgetting. It invites readers to consider how systems of violence are interconnected and how ecological frameworks can deepen our understanding of these relationships, asking how we can remember differently.

In chapter 3 ("Performing Ephemeral Monuments, Attuning to Future Warnings") I explore artistic interventions that challenge linear historical narratives and propose alternative futures. This chapter highlights case studies such as Postcommodity's *Repellent Fence* and Cannupa Hanska Luger's *Future Ancestral Technologies* and *Reunion* exhibition in Amarillo, Texas exploring how these artists utilize emergent strategies as defined by adrienne maree brown as methods of intentional change that enhance our capacity to create and live in just and liberated worlds (7). These strategies focus on intentional change to enhance our capacity for creating just and liberated worlds. Instead of concentrating on violent narratives, the works of Postcommodity and Cannupa Hanska Luger perform aesthetic resistance and anti-colonial visibility. Through an in-depth analysis of Postcommodity's *Repellent Fence*, a large-scale installation that temporarily connected the U.S./ México border, I explore how the project emphasized the interconnectedness of Indigenous peoples while highlighting the artificiality of national borders. *Repellent Fence* addresses themes of out-of-sight violence, and the complex dynamics of the U.S.-México border. By physically marking and intercepting this site, the installation highlights historical and ongoing violence against Indigenous and migrant communities that is often covered up. This work acknowledges the enduring presence of Indigenous cultures often marginalized by colonial and state narratives, inviting reflection on Indigenous sovereignty and relational ties across the border. I also examine Luger's ongoing series *Future Ancestral Technologies* and his *Reunion*

exhibition which used speculative fiction to envision post capitalist and post colonial futures where humans restore their bonds with the earth and each other.

Luger's *Reunion* exhibition addresses the attempted annihilation of the American Bison, using materials like bone black and calcium carbonate pigments from charred bison bones and the chapter traces the elemental connections that haunt the entire dissertation, linking historical trauma with ecological kinship. It explores how traditional Indigenous customs and technologies are renegotiated to celebrate resistance and autonomy, presenting future-oriented narratives of redress. By revealing land as a living entity with memory and agency, these projects help unlearn entrenched ways of thinking. They perform ancestral knowledge and technologies, making visible the invisible forces that shape our understanding of borders and territories, and emphasize the entangled relationships between environment, cultures, and histories. These interventions create counter-memories, engage with speculative world-making, and emphasize the importance of ecological kinship and non-human elements in storytelling. Through these examples, the chapter illustrates how art can offer new narratives and ways of being that resist and transform current realities, proposing a vision of a more sustainable and interconnected future.

In Chapter 4 ("*Weathering: Attuning to and Performing Indeterminacy and Interdependence*") I turn to the weather. This chapter discusses Faye Driscoll's newest choreographic work *Weathering* presented by the Blackwood Gallery (University of Toronto) and Toronto Dance Theatre. This performance explores the collective experience of living in the Anthropocene—addressing the environmental destruction caused by human activity and its effects on individual bodies and their interdependencies. *Weathering* is described as a living, breathing sculpture of flesh, materials, sound, and smell that studies momentums and invites viewers to slow down and explore the unstable boundaries between grief, anger, emergency, and

eroticism (“Weathering”). This chapter investigates how the performance employs aesthetic and embodied strategies to make the often invisible atmosphere of slow violence perceptible, co-sensitizing audience members, the creator, and the dancers to the interdependent structures that hold us. It achieves this through practices of embodiment, deep attunement, and a focus on duration and pace. This embodiment of slow violence reveals the impacts of events moving through us, often unnoticed yet constantly animating and affecting our bodies.

The chapter includes an interview between myself and Driscoll which explores questions around the relationship between bodies, co-sensing, and the environment. It also explores what it means to embody, grieve, and co-sense. Driscoll’s *Weathering* addresses these questions by creating a state of indeterminacy through embodiment and careful cultivation of entangled co-presence between self, audience, and environment. The performance emphasizes the body’s role as a monument and a site for attunement to unseen forces, proposing new narratives and ways of being that resist and transform current realities. By highlighting the interconnectedness of human and non-human beings and their mutual impacts, the chapter underscores the importance of ecological kinship and the need for greater awareness and understanding of our collective ecological responsibilities.

Further, this chapter situates Driscoll’s work within the framework of Timothy Morton’s concept of hyperobjects—vast entities that are difficult to perceive due to their scale and complexity. The chapter argues that Driscoll’s performance embodies these overwhelming and often invisible forces, such as climate crisis, plastic pollution, global warming, or nuclear radiation. I argue that *Weathering* bridges the gap between these abstract phenomena and our lived experiences, using sensory and emotional engagement to make the invisible visible.

Additionally, the chapter draws on physicist Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action," which suggests that agency arises through the energy exchanged between forces, with entities emerging from these interactions rather than pre-existing them. This theoretical framework shifts our view from seeing relationships as interactions between separate entities to recognizing the co-constitutive processes that shape our world. This perspective is explicitly referenced in the performance text by dramaturge Dages Juvelier Keates and in an interview I conducted with Driscoll, both of whom highlight Barad's influence on the work. Through these theoretical lenses and performance analysis, the chapter explores the intricate entanglements and responsibilities arising from our interconnected existence, emphasizing the co-constitutive nature of our world.

This dissertation weaves together artistic practices and theoretical frameworks to reveal how disappearances, erasures, and sites of violence communicate and relate across space and time. By exploring these themes through a range of artistic case studies, from land-based installations, community activations, spaces themselves, and choreographic performances, each chapter performs a challenge to dominant historical narratives, and evokes haunting presences. This work underscores the importance of attuning to the spectral and relational dimensions of violence and ecological kinship, advocating for a more just and interconnected world.

CHAPTER ONE

Attuning to Site as Performer: Missing, Murdered, and Freezing in Colonial Canada

Sometimes ghosts linger. They hover in the furthest corners and when you least expect it, they lurch out, bearing everything they brought to you when they were alive.

-Richard Wagamese, *Indian Horse*

The space holds the information

-Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen

About halfway through the documentary *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival*,²⁶ Haraway faces the camera and implores, “we need other kinds of stories.” Storying otherwise, in Haraway’s expression, is a method for rebelling against hegemonic ways of thinking, living, and being. She asks, how might we (scholars, artists, activists, scientists, etc.) contribute our critiques and our knowledges to a complex web (what she calls the cat’s cradle); how might we learn to tell another story and to build—to learn how to add to the work of those humans and non-humans who have already (always) been storying otherwise (*Donna Haraway*). This moment in the film affirmed for me the importance of finding different, otherwise modes of thinking, knowing, feeling, attuning, and being and I attempt this practice throughout these very pages. This chapter is organized around three artworks that each put emphasis on space, site, land, and disappearance specifically in relation to colonial violence against Indigenous people in Western Canada. I argue that the artists brought into dialogue here practice versions of storying and relating otherwise, and I emphasize that Indigenous people have long been thinking and doing so. The chapter focuses on aesthetic strategies that encourage attunement to spatial and temporal dimensions of site and environment—considering nonappearance itself as an agentic

²⁶ Directed and produced by Fabrizio Terranova.

actor and reflecting on the power and meaning of that which is unseen in spaces where violence, dispossession, and/or disappearance are common.

In experimenting with my own practice of thinking otherwise, there are instances in this chapter and throughout the dissertation where I insert my own poetic and dream-like reflections *at site* or in relation to the artwork. I consider these as speculative research notes, dreamy realizations, and tangential associations, and these are indicated in the text by italics. The goal of the chapter and dissertation broadly, is to illuminate how sites of nonappearance operate with an energetic liveness, and are ultimately connected to one another through a kind of spectral relationality—a force that bends time and space in relation to the more-than-human world. This perspective of these contested places and spaces of disappearance deconstructs linear authoritative historic accounts of site, and instead gestures toward more relational, spectral, connected, and ongoing modes of knowing, feeling, and remembering.

The interdisciplinary artworks engaged with herein consider deeper, longer histories of colonial violence in the country now known as Canada. Methodologically, I draw on embodiment processes²⁷ and performance analysis, along with my curatorial and performance

²⁷ With nearly 20 years of experience in various somatic practices, I am well positioned to discuss embodiment practices. My extensive training includes dance, performance art, theatre, Bouffon clowning, and yogic arts. Additionally, I have expertise in mind/body centring, martial arts, meditation, and mindfulness. This diverse range of experiences enables me to offer a nuanced perspective on embodiment, integrating both traditional and contemporary approaches to understanding and practicing the body in various contexts.

pedagogy practice²⁸ which broadly centres on forms of attunement as critical inquiry.²⁹ I also insert my own poetic voice throughout to experiment with different forms of writing as mode for knowing otherwise. The first section of the chapter focuses on two Saskatchewan based site-specific works, putting Scott Benesiinaabandan's *Land Memories: Starlight Tours* in conversation with Rebecca Belmore's Saskatoon version of the memorial ice sculpture *Freeze*; exploring how the land itself is performing in both cases. The latter part of the chapter considers Belmore's now famous performance *Vigil*, which took place in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood, highlighting how the site acted as a performer, and emphasizing the performative nature of the city streets themselves.

Land Memories, *FREEZE*, and *Vigil* all evoke the presence of what is assumed to be invisible, disappeared, or gone forever and conjure embodied memories through a performative,

²⁸ Here I am referring to my practice as both a curator and public educator. From 2021-22 I worked at The Blackwood Gallery (University of Toronto, Mississauga) as Educator-in-Residence where I curated a year-long public program called the Attunement Sessions which offered pedagogic tools to assist audiences with "tuning-in" to artworks in ways that reach beyond solely seeing. The development of this project was inspired by Tina Campt's notion of "listening to images." Each session that I designed in the Attunement program provided a series of performative instructions situated within specific historical and spatial contexts. My intention with the program was to guide observers by means of embodiment, feelings, perception, texture, joy, meditation, encounter, touch, intimacy, sound, intuition, or other senses so often dismissed in viewing and archival habits. It challenged viewers to open up to different ways of understanding what we "see" and revealed multisensory and resonant methods of engaging these works through multiple forms of connection and fostered participation that reaches beyond familiar modes of encounter. See: <https://blackwoodgallery.ca/program/2021-22-lightbox-program>. This program has been carried forward and has engaged "choreographed and improvised, intimate and planetary, descriptive and speculative approaches by participants from diverse disciplines and practices including art history, black studies, choreography, dance studies, decolonial environmental humanities, disconnection studies, feminist science & technology studies, Indigenous philosophy, intimacy coordination, poetry, queer and transgender studies, visual arts, and more." See: <https://www.shalontwh.com/curation/attunement-sessions2>

²⁹ In 2016 I curated a week long series of performance events entitled *Performing Pedagogies* featuring work by Basil AlZeri, Golboo Amani, Saul Garcia-Lopez (La Pocha Nostra), Francisco-Fernando Granados, Andrew Rabyiniuk, The School for Eventual Vacancy (Justin A. Langlois and Caitlin Chaisson). See <https://shalontwh.com/curation/performingpedagogies>

anti-colonial, attunement to space. Placing that which is unmarked³⁰ in the spotlight, these multidisciplinary works reveal how agency can be/is circulated in ways reaching beyond the strictly visual. Attending to the non-human actants that operate *as* site and weave in and out of temporal and spatial zones—past, present, and across distance—this chapter underscores a vital ongoingness of nonappearance that resists colonial and capitalist regimes of knowledge transmission.

As a non-Indigenous white settler scholar, I in no way speak *for* or on behalf of the disappearances of Indigenous life that the artworks in the chapter refer to, but rather from a positionality of entanglement and inheritance—as someone adjacent to and complicit in this colonial violence. The stakes are indeed high when talking about disappearance itself as a kind of performance and it is certainly not an easy thing to do, particularly from my positionality. I write from a place of considering my own responsibilities inherent within these colonial realities and ongoing legacies. Returning to Haraway, the notion of inheritance poses the question of accountability and responsibility as it is “coming to terms with the world we live in that forces the question of what is to be done” and she insists that “the important question is *how* to inherit” (qtd. in Gane 145). Inheritance itself is a continuous and unrelenting event—it is a fact; it is something to live with skillfully. It is both material and immaterial and I suggest that artworks that mobilize, unsettle, or activate these inheritances are perhaps one way to hold people and publics accountable for shared histories of dispossession and might be able to push toward

³⁰ Phelan argues that performance art attends to visibility’s failures, and asks us to pay greater attention “to communicating nonvisible, rhetorically unmarked aspects of identity” (26). Phelan’s proposal—to consider the place of identities as being beyond the sole denominator of visibility in artistic practice—remains relevant and largely unresolved. I suppose on some level, it is this quest to communicate the nonvisible, and unmarked aspects of nonappearance that this dissertation as a whole grapples with.

action. For Haraway, “the purpose of tracing inheritances is in becoming differently curious and differently accountable. Our task is to pay attention in different ways, through thinking in the presence of others, and with different affects” (*Donna Haraway*). This chapter thinks about what it means to inherit violent legacies, and considers the *presence* of disappearance as agent: as it moves bodies, shapes attitudes, influences preferences, and directs choices through time and space.

Land Memories: Starlight Tours

“Starlight tours” are a well-documented and appalling state tactic that went on for many years in Western Canada, characterized by police violence against Indigenous men in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. The racial/spatial³¹/colonial practice involved abuse of power by police officers who would arrest Indigenous folks, usually men, for alleged public drunkenness and/or disorderly behavior in the urban core. The officers would then drive these men to the outskirts of the city at night in harsh winter conditions, abandon them, and leave them stranded and isolated in sub-zero temperatures.³² This routine of taking people on starlight tours dates back to the

³¹ I am deeply influenced by Sherene Razack’s extensive analysis on freezing deaths in Canada. Razack has studied Canadian legal records and responses to inquest and inquiries around these deaths and has found that “what remains on legal record are the racial spatial economies of the settler city and its persistent devaluation of Aboriginal [sic] life, a devaluation that law both produces and sustains” (*It Happened More*, 51-55). Such a racial-spatial analysis highlights the racial infrastructure of settler colonialism by considering infrastructure as those things which the ongoing process of colonization demands.

³² For a similar Toronto-based example, the term “Cherry Beach Express” refers to a practice by Toronto police during the 1970s and 1980s. Allegedly, police officers would take individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups such as the homeless and LGBTQ2S+ communities, to the secluded area of Cherry Beach, where they would be beaten. This practice came to broader public attention in 1984 when the Canadian new wave group Pukka Orchestra released the song “Cherry Beach Express.” The lyrics describe a person being taken to the beach and harassed by police officers, referred to as the “boys in blue.”

1970s, and while there are other known cases, the most well-known of the Saskatoon freezing incidents involves a series of three deaths of Indigenous men in Saskatoon—Saulteaux-Cree teenager Neil Stonechild in 1990, and Rodney Naistus and Lawrence Wegner both in 2000 (who died the same way within mere days of one another).

The “death scene” as the inquiry into Stonechild’s death would later call it, lay in an industrial area in a field of undeveloped land. The report states, “an autopsy was subsequently performed at St. Paul’s Hospital in Saskatoon. The Pathologist who conducted the autopsy concluded that Mr. Stonechild died of hypothermia. The weather at the time of his disappearance was extremely cold. On the night of his disappearance the temperature fell to -28.1 degrees Celsius” (Wright 1). Police involvement in these deaths was suspected/known for decades within Indigenous communities, but these “dumping” practices were only brought to the media’s attention when the Saskatoon police force came under scrutiny after another man, Darrell Night, survived one of these hideous drop-offs. Night told his story publicly and brought the racist practice to light.³³ *The weather at the time of his disappearance was extremely cold.*

It would take over a decade after Stonechild’s death, and the freezing deaths of two more men (Naistus and Wegner) and the near-death of another (Night) to re-open the original case. Stonechild, the teenager, once dismissed as drunk and responsible for his own death, would become subject of a public inquiry that would lead to the firing of two police officers. It was confirmed through a lengthy RCMP investigation, public inquiry, and commissioner’s report (the cover of which, disturbingly, features a postmortem photograph of Stonechild lying deceased, face down on the snowy ground) concluding in 2004, that these deaths indeed occurred while these men were in the custody of the Saskatoon Police Services (Wright). The report also

³³ Sadly, shortly after writing this chapter Darrell Night died in April 2023.

relays that two Saskatoon police officers (Constables Larry Hartwig and Brad Senger), were responsible for dumping Stonechild's body in the freezing Saskatchewan winter field. While the firing of the officers ultimately did occur fourteen years after Stonechild's death, no Saskatoon police officer has ever been convicted specifically for having caused deaths through premeditated acts of freezing.

Years later, during a 2015 residency program with PAVED Arts in Saskatoon,³⁴ Anishinaabe intermedia and sound artist Scott Benesiinaabandan created an experimental immersive video and sound composition called *Land Memories: Starlight Tours*. Benesiinaabandan's short film explores the sites of loss where these men were picked up in the urban environment, dropped off, and left to die during the Saskatchewan winter months on the outskirts of Saskatoon. The film unfolds over three and a half minutes through the urban cityscape of Saskatoon, on streets presumably walked by these men, and the film ends resting on a long, static, meditative shot of the meadow where the men were dropped off by police to freeze alone in the outskirts of the city. Co-composed with site, the piece foregrounds rhythmic shifts of bodies and masses moving, walking, observing, decentring, revealing the minutia, and the more-than-human shared spaces of temporality. The land upon which Neil Stonechild's frozen body, and the bodies of others, were ultimately found is a field in the North West area on the outskirts of Saskatoon that remains there today, nearby the city dump and an industrial power plant ironically bearing the colonial name of Queen Elizabeth Power Station.³⁵ *The weather at the time of his disappearance was extremely cold.*

³⁴ PAVED Arts is a non-profit, community-based arts organization that exists to advance knowledge and practices in photography, audio, video, electronic and digital. The organization helps artists and independent producers make and exhibit their work.

³⁵ In May 2000, Rebecca Belmore performed *The Indian Factory* at AKA artist-run centre in Saskatoon in response to the city's history of 'starlight tours.' The performance, curated by

In the video, viewers see white picket fences, shadows of the artist walking along the sidewalk, graffiti sketched onto buildings, doors, weeds growing through concrete. As the traveler (Benesiinaabandan) records, he ventures by way of walking toward the outskirts of the city where we see a deep blue sky with billowing clouds, sprawling overhead power lines, a sign that reads: “Private Road No Entry.” Then, an empty field (Figure 1), tall grass, dirt, a butterfly dancing. Benesiinaabandan’s audio composition has been made by recording the tracks of his footsteps, capturing sounds of the space: air, muffled voices of passerby, horns honking, wires and insects buzzing. Through editing devices, the images and sounds sourced have later been stretched and elongated, placing reflective emphasis on the temporal nature of deep histories, spatial passages, returns, and pauses displaying a complex palimpsestic dance of deep time, nonappearance. Manipulated, slowed down, or sped up, the effect of these environmental sounds combined creates a pulse-like pace that replicates a heartbeat, and an ASMR-like effect produced by the audible crackle and crunch of feet walking on the earth, soft hum of ghostly lullabies, the sound of the sun and other non-human beings.

fellow performance artist Lori Blondeau, referred to the power plant where these men were dropped off, Queen Elizabeth power plant, and the realities of starlight tours and anti-Indigenous police violence against Native people in the prairie city.



Figure 1. Scott Benesiinaabandan's *Land Memories: Starlight Tours* (2015), video still.

How do these spaces, where such unthinkable things have occurred, hold memory? Does memory linger on through the butterfly? Is it in the blowing of the tall prairie grasses or the warm sun on your face in summer? Is it in the crunch of frozen snow? The electric hum of the industrial power plant? How does land hold memory; how does it perform? If the space is an archive, how do we become attuned to it?

Land Memories is an invitation to sit with the affective frequency of the space where the freezing deaths occurred, to be with the in-between spaces of plants, animals, and bodies, and the porous spaces of minerals, energy, land, air, and waters. The narrative layers in the video hold sedimented knowledge, fragments of time and memories, offering a window into the unravelling of pasts, presents, and futures of the land and its relations. Highlighting the land itself as performer, Benesiinaabandan experiments with a different kind of storytelling and the audio-video outcome pays homage to the men who lost their lives to police enforced freezing deaths, but also to the unseen ancient pathways of the more-than-human, such as the ancestral

memories held in a kaleidoscope of rocks or the thoroughfares of the coyotes, moose, porcupines, and foxes. This reminds me again of Haraway's insistence that "staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (1).

As his website states, Benesiinaabandan's practice is informed by Indigenous belief systems that suggest that "the land itself retains and communicates fragmented layers of past events," and his methods are derived from what he calls "an intuitive psycho-geography that reenacts notions of the subconscious effects and stories of monuments, histories, and spaces" (Projects). When I interviewed Benesiinaabandan, he said that, when he created *Land Memories*, he had been considering what it means to be Indigenous, but not in your own territory. He stated, "as Indigenous people, we always talk about our territory and the connection to the land and physical space, and I was thinking about what it means when you can't be on your territory, or you don't know the territory you're on or the language or the stories of that land. Where does your indigeneity live when you are decentred from the place you live or grew up or from where your family or community are from?" Benesiinaabandan explained that, while conducting research in Saskatoon, "I was thinking about how history tells stories, and in deep history we can always find connection to where those stories lie." He continued, "having grown up in Winnipeg during the era of the starlight tours, I always heard about them; so being in that space where these 'tours' happened felt really connected to me. As an Indigenous man who grew up nearby, it felt personal, it was close...it has been my friends; it could be me" (Benesiinaabandan).

While working on the project, Benesiinaabandan was staying down on 20th Street in Saskatoon (the same space that these men were picked up by police), an area that was rapidly

gentrifying at the time of the film's making. Gentrification here acts as further violence against the histories of what happened in these spaces, as it is another layer of obfuscation, masking histories and glossing over less pleasant realities of what is held in that space.³⁶ Practices like “starlight tours” or “dumping” are only possible in places where groups of people are devalued and deemed disposable. As public policy scholar Jen Budney notes, this “dehumanization is abetted by city plans and architecture that fail to provide spaces for inclusive citizenship and refuse to acknowledge the collective entitlements of Indigenous people that stem from their ancestral membership in nation-groups” (26). In an interview I conducted with the artist, Benesiinaabandan shared,

the work came about from me occupying the same space [as the men who died in police custody], as a kind of present ghost of what happened before. I don't want to say it was an “enactment” because that's not the right word, but I wanted to honour and engage with that poignant history. The piece is about me literally walking the same spaces as all those young Indigenous men who were picked up in the middle of winter and dropped off.

Being in and making art in the same urban space (the ever-changing streets of Saskatoon) that men like Neil Stonechild were forcibly removed from and escorted to their death by police (see: ongoing colonialism), even years later, Benesiinaabandan was able to connect with the lingering resonance of this “empty” space and all that is continues to hold. He, and his “present ghost,” related to the energy of the space, and channeled these feelings, these memories *of the land* into

³⁶ I'm reminded of Stan Douglas's *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*—a panoramic photograph capturing a block in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The image, devoid of human presence, reflects on the area's socio-economic decline and impending gentrification, highlighting the tensions and violence associated with urban renewal. The work comments on the ethical challenges of documenting marginalized communities while critically examining the forces reshaping the neighborhood.

and through the intermedial artwork *Land Memories: Starlight Tours*, bringing the past into the present.³⁷

Theoretical Context: Indigenous Worldviews and “New Materialism”

By tracing the agency of disappearance itself in these kinds of analyses of artistic work—disappearance as that which cannot be seen in places where people or things have literally disappeared—I contemplate the lively and resonant power that these spaces hold. This understanding can be connected to Indigenous ontologies and spiritual beliefs systems broadly, which have always already been doing this work, and understanding these more-than-human connections, cosmologies, and modes of embodied knowledge. My thinking in this chapter is situated adjacent to Indigenous understandings of spaces and non-human entities as having always been alive, present, active, energetic, and agential. Many Indigenous scholars (and Indigenous communities and worldviews more generally), have long understood the agency of space and resonant relationality with land, having considered the non-hierarchical relationship with non-human entities long before the creation of “New Materialism” as a field. New materialism challenges the separation between humans and non-human entities and emphasizes the agency of materials and objects in the world. I do want to emphasize that while I am making an argument for the agency spaces of disappearance hold, as well as for the vitality of non-human entities, it remains crucial to *also* stay aware of the ways that very real material conditions can and do produce these very spaces of disappearance. As Juliette Singh cautions in her book *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*, new materialism

³⁷ Engaging with the haunting resonance of these “empty” spaces and landscapes parallels Chris Romeike’s short film *Seven Persons*, which also navigates the complex layers of memory, history, and highlighting the deep connections between past and present.

often overlooks the complexities of power relations and human agency, particularly in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism. Singh's critique emphasizes the need to consider the broader social and political context in understanding the material world.

Despite new materialism's claim/hope that this kind of thinking (that there are actant qualities within the material and non-human world) is innovative, "new," or descending from a Western philosophical tradition, much of new materialism is intensely indebted to Indigenous ontologies. Applying this caution within the field of Performance Studies, I recall Dylan Robinson's warning that a performance studies lens, too, can risk consumptive tendencies and the desire to "add" Indigenous methods into its purview without considering Indigenous people's lives or genealogies of thought and being. Robinson questions the relationship between performance studies methodologies and Indigenous performance asking, "to what degree does performance studies efface a colonial enterprise in its desire to understand, and perhaps in the process normalize, Indigenous cultural practice as "performance first". Furthering this, Robinson clarifies: Indigenous traditions *have always* held functional significance for what they "do" as politics, acts of history, and law-making (emphasis mine, 2017 211-12).³⁸ This is important to establish; as artist and scholar Dolleen Manning has explained there is (colonially always) a risk of the same weary extractive impulses that seek to assimilate Indigenous traditional knowledge

³⁸ Dylan Robinson's research and curatorial practice grapples with the senses as a method for decolonial engagement. Robinson's writings on "hungry listening" suggest modes of engaging with Indigenous cultural expression and protest (such as music within the Idle No More movement) in ways that is not passive or consumptive (or extractive and thus colonial). Robinson's methodological approach revolves around deep respect, reciprocity, active listening, unlearning, and sensory engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems as anticolonial praxis. "Hungry listening" refers to a settler's insatiable consumption of Indigenous culture without genuine understanding or respect. It critiques the superficial inclusion of Indigenous music in Western contexts, highlighting the need for respectful engagement that does not commodify or appropriate Indigenous cultural expressions. See *Hungry*.

“into a neoliberal market unaware of the extent of its own embedded anthropocentric imperialism [...] while Indigenous peoples remain the most exploited and marginalized groups worldwide” (19). The notion of the land or of a space “doing something” is certainly not new.

Mohawk and Anishinaabe scholar Vanessa Watts, for example, considers the intimate relationship between people and environment in what she calls “place-thought”—a premise that “the land is alive and thinking and that humans and nonhumans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts” (21). Julie Nagam, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Arts, Collaboration and Digital Media states, there are “ways of knowing that have a much longer history and are significantly bound to Indigenous geographies, concepts of space, and stories of place” (117). Manning has weaved together phenomenology and Ojibwe Anishinaabe orally transmitted knowledges, examining Ojibwe Anishinaabe *mnidoo*, or ‘other than human,’ ontologies. Manning explains that *Mnidoo* refers to “energy, potency or processes that suffuse all of existence and includes humans, animals, plants, inanimate ‘objects’ and invisible and intangible forces” (1-2). Linda Tuhiwai Smith has written extensively on Indigenous knowledge systems; and in particular her text *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* contends with the agency of unseen forces present in many Indigenous worldviews. Elsewhere Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie have articulated how colonial viewpoints shape place in instances when land and its inhabitant are taken for granted (2015), and Leanne Simpson focuses on “land as pedagogy,” relating to earth through ritual and embodied interactions that value all species, collectivity, and that eschew individualism and also highlights the importance of being “fully present in all aspects of your physical and spiritual body to access the gift of knowledge from the spiritual world” (2-25). Indigenous perspectives on these topics almost

always emphasize the importance of land and the interconnectedness of all beings, including plants, animals, the land itself, and other unseen forces—such as ancestors, or healing energies.

Curator Jane Tingley writes that colonialism and industrial capitalism have “all but destroyed a way of life and a perspective that sees the natural world as vibrant, alive, and filled with non-human life forms—both visible and non, both alive and not” (5). Curator Tarah Hogue once described how the work of Michif artist Christi Belcourt “nurture[s] relations through kinship networks that are place-based, inter-species and otherworldly, and in turn demonstrates, through beauty, strength and wonder, that other (to colonial capitalist) ways of being in relation to one another and to the earth are both possible and desperately urgent” (“Walking Softly”). Within today’s global atmosphere of pressing environmental concerns, increasing human and non-human displacement, dispossession, extraction, commodification, exploitation, detention, debt, and poverty these other ways of being are, I would think, desperately needed.

Indigenous ethical principles of respect, reciprocity, relationality, and ecological responsibility that bind human and more-than-human agents, and a non-anthropocentric conception of agency, may be said to offer a truly radical approach to the crucial questions raised by new materialist and posthumanist scholars. Karen Barad has written about the performative nature of matter and the environment. Her work on “agential realism” and “intra-action” explores how the boundaries between human and non-human entities blur, leading to a view of the environment as performative—concepts that are further developed in Chapter 4. Intra-action can help us understand the entanglement of human and non-human agencies and the ethical responsibilities that arise from these interconnections.³⁹

³⁹ In “(K)New Materialisms: Honouring Indigenous Perspectives,” Virginie Magnat argues that Indigenous understandings of agency, which integrate matter and spirit, differ from Barad’s agential realism. Scholars like Vine Deloria Jr., Gregory Cajete, Manulani Aluli-Meyer, and

Several new materialist theorists—such as Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad for instance—have explored the permeable boundaries between humans and non-humans, artificial and natural entities and how these things blur into each other. These approaches also question how human forms flow over and bleed into digital or spatial realms, expanding ideas of what constitutes the vital and animate and also emphasize the active nature of nonappearance. This thinking has been important for the field of theatre and performance studies as evidenced by the work of Marlis Schweitzer, Rebecca Schneider, Robin Bernstein,⁴⁰ Joanne Zerdy, and others as it expands understanding of agency beyond the realm of the strictly human, calling for more relational approaches to (im)materiality. Beyond a politics of representation, absence also holds agency, and as has been noted, Posthumanism and new materialism have “challenged modernity’s dichotomous distinction between human/nonhuman, nature/culture, and animate/inanimate by holding that objects and things have their own lives, forces, purposes, goals and randomness that exists alongside, a part from and in opposition to their human counterparts” (*Performing Objects* 1-17). Schweitzer and Zerdy suggest that focusing on the agency of the object “trouble[s] traditional Western hierarchies that place humans at the top of a ‘great chain of being by insisting on the dynamic collaborations that occur daily between nonhuman and human entities’” (5); likewise, Erin Hurley explains how thing theory and new materialism consider the relational ways matter and

Shawn Wilson emphasize interconnectedness of all beings, including unseen spirits. Magnat suggests that Indigenous philosophies, valuing orally transmitted and embodied knowledge, help decentre Eurocentric paradigms in academia.

⁴⁰ I have been influenced by Robin Bernstein’s concept of “scriptive things” which refers to objects that possess an inherent set of instructions for use, guiding users toward certain behaviors and actions. These objects do not determine behavior but suggest and shape possibilities for interaction. Bernstein’s idea explores how material culture interacts with human agency, emphasizing the active role of objects in shaping experiences and performances.

objects can and do interact as active participants with a lively, “performative force” with abilities to “do things” rather than remaining “inert and determined” (265).

In Mel Y. Chen’s book *Animacies*, they describe a worldview that divides those that seem to be alive from those that are deemed to not be living: birds, trees, stones. In Toronto, a recent group exhibition presented at Onsite Gallery thematically focused on this topic; named simply, *more-than-human*⁴¹ as it explored media artworks at the intersection of art, science, Indigenous worldviews that speculatively and poetically use multimodal storytelling as a vehicle for interpreting, mattering, and embodying more-than-human ecologies.⁴² In the exhibition catalogue, Tingley points toward ecofeminist and philosopher Val Plumwood as suggesting the strongly dualistic structure of Western thought and its bifurcating mindset that includes the human-nature dualism, as a conceptual schism that has rendered those that do not look like us, nor speak like us “as an insignificant Other, a homogenized, voiceless, blank slate of existence....”. It is a “perception of nature” that has given rise to economic and societal structures that see the natural environment as nothing more than a resource for exploitation, and certainly not part of our sphere of moral consideration (*more-than-human*). Kazubowski-Houston points out, however, that despite new materialist engagements with the spirit life of materiality, absence itself remains relatively understudied as a substantive force. This strengthens my belief that investigating absence and spaces of nonappearance is both necessary

⁴¹ *more-than-human* February 1 to May 13, 2023. Onsite Gallery 199 Richmond St. W. Toronto, curated by Jane Tingley and included artists, Ursula Biemann, Lindsey French, Grace Grothaus, Dolleen Tisawii’ashii Manning, Mary Bunch, Suzanne Morrisette, Joel Ong, Rasa Smite, Raitis Smits, Jane Tingley with Faadhi Fauzi and Ilze [Kavi] Briede. I attended the opening reception of this exhibition in February 2023.

⁴² For full details on this exhibition see: www.ocadu.ca/event/more-than-human

and important—particularly since acts of disappearance, especially among Indigenous and other marginalized communities, continue to occur at startling rates.

Creating Alongside the Land: Attuning to Historical Erasure

Land Memories ponders nonappearance and environmental life in quite this way, revealing the ongoing and agential status of these Saskatoon locations. The field itself is already always there living, carrying—an actant with the potential to affect and hold human and non-human worlds. The field appears in a different season—no longer the sub-zero degree winter months when the freezing deaths of Stonechild, Naistus, and Wegner occurred. The ground where Stonechild's body was found appears in Benesiinaabandan's video no longer covered by ice and snow, and it is unrecognizable from photos of the field where the men's bodies were found and circulated widely in the press. There is something of a shock for viewers experiencing this idyllic prairie meadow in summer—a temporal shift; a deceleration and a gesture of intimacy established between the calm, dreamlike pasture, and the violent and terrible memories that this space holds, revealing the deeper history—this is where someone lost their life.⁴³ That moment of history is very important to remember and, despite the changes in season, or loss of memory, these impressions from the land still resonate.⁴⁴ The gentle sway of violet asters, white pearly

⁴³ Historically, it has been a widely employed artistic strategy to use landscape/land art to bring attention to sites of violence—especially present day landscapes—as a way to talk back and engage with past memories/past traumas that the land or site continues to hold in the present. For some examples, Alain Reanais' 1956 short documentary film *Night and Fog* features the abandoned physical grounds of Auschwitz following the liberation of Nazi concentration camps. Reanais' artistic technique depicts the horrors of the Holocaust shown in black and white, through documents, films and photographs found in German, Polish and French archives. The footage of the now empty sites (the camps), filmed only ten years later and shot in colour, shows what energetically remains of Auschwitz.

⁴⁴ A more recent example of this past / present strategy of underscoring the landscape's agency is Jessica Johnson and Ryan Ermacora's 2022 documentary *Anyox* which depicts a former mining

everlasting flowers and tall grasses billowing clash with the violent histories held within this space. The golden sun pouring down over the dry field in this video, and the non-human critters and beings that inhabit it signal and reverberate the longer, deeper stories held within this land, call out for attunement. The collision that occurs between the cinematic image of this sweet and meditative meadow with the context and longer history of this space creates a powerful encounter.

Benesiinaabandan acts as an un-authoritative narrator, and this aesthetic choice refuses a violent or traumatic retelling of these racial spatial legacies of Saskatoon, thus employing a decolonial aesthetic. In this sense, he aims not to *speak about* the land and the histories it holds but rather to speak nearby and *with*—taking up a performative iteration of Trinh T. Minh-ha’s positioning against the colonizing gaze⁴⁵—acting with/alongside these memories. This is perhaps also akin to employing what queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has described as the “periperformative.” For Sedgwick, acts which hover near the edge of doing something, but remain ambiguous are generative and the viewer’s affective response is what matters.⁴⁶

town in remote northwest British Columbia (Anyox) that is now home to massive slag piles accumulated as a byproduct of the early 20th century copper smelting process, illuminating the site’s complex labour history and environmental degradation. In this case rape of the earth through environmental destruction is artistically engaged with through silence and minimalist film making strategies in order to let the site do the “talking.”

⁴⁵ In Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* (1982), an experimental film and anti-ethnographic study of women and rural life in Senegal, there is a now popular quote, “I do not intend to speak about; just speak nearby” signifying the filmmaker’s positioning against the colonizing gaze. Minh-ha critiques the traditional ethnographic impulse to define and categorize, advocating instead for an approach that acknowledges the limits of representation and respects the autonomy of the subjects portrayed.

⁴⁶ See Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 2003.

Exploring the affect of the in between, Sedgwick's notion of the periperformative allows uncertainty, gray areas and/or failure to exist as potential generative spaces.⁴⁷

Refusing an extractive footstep and working against a consumptive impulse, Benesiinaabandan instead creates relationally *with* these histories and other beings. Through an affective choreography, *Land Memories* foregrounds a deep sensitivity to environmental surroundings, making “visible” the frequencies, and resonant materialities of absence, urging viewers to slow down and tune in as a decolonial intervention—a moment of stillness as a radical act. Directing attention to the space of nonappearance itself (namely, the city streets and the field), the video refuses existing colonial spatial configurations. It refuses the violent shaping of space by police officers who impose borders in Saskatoon—for instance, by way of driving Indigenous men outside of city limits and “dumping” them.

Ongoing settler colonial spatial logics have created dividing lines and separation (both literal and ideological) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks by way of residential schools, reservations, land theft, ritualistic starving, loss of language and culture, racist legal policies, the law, intergenerational trauma, and so on. Demarcated spaces bound by figurative and literal borders are thus created, and surveillance and regulation of the movements of Indigenous and marginalized people are enforced by the state to maintain these bounded practices. As Fanon notes in *Wretched of the Earth*, these spatial divisions reveal the lines of force that create them (40-52), prompting a deeper exploration of how we engage with spaces marked by violence and oppression. In contrast to representations that foreground details of colonial violence through sensationalism or which obscure accurate information entirely, *Land*

⁴⁷ Placing experiential attention on these in-between or uncertain moments Sedgwick argues, allows for an embodied understanding of how power operates and also permits moments of rupture and possibly transformation.

Memories performatively focuses instead on connective practices of witnessing land/land as witness, deep listening, memory, returns, and traces left behind, inviting viewers to reflect on why often the things we *cannot see* deeply matter. Here, absence is performing, and by highlighting the space of disappearance itself, Benesiinaabandan illustrates that invisibility lays bare reality.

In *Dying from Improvement*, Sherene H. Razack's examination of inquests and inquiries into Indigenous deaths in custody reveals how Indigenous bodies are specifically inscribed in the present colonial order in Canada. She writes:

Marked as different, a difference that is in essence a lower level of humanity, a species at an earlier, pre-modern stage of development, Indigenous bodies become violable as damaged bodies which can only be managed through force. It is possible to kick, punch, and drag Indigenous bodies with impunity, depositing them in cells with cold concrete floors; these are bodies for which the normal rules do not apply, a distinction so built into everyday routines that it often goes unremarked upon. Violence is not visible when it is meted out to bodies whose difference means that they can and, in fact, must be violated (if order is to be preserved). (87)

Razack's analysis is useful for understanding artworks that interrogate these spatial configurations through their inverse (what we cannot see). I argue that the aesthetic strategies employed by artists like Benesiinaabandan and Belmore call for ways of attuning that tend not only physical space, but spatial and temporal dimensions that encompass other realms, as well—such as the subconscious dream world, or aspects of ceremonial life. Might we probe the acoustic dimensions of historical erasures that overwrite continuous Indigenous presence *as site*?

What sounds emerge from the comings and goings of memory? How might we connect with the resonant environment and all that inhabits it?

There is a counterintuitive approach to this kind of sensing work. One might start by asking, what am I *unable* to perceive? How might I understand my surroundings differently? *Land Memories* also considers the relational ways that space, land, and matter can and do interact as active participants with a lively, performative force, rather than being inert and determined. In this vein, these questions of space put pressure on human-centred ontologies, and challenge power structures that mark material bodies as subjects of power. They reveal something akin to what Levin calls “the environmental unconscious,” as I expand upon in the next case study. Place-based performance engages the idea that the environment becomes a part of the performance in locally material ways that cannot be overlooked. Works like Benesiinaabandan’s, which engage with these very disappearances, guide audiences in attuning to the elemental utterances of things that don’t necessarily speak in words, or appear in physical form. In doing so, they help us tune in to the discourse of multiple other-than-human beings.

I notice the weeds have burrowed through concrete and think of resilience. One rarely thinks of the roots that live beneath the sidewalk, stretching out underneath the houses, roads, concrete buildings. An empty field is a thing of dreams, of poems, of beauty. Its honeyed smells and calming slow energy elicit sweetness.

FREEZE

*LAST SEEN ALIVE IN POLICE CUSTODY
UNDER THE INFLUENCE
FOUND 5 DAYS LATER FROZEN TO DEATH IN A FIELD
WEARING ONE SHOE
MARKS ON HIS BODY LIKELY CAUSED BY HANDCUFFS*

*ABORIGINAL TEENAGE BOY
DROPPED OFF AND WALKING TO WHERE?*

IN MEMORY OF NEIL STONECHILD (1973-1990)

These poem-like words appeared on a plaque nearby Rebecca Belmore's and Osvaldo Yero's conceptual memorial sculpture *FREEZE* dedicated to Neil Stonechild. Created from a large horizontal stack of ice blocks and etched with letters spelling S-T-O-N-E-C-H-I-L-D, this piece was gifted to the earth, an offering meant to live and die within the landscape, to be witnessed only in its temporary and fleeting existence. Initially created for the Nuit Blanche Festival⁴⁸ in Toronto in 2006 (Figure 2), the work later appeared in 2008 at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Association Board and Human Rights (Figure 3) and then again, and most poignantly, traveled to the Remai Modern museum in the winter of 2019⁴⁹ where it became a site-specific work, with deep rooted connections to Saskatoon.

⁴⁸ *FREEZE* first appeared as an installation at the Royal Car Wash on Queen Street, West for the all night festival Nuit Blanche Toronto. The work's title at that time was *FREEZE: Stonechild Memorial*.

⁴⁹ The Remai Modern iteration of *FREEZE* was included in Belmore's retrospective exhibition *Facing the Monumental*, originally curated by Wanda Nanibush at the Art Gallery of Ontario which covered over three decades of the artist's work. *Facing the Monumental* is also the name of Belmore's 2012 performance of the same name wherein the artist transformed a red oak tree in Toronto's Queen Park into a temporary monument to the earth.



Figure 2. Rebecca Belmore with Osvaldo Yero, (2006). *Freeze* at Nuit Blanche Festival. Royal Car Wash, Toronto ON. Image from grunt gallery archives.

Belmore's Stonechild memorial was not intended to be a monument in a grand sense;⁵⁰ rather, it focused on impermanence, and relied on the affective impressions and associations that linger well beyond the physical fact of the sculpture's immanent disappearance. One might say the work is anti-monumental; it is not imposing or authoritative in its approach.⁵¹ Belmore's

⁵⁰ I am reminded of an interview between Dylan Robinson and Bracken Hanuse Corlett entitled "Imagining New Platforms for Public Engagement," where Hanuse Corlett states, we should "keep the residential schools around for monuments to remind us that they did happen" (*Arts of Engagement* 317). Robinson and Corlett explore how preserving such sites can create new platforms for public engagement. The physical presence of these buildings can serve as powerful educational tools and sites of memory, provoking reflection and dialogue about the past.

⁵¹ Another significant ice work includes Zhenchen Liu's "Ice Monument" created for Paris Nuit Blanche in 2015 wherein the artist deposited 270 multicoloured ice blocks on the square in front of the Hôtel de Ville in response to the climate conference with the intention that they would melt over 24 hours. Interestingly, and similarly to what happened to Belmore's STONECHILD monument in Saskatoon, the ice blocks in Liu's installation were kicked over and vandalized

choice to use ice as material is significant as it embodies the absence, revealing that the ice, too, will disappear. For an artist to use material that evaporates into thin air⁵² poses similar challenges of that of performance art itself in that it is not capable of being possessed or easily captured outside of its documentation and it necessarily has a short time frame of existence as the “live.” The ice melts away vanishing; and indeed, as visitors placed their hands upon the ice sculpture, the sculpture began to vanish as evidenced by photographs of the dwindling, dripping sculpture. The thawing ice signals a breakdown of that which is solidified—both the ice and what visitors think they know of the space that holds the work—it references also the story of Neil Stonechild coming to the surface. Additionally, the human body is largely composed of water, and ice is of course the very same material that caused Stonechild’s freezing death. Water *is* life; it transforms, and many Indigenous people view water as sacred, or as Belmore states, as “blood of the earth” (Freeze). The use of water as material is also unsettlingly ironic in the sense that many Indigenous people in Canada are still fighting for water rights and protection.⁵³ Belmore’s

reflecting a general indifference to climate change as well as a disregard for the artist’s work. It is often the responses to these types of work that reveal the most interesting social critique.

⁵² Similarly employing ice, in his 1997 work *Paradox of Praxis I (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)*, artist and architect Francis Alÿs pushed a massive ice block around México City for 9 hours until it melts into nothing.

⁵³ The use of water as material also makes me think of Isaac Murdoch and Christi Belcourt’s (founding members of the Onaman Collective, a collective of Indigenous artists and environmentalists) now emblematic art banners stating ‘Water is Life’ that can be found at land and water defense gatherings, urban city centres, family homes, and also in gallery settings. As Adrienne Huard and Gabby Moser state, “this is just one example of the ongoing intersections of visual culture and Indigenous resistance movements that propel a growing public awareness of colonial corruption and the urgent need for restitution” (“Editorial Introduction”). Furthermore, in 2020 the Metropolitan Museum of Art hosted an exhibition entitled “Water Memories” that explored water’s significance to Indigenous peoples and Nations in the United States through historical, modern, and contemporary artworks. This exhibition highlighted the ongoing struggle of Indigenous people to control and protect water and land resources. Featuring works from artists like Cara Romero and Tom Jones, the exhibition delves into historical and contemporary issues surrounding water, presenting both artistic and activist perspectives.

sculpture disappears and returns to the earth and is clearly representative of the way that Stonechild died, by hypothermia.⁵⁴

Jeff Crowe, a friend of Stonechild, was present at the opening of Belmore's sculpture at Remai Modern, and later expressed disappointment around the illegibility of the word Stonechild due to the sculpture's domino-like positioning. Since the letters in the sculpture were stacked one in front of the other and contained within the ice, it was difficult to read his full name. Crowe stated, "the ice represents that he froze to death, I understand that, but to me, I'm a little disappointed because it doesn't even have his last name on it," adding that he could only see the letters S and D in the work. "So, I'm quite upset because it's almost like you're hiding his last name" (Mattern). This is a valid concern coming from a loved one expecting a memorial in the traditional sense, afraid that this artistic gesture was not enough to pay respect to a lost friend. However, Belmore no doubt had this illegibility in mind when creating the sculpture—highlighting the irony of the fact that Stonechild and countless others remain indecipherable, even and especially, in death. Belmore sent CBC a statement in response to Crowe explaining how the letters in *FREEZE* are "etched out, they are made of air, they are there, and they are not there." She went on, "the sun, the wind and the coming spring will melt the ice, and the blocks will topple, potentially making other letters visible for a short time. The ice will eventually become water and his name will be free" (Mattern). Belmore's strategic framing of conditions of "being there and not being there" is the precise mechanism this chapter seeks to illuminate.

⁵⁴ For a very relevant case study that relates to this, Susan Schuppli's project *Cold Cases* in collaboration with Forensic Architecture, investigates the politics of cold through various cases where temperature plays a crucial role in human rights violations and socio-environmental justice. The project explores how cold can become a form of violence, linking it to issues like climate colonialism and systemic racism. One segment, "Freezing Deaths & Abandonment Across Canada," examines instances where extreme cold has been a factor in harm, including cases where individuals were abandoned in freezing conditions.

FREEZE comments on the ways certain bodies remain unmarked by the state and thus by the police—signaling the regulating logics that cannot *see* Neil Stonechild. At the same time, the sculpture performs what is *there*, what is hidden in plain sight and in the process this reorients disappearance. It highlights the way that language (in this case, literal letters) “produces an interpretive matrix for what is seen” (*Frames* 79).



Figure 3. Rebecca Belmore, *Freeze* at Canadian Museum of Human Rights (2008). Winnipeg, MB.

Image from grunt gallery archives.

Site-specificity and use of space as material in the Saskatoon version of *FREEZE* is perhaps its most important aspect. Belmore reveals the racial/spatial structures in place that are taken for granted and appear invisible. Curator Wanda Nanibush states “Belmore’s desire to make visible the invisible also drives her emphasis on site-specificity and marginal histories” (*Facing* 14). Belmore shows how space and the elements can be material for art making, with the

environment becoming part of, even *being* the artwork (a central tenet of Belmore's larger body of work as well). Bringing land and state into curious relation, *FREEZE* framed the frozen land of harsh Canadian winters in Saskatoon as weapon, illustrating how the state itself was responsible for Stonechild's freezing death—a death by Canada. *FREEZE* was ultimately removed from the Remai Modern grounds following an act of vandalism caught on security footage (one of the ice blocks was kicked over). Sadly, even this artistic gesture of remembering Neil Stonechild was violated and disturbed, and the sculpture was subsequently taken down out of respect to the family.

Race and Space in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Travelling west of Saskatchewan, Sherene Razack's analysis of racialization of space in places such as the DTES (Downtown East Side)⁵⁵ in Vancouver, draws direct connections between British Columbia's (and Canada's) colonial past and the ongoing disappearance of women from the DTES. Systemic inequality, structural violence and the naturalization of racialized "others" are embedded in dominant modes of perception which enable and sustain the status quo. Razack states, we must "uncover the hierarchies that are protected and the violence that is hidden when we believe such spatial relations and subjects to be naturally occurring" (*Race, Space* 128). Dean notes that a "spatial analysis reveals how racialization is produced concomitantly through the histories which also (re)produce particular understandings of a place, such that 'race' signifies quite differently in different places and different epochs" (50). These

⁵⁵ It feels important to note that from 2007-2014, I worked in the Downtown Eastside in two different women's shelters as a frontline worker, and also with the Vancouver Women's Health Collective as a programmer. This experience working closely with residents of the DTES has directly influenced how I perceive the area, and also my commitment to writing about/alongside this community.

theories help illustrate how spatial arrangements, if critically attended to, reveal larger systemic choreographies that produce the very disappearances that haunt them.

Representations of Indigenous women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside oscillate between invisibility and hyper visibility: Indigenous women are invisible as victims of violence and hyper visible as deviant bodies, sex workers, drug addicts—at once marked and unmarked. The oft-used vernacular nickname “pain and wasting” by Vancouver locals, instead of Main and Hastings streets, alludes to city inhabitants' generally ambivalent attitude toward the area, which is marked as a space of criminality and deviance that leverages Indigenous women's expendability and excess within settler colonialism. As Razack outlines, “sexualized violence is key to disposability, and flesh is the site at which racial and sexual power are both inscribed” and emphasizes the “excessive violence that is meted out to Indigenous women as evidence of colonial power imprinted on their bodies” (“Gendering” 291). In the case of the DTES it would seem that these markings of criminality and deviance are laid over the entire neighbourhood like a dirty blanket.

The broken windows theory⁵⁶ of neighbourhood decline states that visible signs of crime, loitering, anti-social behavior, and civil disorder (not to mention sprawling tent cities) create an urban environment that encourages further crime and disorder, including serious crimes. Under the broken windows theory, an ordered and clean environment (like a gentrified one or middle upper class neighbourhood), one that is maintained and orderly, sends the signal that the area is monitored and that criminal behavior is not tolerated. Conversely, a disordered environment, one that is not maintained (broken windows, graffiti, excessive litter), sends the signal (performs)

⁵⁶ The Broken Windows theory was first introduced in 1982 by social scientists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling. It was popularized in the 1990s by New York City then mayor Rudy Giuliani where it was employed by NY police, such as the controversial “stop and frisk” method.

that the area is not monitored and that criminal behavior has little risk of detection. The theory assumes that the landscape “communicates” to people—the landscape is performing. *The landscape communicates*. For example, according to this theory, literal broken windows convey the message that a community displays a lack of informal social control and so is unable or unwilling to defend itself against a criminal invasion. It is not so much the actual broken windows that are important, but the *message* the broken window conveys to people. Read this way, it symbolizes the community’s defenselessness and vulnerability and represents the lack of cohesiveness of the people within. Neighbourhoods with a strong sense of cohesion on the other hand, fix broken windows and assert social responsibility for themselves (read: can afford), effectively giving themselves control over their space. This is a classic example of being from the wrong side of tracks and the literal demarcation of space between the haves and the have-nots (Herbert and Brown), the visible separation of space.

In her study of representations of the DTES in film, Jennifer England points out that the producer of the “true-crime” documentary *Through a Blue Lens* (1999)⁵⁷ describes the area as an “untamed frontier: a place of good guys, cowboy cops and outlaw addicts,” revealing the attitude through which such inner-city spaces (and its residents) can be defined and a perspective which is then reproduced through visual culture. Filtered through the gaze of white male police officers, *Through a Blue Lens* reveals some of the ways in which disciplinary institutions and visual culture produce constructions of inner city space and mark residents as cultural other or outsider. While *Through a Blue Lens* has become a relatively well known film, it is worth noting that there is also a rich tradition of active Downtown Eastside counter cinema films and documentaries,

⁵⁷ This documentary was produced by the National Film Board of Canada. It follows interactions between police officers and residents of the DTES and documents the extreme poverty and suffering many substance users in the area endure.

such as those by Nettie Wild (*Fix: The Story of an Addicted City*, 2002), Antoine Bourges (*East Hastings Pharmacy*, 2012), Paul Wong (*Downtown Eastside*, 2010) or Wayne Wapeemukwa (*Luk'Luk'l: Mother* 2017). These and other activist/community led films are made by and with DTES residents/citizens rather than *about* them, producing cultural output and stories coming directly from the lived experience of the neighbourhood and paint a different story of community resilience, refusal, and kinship.

The space of the DTES is literally partitioned off from the rest of Vancouver like a border zone, within a city long known for being (supposedly) one of “the most livable cities in the world” according to several surveys and the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Global Livability index in 2022 (“The Global”). Livability, according to this survey, depends on urban quality of life based on assessments of stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education and infrastructure. But obviously the question remains, livable for whom? And, what is “urban quality of life” anyways? Surely not disappearing without police investigation, certainly not winding up in the landfill. Surveys like the Economist Intelligence highlight (through a profound lack of highlighting) the underbelly of the scenic, affluent Vancouver. The hyper visibility of Indigenous women in the DTES stems from race/colonialism, class, and gender, which intersect and become the signifiers of deviance and criminality. Yet, as England reasons, Indigenous women are also rendered invisible by/within this space, which is most apparent in the lack of attention paid to their concerns by the police or other state authorities and in the erasure of their histories as colonized others. These colonial legacies, Dean argues, “naturalize violence against certain bodies occupying certain spaces” and this becomes particularly instructive when considered alongside the predominant use of frontier mythology to describe and rationalize contemporary efforts to ‘clean up’ and resettle inner-city spaces like the Downtown Eastside

(49). In sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman's study of 'waste disposal' an argument is made that fuses waste to the project of Modernity. Bauman asserts that certain lives are rendered *as* waste and excess, making modernity possible by turning people into waste through systems that enable the process (31). Similar to literal garbage removal, these processes are often obstructed from view.⁵⁸ Razack explains the colonial state produces bodies that "matter" in contrast to bodies that are produced for violence and death (waste)—bodies, she argues that are required to maintain the status quo of the modern settler subject. Through what Razack calls an "annihilative impulse" a.k.a. the "disappearing of Indians," and through the maintenance of spaces that "let die" (28-29), the settler becomes real, becomes subject, comes into existence. Discourses of waste and degeneracy legitimate violence and disappearance in spaces deemed 'empty'—for example, no-go zones—places that are outside of law—urban slums (favelas), border regions, reservations, impoverished areas like "skid row," the DTES, etc. Waste is considered non-productive in an economic sense and easily rendered as useless or as nothing within a capitalist society—therefore there is nothing *there*. Razack's analysis of the racialization of space in places such as the DTES is essential to understanding the connections between

⁵⁸ I am reminded of Guatemalan performance artist Regina José Galindo's 2017 performance *Desecho* (a Spanish word meaning 'rubbish'; 'scrap'; 'waste'; 'outcast') wherein she makes herself invisible, hidden in literal trash and carried to the trash area of México City's Art Fair. By the loading area, the crowd of artists, curators, collectors and museum directors has gathered to watch. The audience senses a concealed presence from the small movement Galindo makes form within the bag. A city garbage truck approaches to collect all of the trash bags in the area, including the bag within which the artist is concealed. The truck disappears, taking an unclear path away from the the collection area and Galindo records the route from inside the trash bag. In an earlier work, *No Per-der-mos Nada Con Nacer*, or we do not lose anything by being born, (2000) the artist similarly "disposes" of herself in a plastic bag. Naked, her sedated body is dropped off and discarded at the garbage dump in Guatemala City where women's bodies have frequently been discovered in acts of femicide.

British Columbia's colonial past and the disappearance of women from the DTES today as a space where bodies are marked as already absent presences.

Referring to the case of Pamela George, a Salteaux woman who was beaten to death near the outskirts of Regina, Saskatchewan by two white university students in 1995 Razack states, "race, social position, and [...] gender were indeed made to disappear..." (155) for the young white men. In her research on this case, Razack theorizes that the law, during the murder trial, perceived Pamela George as inherently belonging to a "zone of violence," while the accused—two white male university students—were viewed as outsiders to this "zone of violence." This spatial distinction implied that the students, being foreign to the space, were consequently deemed less culpable.⁵⁹ Razack's method of "unmapping" demonstrates the underlying violence and hierarchies in a case by denaturalizing the spaces and individuals involved.⁶⁰

If we consider Pamela George's murder case and relate this interchangeable visibility and fungible positionality⁶¹ to the many disappearances of Indigenous women in the DTES (women

⁵⁹ Ultimately, after a lengthy and highly publicized trial, Steven Kummerfield and Alex Ternowetsky were found guilty of manslaughter in the murder of Pamela George. The case garnered significant attention due to issues of racial bias and evidence handling—topics that are recurring themes in this dissertation. Both men served relatively short prison sentences before being released on parole. In an unusual development, Kummerfield later became a poet, and collaborated with renowned Canadian poet George Elliott Clarke. His work even appeared on the Parliamentary Poet Laureate website. The controversy surrounding one of Kummerfield's poems, which addressed themes related to sex work, is documented in the article "Poems Removed."

⁶⁰ See Razack, "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice: The Murder Pamela George." *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 15.2 (2000):

⁶¹ I am thinking about those individuals who have the privilege to pivot within their positionality. For the two young white male university students for example, being visitors in the "zone of violence" was just "boys having fun"—they were intoxicated (*boys will be boys*); they were "exploring" the wrong side of the track so to speak: no blame to be given to those who have such a "bright future" ahead and who have the mobility to go in and out of different spatial zones. For

who “belong” or blend in within “zones of violence”), and if we cannot trace or recognize these ‘disappearances’ because those who supposedly do not belong in the zone of violence cannot perceive them/acknowledge them/care about them/be part of them/attune to them, what does that mean for communities who literally vanish? In her exploration of camouflage as an active artistic strategy, Levin discusses feminist performance art pieces that situate blending in, or disappearing, in relation to larger cultural narratives that render particular bodies illegible, invisible, and disposable. Taking up Levin’s provocation that what we cannot see can be “as much about revealing as concealing” (97) complicates terms “through which women’s bodies enter visibility” (23). What does it mean (as an individual or as a nation) to not be able to remember (or to not even learn about for that matter, if we recall my student’s question in the Introduction: *but, where do they go!?*). Can we attune to the ongoing legacies of colonial violence? Tracing the spectre of disappearance and the invisible affective remains of these unimaginably violent disappearances transmits a larger more troubling knowledge—that of systemic erasure.

Vigil: Site Communicating

The DTES continues to be a site that is spatially isolated from the rest of Vancouver, known for its high levels of poverty, drug use, intersecting health crises and violence, and it is often described as Canada’s poorest postal code. Vulnerable populations—including those who are unhoused, living in poverty, dealing with mental and/or physical health issues, and coping with substance addiction—comprise much of the area and Indigenous women and sex workers

those who do not have this privilege to change spatial positionality, things (life and death) are much more bleak and justice seems non-existent.

make up a large percentage of the area's population. I would be remiss to discuss performances in Western Canada that have responded to/worked with disappearance without also addressing Rebecca Belmore's June 2002⁶² site specific commemorative performance, *Vigil* (and subsequent video installation created from the performance documentation entitled *The Named and Unnamed*⁶³ (2007), inspired by the growing list of women missing from those very streets).⁶⁴

This now well-known performance happened in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood (DTES) and was dedicated to the Missing and Murdered Women and Girls

⁶² Between 1978 and 2001, at least 65 women disappeared from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Robert Pickton, who operated a pig farm in nearby Port Coquitlam, British Columbia was charged with first-degree murder 26 of the women, many of them Indigenous. Pickton was charged with the disappearance of forty-nine women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside not long after this performance occurred. The arrest of Pickton acted as a catalyst to look deeper into the problem of Missing and Murdered Women and Girls in the area and across the country. It also provided widespread knowledge around the fact that this was indeed an ongoing colonial problem stemming from state racism and not merely a phenomenon of one lone serial killer. These disappearances cannot be understood outside of colonialism and ongoing racism.

⁶³ *The Named and Unnamed* is a visual art installation created from documentation of Belmore's 2002 performance of *Vigil*.

⁶⁴ Another well known artistic project produced around the same time as *Vigil* is Lincoln Clarkes' highly controversial *Heroines Project* portrait series (see *Heroines Photographs* and *Heroines* film 2002). Clarkes began photographing women in the DTES in the late 1990s during the time that a high number of women had been disappearing from the area at an alarming rate. Several of the photos from Clarkes' series ended up on Missing Women's posters that circulated during the Robert Pickton era/killing spree. In an interview I conducted with Clarkes, the photographer told me that many families of missing women during that time period reached out to him asking if he had photos of their loved ones, and that these images were frequently used in memorials honouring the missing women. "When I began taking photographs of the women people were not paying attention," recalls Clarkes. "Women were dying, overdosing, disappearing, and no one cared. When people walked through the Eastside, they would look the other way...they would run the other way" (Clarkes). Clarkes informed me that several of the photos were used by the not-for-profit social service, Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver (EFS), during a campaign which centred on the issues of missing women that ran in the early 2000s. The EFS provides support for women and girls involved in the Canadian justice system and provides a range of services to women who are criminalized or who are at risk of being criminalized. Despite the controversy this project generated, I continue to believe in its importance.

(MMIWG)⁶⁵ who have continued to disappear from the area at tragic rates. At the time of the performance, the DTES was at the heart of the investigation into the disappearance of well over 60 women over the span of ten years, many of whom were Indigenous. Kathleen Ritter notes that what became evident at the time was “the egregious nature of the crimes, the vulnerability of the subjects targeted, and most significantly, the systemic injustice of police turning a blind eye as Indigenous women continued to vanish from the streets” (*Wordless* 50).

In the now well-known, yet rather poor-quality footage⁶⁶ of Belmore’s DTES performance created by Vancouver-based multimedia artist Paul Wong, an interesting temporal play is at work. As I watch and re-watch the 40-minutes of archival video provided to me by grunt gallery, I take note of the joyful way the performance is shot on camera—a playful, smiling Belmore looks straight into the camera before the performance begins stating, “we’re here because I am an Indian ... (big laugh) ... and this is my goddamned festival... and my name is Rebecca, and I was invited”; here Belmore refers to the Talking Stick Festival put on by Firehall Theatre in 2002. Wong’s “b-roll” footage captures the particularities of the site of the performance at that moment in time. A close-up on a soiled back alley mattress with a massive hole in its centre, shots of folks walking through adjacent Chinatown streets carrying groceries past red awnings featuring Mandarin language, overflowing blue dumpsters, an abandoned stove,

⁶⁵ Archer Pechawis’ performance *Elegy* (2006) also honoured MMIWG of Vancouver and their families. Using video projections, the piece was a meditation on the lives of these women and the indifferent response of the Vancouver Police Department in response to their disappearances. *Elegy* is a memorial to the missing women of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. It is important to note that these art projects happened before the national consciousness of MMIWG2S+ and helped to contribute to the widespread awareness of these issues in Canada.

⁶⁶ This brings to mind Hito Steyerl theorization around the “poor image” as a low-resolution, degraded visual form that circulates widely in contemporary digital cultures. It is marked by its diminished quality, which paradoxically grants it a kind of democratizing potential through its widespread dissemination. For more, see Steyerl, Hito. “In Defense of the Poor Image.” In *The Wretched of the Screen*, 31–45. Sternberg Press, 2012.

murky puddles, garbage littering the streets—relatively the same scene you will still find if you happen upon these alleys today. Horns beep, voices from the DTES boom, one yells “I’ll beat you up!” in the background. The sounds of then, and the voices of now, could be interchanged without anyone noticing which makes this site-specific performance continually relevant. Working with site and space as collaborators, Belmore reveals the contemporary reality of the disposable status of Indigenous women in the DTES and the ways this is written on and read through the body. Belmore’s past performance reminds of the ongoing fight for awareness around MMIWG in Canada in the present (Search the Landfill protests, The DTES Valentine’s Day Memorial Women’s March,⁶⁷ commemorations along the Highway of Tears, etc.) and carries an insistence to remember into the future. The disappearances she performed alongside call for actions that transcend mere gestures of care, especially those lacking in substance and failing to address the underlying issues. While these gestures hold meaning, they must be paired with substantive efforts to confront systemic issues. Belmore activates the past and anchors it in a persistent political present, calling—screaming—for responses that are both deeply symbolic and materially impactful.

⁶⁷ The Valentine’s Day Women’s Memorial March in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside is an annual commemoration of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and is also a celebration of resilience and community activism. This annual event, which began in 1992, serves as a vital expression of solidarity among the diverse communities in the DTES. The march highlights the strength and resilience of Indigenous women and the broader community, who come together to honour those lost and to demand justice and accountability. It is a space where families, friends, and supporters can share their grief, memories, and hope, creating a powerful sense of community and collective healing. The event features speeches, prayers, ceremonies, songs, and drumming, which not only remember the victims but also celebrate the cultural heritage.



Figure 4. Women holding a red dress at the annual Valentine’s Day Memorial March, Vancouver, BC.
Image by Author, 2021.

In Wong’s documentation we see a shot of Belmore’s sister Florene sitting in the truck featured in the performance, people gathering casually in the audience; Margo Kane introduces the piece to the growing crowd as “The Vigil.” Then, Belmore begins to empty some of the contents from a cloth bag including small candles and proceeds to sweep the ground at the corner of Gore and Cordova Street (a site well known for abductions and still to this day representative of disproportionately high levels of drug use, poverty, crime, and mental illness). The artist gets down on her hands and knees and vigorously scrubs the ground—a ground which can never be

clean (Figure 5). Is she scrubbing the filth of the streets or is she cleaning the blood of her relations? This scrubbing is a reminder of everything that is considered abject, or as waste in this space—the excess, unruly and improper and disordered matter (matter out of place) which transgresses a sense of cleanliness and propriety; as Julia Kristeva states: “as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3). Belmore’s vigorous scrubbing is asking, what or who, is “thrust aside” from perception in order to continue living? From a different pail, she then washes her mouth with water. Takes off her shoes and is barefoot on the street. Acts of cleansing recur throughout many of Belmore’s performance works as well as gestures that make clear reference to manual labour, signaling the artist’s solidarity with the marginalized, the working poor, as well as Indigenous people.



Figure 5. Rebecca Belmore, *Vigil*, 2002, Vancouver BC. Image by Claudia Katz.

Courtesy of grunt gallery archives.

During the performance, candles are lit by a male audience member after struggling with the wind, and Belmore begins to quietly read the first names of some of the women who have gone missing from the DTES that she has written on her bare arms in black ink. She continues to yell the names out loudly—this is not a peaceful or quiet vigil, and colonial secrets are publicly revealed through her screaming and her embodied remembering. Belmore has created an oral record of/for the invisible and intervenes in the space of the DTES. Standing on the sidewalk, barefoot in her underwear, sweat beaded on her face, she wails their names: “Angela! Kellie! Laura!”⁶⁸ After each name is bellowed into the streets, Belmore pauses and pulls a red, thorny rose through her teeth, stripping it of leaves and blossom—roses that will never be received by the murdered women. Once she stops screaming out the names, she removes her pants and puts on a long red dress,⁶⁹ now synonymous with the MMIWG movement in Canada. Belmore literally inscribed the names of the women onto her skin through this naming process, reflecting that in a way, she *is* these women.

With a hammer, she nails the fabric of the long dress to a telephone pole and as she violently tore herself away traces of the red dress remained stuck to the pole like the hundreds of

⁶⁸ The practice of reciting names of lost lives is a cross-cultural phenomenon that serves as a poignant act of remembrance and acknowledgment. This tradition is seen in memorials and actions like the Vietnam War Memorial, the AIDS Quilt, Roberto Bolaño’s novel *2666*, the 9/11 Memorial, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Stolpersteine project, the #GazaNames project, and the Equal Justice Initiative’s memorials for victims of racial violence. In Belmore’s performance, she embodies this tradition by screaming the names of missing women from the Downtown Eastside.

⁶⁹ The red dress has become symbolic of MMIWG in Canada and now more globally. In 2010 Metis artist Jamie Black initiated the REDress Project which focuses on the issue of missing or murdered Indigenous women across Canada. It is an installation art project based on an aesthetic response to this critical national issue. The project has been installed in public spaces throughout Canada and the United States as a visual reminder of the staggering number of women who are no longer with us. The encounter with an empty red dress in public spaces draws attention to the gendered and racialized nature of violent crimes against Indigenous women and evokes a presence through the marking of absence (<https://www.jaimeblackartist.com/exhibitions/>).

tiny bits of paper left hanging on the poles after the disappeared person's posters had fallen away over time (Figure 6). Ghostly, palimpsestic remains. These very poles continue today to act as everyday holders for the many posters of missing Indigenous women and Belmore tethers herself to this potential fate. After much struggle, Belmore violently frees herself from the pole, the dress tearing from her body, and finally left hanging empty and in tatters from the nails. Now dressed in jeans and t-shirt, she leans up against a looming black pick-up truck (inhabited by her sister Florene), that has been parked at the periphery of her performance space. Without another word, Belmore slips into a waiting pickup truck and slumps, exhausted, into the passenger seat. James Brown's *It's a Man's Man's Man's World* blares into the street, and her eyes are closed. This is a very vulnerable part of the performance documentation as Belmore is not really doing anything, yet the camera and audience are there witnessing her, holding. Everyone is just sitting there, vibrating in the aftermath of the performance, awkwardly waiting, tense, while the James Brown song plays into the streets. *Vigil* encouraged spectators to meditate on the violence against, absence of, and murder committed against hundreds of Indigenous women in the area through a process of bearing witness, tuning in, and remembering.⁷⁰ Through this public witnessing and attunement to site, Belmore commanded embodied attention to be directed toward disappearances that have routinely been ignored or dismissed entirely by law enforcement, as the obvious and inevitable consequence of "dangerous lifestyle choices." *Vigil*

⁷⁰ Another important MMIWG project is Métis artist Christi Belcourt's large scale community memorial project *Walking with Our Sisters*, a travelling commemoration ceremony which honoured murdered and missing Indigenous women and their families in Canada and the United States that included nearly 2000 pairs of moccasin vamps created by community members to draw attention to this injustice. This project was initiated in 2012, and acknowledges "forms of knowledge that reside in individual bodies, in communities, and in the spaces that they daily inhabit" (*Travelling*).

was at once bearing witness to invisibility and the hyper-visibility of women who disappear from the space of the DTES and commemorating their lives.



Figure 6. Rebecca Belmore, (2002). *Vigil*, Vancouver BC. Image by Claudia Katz.

Courtesy of grunt gallery archives.

With the visceral and terrifying reality of the Robert Pickton case that was happening around the same time, the affective impact of site cannot be understated. Between 1978 and 2001, at least 65 women disappeared from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Following an 18-month investigation, wherein authorities found the remains of 33 women, most of them Indigenous, at a derelict pig farm outside Vancouver owned and operated by Pickton, who came to be known as "the pig farmer killer." In 2001 Pickton was charged (and convicted in 2007) with murdering 6 of the women (Sereena Abotsway, Mona Wilson, Andrea Joesbury, Brenda Wolfe, Georgina Papin, and Marnie Frey), but admitted to killing 49 to an undercover police

officer. Pickton's pig farm became the largest crime scene in Canadian history, a site where police took 200,000 DNA samples and heavy equipment was used to sift through 383,000 cubic yards of soil in search of human remains (Butts).

There is no doubt the audience's experience of Belmore's performance at the time was shaped by their awareness of the terrible events that were becoming well known to Vancouver residents broadly, as disappearances, and horrific murders were made increasingly public. During this time of Belmore's performance in Vancouver, particularly the lower eastside, there was a visceral affect of fear and violence circulating. It should also be said that at the time of Belmore's *Vigil* performance there was much less of a national consciousness around the issue of MMIWG than there is today. The Pickton case in many ways created a massive national and international visibility around the issues of MMIWG in the country, and the role that artists, activists, and community agitators played in bringing this to public attention can not be understated. Pickton's hideous murder spree of women who were mostly from the DTES highlighted the ongoing targeting of vulnerable women: Pickton preyed on women struggling with addiction, poverty, and sex work, many of whom were Indigenous.

The case also outlined systemic failures by the police in addressing missing persons cases and supporting vulnerable populations, and illuminated the community's trauma, as the murders and investigation caused widespread fear in the DTES, already struggling with marginalization and overlapping systemic inequality and societal disregard. The case led to increased advocacy for missing and murdered women, Indigenous rights, and community-led initiatives for safety and support in the DTES.⁷¹ It needs to be resaid that for many years, police and city officials

⁷¹ During the writing of the dissertation, on May 31 2024, Robert Pickton died after succumbing to injuries after being assaulted in prison in Quebec where he was serving a life sentence.

ignored direct pleas from community members and activists in the DTES who knew that women were vanishing at alarming rates, and that these pleas went ignored and unacknowledged. This was affirmed in the 2012 Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry titled “Forsaken” conducted by Commissioner Wally T. Oppal following Pickton’s trial and conviction. As if a repetition, Oppal’s report, under the section “Nobodies: How and Why We Failed the Missing and Murdered Women,” seven potential overarching reasons for the failures in policing were proposed to the Commission (24-29), mirroring the Neil Stonechild inquiry findings of systemic failure in 2004 outlined in Chapter 1. Oppal’s findings of police inefficacy and misconduct concluded:

- I. Discrimination, system institutional bias, and political and public indifference;
- II. A want of leadership;
- III. Poor systems, limited and outdated policing approaches and standards;
- IV. Fragmentation of policing;
- V. Inadequate resources and allocation issues;
- V. Police force structure and culture, personnel issues and inadequate training;
- VI. Allegations of conspiracy and cover-up.

“The pattern of predatory violence was clear and should have been met with a swift and severe response by accountable and professional institutions, but it was not” (*Forsaken*), the report said. Sadly, many of the failures in this report directly led to the disappearance of women and moreover, mirror the failures played out in Saskatoon following the investigations into the so-called starlight tour deaths outlined earlier in this dissertation.

What the Space Holds

Curator Marilyn Burgess has noted that documentation of Belmore’s performance work has typically been an afterthought (as evidenced by the only existing video footage of the 2002 performance); rather, the concerns of Belmore’s work “lie elsewhere: in a particular place, with a

particular audience and in relation to particular contextual, historical and ‘imagined’ geographies” (“The Imagined”).

While this may be a relevant point, Richard William Hill’s essay, “Vigil’s Audience: An Experiment in Performance Documentation,” offers a compelling perspective on the importance of the archival documentation for this work, or perhaps reinterpreting documentation through the body and senses, in relation to this performance. Hill considers the work contemporaneously, twenty years after the performance, from the perspective and oral accounts of those who witnessed *Vigil* firsthand. He interviewed audience members who were there and was interested in hearing from them about their experience of the performance, especially elements that video documentation would not be able to capture (such as smells, events, weather, people present, gossip shared, etc.).

In Hill’s interview with Kate Barry who was present at the performance, she remembers being there live as a spectator stating, “it was amazing, the physicality of the space of this alley that’s dirty...” and Tabrizi Ahmad continues, “it smelled like piss” (*Wordless* 57). Recalling the participatory and unintended call and response element of the performance, Barry said, “it was just this really eerie feeling of almost like ghosts, this call and response thing just spontaneously started to happen” (*Wordless* 59-60). Peter Morin, a now well-known performance artist himself and an audience member at the time said, “I remember the street yelling back...nobody had really been talking about the murdered and missing women in the Downtown Eastside. I remember saying to my friend afterwards, how it felt, like the land was yelling back...about how these ghosts or these spirits, or these energies were yelling, answering” (*Wordless* 60). The street itself was co-performing alongside Belmore; the space of the DTES and its inhabitants were choreographing the event.

Re-watching the footage of Belmore's performance I realize that it is the screaming of the names of the women that haunts me the most. The violent and desperate screaming of each woman's name followed by her running each thorny rose through her teeth is both an aural and physical embodiment of pain. Belmore's screaming begs, *where are they?* The use of voice in this performance is striking—Belmore's lived, embodied, inner knowledge, is realized and brought forward into public space. The sound vibrates inner tissues and cells of bodies, through time (I am feeling this vibration watching it 20 years later on grainy video through a laptop). It resonates outward, into the streets, reverberates in the back alley dumpsters, is caught, and carried by other people. The insistence of Belmore's scream within the DTES reminds me of movement therapist and somatic educator Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's assurance that "the space holds the information," suggesting that the physical space or environment contains implicit memories, emotions, and experiences that can be accessed and explored through movement and somatic practices like dancing at site, or screaming in this instance. Belmore's voice screaming the names of missing women through the streets of Vancouver still haunts with its relentless remembering. Bainbridge Cohen (whom I have studied with) argues that spaces retain energetic imprints of past events, emotions, and experiences, and that these imprints can be sensed and explored through somatic awareness, allowing individuals to tap into the embedded information ("The Space Holds"). In this sense, the space of the DTES (and everything that it holds including its vanishings) is its own living consciousness, an environment that possesses an energetic and tactile quality (including texture, smell, temperature, and resonance).

During the performance, the space holds Belmore's resonant voice: the names of the women temporarily interrupt the status quo and shape the flow of air transforming it. Sound and affect resound. These voices, this screaming, the sensations, have been carried forward, staying

with people for many years, and *Vigil* continues to make absence present—it continues to actively hold agency, fullness, vitality. Belmore worked toward making absence present in the representational field but also through sensory memory of the performance. In art historian Claudette Lauzon’s observations of *Vigil*, the author states that the work “does not contrive to literally re-member or re-materialize the disappeared women;” rather, Belmore’s work “engages with absent presence in the indicative world by making absence present in the representational field” (157). Lauzon continues, Belmore “insists upon mapping the inevitable traces of ghostly presence” (167). Gordon offers that “following ghosts is a practice of inheritance that requires a different approach to doing academic research” (59), one that “draws our attention to the affective relations brought on by injustice, trauma, disappearance, and violence.” Gordon describes a haunting as “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known” (8). Attuning to these hauntings as a methodology provides a form of knowledge production that brings in the affective and makes space for possible new imaginings.

Disappearances from the DTES have not gone away. In fact, they have potentially worsened. Since March 2020, the media focus on the COVID-19 pandemic has largely obfuscated the thousands of deaths that have occurred in the DTES due to the opioid crisis and escalating homelessness in Vancouver.⁷² Somehow, these deaths are rarely discussed and given very little media coverage, which continues to raise questions about which bodies are considered “precarious and grievable” (Butler) and which lives are considered more valuable than others in

⁷² According to the BC Coroners Service Death Review Panel, since 2023, there have been approximately 200 deaths per month, equating to about six people per day in British Columbia, due to unregulated drug use. The report highlights that Indigenous peoples, as noted by the First Nations Health Authority, are disproportionately affected by toxic drug poisonings, comprising a significant portion of overdose deaths in the province. This overrepresentation reflects broader systemic inequalities and highlights the urgent need for targeted public health interventions. See “An Urgent Response.”

a system which prioritizes capital over lives. By reframing the space of the DTES, Belmore cultivates and unlocks a new perceptive sense through her performance, evoking the felt presence of what was assumed invisible, or disappeared. Levin has illustrated how artists have “performed ground” to make visible “body as territory” (112-119) and to contest the ways in which particular bodies are already marked as absent. A spatial analysis of performance reveals how space itself can shape subjects, rendering them visible or invisible (both materially and politically).

Levin states that “women’s bodies have been conflated not only with environment but also with trash” (188) thus linking their status as ground also to a kind of disposability that operates invisibly yet in plain sight. She asks, how might embeddedness “be understood as a performative strategy used by artists to work against a dominant perspective and the obfuscating frames produced by media and state” (141). Performance art that is situated firmly into/with the surroundings (like *Vigil*), allows the viewer to at once perceive the artwork and to also notice the surroundings at site. Levin’s discussion of place-based, environmental performance engages with the idea that environment becomes a part of the performance that cannot be overlooked: “recognizing the independence of the non-human is not simply a philosophical project but also a political one.... This framing of site-specificity provides access to.... [the] ‘environmental unconscious,’ rendering perceptible those aspects of the environment that we habitually engage but routinely overlook” (105-6). I extend Levin’s idea by considering the ways that artists have framed disappearance itself as performance through land-based and site-specific interventions, rendering absence perceptible. The art works discussed in this chapter create a scaffolding for nonappearance to become amply illuminated, to be perceptible as a vivid, present, eventful force despite remaining largely otherwise unseen, and perhaps unconscious outside of the aesthetic

strategies employed. The significance and magnitude of this of this ability to make perceptible, cannot be overlooked.

Conclusion

Tracing absent presence, as Dean notes, is a “practice that demands both a different way of knowing and a different way of (re)producing or animating that knowledge, one that attempts to account for significant theoretical shifts in the humanities and everyday life” (55). The art works in this chapter position viewers as witnesses to sit with the discomfort of the challenges that face Indigenous communities in Western Canada today as the direct fallout from ongoing colonialism, generational trauma, and systemic racism. They each ask audiences to tune in by way of embodiment, perception, texture, meditation, encounter, touch, intimacy, sound, intuition, or other senses so often dismissed in viewing and archival habits to reveal multisensory and resonant methods of engaging these works through multiple forms of connection and knowledge production.

The spectral relationality of these works transcends temporal boundaries, weaving together past, present, and future in the context of ongoing colonial trauma. They reveal the continuity of histories and experiences embedded in the land, reflecting the enduring impact of these traumas on both the physical and cultural landscape. This affective materiality of disappearance lingers, ready to “lurch out” as Richard Wagamese’s epigram foretells. Absence holds a transformative power, and, as Kazubowski-Houston observes, it “mischievously plays with you when least expected” (258). The land speaks, says Julie Nagam; “it will tell you stories if you want to listen. Our land has spanned countless millennia. It is the only living thing that can tell us what the future might hold, for the reason that it stores knowledge in the rocks, trees,

water and deep within the earth” (90). Trying to name these evocative affects is a difficult and often fleeting endeavour—these efforts are bound by failure and maybe sometimes impossibility. One always feels as though they are chasing something in the pursuit—attempting to establish an orientation to that which can only be sensed.

Queer and feminist theorists often turn to similar methods for understanding the political world—through means of embodiment, identity and space. Sara Ahmed, for instance, has explored how various communities and individuals are “oriented” or drawn to certain ideals, norms, beliefs, behaviours etc. that come to shape their subjective experience in the world. In her book *Queer Phenomenology*,⁷³ Ahmed explains how certain social relations are arranged spatially, and how certain orientations are normalized and routinized. The author suggests exploring and becoming aware of what orients us toward or away from things and how these orientations become sticky with meaning (11).⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty might conceptualize orientation through phenomenology.⁷⁵ When we, as human, interact with physical objects (for example, when I touch a hot stove), this interaction shapes our understanding of the world. This experience with the stove not only orients me to it but also informs my broader engagement with the world. Perception is not simply a matter of passive reception of sensory information but

⁷³ In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Ahmed reveals how social relations are arranged spatially, how queerness disrupts and reorders these relations by not following the accepted paths, and how a politics of disorientation puts other objects within reach, those that might, at first glance, seem “not right.”

⁷⁴ Ahmed contends that challenging dominant orientations, highlights the importance of other ways of being, and other ways understanding and experiencing the world.

⁷⁵ Phenomenology is the experience of the body in relation to, and in communication with, an object in space. French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty describes experience as the thing that happens between the subject and the object—that encounter is experienced in and through the body: “The thickness of the flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer for her corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is a means of communication” (4).

involves an embodied engagement with the world. Ahmed's orientation analysis helps to understand how becoming familiar (orienting) with the now always familiar, the unseen even, might open up new ways of understanding the world. Ahmed's orienting is similar to what I have been calling "attuning"—attuning to other frequencies, to land memories, or the seemingly unseen.

I used to think that the task was to *write* towards these intangibles but now I think it is more about the *sensing* them, *tuning in* to the felt environment, and recognizing that these resonant moments of attunement hold radical, transformative potential within the deeply violent institutional frameworks. Because these ruptures co-exist with existing frameworks of violence, they make what operates as an invisible structural force visible, sensed, and perceptible. Perhaps it is about developing sensitivities to that which cannot be encapsulated through words, to something ineffable. Attunement requires a practice of learning the distinction between the involuntary nature of hearing, seeing, and sensing and the intentional, felt, and vibrational attunement to the indirect, the not clear or literal, to that which arrives quietly and barely at all—a language beyond words.

These philosophical arguments and observations around phenomenology can be (should be!) situated within a very lived and political reality. For instance, can we orient ourselves to land memory? Can we understand, bodily, why it is that this information has been concealed from us (thinking of Indigenous disappearance)? Tina Campt has done this in her careful analysis of Black diasporic archival images and convict photography in the late nineteenth century elucidating how these spatial orientations can sometimes be orchestrated and choreographed as framing devices. As Campt notes, to make contact with an image one must attune to certain frequencies of encounter that aren't always available in our normal register—an idea which I

expand upon in the following chapter. Campy understands photographs as deeply affective objects that implicate and leave impressions upon their viewers through “multiple forms of contact: visual contacts (seeing), physical contact (touching), psychic contact (feeling), and, most counterintuitively of all, the sonic contact ... described as frequencies that require us to listen to as well as view images” (72). Can we think about this in terms of what we do not spatially see (unmarked graves, Indigenous deaths that have occurred in frozen empty fields?)

I apply this form of attuning, this technique of sensing to artworks that take disappearance as their material, but also to the sites themselves. Campy explains that corporeal modes of apprehending the photograph involve multisensory engagements with images, reversing the relation of mastery and hierarchy that usually characterizes optical viewing.⁷⁶ To be touched by something, after all, is to be affected by a particular quality or pierced by a feeling.⁷⁷ Convict photography in the late nineteenth century evolved into a performative genre, deliberately producing and capturing a “stylized framing of criminal difference.” This was

⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty’s arguments about vision in the *Visible and Invisible* are an important precedent to these theories of other ways of apprehending. Merleau-Ponty not only challenges a dialectical understanding of visibility and invisibility but also offers a way of thinking about vision as multisensorial and interrogates the very notion of what the sensible is. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception is not solely a visual or cognitive act but entails a dynamic and ongoing process of bodily intertwining with the world. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that perception is not limited to the isolated individual but is inseparable from the relational and contextual nature of our existence.

⁷⁷ Here I am thinking of Roland Barthes’ notion of the Punctum as “*that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)*” (27). Punctum can exist alongside the studium, but disturbs it, creating an “element which rises from the scene” and unintentionally fills the whole image. Punctum is the rare detail that attracts you to an image, Barthes says “its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value.” In the context of my discussion, *Punctum* serves as a metaphor for those unpredictable elements in artistic or historical representations that unexpectedly invoke a deep, personal resonance. This resonance can disrupt conventional narratives, inviting a more nuanced and complex engagement with the work. By focusing on these poignant details, we can uncover layers of meaning that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

achieved through serialized photographic portraits that emphasized and reinforced societal perceptions of criminality (79). Campt suggests looking beyond what we see in these photographs to hear their quiet frequencies and resonances. Campt calls for a strategy of looking and listening which enacts modes of quotidian refusal, resisting familiar terms and maneuvers in visual culture. Unlike Campt, I am less concerned about “hearing” and more about “feeling/sensing” these possibilities and the varied attunements they incite. I want to know: how do we learn to feel the histories around us? To attune to absence? What is the sound or touch of the past? Does absence take shape? How might we imagine or dream *otherwise*? Echoing what I posed earlier, perhaps this is passed on through the fluttering of a butterfly’s wings, held in the reek of piss, kept safe in a piercing scream, and embraced in a tingling sensation, fostering these kinds of frequencies. It asks us to open ourselves to radical vulnerability and sensitivity. Attunement allows unknowingness and invites genuine care and reciprocity in a process of sensate perception.

Acknowledging the political importance of taking sensation into account as it relates to responses to Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools,⁷⁸ scholars Martin and Robinson assert that an aesthetic politics “lives within the immediate sensory experience and impact of artistic forms,” arguing that the affective aspects of these artistic works “enact politics through displacement of normative and hegemonic structures” (10). Martin and Robinson examine how aesthetic and sensory interventions offer alternative forms of political action and healing. It is precisely this ability to (re)organize perception that gives art any transformative power and potential; while thinking about different modes of being perceptive

⁷⁸ *Arts of Engagement* focuses on the role that music, film, visual art, and Indigenous cultural practices play in and beyond Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools.

and unlearning, I reflect on Rancière's arguments in *The Politics of Aesthetics* that social and political orders are founded on the "distribution of the sensible" (12-28). In this sense it is through aesthetics that we can articulate affective politics and demonstrate new ways of 'doing' politics. The 'distribution of the sensible' refers to a code of what is possible and acknowledged: the felt, heard, seen and perceived within a space, implicated in particular familiar patterns, inclusions and exclusions.

I argue that this perceptive logic can be extended to disappearance itself—some disappearances can be sensed while others remain outside of perceptive social range due to violent framing mechanisms, or all out erasure (no frame at all). Rancière notes that who can be seen and who can be heard ultimately determines who gets to participate in decision-making processes. As Barbara Adams argues, drawing on Rancière, "to see and to hear those normally rendered inaudible and invisible by current systems, we need to invent fictions that demonstrate new alliances and forms of action—ultimately constructing new communities of sense" (*Art, Fabulation*)—constructing different registers of intelligibility. As evidenced in this chapter, Benesiinaabandan and Belmore have both created works with a strong experiential dimension that call on viewers to do their own attuning. Rancière compellingly argues in *The Emancipated Spectator*:

Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination it presupposes disrupts the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is not rhetorical persuasion about what must be done. Nor is it the framing of a collective body. It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are 'equipped' to adapt to it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience

that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation. (72-73)

A change in the cartography of the perceptible opens up so many possibilities, futurities, and ways to story otherwise. These perceptual changes and affective ripples often occur gradually, but when they do, change can quickly be absorbed into a new framework of understanding. What would it mean to linger in new spaces of perception? To immerse ourselves in them, allowing their orientation to unfold slowly and curiously, and to let them transform us, rather than rigidly adapting to a new, neatly contained body of knowledge? Post-colonial scholar Divya P. Tolia-Kelly unpacks Rancière arguments, stating that “democracy is produced and legitimated through aesthetic practices and in turn creates the shackles that bound what can be termed aesthetics—both are morally and politically co-constructed, intertwined” (“Rancière and”). Put simply, some groups of people, and the ideas with which they are aligned, can be sensed while others remain outside sensibility.

Emerging ecologies of perceptibility, such as the ones offered in this chapter, provide political impetus for change, and might be achieved by learning to “tune-in” differently, by helping to visualize, sense, or give shape to ways of being and knowing otherwise. As Tingley notes, “it is essential that we shift our collective understanding about the sophistication and vitality of non-human, even what we might consider ‘non-living,’ agents to develop an ethics of inclusion that would enable a radical transformation of our perceptual capacities, our conceptual schemas [...]” (7). In Belmore’s words about another land based project,⁷⁹ “asking people to

⁷⁹ Belmore is speaking about her performance *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991, 1992, 1996) wherein she built a massive wooden “megaphone” and invited members of the public to speak into it, amplifying their wishes to the land in response to what is

address the land directly [is] an attempt to hear political protest as poetic action” (“Ayum-ee-aawach”). If we really listen, might we still hear Belmore’s voice screaming the names of missing women through the streets of Vancouver’s lower east side? Or the echoing voices answering her? Do the shivers of wind blowing tall prairie grasses still dance and rustle with the memory of Neil Stonechild? Can we attune ourselves to the inaudible frequencies of ice melting onto the bustling Saskatoon streets and all that those waters hold? Are we able to sense the felt and resonant materialities of what is lost and what is yet to come?

now referred to in Canadian history as the “Oka Crisis.” During the summer of 1990, many protests were mounted in support of the Mohawk Nation of Kanesatake in their struggle to maintain their territory. This performative object was taken into many First Nations communities—reservations, rural, and urban environments. Belmore has also created works that facilitate listening to the earth, such a *Wave Sound* (2017).

CHAPTER TWO

The Land Cries Out: Activating Legacies of Violence in the Southern United States

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

-William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

There is something holy about soil, that it's sort of this repository of everything that's ever been
and will be.

-Dr. Suzanne Pierre, *For the Wild*

The axe forgets; the tree remembers.

-*African Proverb*

Montgomery, Alabama

In the late summer of 2021, I packed up the car and drove with my then one-and-a-half-year-old daughter from Atlanta, Georgia to Montgomery, Alabama, the former Confederate capital of the Southern United States. Just the two of us—Canadian visitors—we made the three-hour journey down the interstate highway system to visit the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum founded by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). In my time spent living and researching in the South, I had become aware of the work of the EJI, founded in 1989 by Bryan Stevenson, a now widely acclaimed public interest lawyer and bestselling author of the book⁸⁰ and subsequent film *Just Mercy*.⁸¹ The non-profit organization provides legal representation to people who have been illegally convicted, unfairly sentenced, or abused in state jails and prisons (About EJI). Much of EJI's legal work challenges the death penalty (which is still active in Georgia and Alabama) and excessive punishment, and they provide re-entry assistance to formerly incarcerated people. Their mandate states that they are committed to

⁸⁰ Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. Spiegel & Grau, 2014.

⁸¹ *Just Mercy*. Directed by Destin Daniel Cretton, performances by Michael B. Jordan, Jamie Foxx, and Brie Larson, Warner Bros., 2019.

changing the narrative about race in America. Aside from criminal justice reform, EJI also houses a massive archive of historical records, reports, educational materials as well as photographs and short films that explore the nation's history of racial injustice. In 2018, EJI opened the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice as part of their "national effort to create new spaces, markers, and memorials that address the legacy of slavery, lynching, and racial segregation, which shape many issues today" (About EJI), and it is these two specific sites which my daughter and I made the trek to find.

Drawing on insights that came from personal exhibition visits in the Southern US, attending EJI soil collection ceremonies, and conducting interviews with people involved in these memorial efforts, this chapter invites speculative exploration (as in, *what is possible*) around how public monuments, memory, and soil attune to the unseen. It asks, how can we remember *differently*? Soil collected at lynching sites plays a significant role in this chapter as its own active force; and the soil I discuss hereafter is that which has been encountered through the EJI's exhibitions, archives, collections, site, and through remembrance ceremonies to frame a consideration of its ongoing haunting.

Given the history of racial terror in the South, one might think that public remembering of histories of violence is everywhere but that was not the experience I had. I was shocked to discover how rare it actually was to see public monuments dedicated to many of the atrocities that happened not so long ago (and that continue), and overwhelmed by the endless edifices glorifying the Confederacy. When I learned about the EJI's Community Remembrance Project, I began seeking out individual historical markers within the state of Georgia and Alabama and diving into their corresponding soil collection—a project that collects soil at lynching sites. EJI's historical plaques and soil collection create spaces for remembering otherwise. These projects

provide ruptures in the memorial atmosphere, as counties adopt their own commemorative markers across the United States, interrupting a landscape historically, and continually, dominated by symbols of white supremacy. The soil collection haunts the present moment with a past that is not past. I understand the soil written about in this chapter as autonomous and active. It possesses spectral forces of memory and haunting that do not necessarily occur in linear time (but are rather out of joint and lingering, unexpected, and fleeting). Remembering differently might mean turning attention toward an attunement to absence and a resonance with what is seemingly *not there*.

The chapter explores how haunting can serve as a means of engaging with memory and pursuing redress for the future. It examines the complex temporalities associated with absence and memory, positioning soil as a non-human participant in deep history. Through a detailed analysis of the EJI's National Memorial for Peace and Justice and their Community Remembrance Soil Collection Project, I contend that these hauntings often defy a straightforward temporal progression, instead presenting as disjointed and lingering phenomena.

Legacy Museum

The Legacy Museum contains the permanent exhibition *From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration*, situated in a former slave warehouse in Montgomery (now Dexter Avenue and Market Street—formerly Commerce Street) that once held offices of slave traders and “slave depots,” which functioned as active trading sites and as detention facilities where the enslaved were held captive until they were auctioned at Court Square (one of the state's largest slave auction spaces in Alabama) mere blocks away (Equal Justice 31-49). Only steps away is the rail station where tens of thousands of enslaved Black people were trafficked during the 19th century

to be relocated to white slaveholding families. These men, women and children arrived by steamboat or rail and were paraded down Commerce Street from the Alabama River to the railway station to the slave auction site or depots (Equal Justice 31-49). Also a few streets away, standing proud and looking out over the city in front of the state capitol, is a bronze Jefferson Davis monument, the sole president of the Confederacy. The memoryscape of Montgomery is conflicted to say the least. Confederate images in and around the state capital abound, including the nearby Alabama Confederate Monument; after all, for more than 150 years, the American South's memory culture has been dominated by the heritage of the Confederacy. This collide between, on the one hand, the push to honour the devastating memory of racial terror in the southern US in different, more visible ways and, on the other, a rigorous and protective clinging to another kind of memory meets head on, making the struggles over historical memory feel visceral in space—even more so in post-Charleston and post-Charlottesville America.⁸² The

⁸² Charlottesville, Virginia, saw an outburst of protests in the summer of 2017 by white nationalists spurred by the removal of a statue memorializing Robert E. Lee from Emancipation Park. The protests were initially led by far-right leader and white supremacist Richard Spencer. The “Unite the Right” rally was attended by protesters including white supremacists, white nationalists, neo-Confederates, and Klansmen. Marchers chanted racist and anti-Semitic slogans and carried rifles, Confederate battle flags, and anti-Muslim banners. The rally was also attended by hundreds of counter-protesters. During the protest a vehicle drove into a crowd of counter-protesters marching through the downtown area before speeding away, resulting in one death and leaving more than a dozen others injured. Following the Unite the Right rally in 2017, the NAACP and the National Action Network called on the government of South Carolina to repeal a law that barred the removal of public monuments and memorials, including Confederate monuments. On August 13, a day after the Charlottesville car attack, NAN held a rally at the *Defenders* Confederate monument. The event was organized by the local chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America, who also called for a repeal of the act barring the removal of monuments. In response, Charleston Mayor John Tecklenburg announced plans to “add context” to several monuments in the city (including the *Defenders* monument) with the installation of plaques that provide additional information on the monuments and their backgrounds. In 2019, the monument was vandalized again, with a “red paint like substance” splattered onto the monument. In 2020, as part of the George Floyd protests in the United States, the statue was again vandalized, with “traitors” and “BLM” spray-painted on the pedestal. The statue itself was later covered up.

conflicted landscape evokes questions about memory, racism, and white supremacy and their broader spatial and temporal interlockings.

The faintest warm breeze wafted through the otherwise scorching city from the Alabama River, which runs along downtown Montgomery—the same river that transported and carried enslaved people. The sky was clear blue with colossal white fluffy clouds. In the blistering heat, I walked around Montgomery where the Legacy Museum and this history of enslavement co-exist. An affect of shock and fractured confusion permeated as I stood at the site where the atrocities of the slave trade had occurred, in what was once known as the “cradle of the Confederacy”; simultaneously, I felt in awe of the revolutionary events that transpired here. This contradictory landscape is where Rosa Parks walked the streets⁸³ alongside Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.; it was here that the year-long bus boycotts sparked the modern civil rights movement. It felt like hallowed ground. The deliriously oppressive Southern heat seemed to mimic an ambient state of disorientation and it seemed like a temporal play was at work, as it is difficult to reconcile the amount of the human suffering that once took place at the spot I now stood: where people were treated like chattel and families were torn apart, now people walked around laughing, shopping, working. Walking through such a location, a site of immense violence, the ground seems to tremble with all that it holds. The sense of contradiction I felt standing on Dexter Avenue is illustrative of what urban planning scholar Michael Hebbert notes as the capacity of the street to serve as locus of collective memory, not only as a site for “overt commemoration of public memory,” but also as “the accumulation of group memories” through

⁸³ The Rosa Parks Museum is located on Montgomery Street, between the two EJI sites in Montgomery, and nearby the church where MLK Jr. served (1954-1960) and held mass organizational meetings is located on Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church. It is now a National Historic Site open for tours and still remains an active church.

the everyday material settings and socio-spatial patterns of living, moving and remembering (581). The streets of Montgomery are contradictory and complex sites indeed.

Trying to distract my fussy baby, I came upon an historical marker stamped by the Black Heritage Council State Historic Preservation Office that details how Montgomery had once become “one of the most prominent slave trading communities in Alabama.” Another plaque explained, “Africans of all ages were lined up for inspection and auctioned at this as well as four other major depots, three of which lined Market Street (now Dexter Avenue).” When I finally arrived at the Legacy Museum, I knew I was at the right place when I saw a large and delicately painted quotation on the side of the white building by Maya Angelou that reads, “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”

Having cleared security, we entered the exhibition and the words “From enslavement to mass incarceration” prominently welcomed us, indicating that the museum is no ordinary journey but rather one of temporal, political, and spatial dimensions. The exhibit performs a vivid historical narrative arc as the welcome quote suggests. The dramaturgical composition of the Legacy Museum’s exhibition performs the continuing effects of legal, social, and political disenfranchisement—the structural layout physically leads guests through this before and “after” (read ongoing/current) of slavery. The exhibit begins with slavery and racial injustice in the United States, and guides visitors through to the Jim Crow era to convict-leasing labour –the system in which Southern states leased prisoners to private railways, mines, and large plantations for enforced penal labour and debt peonage.⁸⁴ At one end of the gallery are representations of

⁸⁴ Convict leasing was able to happen under a series of laws called the “Black Codes” which were passed in the South in the aftermath of emancipation. Black codes were restrictive laws designed to limit the freedom of African Americans and ensure their availability as a cheap

enslaved people, at the other, are contemporary images of young black men wearing orange prison jumpsuits.

The museum's theatrical use of sensory tactics represents a terrifying and chaotic legacy of racism—visitors are confronted by a cacophony of images, replicas of pens where enslaved people were once kept; didactics, video consoles, clothing, overlapping voice recordings, draped flags, newspaper clippings, letters from people currently serving time on death row in federal penitentiaries, interactive media. Historic pictures of slave auctions, contemporary images of prisoners picking cotton in state yards, photos of public lynchings, graphics of statistical information, and many other ephemera are presented in vitrines. The exhibition performs a version of what Sharpe refers to as “the wake”—that is, life in the ongoing aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, where the past (that is not past) ruptures the present (9). The exhibit overflows with information and animates a vivid historical narrative arc—from slavery to mass incarceration. In the wake of so many “ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people,” Sharpe argues that Black death is a foundational aspect of American citizenship— “it is the ground we walk on” (7). The Legacy Museum and Memorial ask visitors to acknowledge (and be critical about) antiblackness as a foundational ground of American citizenship and to understand the ways it is embedded in the past, present, and future organization of the nation.

Like Sharpe and Hartman, the EJI illustrates how Black lives are continually animated by the afterlives of slavery, and also delineates what survives despite such insistent violence and

labour force after slavery was abolished during the Civil War. These control mechanisms were intensified through vagrancy laws, surveillance, curfews, and pass systems and were specifically designed to curtail the economic, political, and social freedom of African Americans and, through a combination of private and public efforts, restore much of the slave system that had existed prior to the war (see “Black Codes”).

negation. Visitors are able not only to see, but also to feel, the struggles for justice since the time of slavery. Contemporary photographic images show present-day prisoners picking cotton in state yards that could easily be interchanged with photographs from the antebellum period. Through this embodied and spatialized curatorial approach, the museum provides education on how ideological myths of racial inferiority and white supremacy were created and sustained long after the official end of slavery, thus making clear how these false narratives evolved to shape present-day attitudes.

National Memorial for Peace and Justice

After leaving the museum I trudge across town, about a mile, in the ardent heat to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (NMPJ), which covers six acres on the side of a hill overlooking the city. The large-scale memorial is a visual ode to the approximately 4,400 African Americans who were lynched in the US between 1877 and 1950. I can see the pavilion-sized monument in the distance on my steady walk uphill, pushing my sleeping daughter in the stroller. Sweat dripping from my face and mosquitos buzzing around my legs, I look up at the staggering memorial looming high overlooking the city of Montgomery. I reflect on the arduousness and labour of arriving at the site and think this hard work is intentional by design. A haunting quality exists in the monument's visuality, in both its colossal size and its location above the former confederate city, giving off an aura of brooding omnipresence. The monument's immediate heaviness impresses upon the burden of remembering, or rather activating the memory of, lynching histories in the Southern United States. We finally make it to the top of the hill, and I take in the mnemonic monument in its vastness. Etched on the wall of the entrance is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s statement: "True peace is not just the absence of

tension, but the presence of justice.” Once through the gateway there is a winding pathway where visitors encounter didactic text and narratives conveying the horrors of the state-sanctioned violence that has plagued Black people in the U.S. for hundreds of years.



Figure 7. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama, 2022, Image by Author.

Art and design are incorporated along the path to the memorial to “contextualize racial terror” including Ghanaian sculptor Kwame Akoto-Bamfo’s jarring multi-figure *Nyinkyim* installation (2010-ongoing). The work features seven partially nude African figures, including a baby, who are shackled together and represent slaves on a ship on the harrowing journey across the Atlantic. Each figure has an anguished expression and is actively pulling away or struggling with the chains around their necks, manacled hands, and feet. It is the most figurative and explicit reference to Black people suffering from terror, humiliation, and labour in bondage

within the memorial grounds. As we walk by, and my own child looks at the sculpture fearfully, I reflect on the potential exploitation of Black pain in such displays, particularly by white audiences. The risk of the consumptive and spectacular. Acknowledging the slippery possibility of dark tourism (the act of travel to sites *of*, or associated *with*, death and disaster) reminds me of the “terrible spectacle” that Saidya Hartman cautions against in “horrible exhibitions” and the ease with which the spectacular character of the violated black body is reiterated and reproduced (*Scenes 1*). Simultaneously, I am struck by the contrast between my mobility and security as I care for my young daughter at the site, and the enslaved families represented—families torn apart by force. This uneven positionality highlights my privilege in holding my child, while the monument honours families ripped apart by racial violence. The juxtaposition unsettles my presence at the memorial, forcing me to confront legacies of enslavement and separation.

It also reminds me that the routine circulation and reiteration of depictions of the slave’s ravaged body can also “rather than inciting indignation, immure [sic] us to pain by virtue of their familiarity” (*Scenes 1*). The *Nykinkyim* installation is one of the first figures encountered on the memorial’s walking path and forces direct confrontation with one’s own positionality, setting a self-reflexive tone. Visitors are asked to encounter themselves in relation to this sculpture, and to situate themselves relative to the history of slavery before moving past, to the rest of the display.

My positionality as a white visitor is important to note as my experience of the memorial is an inherently different one than it would be for a Black person. As a white visitor, the memorial is asking something different from me. Moving through it, I am moved beyond the idiom of the ‘terrible spectacle,’ and the theatrical language that distances us from the real terror. The NMPJ demands responsibility and self-reckoning, but not indulging in sorrow or regret; rather, a call for accountability and action. For Black visitors this memorial presumably has a

different, difficult meaning—a site of mourning, grief. But as Sharpe has asked, “How does one mourn the interminable event?” and “How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?” (*In the Wake* 19). How are we to grapple with or memorialize the ongoing aftermaths of these traumas?

Stevenson has said of visiting, “You’re going to have to navigate this difficult terrain. You’re going to have to get closer to this history than might be comfortable. And we’re not going to make it shaded and padded and beautiful” (Stevenson in Bey). White visitors are expected to do labour; they are asked to become active participants in the memorial, resisting the voyeuristic impulse that a monument like this may also attract. Once “inside” the monument, the design forces viewers to wade through the voluminous hanging sculptures (fig 1); they surround and engulf visitors. Eventually a descending wooden floor leads to the last section of the memorial where guests are looking up at the dangling steel monuments overhead—the density of which feels like it may come crashing down, claustrophobic, a maze of memory and the full weight of racial terror. American history scholar Jenny Woodley notes, “the NMPJ is not only performing lynching; it is also performing the loss and despair of those who remain in its aftermath” (para 16). The physical experience of traversing the memorial is difficult because the history is difficult. The swerving architecture and ambient landscape supply space for experiential, reflective processing for visitors as they access their own feelings about this history. To be present with affect facilitates co-presence and communication with the non-visible yet resonant aftermaths of lynching history in the South. The nonlinear and repetitive layout of the memorial offers no view *through* it, showing that consumption of this material is not easy or organized. It reflects the chaos of reconciliation and the complex web of the aftermath of trauma that has no clear ending or escape.

Further along the walkway is another bronze sculpture by American contemporary conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas, which features the all-too-familiar sight of Black men with hands stretched to the sky in surrender, their bodies frozen within a free-standing concrete wall holding ten bronze portraits of bodies shown from the neck up. Entitled *Raise Up* (2014), Willis Thomas' sculpture embodies at once a gesture of surrender but also a gesture of resistance conjuring the "Hands up, don't shoot!" that became a popular rallying cry in the aftermath of Michael Brown's murder in Ferguson, Missouri—an utterance that is now representative of systemic police violence.



Figure 8. Hank Willis Thomas *Raise Up* (2018) sculpture at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama. Image by Author, 2022.



Figure 9. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama, 2022, Image by Author.

Thousands of red-rusted rectangular shaped Corten steel monoliths hang from the rafters of the open-air complex, each one standing for a county in the United States where documented lynchings occurred. Visitors must maneuver around and weave between these oblong markers, on which the names of the victims and the dates of their deaths are inscribed, and some of which are simply engraved “unknown.”⁸⁵ But as Sharpe reminds, they are not unknown, but rather *hidden*: “Their names are not lost to time, they are hidden in time, hidden in the work of the US, hidden in towns, in cities, in consciousness, and in lies. They are hidden and enjoyed, loved,

⁸⁵ The hanging Corten steel monoliths of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice evoke a powerful dialogue with other memorials, such as Daniel Libeskind’s Holocaust memorial, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, Germany. Libeskind’s design features thousands of concrete slabs of varying heights, arranged in a grid pattern over sloping ground, creating a stark, labyrinthine space. Both memorials, though differing in form and historical context, serve as types of graveyards, embodying collective memory and the acknowledgment of lives lost to violence. These spaces compel visitors to physically and emotionally navigate through them, confronting the weight of historical trauma and silenced narratives of the past. Additionally, this dialogue extends to Belmore’s memorial ice sculpture, as discussed in Chapter 1, which also engages with themes of memory and remembrance through its ephemeral nature.

adorned, and breathed in like air” (*Ordinary* 59). The engraved names on the monuments bring forward the traditions of burial and mourning similar to ones inscribed onto gravestones. For every monument hanging inside the complex, a corresponding one lies on the ground outside the pavilion, inviting individual state counties to claim a replica by engaging in the EJI’s Community Soil Remembrance Project, which aims to raise local awareness of lynchings that occurred across the USA. The downward slant of the floor adds to a sense of imbalance—this is not solid ground.

As you descend into an area with water gently pouring down the length of a long concrete wall, an epitaph reads: “Thousands of African Americans are unknown victims of racial terror lynchings whose deaths cannot be documented, many whose names will never be known. They are all honored here.” In the center of this room is a Plexiglas and metal container encasing a bed of soil. The inscription invites community members to visit lynching sites and gather soil to honor the lives of those killed and terrorized by racial violence and injustice. This soil, collected from dozens of lynching sites across the US, is part of EJI’s Community Soil Remembrance Project.

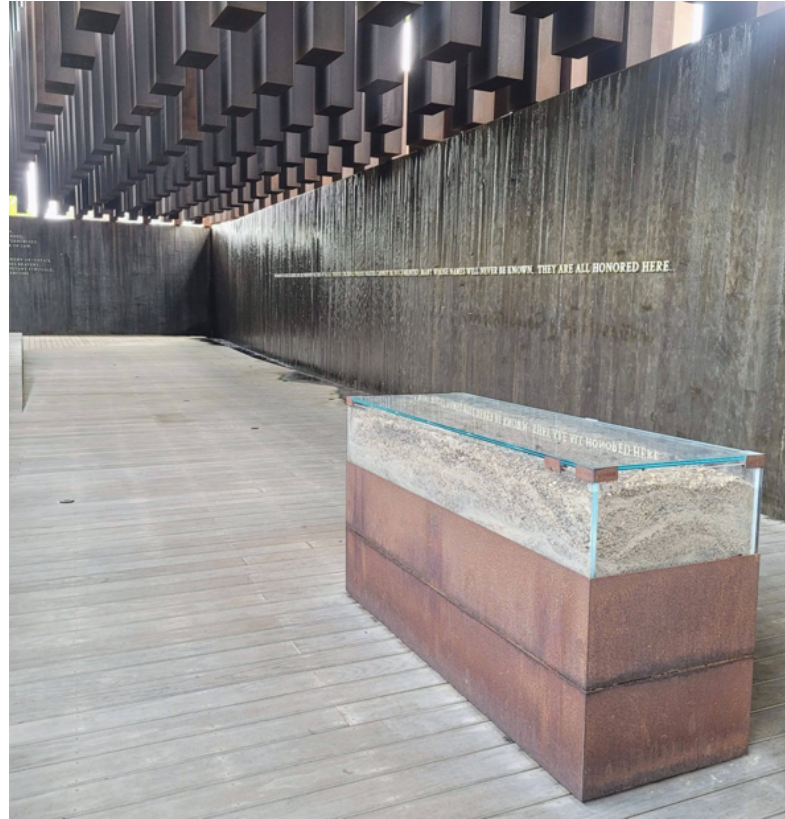


Figure 10. Inside the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama, 2022.
Encased soil. Image by Author.

Walking through the seemingly endless sea of metal monuments creates a dizzying effect, reinforcing a sense of being lost. The slant of the floor intensifies the feeling of unease. The gentle sound of water cascading down the wall allows space for reflection, with seating across from the water feature. The Plexiglas and metal casket-shaped container in the center of the room, containing soil, ties into the larger Community Remembrance Project, which I explain further in the Fulton County section. The poem “Invocation,” by Elizabeth Alexander, which appears in her collection *American Sublime*, is featured at the end of the memorial. It illustrates and performs how the overall memorial possesses and exerts its agency—what it *does*. Additionally, this poem summons the elemental utterances I aim to convey in this chapter. Etched in black granite, the poem reads (italics mine):

The wind brings your names.
We will never dissever your names
nor your shadows beneath each branch and tree.
The truth comes in on the wind, is carried by water.
There is such a thing as the truth. Tell us
how you got over. Say, Soul I look back in wonder.
Your names were never lost,
each name a holy word.
The rocks cry out—
call out each name to sanctify this place.
Sounds in human voices, silver or soil,
a moan, a sorrow song,
a keen, a cackle, harmony,
a hymnal, handbook, chart,
a sacred text, a stomp, an exhortation.
Ancestors, you will find us still in cages,
despised and disciplined.
You will find us still mis-named.
Here you will find us despite.
You will not find us extinct.
You will find us here memoried and storied.
You will find us here mighty.
You will find us here divine.
You will find us where you left us, but not as you left us.
Here you endure and are luminous.
You are not lost to us.
The wind carries sorrows, sighs, and shouts.
The wind brings everything. Nothing is lost.

The encounter with Alexander's incantation at the end of the winding memorial
experience is an invitation for guests to sit with broader reflections on the meanings of lynching

in the US, and on how the impact of these ongoing legacies lingers, and the significance of the EJI memorial for the entire nation. The juxtaposition of the poem against the backdrop of downtown Montgomery brings the past into the present, providing testimony to the truth of racial terror never fully confronted in the US, and speaks to the unanswered questions of these ongoing spectral relationalities. Like Alexander's poem asserts, these elemental utterances refuse purposeful forgetting—they continually make present that the past is not past (*The truth comes in on the wind, is carried by water/ The rocks cry out—/ Ancestors, you will find us still in cages, / The wind brings everything. Nothing is lost*). The memorial is asking audiences to engage with what Gordon writes about in relation to haunting as producing a “something-to-be-done” (xvi). It is a haunting that hopefully summons visitors to action.^{86 87}

⁸⁶ Significant questions arise about the political and cultural economy of memorials and the intentions of their corporate creators, often a blend of genuine solidarity and opportunism, leveraging the moment for various professional purposes. The Equal Justice Initiative memorial designed by MASS Design Group showcases the company's commendable designs, but it is interesting to reflect on that fact that a predominantly white, architectural firm from Boston is actively pursuing such memorial projects in Montgomery. This raises important questions about the notion of local stakes and the importance of Black stories being told by Black people. These debates exist with the EJI monument and elsewhere. For instance, the controversy surrounding the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C., which was designed by a non-Black artist. For more examples and discussions on these issues, see Craig L. Wilkins' article “Innervisions,” Kirk Savage's book *Monument Wars*, or Micki McElya's *The Politics of Mourning*.

⁸⁷ Dave Tell's book *Commemorating Emmett Till* examines the ways in which the memory of Emmett Till, a young Black boy murdered in Mississippi in 1955, has been preserved and interpreted through public commemorations. The book delves into the complex narratives and controversies surrounding these commemorations, highlighting the intersections of race, memory, and geography in the American South. Tell introduces the concept of the “ecology of memory” (5), where race, place, environment, and commemoration intertwine to shape the collective understanding and remembrance of historical events. Tell's book is a deep exploration of how tourism, racism, poverty, ecology, local politics, and economic development all play into various commemorative efforts, specifically focusing on the memorialization of Emmett Till in the Delta region and along the Tallahatchie River.

Following our trip to the museum and memorial, I stopped at a local restaurant and met a young white man who was the server there. We started chatting and I told him I was visiting from Canada. I discussed my research trip and travels in the South, and quickly learned that his whole family was from Montgomery, a few generations deep. In our conversation, he kept gesturing to Alabama's "history" in air quotes, expecting that *that* was what I was there to experience. Every time he would say the word "history" he would use his fingers and isolate the term from the rest of the sentence. I was fascinated by the way he continually qualified "history" in air quotes, but I also felt uncomfortable as an outsider—was I missing something? What was latent in this gesture? Since air quotes are usually used to express sarcasm or irony, I felt confused by their repeated use in this instance. Was he trying to convey something specific to me through this embodied gesture? Did he want me to know something—was he redacting? Or was this something of a "let sleeping dogs lie" mentality? Some of these perhaps similarly "mixed feelings" can be found quoted in response to the memorial in local Alabama newspaper articles around the time of its opening: "It's going to cause an uproar and open old wounds," and "it's a waste of money, a waste of space and it's bringing up bullshit" ("Lynching Memorial"). Or maybe this air quoting was a protective mechanism, a projection that I was aware of his white, local inheritance?⁸⁸ Or, worse, was he trying to convey that this was a partially false or

⁸⁸ In his analysis of monumental architecture in post-World War II Germany, Andreas Huyssen theorizes that certain forms of nineteenth-century monumentality possess a "seductive power." Huyssen claims that this seduction of the monumental (in this case, the grand and spectacular) was tied to the political needs of the nation-state and asserts that only by historicizing the category of monumentality itself can we "step out of the double shadow of a kitsch monumentalism of the nineteenth century and the anti-monumentalism of modernism and postmodernism alike. Only then can we ask the question about monumentality in potentially new ways" (191). He argues that redemption through memory (and a move away from monument) became significant to Germans after what has been termed "relentless monument mania." He continues, "it was particularly striking during the events marking the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Nazi war of extermination that the discourse of redemption had all but replaced the

exaggerated “history”? I will never fully know, but I thought a lot about this awkward exchange afterward and I considered the deep shame associated with *inheriting* these historical legacies as white people, even when they are tied to the core of one’s identity in place. The burden of responsibility—and the aftermath of slavery—lives on even if the “history” happened in the past. We carry these legacies within us, individually and subjectively. I wondered to myself: how am I entangled with this man and his air quotes? How am I complicit, entangled? And I am reminded that Canada too, is entwined in these histories of violence. While often perceived as a sanctuary during the transatlantic slave trade, Canada was complicit through its participation in slavery, as well as ongoing anti-Black discrimination. The nation frequently misremembers or downplays its colonial past and its ongoing impact on Indigenous communities. My conversation with him made me curious about the generative possibilities of shame as an affect, as a public motivator for change and healing—but also as a driving force away from stasis and toward a grief, a discomfort, that propels people toward action.

Fulton County, Georgia: EJI’s Community Soil Remembrance Project

A major component of the NMPJ includes displays of soil in jars (at the museum and around the country) that have been collected from lynching sites across the USA. Local community coalitions are formed across the United States and work together with EJI to tell the story of racial terror lynchings in their given counties through the both the Community Historical Marker Project and the Soil Collection Project. Doing this, these coalitions are moving towards claiming

earlier discourses of restitution and reconciliation” (182). Discussions and desires surrounding monuments evolve and are dictated by specific socio-political and historical contexts. This example illustrates that for the post-World War II German nation-state, a “monument mania” produced a subsequent impulse towards a tempering of memorialization into more ephemeral, silent forms. See Huyssen.

their county's Corten steel monument from LMPJ, (mentioned above.) The Community Remembrance Project partners with community coalitions to memorialize documented victims of racial violence throughout history and foster meaningful dialogue about race and justice today. Local communities gather soil at lynching sites for display (Soil Collection Project) in exhibits bearing each victim's name, date, and place of death. One such community-led partnership is the Fulton County Remembrance Coalition (FCRC), a county branch of the EJI in Georgia. Fulton county includes the city of Atlanta as well as regions to the north and south. The Soil Collection includes a ceremony honouring the lost life and discussion about how a historical narrative addressing these atrocities might be spread more widely. Truly a community project, these ceremonies include people from various socioeconomic statuses, ethnic backgrounds, education levels, and societal upbringing coming together to create a testament to those whose lives were cut short due to domestic terrorism and racism.



Figure 11. Soil collection jars displayed inside the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama, 2022. Image by author.

On what was coincidentally the 67th anniversary of Emmett Till's death, August 28th, 2022, I had arranged a meeting with community organizer, journalist, and preservationist Ann Hill-Bond in Atlanta who is also that lead representative of the FCRC. Self-conscious, anxious, and full of self-doubt, I arrive early to our interview. Quivering with nerves and caffeine, I begin wondering, what on earth am I doing? Me, a white Canadian woman asking for time from a Black Southern woman to discuss legacies of racial violence in the deep South. As I feel in myself a nervous system response contemplating to "just leave" (fight or flight), I realize that white fragility is kicking in and that the mere threat (real or imagined) of racial tension is stressful and terrifying, triggering my desire to emotionally vacate the situation. I am also aware that my status as an outsider (a Canadian) to the Southern states as well as my position as a white woman occludes certain knowledges, making me incapable of understanding particular nuances. Quickly realizing that these avoidant tactics were at work, I press on through my discomfort, sitting fully present, vulnerable in my implicated self, waiting for Hill-Bond to arrive. When she does, she is with her friend, Atlanta-based lawyer Nubiyan Mzekewe, and the three of us dive into a nearly three-hour long conversation on the history of racial terror in the Southern United States, about memory and memorialization, the meanings of reconciliation, reparations, and about healing and repair.

The FCRC website states that the group is committed to "collecting soil at the sites of Fulton County's 36 documented racial terror lynchings, erecting historical markers [...] fostering a lasting dialogue founded on truth and justice" (Stories). During our conversation Hill-Bond asserts, "we need to remember *differently*,"⁸⁹ and describes the process of the soil collection

⁸⁹ Ann Hill-Bond is also responsible for bringing attention to the inaccuracy of the widely used terminology used in Georgia that describes the 1906 Race "Riot" that occurred in Atlanta. Hill-Bond is part of a movement to rename the event a "massacre" and has been successful in

gatherings wherein groups of people dig up soil together at the approximate lynching sites while someone reads aloud the details of the historical event that took place at the site. She explains the feeling of being present at these ceremonies as “actually remembering something you were not a part of and feeling as though [she] were literally there”—remembering differently. The affect of “being there” that Hill-Bond refers to signals to the ways that digging up this charged soil evokes the presence of intergenerational trauma that lives on still—these stories are held in the very ground we walk upon. These past experiences survive and linger in the present through bodies, ground, and memory. Through the EJI facilitated rituals, this trauma is dug up, unearthed at site consciously and intentionally. The soil collection events, Hill-Bond continues, are both “grounding and humbling because you realize that you are here and that the soil [holds] sacrifices that others have made who are no longer living.” Speaking about the soil collection in a video on the EJI’s website, the organization’s Director Bryan Stevenson states, “there was blood in that soil, there’s DNA in that soil. There is history in that soil that needs to be resurrected if we’re going to really be free in this country” (“How Equal”).

These material remains testify that this soil is a constant witness, and the land cries out—it refuses forgetting, and demands a response. The soil in the collection asserts itself as a living witness to racial violence, as are the trees, plants, stones, and other non-human entities. While we may often take the ground for granted, the soil collection project invites new ways of being with our entanglements with histories of both violence and resistance. If, as suggested by Black studies scholar and cultural geographer Kathrine McKittrick, we try to understand domination as

changing the historical marker found in Atlanta to the name “1906 Race Massacre.” This too, is remembering differently. With her assistance, U.S. Representative Nikema Williams of Georgia’s 5th Congressional District introduced a resolution commemorating the Atlanta Race Massacre on the 116th anniversary in September 2022. See: McCracken, Serena.

a visible, spatial project in which power seeks to conceal and erase subaltern counternarratives (*Demonic*), we can then see the work of the EJI (and the communities they support) as a challenge to dominating white narratives of history (the ground we walk on). This is just one part of the EJI's broader ongoing work of weaving history into the present moment by bringing attention to the ways in which acknowledging unimagined geographies can deepen contemporary understandings of space, place, and politics. The EJI challenges the normative histories, symbols, and mythologies that claim sacred and foundational status. The embodied ritual of digging in the soil, of putting one's hands into the earth is an important way for the victim's families and the public to connect resonantly with time and memory.

Within that context, it is crucial to recall that these horrific murders were often accompanied by food, celebrations, crowds, "souvenir" collecting with a carnivalesque atmosphere of white people gathering in their Sunday best, in jubilee, to watch a lynching spectacle. It is crucial to recall that these murders happened in public, largely tolerated by state and federal officials, and were often attended by large herd-like crowds: "Many were carnival-like events, with vendors selling food, printers producing postcards featuring photographs of the lynching and corpse, and the victim's body parts collected as souvenirs" (EJI 2017)—what Harvey Young has theorized as being the "remain[s] of a performance spectacle" (169), foregrounding the participatory logic of a lynching as a form of racial torture designed for an audience.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ I would like to point out Ken Gonzales-Day's ongoing project *Erased Lynchings*, a series of over sixty photographic copies of archival photographs of lynchings where the victim has been digitally removed from the image. As a means of preventing re-portrayal of violence, Gonzales-Day focuses the viewer's attention on the lynch mob to confront the perpetrators. See: kengonzalesday.com/projects/erased-lynchings/

The Alabama soil testifies to yet another violent history that is intertwined with its painful history of lynching: its texture bears witness of the devastating soil erosion that the territories of Alabama faced since the deforestation activities of the early twentieth century. Considering the state economy's reliance on cotton cultivation, and the ways in which racial capitalism has continually extracted from and wreaked unrelenting havoc on land and bodies brings an even deeper resonance to the EJI's use of soil in their memorial project. The soil's materiality and its dynamic, shifting nature highlight the interconnectedness of environmental destruction, geologic change, plantation agriculture, slavery, and capitalism.⁹¹ The ground is uneven and reminds of the unsettling and uprooting of histories that still needs to be done; it reflects the uneasy messiness—perhaps even the muddled impossibility—of reconciliation.

Stories from the Soil

At the Auburn Avenue Research Library (AARL) on African American Culture and History in Atlanta's Midtown, I visit another permanent EJI soil collection. This one is for Fulton County lynching victims, displayed as a humble exhibit called *Stories from the Soil*. I walk into the sparsely filled room and instantly see the wall of dirt to my left. It feels as if the soil is coming toward me. Despite the modest display, the rows of jars possess an electric charge. Hesitant at first to approach the wall of jars in any contiguity, I feel as though there is an energetic force radiating from them that prevents me from getting nearer. The feeling is akin to

⁹¹ Elizabeth M. Webb's exhibition, *A Bearing Tree is a Witness* at Gallery 44 in Toronto (2022) curated by Lillian O'Brien Davis grappled with the ways that plant and soil life can provide liberatory models for how bodies might also subvert these structures of power and control. I wrote a review of this exhibition in *C Magazine*: "A Bearing Tree is a Witness—Elizabeth M. Webb." *C Magazine*, Toronto: C Magazine, Feb 7 2023 and also visited an iteration of Webb's work at the The Jules Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art at Auburn University.

being present around ashes in an urn or near a casket at a funeral, uncomfortable in its symbolic resemblance of bodies. While it is difficult to walk right up to the jars (at this exhibit there are thirty-six), I eventually do—stepping into the auric field of the soil and all that it contains and exudes. The jars themselves are uniform—clear, medium sized and glass with a white lid, each bearing the name of the victim, place and date of lynching.



Figure 12. Soil collection jars displayed inside Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta, Georgia, 2022.

Image by author.

I spend time sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the vessels, and as I look closer, I notice some of the soil has mold growing throughout it, reminding me that it is very much alive, teeming with bacterial culture, microscopic bodies, minerals, water, and life. Pieces of roots, grass, and other debris from the ground can also be seen in the jars and I consider how this contained earth asserts its agency through these living processes. The soil has eroded, microbes

and bacteria have formed zigzagging patterns: it is an active agent with the ability to cause or experience a feeling event, and there is nothing inert about it. In other jars the soil has separated due to sedimentation; darker dirt has settled to the bottom, lighter on top. Each jar's content is a different colour—red, grey, mustard, burgundy, murky and light brown, near black—and each one imbues its own character through textures ranging from fine to porous. The more I gaze, the more active and agent-like each jar appears. The traces of mold are an overt reference to time passing, to a living ecosystem of organic matter, and the presence of death. The soil is potent with the ability to cause or experience an event.

Many jars simply read “unknown.” The wall confronts visitors with the repetitious weight held in the long histories contained here. The rows of jars create a powerful sense of accumulation, making this archive of violence felt, resonant and undeniable. Sitting on an old plinth beside the shelves of jars is a black binder that contains many sheets of laminated papers—each one with the name of the lynching victim and the story surrounding the event of their death. In the binder I read the page on Warren Powell and sit with his corresponding jar; I end up attending Powell's soil ceremony and historic marker dedication a few weeks later (which I expand on later in this chapter).

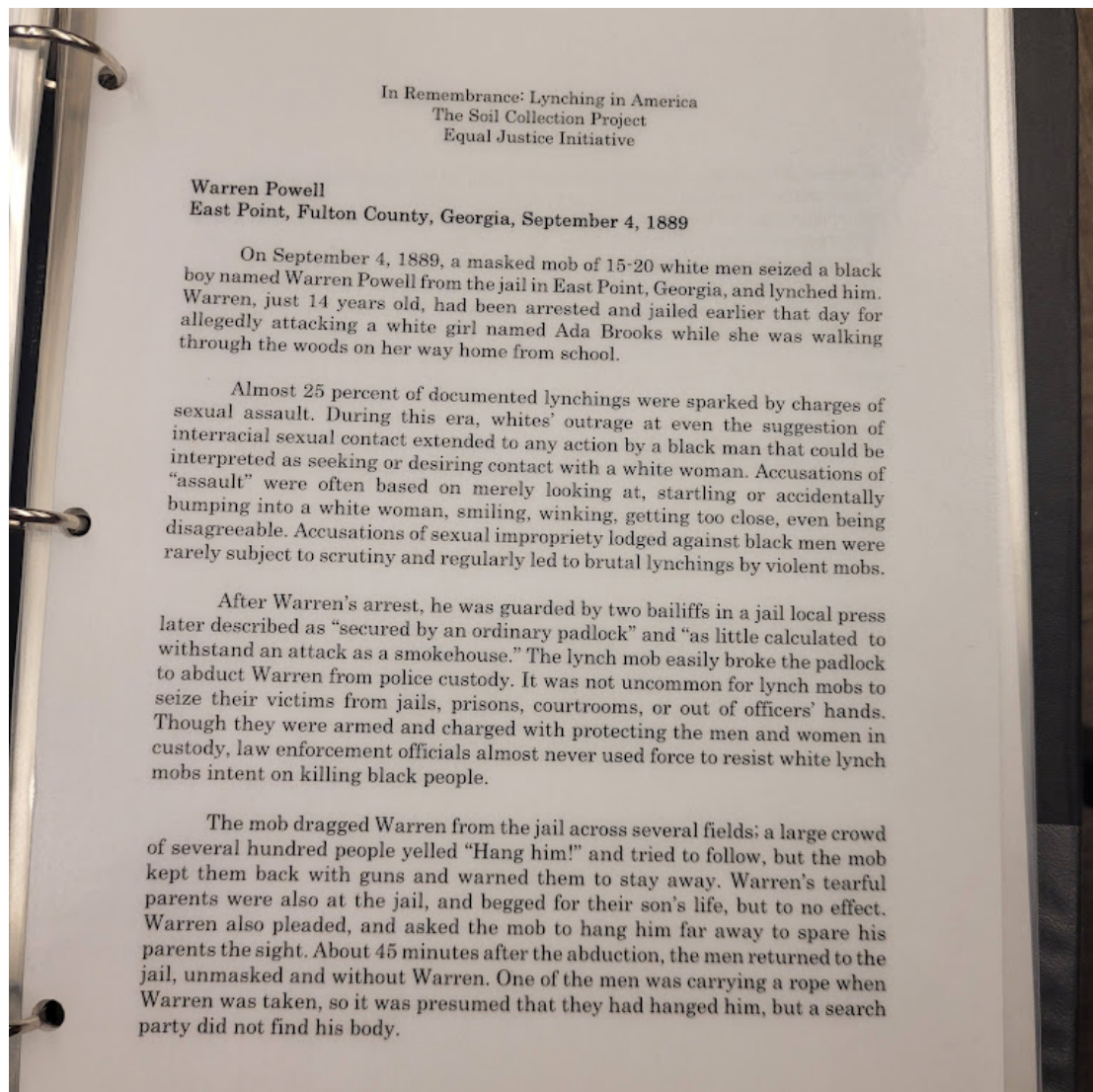


Figure 13. Photo of binder page containing historical information on the lynching of Warren Powell, Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta, Georgia, 2022. Image by author.

Being present with this living archive of violence challenges visitors to, at least momentarily, make connections between themselves, and the remains of histories shared—regardless of subjective circumstances. Facing this archive as a white woman, I stand in the “thick present,” described by Donna Haraway as “a tentacular web of troubling relations that matter now” (2). Being present with the ever growing soil collection exhibition and staying within the discomfort of all that it communicates requires a deep engagement with one’s own entanglement, inheritance, and complicity. Microbial remains endure, exhibiting both a legacy of violence and

an ongoing memory, an inheritance that binds the past to the present. The soil in the EJI collection performs this entanglement, connecting living organisms to ancestral remains in a way that refuses a recirculation of violence. The collection and its caretakers revere the soil and the ancestral character expressed within it. EJI's collection holds, foregrounds, and makes visible, through the rows upon rows of jars (not only here at the Auburn Research Library, but in the hundreds of collections found across the nation) an ongoing atmosphere of the aftermath of slavery. To understand these jars as a record, to really *look deeply* at them, is for me, the work of being with, holding, and recognizing this terrifying knowledge.

The soil performs a mode of temporal haunting as it inhabits non-linear time: the past, present, and future merge through the soil collection. Memories of violence *remain* in ways that escape a traditional archival logic of collecting, containing, and preserving. Relating to haunting in this way aligns with what the EJI webpage states about the soil collection project: "We aim to transcend time and alter terrain to bear witness to this history and the devastation these murders wrought upon individuals, families, communities, and our nation as a whole" (*Lynching in America*). Thinking about microbial traces in relationship with the archive, how do they perform a different and otherwise historical account? And how do these ongoing and lively remains destabilize official Western archives or historical records?

Approaching the jars of soil not as symbols of those who have been made to disappear, but rather as marks of both the act of remaining and a means of reappearance, we almost immediately are forced to admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object (*Performing Remains* 103). The soil collection evokes complex remembering across time, buzzing with agency as it holds a constant terrain of stories. A fertile kinship between land, bodies, and memory becomes apparent through the soil collection and its temporal nature, deep

histories, and returns. A fecund and sticky stewardship is at play in the EJI soil collection and the devoted volunteers and community members who tend to it, care for it, hold it. A deep care and profound responsibility is inherent in this work (recall Hill-Bond's assertion that we need remember *differently*—this is spiritual work). Sharpe's writing in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* on the enslaved Africans who died at sea through the Middle Passage during their transportation to the Americas reflects poetically on how these lives were not dissolved into nothingness but endure as part of the oceanscape:

But even if those Africans who were in the holds, who left something of their prior selves in those rooms as a trace to be discovered, and who passed through the doors of no return did not survive the holding and the sea, they, like us, are alive in hydrogen, in oxygen; in carbon, in phosphorous, and iron; in sodium and chlorine. (19)

Likewise, individuals who lost their lives to lynching violence endure through time in the physical, chemical, and biological bonds of soil. This rich repository requires a kind of ethical care. These jars of soil facilitate considerations of what the land itself *bears* and how it at once acts as a living witness to racial violence and also holds these stories. Wading through the dense materiality of the EJI's soil collection is an insistence that landscape provides vital evidence to that which is excluded from official archives. EJI's thoughtful offerings cultivate an attunement to the elemental utterances of things that do not necessarily speak in words or even appear in physical form yet still remain.

Practicing Ecological Grief and Care

I have noticed that many trees in the South have an otherworldly quality about them—mythical almost—majestic sweeping limbs plunge down toward the earth and then dramatically

up toward the sky, draped in green moss, dripping with gothic aura. These trees have borne witness to historic atrocities—like the soil, they too hold memories, and inherit hauntings. They are like elders rich with knowledge and counsel (should they be asked). Thinking about memories held in the boughs of the Southern trees, or histories sedimented in soil, I am reminded of anti-colonial scholars Tuck and Ree’s understanding of haunting as the “relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by [...] assurances of innocence and reconciliation” (642). Haunting, they argue, is “both acute and general; individuals are haunted, but so are societies” (642). Acts of racial terror have been witnessed by soil and held by trees; their ghostly reverberations carry on beyond linear time and space. The trees and the soil have been sites and vehicles for lynching deaths and trauma—“*blood on the leaves and blood at the root*,” as Billie Holiday laments. The ground holds memories and inherits hauntings.

Writing about environmental collapse and strategies for mobilization, Indigenous author and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer draws on the wisdom of Joanna Macy, a specialist in the field of ecology and spirituality who says that until we grieve for our planet, we cannot love it. Wall Kimmerer agrees that “grieving is a sign of spiritual health. But it is not enough to weep for our lost landscapes; we have to put our hands in the earth to make ourselves whole again” (327). Soil is the skin of the earth—it is a living ecosystem, a breathing entity that protects; it provides nourishment, support, and a final resting place for all living creatures, plants, and animals.

Thinking back to my drive away from Montgomery, the “air quotes,” the looming and grand lynching memorial hovering over the city like a shadow, I consider how the EJI’s memory work serves as a constant specter of this “history” throughout the South, and how the soil held in jars in Montgomery and across the nation is performing this unsettling work of grief. Rev. Elliott Robinson, who participated in one of the soil gatherings states, “as the process began, it started

to feel very solemn and sacred. It got real when you put your hands in the soil. You could almost feel their blood in the soil, and that created a connection. It was much deeper than [I] expected” (quoted in Poole). Grief is generative in how it opens up an attunement to what it is to be present with what and who are no longer here. The EJI brings these uncomfortable histories of violence, held and hidden in the soil, into a present, visual, and sensory experience. A haunting, complex (spatial and temporal) remembering is at play. The EJI’s jars of soil act as chilling reminders that the “ground we walk on” holds lingering legacies that remain the foundation of the present-day United States.

If we were to understand violent disappearance within an ecological framework (of or relating to the environments of living things or to the relationships between living entities and their environments”)⁹² it might help to make clear how systems of violence across the Americas are connected. How they are in relation and how they are interdependent. Might we get closer to understanding this atmosphere of violence if we tune in to the expressions and articulations of the soil in this archive of violence? How can different kinds of attuning or orientating, engage meaningfully with lost ecologies of historically dismissed subjects? Framing lynching disappearance through an interconnected and ecological lens involves thinking alongside what Sharpe calls “the weather” wherein “antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate” (106). Ongoing histories of racial violence operate in quite a similar manner, sometimes (not always) quiet, hidden, the kind of “slow violence” that Rob Nixon describes as that which occurs gradually and (for many) out of sight, violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, and attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. In this way, structures like coloniality make themselves “appear benevolently omnipresent, while rendering its violence and

⁹² Merriam-Webster Online.

unsustainability invisible” (Machado de Oliveira 18). Framing these deaths within an ecology of violence, as relationships between environments and systems, might help in understanding the interconnections between not only “history” but also those lynchings currently happening, to name only a few recent extrajudicial killings: Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Daunte Wright, Rayshard Brooks, Sonya Massey.

The soil collection project in particular practices what Hill-Bond calls “remembering differently.”⁹³ Unlike tombstones or urns, which often signify closure and finality, the soil jars represent the opposite—they are active and dynamic. The soil collection precludes any kind of forgetting and, like a garden, requires constant tending both materially and metaphorically. The presentation of voluminous jars of soil collected at lynching sites confronts viewers with this memory, forcing them to contend with these histories of violence, to be present with it, and to wade through their loamy affect. The collection insists that landscape—in this case soil—is a vital witness to Black histories excluded from official archives, historical narrative and many public monuments. The soil collection poignantly reflects what Hartman has called the

⁹³ In February 2024 I visited an exhibition opening at Atlanta’s Echo Contemporary Gallery, featuring Ann Hill-Bond’s first art installation in a group show. The show was entitled “Collective Telling: Southern Rooted Perspectives on Place, History + Emergence” and curated by Heather Bird Harris and Jennifer Williams. Hill-Bond’s installation featured a jar of EJI collected soil in honour of George Union Wilder the soil collected at Wilder’s lynching site was on display in the exhibition at Auburn Library and can be seen in Figure 14. The installation also included a wooden rocking chair, Georgia red clay on the floor, Thomas Finch and Sterling Thompson and Mack Henry Brown Remembrance quilts, an Ethiopian throw, ancestral altar, African mask, family photos, her grandmother’s Bible, and plants. The curatorial statement read, “Collective Telling counters the political suppression of history across the United States by amplifying and connecting artists who examine the past to understand place, present belonging, and possible paths forward. By unearthing stories held within ancestral fires, sacred waters, or the soil around Echo Street in Atlanta, Collective Telling visualizes emergent strategies that allow for new ways of being” (Heather Bird Harris and Jennifer Williams, 2024).

“*something else and the what-might-be*” of archival remnants, artefacts, and lives (*Intimate*) and does more “than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive” (*Venus 2*). The soil archive is not a spectacular, representational retelling of past violence, it is living, ongoing, and is what remains active. Touching upon this “something else and what-might-be” of the archive, Hill-Bond discusses how this kind of work with the soil is not a one-time event—it is an activation towards retrieving what might seem dormant (*the ground we walk upon*). This is, she says, “deep spiritual work and it is ongoing—once you start there is no going back.” She continues, “I tell people to go dig up the soil if they really want to understand its dense materialities and these histories of violence.” The type of inner work that happens through encounters with the soil that Hill-Bond refers to has to do with truly reckoning with our personal burdens and entanglements in these ongoing aftermaths of violence—where am I complicit and what does that mean? This relationship between the Southern soil, the humans who engage with it, and the histories held there is a transformative matrix that has the power to activate change within, perhaps a starting point to generative action, healing, and repair.

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa has written about soil and the socioecological entanglements in which humans and non-humans become active agents through relation, and she considers care beyond the human realm. Thinking about the temporal orientations that pace soil’s fertility through technoscientific intervention, Puig eschews the inherently progressivist and productionist modes of relating to soil (as in, through agrarian development) (*Matters 23*). Through a conceptual and historical approach to soil knowledge, she instead looks for soil ontologies and relations of care that are obscured by the predominant understandings of time and emphasizes the necessity of exploring the “significance of care for thinking and living in more than human worlds” (1). I am reminded of Hill-Bond’s “deep spiritual work” in relation to the

soil while reading Puig who writes about care as an ethical obligation, and as a “practical labour” (*Nothing* 197). This intimacy and care with/of the soil is “not a one-time event” but rather is a kind of labour, and practice.⁹⁴

Political scientist Joan Tronto argues that care “is both a practice and a disposition” (104), and that care work signals “the acceptance of some form of burden” (103). Engaging with the EJI’s soil project, I would say, largely deals with the acceptance of “some form of burden” and the personal and collective inheritances that haunts us, however subjective and varied.

Reading these modes of communion with soil as a form of ethical care reveals a diversity of more-than-human temporalities and relationalities. The soil that is engaged with through these collection ceremonies is fertile with the affirmation of subjugated knowledges and performs Sharpe’s notion of “the wake,” that is, life in the ongoing aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, where “the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present” (9). The EJI’s expansive soil project emphasizes how temporal entanglements of past, present and future illuminate an (in)ability to sense, tune-in, and perceive different forms of media like the aural, resonant and tactile ones that exists through collaborative kinships with the more-than-human. It is a way to become sensitive to the land and to understand the soil as an active, independent partner in non-forgetting, as the EJI’s soil collection employs in its reclaiming of violence memories, without repeating past violences.

⁹⁴ I am also thinking about Kathrine Lawless’ research project *Soil as a Relational Medium*. Lawless explores the concept of soil not merely as a physical substrate but as a relational and living material that connects various forms of life, histories, and ecologies. The project considers soil as a dynamic entity, rich with microbial life, nutrients, and stories, serving as a fundamental component of our ecosystem and a symbol of the interconnectedness of all life forms. Through performance, installation, and community engagement, the project challenges traditional views of soil as inert, highlighting its significance in sustaining life and as a medium for artistic and philosophical exploration. See Lawless, “Developing an Expanded.”



Figure 14. Image Jars of Soil from Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta, Georgia, 2022.

Image by Author.

The ubiquitous nature of violence that circulates today and that is being remembered from the past is often hidden, out of sight, ignored much like the soil itself, and what it *holds*, what it cannot forget. A tree, the soil, wind patterns, or plant matter are all openings—to new ways of thinking and feeling our own entanglement with histories of both violence and resistance in the present.

Selma's Contested Memories

I spent one week in Selma, Alabama, to conduct research. I wanted to find EJI's recently erected historical marker for Racial Terror Lynchings which commemorates 19 lynchings in Dallas County, Alabama, and I wanted to visit the Edmund Pettus Bridge⁹⁵ where the infamous

⁹⁵ It should be noted that the name of this bridge is currently in debate, and there is proposed legislation to change it (but only to: Edmund Pettus Bride—Foot Soldiers). The bridge is named

“Bloody Sunday” Selma-to-Montgomery March occurred on March 7, 1965, that ultimately helped lead to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

On my first day in Selma, I encountered a Confederate graveyard with freshly placed Confederate flags, indicating that the tombstones were being actively maintained (*a past that is not passed...*). Next to the graves stood a well-maintained monument honoring Nathan Bedford Forrest, a controversial figure known as a Confederate Army general during the American Civil War, a slave trader, and the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan from 1867 to 1869. This monument, cared for by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, reflects the organization’s efforts to commemorate Confederate ancestors, fund monuments, and promote the pseudohistorical Lost Cause ideology along with its associated white supremacy (“United Daughters”).

These contradictions within the landscape highlight the ongoing and unresolved realities of white supremacy. The meticulous care for Confederate graves and monuments, such as those observed in Selma and elsewhere in the South, serves not merely as historical markers but as active symbols of an enduring ideology. They perpetuate the Lost Cause narrative and its underlying racial hierarchies, rendering them politically charged and culturally significant. In contrast, monuments like the EJI marker for racial terror lynchings aim to acknowledge and remember the atrocities committed against Black communities, seeking to confront and heal the wounds of a deeply divided past.

The ritualistic care and remembrance of Confederate history exist in tension with efforts to ‘remember otherwise’—to confront and acknowledge the injustices of the past. This duality

after Edmund Pettus, who was a lawyer, judge, Confederate brigadier general, reputed state-level leader (‘Grand Dragon’) of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan, and U.S. senator.

underscores the temporal slippages and contested memories within American society, where the past continues to exert a significant influence on the present. The Daughters of the Confederacy ardently protect monuments to the Confederacy, including the one dedicated to Bedford Forrest in Selma. They continue to place new Confederate flags around it, maintain the bust, and tend to the garden and grounds, albeit in a different manner from the soil collections discussed earlier.



Figure 15. Image of Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, Alabama, 2021. Image by Author.



Figure 16. Image of EJI's historical plaque in Selma, Alabama. Image by Author.



Figure 17. Image of Nathan Bedford Forrest monument, Selma Alabama. Image by Author.



Figure 18. Image of Confederate cemetery in Selma Alabama. Image by Author.

This monument stands for something; it possesses hubris. *THERE IS GLORY IN THE GRAVES*, reads the inscription on the Confederate Monument standing in the centre of the cemetery. My field notes reach for beauty where it is difficult to locate:

Alone, I sit on the broken bench in Selma's Live Oak Cemetery and notice a faint smell of sweet magnolias carried by the breeze and reflect on the Southern blackbirds swirling above. They do not seek validation with their song but simply know. A shock of electric pink crepe myrtle flowers pulses outward flaunting lightness, joy. Flitting like messengers, holders and keepers of light and death. Disappearing into interiority, to an inconspicuously rich existence of self-possession and autonomy outside of human understanding; a mattering apart from these realms of perception and publicity. The competing tensions of memory disorient.

In Rebecca Schneider's examination of practices of reminiscence in relation to disappearance, it is what *remains* that can and should be continually engaged with as the charge to remember: memory, history, preservation, and live performance (26). Something can disappear, she argues, and yet still remain—what has happened in a place is always happening, and this idea complicates linear time. My experience of walking into the burial grounds holding the Confederate memorial, within an hour of having just been at the new lynching marker in Selma and crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge with my daughter, all felt in direct opposition, creating a spatial charge and temporal collide gesturing toward all that remains at site. In “real time” I experienced an active play of past and present swirling in motion—the EJI's new historical plaque, the freshly minted Confederate flags at the graveyard, feeling the Daughters of the Confederacy's loving care for Bedford Forest's bust, the proposed name change of the Bridge. It was all indicating to me a past that is not past, to that which remains. Rooted in place with these spatial-temporal contradictions, held within the ground, I thought of the creature world active within the soil, the ancient smell of the flowers, that which remains and is luminous through time.

East Point, Atlanta: Honouring Warren Powell: A Ceremony of Ancestral Reverence

On a sweltering hot afternoon on September 4th 2022, I drove to downtown East Point Atlanta to attend the commemoration of the life of 14-year-old Warren Powell who was lynched in East Point in 1889, where a historical marker unveiling and a community-based soil collection dedication were being held. I had already visited Powell's jar of soil in my earlier trip to the Auburn Avenue Research Library. When I arrive in East Point at the address, I quickly see the small group of people who had gathered around what I could tell was the new plaque, which is

draped in a large piece of traditional West African fabric. The event, put on by East Point Public Art Division and the FCRC, takes place outside a municipal building, the approximate site of Powell's death. Incense is burning, the strong fragrance wafting out into the warm streets. The ceremony begins and volunteers with the FCRC read out a historic narrative of Powell's life and death, and the attendees are invited to participate in the ritual through a call and response song in West African tradition by three men playing hand drums and wearing traditional Ghanaian clothing. One of these men, Enoch Demar, explains to the crowd what the commemoration is *doing* and expresses that the thoughts and actions of each person present at the event in the physical realm are "interacting with all other living things, including the earth itself." We are told that even if we do not understand the words of the music or the language, these songs hold power in evoking the ancestors of everyone present—our own, as well as the ancestors of Warren Powell and of Powell himself.



Figure 19. Image of plaque unveiling ceremony dedicated to Warren Powell. East Point, Atlanta, Georgia.
From L to R, Ann Hill-Bond, Christopher Swain and Deana Holiday Ingraham. Image by Author.

Demar discusses the importance for each of us to be in contact with our own ancestors, and says that for healing to take place, these kinds of ceremonies need to happen. While singing and drumming, Demar is radiating joy, and repeats to the crowd, “we need to listen to what the ancestors are telling us as they are regarded as the link between the physical world and that of the spirit, the seen and the unseen—they are sources of power.” The three men turn their backs to the witnesses in the crowd and explain that they will sing to the historical marker itself which was still veiled—and to the jar of soil sitting on the table.

This act of singing *to* the historical plaque and *to* the jar of soil renders these publicly viewed items active, they are no longer just thought of as objects but are rather imbued with the power coursing through the songs, the beat of the drum, and ritual. The metal memorial plate stood draped in West African fabric blowing in the warm Georgia breeze, surrounded by the smoke of incense drifting through the air and the exuberant sounds of song. People are clapping along to the beat, swaying to the music, and singing with eyes closed (Figure 19). Finally, the ornate fabric cover was carefully pulled away and the marker was unveiled, energetically charged by the prayers and the songs. The front of the plaque details the events surrounding Powell's lynching, and the back of it outlines information from the Equal Justice Initiative about the history of lynching in America. Demar states, "we navigate between the seen and the unseen, the manifest and the yet-to-become." Attuning to this site of violence with such reverence and care, makes racism visible with a sharpness of perception, which acts in service of redress.

Following this ceremony, I reached out to Enoch Demar and interviewed him on Zoom about his role in performing these commemorations. I learned that he is a practitioner of Ifa divination, which is practiced among West African Yoruba communities and by the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean. He uses Batá (sacred) drums that the Afro-Cuban liturgy of Ifa and Orisa practice (Demar described the drums at Warren Powell's ceremony as "consecrated" and "charged with a particular type of raw living energy").⁹⁶ "Ancestral healing, ancestral veneration, ancestral remembrance" are all central to the belief system, he said.

⁹⁶ This refers to the Afro-Cuban tradition of Lucumi and Santería which developed among Afro-Cuban communities following the Atlantic slave trade of the 16th to 19th centuries. It formed through the blending of the traditional religions brought to Cuba by enslaved West Africans, most of them Yoruba, and Roman Catholicism. Singing, drumming and dancing are liturgies that follow a sacred formula for communication with Orichás.

Connecting the group's practice of divinization with the EJI historical marker, I considered Hartman's insistence that practice is a method through which the:

dominant space is transformed and remade as a sacralized and ancestral landscape so that it might shelter life, spirit, gods and ancestors. [...] The goal here is not to create an index of African survivals or retrievals of Kingo, Fon, Ibo, or Yoruba traces, but to consider the everyday historicity of these practices—the ways in which the quotidian articulates the wounds of history and the enormity of the breach instituted by the transatlantic crossing of black captives and the processes of enslavement: violent domination, dishonor, natal alienation, and chattel status. [...] What is most important here are the ways memory acts in the service of redress, not an inventory of the lost world. (*Scenes* 122-23)

This framing highlights the agency and potential for resistance held within the soil collection and historical marker activations (not just an inventory but that which acts in service of redress) through active engagement in creative, alternative modes of remembering. This way of understanding memory made me reflect on the following words from Demar:

The thing about performance, song, and gesture is that that is how things are encoded. That's how inception is born, how information is passed on; people remember through melodies; ideas and memory are contained within songs. Visceral emotion is evoked from song even if you don't know what the hell we're talking about. Explaining the context to the witnesses makes what is happening make sense, so that the energy can be carried away by the observers out into the world. (Demar)

Demar told me that the first round of songs is played to the shrine and the jar of soil, and is *for* these objects, not the people, and stated that “regardless of whether people can feel or see it during the ceremony, there is something there. The songs that we had sung at the dedication were

for the ancestors, the same songs we sing in our religious ceremonies to this day.” Regarding the plaque dedication and the commemoration of the jar of soil, Demar said, “we played our music to the shrine first and to the deceased, and in this case a specific ancestor that was listed on the shrine—Warren Powell. We were venerating this ancestor, but not only this ancestor—no, every ancestor who has given their life or who has had their life taken.” In Cuba, the Lucumí word *Oro*⁹⁷ describes these musical liturgies and means conversation or word, stressing the idea that music and dancing are ways to speak to the Orishas, or spirits. As Demar explained, “metaphysically, through voice and octaves—the words formulate an intention. Octaves are different spectrums of energy. The sound is just energy, and so those vibrations, combined with our formulated intent, agitate things [laughs].” These ceremonies and the EJI’s historical marker act as a moment of reveal at sites of racial violence (once you see what is hiding, it is difficult to unsee).

The beautiful, lush public park in Atlanta or the idyllic country road in Monroe, Georgia, become marked by history through these visual and ritual reminders. Without them, it is possible for the violence at site to remain concealed and unnoticed. This practice of public marking interrupts McKittrick’s concept of “transparent spaces” which refers to the ways in which Black people and their experiences are rendered invisible, erased, or made to disappear within dominant spatial narratives and geographic imaginaries (*Demonic* 6). McKittrick argues that transparent spaces are created through the violent and ongoing erasure of Black presence,

⁹⁷ One type of *oro* is unaccompanied singing featuring African-style call and response; the lead singer calls out to a group, who answer in unison. These songs function as prayers, asking for the blessings of the Orishas and for permission to carry out the ceremony and is unaccompanied *bata* drumming. Again, the purpose is to ask for the permission of the Orishas to carry out the ceremony, and to invite them to participate in the rituals that follow.

culture, and history, making it seem as though Black people have never existed or contributed to the production of space.

Transparent spaces are not just physical locations but also represent the ways in which Blackness is marginalized, excluded, and made invisible within dominant discourses, such as cartography, urban planning, and cultural heritage. McKittrick suggests that these spaces are “transparent” because they are seen as empty, neutral, or natural, rather than as sites of Black cultural production, resistance, and survival. By acknowledging and centring Black geographies and spatial experiences, McKittrick argues that we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable understanding of space and place. The EJI echoes this insight, namely the importance of not erasing Black humanity, resistance, and sense of place from discussions of the heavy weight of oppression and racialized violence (“On Plantations”). With these markers in place, an affective dimension emerges when engaging with these sites, evoking the spatial and temporal aspects of history.

Brutal Imaginations: Haunted Perceptions

When I was walking around downtown Atlanta, Georgia one day following my visit to the lynching museum in Montgomery, and after the commemoration for Warren Powell, I saw from the corner of my eye four men dangling from the side of a building, suspended by long ropes: window washers. But before my brain could process that these were indeed window washers, a feeling of terror and shock washed over me. The histories of a place and its hauntings were at play: Is what I perceived in my periphery akin to a version of Cornelius Eady’s notion of

the “brutal imagination” produced by white constructions of Black masculinity?⁹⁸ Eady’s eponymous poetry collection confronts the same subject—however more from the account of how white fear of the (unjustly) criminalized Black body results in alteration of white sensory perception that perpetrates and projects violence and terror onto Black bodies, whether at the hands of police or armed vigilantes (see: shooting death of an unarmed Trayvon Martin by self-appointed neighbourhood watchman George Zimmerman in 2012 in Sanford, Florida, USA).⁹⁹ Or, is this another kind of brutal imagination produced by the languid ghosts of legacies of violence in place,¹⁰⁰ the deep layers of time revealing themselves spectrally. Was this my imagination playing tricks or history speaking to me?

⁹⁸ On the other end of this imaginary, is bell hooks’ essay “Eating the Other” wherein hooks provides an analysis of the commodification and consumption of Otherness in Western Culture—in particular through the fetishization and appropriation of Black cultures. This “eating the other” results in objectification and consumption of “the other” in white imaginaries through cultural and physical proximities (hooks, 1992).

⁹⁹ For an artistic exploration of these social projections and imaginaries through the lens of performance, Jessica Thompson’s wearable media project *Doublebind* explores the duality of the hoodie, making apparent that this hyper-charged garment has different meanings depending on the positionality of its wearer, as well the social setting in which the garment is worn. Following the shooting death of an unarmed Trayvon Martin, the hoodie has gained widespread legibility globally as a symbol for practices of racial profiling and stereotyping that disproportionately inflict violence on Black individuals and communities. The hoodie has also become representative of protest and public uprising against this injustice.

¹⁰⁰ Thinking about “brutal imaginations” reminds me of Lillian Smith’s autobiographical book, *Killers of the Dream* (originally written in 1949) wrote from her positionality as a white woman growing up in the South during segregation. Smith explains how these brutal things, terrible ideas, monstrous imaginations are intergenerational, taught, inherited, passed along through specific domestic as well as political systems. The books provide a powerful critique of the deeply ingrained idea of white supremacy in the South at that time (and how it carries forward) and also discusses the psychological and cultural impact of racism on both white and Black individuals.

DeKalb, Georgia: *A Song Without Words*

Through my research of the EJI, I came across Johnathon Kelso, a white southern Christian man who photographs “empty” lynching sites across the Southern USA. While he himself is not affiliated with the EJI, he has worked extensively with their archives to locate these sites. He also takes photographs for the *New York Times* and has photographed such notables as Lil Baby and Stacey Abrams as well as the Moore’s Ford Massacre re-enactors¹⁰¹ in Monroe, Georgia, a group of activists and actors who annually recreate the night two black couples were lynched by the Ku Klux Klan in 1946. I met with Kelso in his humble home in Decatur, Georgia, to discuss his work. I was particularly interested in Kelso’s photographic project *A Song Without Words* (2017), made throughout six Southern States using research from the EJI to investigate lynching histories in communities where racial violence took place and which Kelso has said was a “mission from God” (Turner). What I found initially interesting about this project is that Kelso photographed the “empty” sites, years after these violent lynchings occurred. With four of his children running around and his pregnant wife baking cookies in the kitchen, we chit chat, and I take note of the Black Madonna on the wall beside other religious iconography—rosaries, the ubiquitous Rhoda Nyberb painting, *Grace*, featuring an old man praying beside a loaf of bread, several bibles.

¹⁰¹ For a separate project I would like to analyze the lynching re-enactment performances that happen in Monroe, Georgia annually. This re-enactment of violent histories at the site is explicitly linked to Rebecca Schneider’s ideas on re-enactment, which she describes as “an activity that nets us all (reenacted, reenactor, original copy, re-event, by-passed, and passer-by) in a knotty and porous relationship to time.” Schneider’s concept emphasizes the “temporal tangle,” “temporal leak,” (*Performing Remains* 10) and the many questions that arise from time’s cyclical nature and its returns. This perspective will provide a compelling framework for examining how the Monroe re-enactment engages with and disrupts historical narratives.

For *A Song Without Words*, Kelso visited over 20 lynching sites and talks about finding himself in a state of being heartbroken (I read this as *grief*) as the impetus for creating this work. Of the project he has said, “learning of this hidden American history has devastated my heart and altered how I view the Southern landscape and its people. A veil has been lifted from my eyes, and now even the ground below my feet cries out saying, ‘What have you done?’” (Turner). Kelso also has a project that involves photographing neo-confederate and white supremacists across the South as well (*As God as our Witness*). He tells me he wanted to truly look at this “real history” of America that is so often erased or ignored, and stated that after visiting so many sites he realized it was actually the people who were left in these places that were the most profound photographic subjects for the work, rather than the physical sites themselves, as the project originally intended. He discusses how this shift in perspective was a process of waking up and looking at things soberly. In a sense, Kelso began photographing the legacies of trauma left behind in the aftermath of terrible violence, and continued photographing the traces of pain and harm that still exist and linger on.¹⁰² This project, he says, started to evolve and became more about truly listening to the stories of families and community members affected by lynching violence. He tells me that through his travels he began understanding these folks who remained at the sites of violence as the informal caretakers of history, archivists of trauma.

Kelso discusses how many of the environments that he has photographed “possess a viscerally violent and terrifying energy,” which I also experienced when visiting three separate

¹⁰² While thematically different yet conceptually similar, an ongoing video installation initiated by Public Studio called *What Isn't There* which was shown in Toronto, Canada (2014)—this art project documents sites where Palestinian villages once stood. This version, a four-channel outdoor video installation, plays with notions of time by tearing at the seams of photography and film, and presenting the Israel-Palestine conflict as ranging from the mundane, to the sublime, to the absurd—as a bestiary, a map, and a place that doesn't exist.

EJI memorial lynching sites in Georgia (marked by historical plaques). I experienced a felt and embodied sense of terror in these spaces, particularly in the small city of Monroe, Georgia, where I visited the historical marker at Moore's Ford Bridge. At this site, in July 1946, murders occurred of four young African Americans by a mob of white men. The atmosphere there was heavy; I was alone, and there was nobody in sight on the overgrown and lush dirt road. Some houses I drove past to find the historical marker were being developed; some houses I passed by were dilapidated, plants and weeds nearly covering them. A coldness blew through me like the American flags waving in the wind.

Kelso described feeling a dark affect at a site as seeming like a "tangible evil" and said that the sense he had was a "physical feeling"—tuning in to the generations of racial terror committed by white people, and the thick layers of social silence resounding at a site. This is haunting, real or imagined, an affect of violence is felt "in the air;" it is atmospheric, like weather. Kelso described this as a feeling like someone is watching you. Near the end of our interview he said something that stays with me: "it felt as though the land itself carried something with it that I could not describe." As a self-proclaimed devout Christian man, Kelso hauntingly (resonantly) quoted to me from the Old Testament, saying, "when I was in these places, I remembered God's words: 'the blood of your brother will cry out from the land'" (Bible, Gen. 4:9-12). When he says this I recall Stephenson's words, "there is blood in the soil, DNA in the soil" ("How Equal"). I think, too, of Neil Stonechild's freezing death (in Chapter 1), his body left in a field at the city's edge in Saskatoon by police officers. These material remains testify that soil, that the ground is a constant witness, and much like Kelso's Old Testament allusion, *the land cries out*—refusing forgetting, and begging for attention.

Maybe this kind of hyper-attunement to elemental frequencies, to what the land is saying, mirrors Elaine Scarry's concept of "acuity of regard" from *On Beauty and Being Just* (11), where she emphasizes the importance of closely attending to what is before us. Similarly, Fred Moten describes Emmett Till's mother's decision for an open casket as a demand for white publics to confront the pervasive reality of white supremacy (192-210)—a mother's choice to show, and the ethical responsibility for white audiences to look directly at white supremacy weaving through everything. As author Ladee Hubbard argues, in some ways, "the entire Civil Rights movement was predicated on a refusal to hide, as exemplified by Mamie Till's powerful insistence on revealing the violence inflicted on her son for transgressing the social codes that governed black behavior in the South" ("Why do We"). Hubbard continues, "part of the logic of non-violent protest was that by compelling white Americans to bear witness to the atrocities committed in the name of white supremacy, they would be forced to consider the ways in which they were complicit in it, by not taking a stand against it." Attuning to sites of violence with an acuity of regard, making white supremacy visible with a sharpness of perception, is part of facing what histories are purposefully buried there.

Conclusion

For the communities that dig up, hold, tune-in, and tend to soil that contains traces of loved ones or of strangers, for the custodians of memories holding unthinkable violence, the soil collection project is a work of radical love. To maintain and protect the jars which hold such vibrant ground, to display them with such tender consideration and ritual, to physically mark space and make the past present with a plaque are acts of relational care. These are profound acts, with a responsibility and dedication to what is often considered unseen, invisible. The soil,

too, is doing work—it bears these histories and cries out to be sensed. The projects I have participated in and examined here do this *otherwise* work by creating space for the memorialization of and attunement to absence, rendering perceptible that which has been erased by active forgetting, intentional burying or encasing “history” in scare quotes. The EJI initiatives make perceptible the agentic liveliness of the disappeared, despite the systemic violence and racial terror. These disruptions to forgetting do not mimic the violence they reference—they work toward making nonappearance visible and felt. The soil collection and the work of the EJI unearth more-than-human resonances of memory held in space, illustrating how these spectral invisibilities continue to be vital, productive, affectual forces of grief, care, transformation, and healing.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Sections of this chapter appear in my article “Remembering Differently: Activating Legacies of Violence in the Southern US through Soil,” published in *Performance Research* journal.

CHAPTER THREE

Performing Ephemeral Monuments, Attuning to Future Warnings

there is no linear history
only strategic remembering
-Gean Moreno

In an essay called *The Great Forgetting*, marine geologist Summer Praetorius asserts, “In the biosphere, resilience is deeply entwined with memory—it is the ability of a system to find its way back to an equilibrium state following a perturbation, which requires memory of previous states.” The concepts repeat in my mind: *resilience is entwined with memory: an ability to find a way back to equilibrium following unease*. The records of the earth are an archive of information from ice cores, tree rings, glacial changes, ocean and soil sediments. Praetorius explains that these records accrete memories on time periods varying from months to millions of years, displaying a long-range spectrum of Earth’s changes on various temporal and spatial scales. Inspired by the knowledge that the earth keeps score in this way, this chapter engages with distinct (yet related) case studies that, in their own ways, assist audiences in tuning in to deeper histories, sensing resonant land memories, and engaging with future-oriented speculation that weaves together memory and resilience, past and present. The chapter seeks subtle modes of making visible, attuning to, and registering more-than-human presences.

The examples in this chapter both perform what could be called counter-memories¹⁰⁴ by creating alternative discourses, engaging with speculative world-making strategies, and attuning to elements often thought of as invisible as active collaborators in remembering that which has

¹⁰⁴ The term “counter-memory” was first coined by French philosopher Michel Foucault in his essay *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* 1980. For Foucault, counter-memory comes down to individual acts of resistance, and he stresses the importance of relentlessly questioning the veracity of “history as true knowledge.”

been systemically forgotten or intentionally repressed (i.e., by institutions/governments/corporations/etc. invested in settler colonialism, the status quo of dispossession, and ongoing cultural erasure). The projects presented here disrupt linear versions of history through temporal and ephemeral monument interventions by tuning in to the insistence of unseen elements through time. The examples I present here have elemental links to the other projects discussed in the dissertation thus far—recall Belmore’s melting ice and her lingering screams through space, Benesiinaabandan’s ghostly field, the EJI’s activated soil collection and the DNA held there, Kelso’s photographs of ‘empty’ sites of violence. Continuously I ask how nonappearance is rendered felt and resonant.

First, I examine the large-scale ephemeral monument installation at the US/México border (pre-Trump era), *Repellent Fence* (2015), by the Native American and mestizo multimedia collective Postcommodity. I trace how this public artwork, which drew critical attention to the Indigenous lands upon which borders and trade policies have been built, rewrote particular historical scripts by temporarily intervening in public memory and making visible the complexity of historiographical (often buried) national narratives at the border. Second, I turn to a handful of examples by Cannupa Hanska Luger, an interdisciplinary artist raised on the Standing Rock Reservation and who is an enrolled member of the Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold and is of Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota, and European descent. In particular, I analyze Luger’s solo exhibition *Reunion* (2022), which I experienced in Amarillo, Texas. The iteration of *Reunion* I saw featured Luger’s performance/installation series *Future Ancestral Technologies* (2018–ongoing), a blend of Indigenous science fiction as a way of making, and a speculative methodology which hopes to “influence global consciousness using creative storytelling to radically reimagine the future” (Luger). It is a project that articulates

future narratives in which global collective thinking is challenged to dream of postcapitalist, postcolonial futures wherein humans restore their bonds with the earth and each other (*equilibrium following unease*). The projects in the chapter contain the spectral forces of memory and ancestral presence that do not necessarily occur in linear time but that confront dominant modes of knowing by asserting different stories that help us sense, heal, register, and imagine *otherwise* through an insistence of the powerful liveliness that disappearance continues to carry.

In her book *Hospicing Modernity*, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira explains how modernity is a “worlding strategy,” which she understands to be a “complex adaptive living system that actively does things, including conditioning the habits of knowing and being of those whose lives and livelihoods are intertwined with it” (16). By renegotiating and reframing traditional Indigenous customs and technologies, the projects outlined below celebrate resistance, embrace autonomy, and perform and insert future-oriented narratives of redress in the face of these habits of knowing that Machado de Oliveira outlines. The artists do this by collaborating with and illuminating the non-human elements often unacknowledged in modernity’s linear narratives of history (such as ancestors, the earth, dreams, or the imagination). Postcommodity and Luger challenge settler-colonial epistemologies (“worlding strategies”) of land and temporal frameworks by amplifying the importance of ecological kinship between humans and more-than-humans including plants, animals, and the earth, which encourage attunement to deep time and the land’s longer stories creating counternarratives. For Postcommodity and Luger, these non-human elements are part of, and not separate from, the art projects in which they engage; they are collaborators in storytelling through time—reaching back, across, and through, and lurching forward in time and space, pointing toward other possible futures. These artists pose challenges to modernity’s human exceptionalism and imposed sense of separation between us (humans) and

“the dynamic living land-metabolism that is the planet and beyond” (*Hospicing* 20). Through a comparative analysis in this chapter, it becomes clear that these projects challenge prevailing (Western colonial) linear notions of time and space, and problematize colonial modernity’s single narrative of progress, development, and civilization. The artists in this chapter speak to a world ahead; they understand land as a living entity that possesses memory and agency that can help in processes of unlearning ways of thinking, imagining, and being. These interventionist works create counternarratives to dominant colonial histories, making visible the invisible forces that shape our understanding of borders and territories, while highlighting the ancestral knowledge and technologies used for tuning in to the messy entanglements and unseen relations between environment, cultures, and histories.

Shifting Focus: Emergent Strategies

Before the pandemic, I had received a travel grant to conduct research in the US/México border region, but ended up only being able to use these funds in its wake. Characteristic of the creative process generally, and especially due to the Covid-19 pandemic, my research and writing had significantly changed course by the time travel bans were lifted and it was finally time to conduct my research at the border. I had originally proposed to examine performance artists working in the border region between Ciudad Juárez, México, and El Paso, Texas, who were making work in response to the impunity of violent crimes in the region, where since the

early 1990s¹⁰⁵ hundreds of unresolved killings of women and girls have occurred,¹⁰⁶ the bodies disappearing without a trace—an ongoing devastation referred to as “femicide.” In the end, however, I decided to focus my attention less directly on projects that dealt with this violence and instead on artists whose work intentionally *rejects* violent retellings of the horrific and ongoing crimes brought on by border imperialism—projects that attend instead to acts of resistance and thrivance (as opposed to just survivance), as aesthetic strategies.

These aesthetic choices to focus less directly on violence, it should be noted, are different from optimism, spiritual bypassing, or toxic positivity—rather, they can be considered part of an emergent strategy, defined by adrienne maree brown, as the ways “we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for” (7). Focusing on resistance and resilience is a way of thinking expansively about the future, dreaming about

¹⁰⁵ During the 1960s, Maquiladoras (which provided low-wage manufacturing work) in México began to spread, tracing their origins to the National Border Industrialization Program of 1964. This initiative by the Mexican government aimed to encourage foreign investment to stimulate domestic markets. Under the maquiladora program, all raw materials imported into the country for manufacturing purposes became duty-free with one stipulation: the final product had to be exported back to the country of origin or to a third party. From the 1970s to the 1980s, this project rapidly expanded, and in 1994, with the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which created the world’s largest free trade area, a crisis of displacements ensued. As Harsha Walia has detailed, within the first five years of NAFTA, maquiladoras expanded by 86 percent and 85 percent of this workforce was women. Maquila border towns also became key sites in the drug war fueling the crisis of femicide (*Border & Rule* 50–53). This expansion led to various environmental and social challenges, including pollution, inadequate infrastructure, and poor working conditions, often characterized by low wages and lack of job security. These issues were compounded by insufficient labour protections and enforcement, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation. The environmental impact of maquiladoras has also been significant, with many factories contributing to water and air pollution, affecting the health and well-being of local communities.

¹⁰⁶ Originally, I had intended to write about an “unofficial memorial” site featuring large pink crosses in Ciudad Juárez—*Campo Algodonero* (The Cottonwood Field), situated across from the maquiladora industries (border assembly plant) headquarters. The site is dedicated to hundreds of women who have died in the area during the past two decades, and includes a large-scale monument of a woman and multiple pink wooden crosses that represent the women who were found murdered in the region.

what it could *possibly* look like. brown states that an emergent strategy “notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies” (7). Framed as emergent strategies,¹⁰⁷ the works of both Postcommodity and Luger defy and counter the scenes of violence that play out regularly and graphically in media outlets and that act as scripts or scenes. Activist and writer Harsha Walia points out that “scenes of border death maintain structures of racial violence and, as statistics of deaths pile up, we cannot evade an interrogation of the *source* of this violence shaped through imperial, racialized, and spatialized control” (108). The works in this chapter elude spectacles of violence while still engaging with the *source* of the violence that Walia refers to. They perform an anticolonial visuality, creating shifts in perception, and counter state narratives of particular violence and invisibility.

Postcommodity—*Repellent Fence*

For three days in October 2015, the interdisciplinary arts collective Postcommodity¹⁰⁸ launched their socially collaborative temporary installation *Repellent Fence* (*Valla Repelente* in

¹⁰⁷ *Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times* by Natalie Alvarez, Claudette Lauzon, and Keren Zaiontz is a significant collection that examines how artists develop both interventionist and emergent strategies to navigate the increasingly precarious conditions of contemporary society. The book explores creative approaches that artists use to engage with these challenges, offering tools and methodologies that sustain artistic practices while addressing social and political issues. Alvarez, Lauzon, and Zaiontz highlight how such strategies not only intervene in immediate contexts but also adapt and evolve to meet shifting demands, effectively contributing to broader social change by exceeding the space-time of individual actions (3). This aligns with the notion of emergent strategies I employ in this dissertation, which focuses on the ways small actions and connections build complex systems capable of fostering resilience and resistance.

¹⁰⁸ The collective Postcommodity is based in the Southwestern United States and currently consists of two members: Cristóbal Martínez (of the Genízaro, Pueblo, Manito, and Chicano people in Northern New México), and Kade L. Twist (Cherokee). The creation of *Repellent Fence* included a third and previous member of the collective, Raven Chacon (Navajo). The group’s website states that their art functions as a shared Indigenous lens and voice to engage with the multiple and complex forces of twenty-first century violence.

Spanish), a large-scale, short-term, two-mile-long monument. Working with local communities on both sides of the border, institutional and government organizations, volunteers, and publics, the project culminated in the establishment of a fleeting, large-scale outdoor monument near the border of Douglas, Arizona, and Agua Prieta, Sonora. The hovering temporary monument perpendicularly crossed the US/México border and highlighted the politics of the border's division of Indigenous nations, illuminating the Indigeneity of many of the people who are crossing the border daily as well as those whose lives have been informed by living and working in the borderland regions. This work now lives on through online photographs, interviews, articles, and conversations, and has been memorialized through Sam Wainwright Douglas's 2017 documentary about the project, *Through the Repellent Fence*, which provides a glimpse into the arduous process behind creating and executing such an ambitious (and bureaucratically involved) project in the lead-up to the three-day monument performance.¹⁰⁹ The project gained more relevance and urgency within the Trump administration's border-obsessed regime—his proposed wall, immigration policies, and legislation that forcibly separated hundreds of migrant families caught attempting to cross the Southern border.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ I have only experienced *Repellent Fence* through images, videos, film, texts, and in-person artist talks delivered by members of Postcommodity. The cinematography in the documentary *Through the Repellent Fence* emphasizes the scale and beauty of the installation, effectively conveying the project's message about the deep temporal and spatial relationships between people and the land.

¹¹⁰ Beginning in April 2018, the Trump administration adopted a “zero tolerance” policy and decreed that border-crossers should be criminally prosecuted; parents and children are separated. Trump made it a political issue in the November 6, 2018, midterm congressional election, threatened to cut off regional aid, close the US/México border, and deploy troops there if México failed to halt migrants entering the US. Thousands of migrant families were infamously separated under Trump's crackdown on unauthorized border crossings during the first two years of his presidency, with children and infants taken away from their parents and sent to shelters and other facilities while the adults were prosecuted.

Repellent Fence incorporated twenty-six giant scare-eye balloons (made of PVC), each ten feet in diameter, evenly spaced, filled with helium, hovering in the sky, literally intercepting the contested Frontera—reaching one hundred feet above the desert floor, they created a two-mile-long visual link between Douglas, Arizona, and Agua Prieta, Sonora. These scare-eye balloons are typically intended for the commercial purpose of repelling birds from fruit trees and gardens—usually inefficiently. The spherical inflatable balloons were vibrant red, blue, yellow, black, and white, emblazoned with an “open eye” in the centre. At Toronto’s Creative Time Summit¹¹¹ in 2017, members of Postcommodity discussed how the balloons represented Indigenous medicine colours and connoted an Indigenous iconography and consciousness that exists throughout the Americas, jokingly calling these balloons “consumer-product Indigenous ready-mades.” The *re*-appropriation of this orbic iconography visually demonstrated a more expansive historical interconnectedness of Indigenous peoples throughout the hemisphere—from South America to Canada—that reached beneath and beyond the temporal limits of linear historical narratives of the hard, physical border which divides nation-states. The scare-eye balloons visually and metaphorically indexed a deeper invisible history at the particular border site and a “long view history of trade between Indigenous peoples” before European arrival (Chacon, Martínez, and Twist quoted in Irwin 6). As art historian Elizabeth Eliza Scott notices, *Repellent Fence* shifted viewers’ frame of reference, and the “respective beginning and ending of the United States and México [were] obscured, while the artificiality of the border [came] into focus” (“Decentering”).

¹¹¹ The Creative Time Summit is a US-based arts organization that supports and promotes politically engaged art, which I attended in Toronto in 2017. The theme for that year was “Of Homelands and Revolution,” which focused on the intersections of art and social justice, with a particular emphasis on issues of migration, borders, and the displacement of communities.



Figure 20. Postcommodity *Repellent Fence*, 2018, Douglas, Arizona and Agua Prieta, Sonora.

Image courtesy of the artists.

Although Postcommodity's countermonument was temporary, the project itself was more long-lasting and processual (ten years in the making)—given the geopolitical site-specificity and bureaucratic complexity of *Repellent Fence*, many individuals were involved in manifesting the project. It included the participation of “borderlands stakeholders, across diversity and interests, in generative conversations—as a means of broadcasting complex approximations about the complexity of movement (peoples, cultures, ideologies, and capital) of U.S./México trans border systems” (Postcommodity) and knowledges. *Repellent Fence* highlighted discourses of race and immigration beyond the logic of partisanship, illuminating how both Canada and US political-economic nation-states are settler-colonial societies premised upon Indigenous genocide, imperialism, and immigrant labour.

As a countermonument, *Repellent Fence* performed shared, complex remembering across time—it became a harbinger of the memories of others, signaling the approach of a future. Bring to mind now the meditative, dreamlike quality of the large, luminous, wavering scare-eye balloons drifting high in the warm desert breeze, dancing in the wind, traversing the border: at once their own ghostlike apparitions and autonomous objects imbued with culturally specific meanings and memories. Viewers were asked to deeply listen to (and to *feel*) what teachings these transitory objects were offering. The tethered balloons exerted their independence while rebelling against utilitarian instrumentalization. They did not signify a border-as-usual politic but rather a transcendent and complex reimagining of national narratives, histories, and belongings.

Despite often being framed as “land art” by critics and art writers, *Repellent Fence* stands in contrast to more famous land art¹¹² pieces like Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970), which carved a fifteen-foot-wide coil stretching more than 1,500 feet into Great Salt Lake, or Michael Heizer’s dynamite-blasted trench *Double Negative* (1969). Unlike these projects, *Repellent Fence* intentionally used ephemerality as form.¹¹³ This is dissimilar to the 1960 and 1970s canonical land art or earthworks which might in their permanence, Scott points out, be read more as “expression[s] of settler colonialism, including its fundamental maneuver of claiming territory by erecting borders. With its prototypical slashes into the desert’s surface, in other words,

¹¹² Using natural materials like earth, wind, water, fire, wood, rocks, and explosives, American artists of the 1960s began to move beyond the white cube gallery space to work directly in the land. With ties to minimal and conceptual art, these artists placed less emphasis on the discrete object and turned their attention to the experience of the artwork, foregrounding natural materials and the site itself to create works that were large in scale and located outside of typical urban art world circuits (*Groundswell*).

¹¹³ The use of ephemerality in land-based projects is exemplified by various notable works, such as Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s *The Gates* in Central Park, New York; Walter De Maria’s *Lightning Field* in New Mexico; and the *Desert X* exhibitions in California’s Coachella Valley, which showcase temporary installations that engage with the environment, impermanence, and the passage of time.

canonical Land art arguably embodies and entrenches the logic of borders, moreover, doing so based upon the evacuation of indigenous realities and imaginaries” (“Decentering”). *Repellent Fence* also differs, in its collaborative spirit (working with different artists and communities), from land art traditions, which tend to celebrate a lone “master” artist toiling in solitude.

Postcommodity’s ephemeral monument temporarily resisted contemporary spells of genesis amnesia—the systematic forgetting of colonial foundations and imperial histories—and attempted to complicate geopolitical discourses beyond the logics of divisive us-and-them politics. Through *Repellent Fence*, Postcommodity performed what they termed an “Indigenous reimagined ceremony”¹¹⁴ meant to, as art journalist Matthew Irwin describes, temporarily re-indigenize the borderlands and complicate discourses between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (6). The land in this ceremony became a mediator and a means for rebuilding public memory and recovering knowledge in a transborder context. Irwin quotes collective member Martínez recalling that in Agua Prieta, during the launch of the balloons, participants shared stories and prayers around each balloon, resulting in an unexpectedly emotional and spiritual event (“Suturing”). The temporary monument became charged by ceremony and celebration and grounded in the shared and complex experiences of border life, movement, identity, and connection to land. Postcommodity’s performed borderline functioned through an Indigenous lens¹¹⁵ to pose hemispheric questions of the global market, as well as interrogate public perceptions and individual actions that “comprise the ever-expanding, multinational, multiracial and multiethnic colonizing force that is defining the 21st Century through ever increasing velocities and complex forms of violence” (Postcommodity). The goal of this project, the group has stated, was to

¹¹⁴ The group stated this during their talk at Creative Time Summit 2017.

¹¹⁵ Postcommodity have been careful in distinguishing that their work applies an Indigenous *lens*, rather than a focus on Indigenous *people*.

shift trans border discourses away from dehumanizing and polarizing constructs of nationalism and globalization, and to reposition discourses into a dialogue that is respectful of the Indigeneity upon which borders and trade policies have been fabricated using the borderlands as a metaphor to acknowledge and honor the Indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere—both those who are experiencing diaspora, and those who are coping with the militarization of their ancestral homelands. (Postcommodity)

The group asserts that *Repellent Fence* “recognizes all Indigenous peoples that are intermeshed in the theater of the contemporary immigration crisis of the Americas.” The monument’s bidirectional reach across the US/ México border symbolically demonstrated the “interconnectedness of the Western Hemisphere by recognizing the land, indigenous peoples, history, relationships, movement and communication” (Postcommodity). This symbolic gesture demonstrated how hemispheric understandings of time and history might complicate linearly constructed knowledge and assumptions about cultures, languages, and communities in the area and gave voice to the land and people who exist and live within the borderlands.

Through its performance of metaphoric border crossing, *Repellent Fence* symbolically stitched together nation-states, encouraging discourse that challenges the political and economic processes that destabilize local communities and geographies at the frontier. It asked how Indigenous people living on their ancestral territories have become “illegal aliens” in their own homelands, unrecognized by the state. It challenged viewers to consider the monuments (and monumental remains)¹¹⁶ of colonialism *beyond and beneath* official statues and erected memorials and how these colonial phantoms may inform the future. The stitching across the land

¹¹⁶ Thinking here of performance theorist Rebecca Schneider’s suggestion that remains (through disappearance) perform their materiality. Schneider resists the temporal logic of the once occurring.

also conjured scars—a physical one marked by the balloons, but also the scars marked by trauma on bodies and on the land,¹¹⁷ as these violent dispossessions continue to produce effects, provide the conditions of life for many, and recalling Gordon, haunt the present with a “seething presence” (8). Postcommodity’s floating monument gave way for the borderland *space* itself to perform its fluidity as a spatial entity.

In her book *Mohawk Interruptus: A Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, Audra Simpson writes about border crossing from the perspective of the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke (part of the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Confederacies) who live on either side of the Canada/US border. Simpson illuminates how Iroquois crossers perceive themselves as members of a sovereign nation, while the state and settler law do not. Simpson makes clear that not all border crossers are “transgressors” because of their temporal and rights-based relationship to the nation-states of the United States and Canada (124), noting that these relations are “temporal because the Haudenosaunee predate both political regimes” and that, in fact, the “geopolitical boundary of the United States-Canada border actually transgresses *them*” (124). Postcommodity complicated the dimensions of relations at the border performing legal violence and the way the physical border divides Indigenous nations. *Repellent Fence* haunted and intercepted the ongoing militarized present by illuminating the systemic erasure of Indigenous peoples while simultaneously inscribing different historical narratives upon the land, activating and engaging with longer stories around the México/US border.

¹¹⁷ I am reminded of Rebecca Belmore’s performance photography (and billboard installation) *Fringe* (2007) wherein a deep bloodied scar decorated with a fringe of red beads slashes across a reclined woman’s back reflecting wounds and trauma done to Indigenous female bodies. It at once represents colonialism’s trauma inflicted on Indigenous women’s bodies and it also gestures toward healing.

In explaining his motivation for making the *Repellent Fence* documentary, Douglas states, of *Repellent Fence*, “this is a border story that has not been told: Indigenous artists giving voice to the shared history of Indigenous people who have traveled back and forth for thousands of years, reminding the world that being indigenous does not stop at a border” (qtd. in Calvario). Unlike a rigid, geopolitical border, *Repellent Fence* represents a metaphorical boundary that challenges the idea of borders as fixed and impermeable. The line of large, colorful balloons remains flexible and responsive to natural elements like the wind, causing it to sway and move. This movement breaks the concept of a ‘hard’ line and instead creates a temporary bridge of interconnectedness, emphasizing the fluidity and enduring connections among Indigenous nations across the Americas.

The group’s claim that this temporary monument acted “as a suture that stitch[e]d the peoples of the Americas together” (Postcommodity) is a mission I connect to performance studies scholar Jill Lane’s understanding of hemispheric deep time. *Repellent Fence* sharpened and brought into focus the “deep and textured relationships and practices” (Lane 113) that have sewn the Americas together, providing a temporal experience that exceeds the lineament of European monochronic temporality (past, present, future). Those who encountered the zigzagging monument confronted a dizzying representation of the physical geographic boundary and the implications and complex histories that lay beneath the material structure. This interaction prompts a reflection on how borders are profoundly intertwined with the lived experiences of bodies. *Repellent Fence* visualizes the boundary as a dynamic and contested space where geopolitical divisions intersect with the lived realities of Indigenous and migrant communities. It acknowledges the enduring presence of Indigenous peoples and their historical movements across this border, thus emphasizing how these movements contribute to the ongoing

redefinition of national and territorial identities. This work temporarily and visually integrated deep time into a geopolitically contested, militarized area within the western hemisphere by acknowledging the Indigeneity of the people who are crossing the border and their ability to recover memory of the land where encountering a division of “nations.”

From an embodiment perspective, the installation underscores the mutual constitution of bodies and borders. By physically placing the fence across the landscape, *Repellent Fence* invites participants to imagine the border not just as a static barrier but as a force that shapes—and is shaped by—human and non-human bodies. As viewers engaged the temporary installation, their altered perceptions—whether through changes in movement, sight, weather, or emotional response—create a reorientation of their bodily experiences and perceptions of identity. This reorientation becomes a kind of embodiment as participants are made to feel the border’s presence not only in abstract or symbolic terms but as a lived, physical experience.

The medicine eye symbols on the balloons add another layer, suggesting that the land and its borders are imbued with a protective and watchful presence, connecting to Indigenous cosmologies and acknowledging the spiritual dimensions of place. This embodied experience challenges participants to confront the border as a site of both physical and symbolic violence, where the separation of peoples is not merely a matter of geographic division but also an act that impacts the physical, emotional, and cultural lives of those affected. *Repellent Fence* illustrates the entanglement of bodies and borders, revealing how each informs and shapes the other. By integrating deep time with embodied engagement, the installation facilitates a critical examination of the border as an active, relational force that both shapes and is shaped by the bodies it encounters.

The ambitious project visualized how the boundaries of nations are not strictly geographic or geopolitical but also discursive and visual, and are produced and constructed as communities of belonging. As queer and feminist theorist Sarah Ahmed states, “the imagining of nation as a space in which ‘we’ belong is not independent of the material deployment of force, and the forms of governmentality which control not only the boundaries between nation states, and the movements of citizens and aliens within the state, but also the repertoire of images which allows the concept of the nation to come into being in the first place” (98).

Repellent Fence performed and gave visibility to deep time by focusing more on a geologic timescale and highlighting long term environmental impacts of human activity on the land. By linking contemporary environmental issues to older cultural practices, it emphasized the continuity of Indigenous presence. This installation underscored the deep (and invisible) temporal layers of human and environmental interaction in a historically and ecologically significant region. Its temporary nature, contrasted with its enduring visual impact, highlighted the lasting effects of human activity on the environment. This project challenged audiences to confront constructions of nationhood by understanding and attuning to the entanglements of human and non-human temporalities.

Hemispheric Perspectives and Deep Time

In the field of performance studies, a hemispheric perspective considers the vital cultural, political, and artistic connections and exchanges across the Americas and analyzes how performance practices have been used to resist, subvert, or reinforce power structures across the hemisphere. This approach challenges common perceptions of the geographies that underwrite both the historical and the present in the Americas and, as Lane notes, makes visible the

“competing tensions...of imperial settlement, anticolonial struggle and neocolonial domination that inform the histories of nation, community and identity in the Americas” (115).

Understanding a work like *Repellent Fence* from a hemispheric point of view makes explicit, as performance studies scholar Diana Taylor explains, the “logic of looking at the Americas not only as a series of independent states or as a geographic fact but also as the enacted and contested arena of crisscrossing and encounters” (*Remapping* 1426). A hemispheric lens shows the Americas as a “complicated, back-and-forth history of migratory, cultural, economic, political, military, linguistic, and religious practices, of which we are all a part and for understanding the deep inter connections of populations in the Americas” (*Remapping* 1426). This approach reconceptualizes “geographies that underwrite histories and geographies of performance in the Americas by delineating shared historical experiences” (Lane 114). Postcommodity does not rely on the hemisphere’s linear time “where past, present and future make up a time-line of human progression, a chronos of self-actualization” (Neimanis and Walker 567). Like the intention behind *Repellent Fence*, working with deep time artistically also reveals a hemispheric connection between Indigenous people through non linear time.

Deep time frames the articulation of historical formations through complex temporalities across geographies. Anishinaabe writer Leanne Simpson’s explanation of “transmotion” in *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* expands notions of linear time as being marked by “pre-colonial movement patterns, wherein movement, change and fluidity were a reality for Nishnaabeg people” (87–104). Simpson sees transmotion as a way for understanding the interconnectedness of relationships and movements through time and space—to access ancestral wisdom and to face the long-term implications of colonization and environmental disregard. This fluid understanding of time stands in stark contrast to the static and constrained time that Walia describes as when

“police, prisons, and borders operate through a shared logic of immobilization containing oppressed communities under racial capitalism” (*Border & Rule* 5). According to Lane, the hemispheric Americas “may be usefully engaged as a set of connected practices in deep time rather than as continental mass in uniform shape” (113). *Repellent Fence* directs attention to this idea of reconnecting the Americas; hemispheric understandings of this region reintegrate multiple national players into the neopolitical regimes of power and implicate all nation states (Canada included) as border crossing is the project of capital, labour, and imperialism. *Repellent Fence* performed a hemispheric long view, it temporarily disrupted dominant border narratives by activating a deep time perspective, revealing the entangled histories and ecological consequences of human activity across the Americas, and invited its viewers to confront the long-term impacts of colonialism, capitalism, and environmental degradation on Indigenous lands and communities.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Sections of this chapter appear in my article “Performing Monument: Future Warnings” published in *Performance Matters* journal. In that article, I situate Postcommodity’s cross-border installation within the context of performative monuments, exploring how such artworks challenge and reframe dominant colonial narratives. In particular, I examine a performance action by the Toronto-based comedy-art duo Life of a Craphead and their performance action, *King Edward VII Equestrian Statue Floating Down the Don River* (2017), which simulated a colonial monument tear-down and subsequently floated the imitation down the Don River. This performance simulated the dismantling of a colonial monument and involved floating an imitation of the statue down the Don River in Toronto. The act symbolically critiqued colonial legacies and the pervasive presence of colonial symbols in public spaces. The article further discusses how these public and interventionist monuments operate on a hemispheric scale, addressing not only localized histories but also broader, transnational issues of colonialism and its aftermath. By creating counter-narratives, these artworks offer alternative ways of engaging with public, political knowledge and encourage anticolonial thinking and imagining. This approach emphasizes the role of performative monuments in not just commemorating the past but also actively participating in the reconfiguration of historical memory.

Reimagining Monuments

What possibilities exist for monuments as a mode of attunement to things unseen? If monuments—whether historical, newly created, or speculative—serve as tools for remembering, how can they assist us in confronting future challenges?¹¹⁹ How might they guide us in understanding that disappearance may not be a permanent state? The concept of monuments extends beyond their physical form to include their role as active participants in the process of non-forgetting, challenging us to face and reflect upon significant historical and contemporary issues.

Monuments have traditionally been viewed as static structures commemorating notable people, events, or historical sites. However, the concept of monuments as performance challenges this fixed view, suggesting that monuments actively participate in shaping collective memory and public consciousness. They serve as agential collaborators in nonforgetting, engaging the public in a dynamic dialogue about the past, present, and future. The term “monument” originally denoted a structure placed by, or over, a grave in memory of the dead (a memory of the *dead*). Interestingly, “monument” also has etymological links to the verbs “remind,” “advise,” and “warn.”¹²⁰ This term is also popularly used to refer to something that is large in scale and importance, as in “monumental”—something of extraordinary size and power. John Y. Cole in his book on the architecture of the Thomas Jefferson Building asserts “a

¹¹⁹ Rebecca Belmore’s 2018 survey exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario curated by Wanda Nanibush, entitled *Facing the Monumental* comes to mind. The exhibition overview stated that Belmore’s “poetic and beautiful works respond to the pressing issues of our time, including water and land rights, women’s lives and dignity, violence against Indigenous people by the state and police, and the role of the artist in contemporary life” (*Facing the Monumental*). The exhibition’s title itself suggests a confrontation with monumental challenges and injustices faced by Indigenous communities and beyond.

¹²⁰ Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “monument.”

monument allows us to see the past thus helping us visualize what is to come in the future” (*The Library of Congress* 16). This perspective aligns with the idea that monuments are not merely retrospective but also projective, influencing how we conceive the future. By engaging with monuments as performative acts, we acknowledge their role in the temporal entanglement of memory and history, where disappearance is not permanent but part of an ongoing process of cultural negotiation and reimagining.

The performative nature of monuments lies in their ability to embody and enact narratives that resonate across time. By acting as sites of ongoing interaction and interpretation, monuments perform the work of reminding, advising, and warning us of historical legacies and future possibilities. This performative quality is especially evident in interventions and re-enactments that reinterpret or challenge existing monuments. For example, performances around Confederate monuments (like in Chapter 2) have highlighted the selective memory and incomplete historiography these structures often represent, revealing the colonial and linear narratives they perpetuate. Considering monuments as performance enriches our understanding of their role. It opens up possibilities for monuments to be active participants in the cultural landscape, fostering a deeper engagement with history and its implications for the future. This performative approach encourages us to see monuments not just as commemorations of the past but as vital, living entities that continue to shape our collective consciousness and societal values.

As for Cole’s next point, how do monuments allow us to visualize what is to come? There is an element of prophecy in his statement, which leads me to believe that to see what is to come we must truly consider the agency and implications that these monuments have, and what they represent. Returning to the early etymological root of the word “monument” which means

“to advise or to warn,” we might ask, could monuments be performing a warning for the future? What if facing the monumental also means encountering the unseen histories around us, the ephemeral remains that living memories continue to possess? Recognizing these historical spectres, these things that, as Derrida claims, “elude us as spectators, most of all because we believe that looking is sufficient?” (11). How are they acting as revenant and how are we to *be with* these historical ghosts? We must consider how these ghostly reverberations of colonial monuments speak to the present and the future.

In thinking through monuments as performance, what does it mean for these objects to act in ways that extend beyond memorialization? What are their deeper meanings as autonomous agents, and how do individuals come to attach themselves relationally, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually to these monumental things? Because *Repellent Fence* was a fleeting and short-lived installation—ephemeral—it too disappeared. But it did not disappear for those who encountered it, as it lives on in memory, in ideas, in writing, in conversations. It left traces and residual imprints for all who were involved with its dissolvable existence and provided a temporary, imaginative alternative to linear thinking and being, offering a hemispheric way to relate to space and time. *Repellent Fence* temporarily exceeded the limits of “fact” as well as colonial and imperial histories by offering a moment to dream of alternative realities, demonstrating the deeper interconnectedness of the hemisphere. Postcommodity momentarily interrupted the colonial world-system’s maintenance of power through the “structures of identity, ethnicity, race, experience, and knowledge production while directing attention to the ways in which border people live outside of the confines of the nation-state” (Irwin 6). As an ephemeral monument, *Repellent Fence* performed an act of transfer (Taylor 2007), a transmission, pointing

toward the violence of the site, to the movements of deep time, while creating a space for sharing counterknowledge.

In Canada, colonial monuments abound—those celebrating the first Canadian prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, and many others. Artists “talking back” and engaging with monuments and statues is not new.¹²¹ Macdonald is revered in the Canadian national imaginary, but not often remembered for his role in the systematic erasure of Indigenous peoples.¹²² Métis writer and performance artist David Garneau has performed a piece entitled *Dear John, Louis David Riel* in Kingston, Ontario, in which Garneau, performing as Riel, holds a silent conversation with a statue of John A. Macdonald. In an interview, Garneau claims, “there’s a recent tradition with a number of artists, Indigenous artists.... who have been working with statues” (CBC News). He continues, “Indigenous folks do believe that material objects actually have spirits, have some sense of communion. And it’s not just Indigenous people—non-Indigenous people erected this statue because they believe the same thing, that there’s something there. It’s not just a hunk of metal” (CBC News).

Garneau is reflecting on the power of monument interventions in unsettling historical narratives. Through live artistic intervention, these monuments become concerned with the

¹²¹ In 2015 in Kingston, Ontario (traditional Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territory), I attended a performance series entitled *Talkin’ Back to Johnny Mac* in which Métis curator Erin Sutherland invited artists to respond to the Canadian celebration of European settler history and nationalism. Artists included Leah Decter, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Peter Morin, David Garneau, and Adrian Stimson.

¹²² Macdonald introduced the Indian Act in 1867, making Indigenous people wards of the Canadian state. The Act also laid the groundwork for policies that aimed to assimilate Indigenous peoples into Euro-Canadian society, leading to the establishment of the residential school system. These schools, which operated from the late 19th century until the late 20th century, were designed to forcibly remove Indigenous children from their families and communities to “civilize” them, often through abusive and neglectful conditions. The legacy of these policies has had devastating and long-lasting effects on Indigenous communities across Canada.

symbolic realm and with reshaping individual and collective imaginaries, helping envisage futures beyond colonial commemoration. This interaction with the symbolic relates to artist Biljana Jancic's statement that "shifting the monument's traditional signification of historical continuity and permanence, to a temporality favouring contemporary ideas around immediacy and 'presentness,' allow[s] the inscriptions accrued on [the] monument to be in a constant state of renewal."¹²³ Jancic states that "monumentalisation of social interventions interferes with the incessant mobility of contemporary life and places a question mark before the habitual stream of everyday consciousness" ("Performing the Monument"). Bringing invisible histories to the forefront, Postcommodity indeed cleaves a space to interrupt habitual historical consciousness.

Countermonument performances like *Repellent Fence* provide a moment of rupture in linear historical narratives and in this way are a "welcome derailment that can cause conflicting feelings of discomfort because they require a readjustment within an otherwise structured, familiar situation" (Jancic). Counterperformance and countermonuments intervene in habitual historiographical consciousness and perform temporal fissures for spectators by challenging the chrononormative (past, present, future) organization of serial time, reframing the cultural and historical meaning of the border with which they engage. *Repellent Fence* created alternative and anticolonial imaginings for disrupting chronological norms—allowing observers to understand the world in different ways. In moving forward and perhaps heeding monumental warnings, might we consider the "implications" of multiple histories that move across, beyond, and through time, which forge connections between nationalism, imperialism, and militarized border

¹²³ Jancic is referring here to Sydney-based artist Astra Howard's 2007 series *Action Research / Performance Project*.

regimes? Can we develop a sensitivity to these longer histories, or a hyperattunement, a mode of perception that engages with their lingering through space and time?

During Donald Trump's term as president of the United States, he announced and implemented significant reductions to two environmentally and culturally significant national land monuments in southeastern Utah—Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante. These reductions were met with strong opposition and legal challenges, as both sites are important cultural areas protected by Indigenous nations.¹²⁴ These actions revealed layers of erasure and divisiveness that seemingly have no end in sight. Furthermore, the Trump administration achieved hundreds of miles of border wall along the Southern border before President Biden halted construction, and there continue to be Republican attempts to complete Trump's project.¹²⁵ Trump's current campaign for president (2024 election) also leans on promises to implement a series of policies that include reinstating and expanding travel bans on people coming into the United States from certain majority-Muslim countries (including Iran, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia and North Korea); conducting what he calls the largest deportation operation in the country's history; and, in a revamp of his 2016 campaign, continuing work on the Southern border wall. Mounting tensions and ongoing controversies surround the removal of historical monuments throughout the Americas, indicating that there is a need for new methods for “doing” political transgression that consider the body as a location for epistemological discovery and as a site of knowledge, developing new perceptions and creating spaces for new

¹²⁴ Subsequent legal and political actions under the Biden administration restored the original Boundaries of the monuments.

¹²⁵ In 2022, Republicans issued their “Commitment to America” plan which pledged to take action on a number of border security measures and asylum reforms in order to close loopholes, protect national security, and discourage a flood of migration (Keene and Shaw). Specific actions proposed include increased funding for border enforcement, constructing more physical barriers, deploying advanced surveillance technologies, and revising asylum policies.

political memory. This may mean learning to listen and struggle to truly hear and heed the warnings that monuments offer by broadening understandings and complicating historiography. Perhaps monuments can act as reminder of the past and how it is not past, and open space to radically imagine a liberated future beyond the present moment of confinement, detention, prisons, and militarized border-zones that restrict movement to migrants seeking refuge from violence and political and environmental conditions.

In Ila Sheren's book *Portable Borders: Performance Art and Politics on the US Frontera since 1984*, the author explores the idea of the mobility and portability of the border. She explains how border art and its constituent ideas, post-NAFTA, became portable through a shift in thinking about international borders and their place in the postcolonial world-system. Although NAFTA was ostensibly designed to eliminate trade barriers among the US, Canada, and México, it had perilous economic effects for México due in part to an influx of subsidized US crops (corn) that put millions of Mexican farms out of work. So while the US profited, México suffered, and many low-wage workers began migrating to the US to find employment (Fiess and Lederman). Without effacing the historical and economic particularities of the region, Sheren explains how the border itself is a performed space, not just a space of performance, or a physical demarcation; it is thus a space of negotiation that cannot be reduced to its geographical location. As Sheren notes, ideas of "border thinking"¹²⁶ at the US/México border have been allowed to resonate globally "because of their portability" (89). Sheren's analysis emphasizes the mobile and pliable politics that produce various spaces throughout the hemispheric Americas as

¹²⁶ "Border thinking" is a term first coined by Walter D. Mignolo and questions the essentialist perspective that privileged the status of the border dweller. The concept was originally used by Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, and defined by epistemic difference and geographical distance (see Sheren 3–4).

border-zones, places where disappearance and invisibility are permissible and often go unnoticed.

This attention to movement is important; Walia notes, in *Border and Rule*, “As Clinton was signing NAFTA to ensure the movement of capital and goods, the US Army Corps of Engineers was fencing the border to interdict the movement of people” (52). Having the (post-NAFTA) effect of forcing migration toward the more dangerous Sonoran Desert, Arizona (which the Postcommodity piece partially intercepted), and southern Texas, “border deaths from hypothermia, dehydration, drowning, and heat stroke increased by 509 percent” (Walia qting Bejarano, Cynthia et al 30). Walia explains how disparate global geographies share a logic of border rule that displaces, immobilizes, exploits, and expels migrants and refugees and links connections between state violence, capitalism, and right-wing nationalism around the world.

Sheren traces an art-historical trajectory whereby “border art” evolved from site-specific works produced in relation to everyday life in the US-México border region to a more “portable” concept. This shift allowed the border to represent a “state of mind as well as the boundary between nations,” extending to “places of coexisting cultural or social difference” (Anzaldúa 60). This evolution broadened the definition of “border” and “border art” beyond their literal meanings.

The different definitions of border advanced by theorists like Sheren and Gloria Anzaldúa prompt a reconsideration of the concept. Anzaldúa, a prominent Chicana feminist, wrote extensively about the invisible borders that marginalized groups encounter. Her work, which emerges from the mestiza experience and consciousness, highlights how those who inhabit

multiple border zones navigate complex cultural landscapes with distinct expectations.¹²⁷ These individuals, living on the frontier between cultures and languages, embody hybrid identities and must negotiate multiple worlds. Anzaldúa emphasizes that those who cross these multiple borders are still expected to adhere to various cultural norms and expectations. This perspective encourages a rethinking of sites of disappearance as spatial entities in the Americas. Examining the organization of space and visibility, the dynamics of presence and absence, and the more-than-human elements within these environments offers valuable insights into the fluidity and multiplicity of borders. The concept of portable borders, as explored through border art, has catalyzed broader dialogues about international boundaries and can be applied to spaces operating outside traditional aesthetic and visibility regimes.

Amarillo, Texas: *REUNION*

In December 2022 I travelled to the High Plains of the Texas Panhandle to Amarillo to experience New México-based artist Cannupa Hanska Luger's solo exhibition *Reunion* presented at the Amarillo Museum of Art (AMoA). Telling a story about planetary interconnectivity using performance, video, ceramics, and monumental sculptural installation, *Reunion* implored audiences toward relational repair and reflection on interdependence—between each other, with more-than-human relatives, and with the land. Traveling both backward through history and forward into the future, the work challenges and empowers humans to develop deeper kinship with the natural world while dreaming of alternative futures.

¹²⁷ In Anzaldúa's work, particularly in her seminal book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, she explores how mestizas navigate a complex landscape of overlapping cultural expectations and identities. Anzaldúa's insights and theories are deeply rooted in her lived reality as a Chicana, which encompasses a blend of Mexican, Indigenous, and American cultural influences.

One of the few things I knew about this region of the United States before arriving is that it was once home to millions of Bison¹²⁸ who roamed freely, grazing on grasses, and who are sacred animals to the numerous Native Americans who lived and thrived there. Due to overhunting in the late 1800s by white market hunters and the introduction of their weapons, alongside growing market demands for Bison bones and hides, the animals were nearly annihilated. From his Instagram page, Luger states of the exhibition:

It is my intention that the work and ideas presented in *Reunion* will open dialog around how Indigenous peoples of The Great Plains regard the bison. For us, the buffalo is the emblem of survival and cultural adaptation; we respect the buffalo as a relative. *Reunion* mourns the loss of a mighty species and the violence that has built our country while celebrating the bison's resilience and in turn our own. This exhibition empowers Indigenous people and practices as central to global futures and reflects a future space where we once again live in reverence and respect for our more than human kinships. *Reunion* does more than celebrate an animal; it acknowledges atrocity and reveals complexity; it reckons with the accumulation of time and the potentialities of the future. Buffalo are a symbol of freedom; they represent sustenance and survival for Indigenous people; they have agency and immense power. ("It is my")

The site-specificity of the exhibition—with its focus on the buffalo and the land on which the artwork was situated—realized Luger's goal of critically reflecting on the past while dreaming of a future. Luger melded past and future at the Amarillo Museum of Art exhibition, paying homage to millions of massacred Plains bison. Ironically, the buffalo is now the United States

¹²⁸ Throughout the chapter I use the terms "bison" and "buffalo" interchangeably. Scientifically these animals are typically called bison. However, within Indigenous cultural contexts, they are commonly called buffalo.

“national animal” despite colonial settlers once being incentivized to kill as many buffalo as possible as both a way to clear land for settlements, but also the explicit incentive to dispossess Indigenous tribes of their mode of sustenance and spiritual connection to the sacred animal in the pursuit of settlement. Luger explains, “the liquidation of buffalo not only subjugated the tribes but made space for railroads, towns, and the advent of private property, all of which in turn aided in the buffalo’s further demise” (*Millions*).

Admittedly, my time in Amarillo was odd and these conditions informed my overall experience and affective resonance with the exhibition—particularly its futuristic projections. I spent five days there and it was the first time I was ever away from my daughter for longer than a day. I include these personal reflections to situate myself in connection with *Reunion* and how I engaged with the exhibition, its setting, and the moment. My field notes read:

It is bleak here bordering on dystopic—it’s December and everything in Amarillo is dead, dry and brown—the grass is scorched. When I walked around the town today there was absolutely nobody on the sidewalks despite the mild temperature; it felt like a post-apocalyptic ghost town—everyone drives I suppose. My Uber driver yesterday said (proudly) that this is the home of America’s only nuclear weapons assembly and disassembly facility. I visited Cadillac Ranch and was struck by how much garbage was on the ground—nearby was the 22-foot-tall 2nd Amendment Cowboy statue, celebrating the right to bear arms. I went by myself to the Big Texan Steak Ranch for dinner, despite being a vegetarian (I saw a sign promoting a 72 oz. steak eating challenge...).

What I could not perceive here in this place, was how this land once appeared, or what it would have been like today, largely due to the absence of the Bison. It is this very absence that Luger

engages with in *Reunion*, attuning to the unseen forces of the buffalo spirit, and conjuring dreams of a restored future.

Monuments to Resistance

I first became aware of Luger's work in 2016 during the #NoDAPL protest against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock Sioux Reservation (Oceti Sakowin camp) across the Missouri River. During this time Luger began the Mirror Shield Project, an open-source protest art series which involved inviting participants to assemble hundreds of simple, mirrored surfaces using accessible and affordable materials. The reflective shields, according to Luger, were inspired by images of women holding mirrors up to police in the Ukraine, so that the police in riot gear could see reflections of themselves and be confronted with their own violence in real time. Luger developed a short tutorial video (called "How to Build Mirror Shields for Water Protectors") which was circulated thousands of times online and featured instructions on how to create one's own long wooden shield covered in an unbreakable reflective coating. The shields were a gesture to protect the people and land defenders holding the frontline for the cause that they believed in both from police batons and from the military actions which drenched activists protesting nonviolently in freezing temperatures. During these protests hundreds of people were injured after law enforcement deployed water cannons, teargas, and other "less than lethal" weapons on protestors.

At the Standing Rock demonstrations, protesters and land and water defenders literally used these shields for protection, but as T.J. Demos points out in *Beyond the World's End*, "these practices of Indigenous empowerment and anticolonial visibility produced critical shifts in perception and disidentification from state narratives of the conflict" (176-77). According to

Demos, Standing Rock (and other land-defending movements) was more than just a struggle over a pipeline: “#NoDAPL has figured as an expression of Indigenous sovereignty demands, continuing the battle against more than five hundred years of colonial incursion. As such, it also resonates with the broader aims of the Idle No More movement [...] that has energized and networked First Nations across Canada and the Americas in the collective struggle for First Nation rights, treaty enforcement, and self-determination” (174). Demos quotes Native American environmentalist and writer Winona LaDuke, who said that #NoDAPL has represented a “battle for dignity and the future of a nation”—Demos clarifies how this claim applies “specifically to the Oceti Sakowin and Native Americans more widely, as well as more generally to us all, for a future of a nation (a nation of nations, a world of worlds, a future of futures) whose postcolonial character has yet to be realized” (174). I interpret Luger’s work as engaging this unmet postcolonial potential, through his art practice which calls in possible futures.

I encountered Luger’s work again in 2018 when *Every One* was featured at Toronto’s Gardiner Museum. For this sculptural project, the artist had collaborated with volunteers and community members (recruited through a call to action video shared through social media that invited communities across the United States and Canada to make two-inch clay beads, each one representing a unique person who has been lost). The thousands of fist-sized clay beads reflected the number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) documented in the 2016 report by the Native Women’s Association of Canada. The earthen beads were then hung to form what looks like a pixelated black-and-white portrait of an Indigenous woman, each bead representing one of the missing or murdered women, while the portrait images were based on the tintype photograph “Sister” by Kali Spitzer, an artist who explores the individual stories behind the MMIWG crisis through portraiture and self-representation. Hundreds of participants held

workshops, both with Luger and on their own, making the beads in studios, community centres, universities, and private homes. These experiences generated over 4,000 beads, as well as numerous conversations, stories, and occasions for healing through clay (Gardiner). Using the earth's materiality (clay), *Every One* visualized the data behind the MMIWG crisis, transforming large and abstract numbers into a representation of individual lived experiences.



Figure 21. Cannupa Hanska Luger and Kali Spitzer, *Every One*, 2019. Gardiner Museum, Toronto, Canada. Photo by Author.

Future Ancestral Technologies

I was inspired to take the trip to Amarillo to see *Reunion* because I knew that Luger's evolving project *Future Ancestral Technologies* (2018–ongoing) was going to be premiered in

the solo exhibition. *Future Ancestral Technologies* (FAT) is a multimedia Indigenous futurist and speculative fiction series that envisions postcapitalist and postcolonial life. The iteration (there are many and they are ever-morphing) of the project that I saw in Amarillo was called *Midéegaadi* (which translates as “Buffalo”) and featured a large-scale installation of imagined ceremonial regalia for future descendants and accompanying videos, screened in the gallery of live figures activating the wearable garments through performances. These sci-fi activations act to articulate future narratives. Through these speculative videos and what are called “entry logs” (in science fiction traditions, entry logs are notes or recordings, a storytelling device that explorers often use to convey information to people who in the future might find them), human-sized figures perform wearing, moving, walking, dancing with and in the regalia for camera. There are no words (or “entry logs”) in the *Midéegaadi* videos, but there are in other iterations of FAT such as in the video “We Live” (2019). In a nearly three-minute-long video, two figures wearing Luger’s handmade regalia dance and perform ceremonies and rituals with the land (the land is also the audience). “We Live” includes sweeping shots of the vast and mostly empty landscape, open sky, rocks, and water and we hear Luger’s voice calmly reading an entry log:

Eighty cycles ago, half the population left this planet. They created huge ships and, in the process, mined massive chunks of our planet to develop the raw materials into these arcs. They left a lot of devastation behind but what they took with them was this notion of colonization. The colonizer has left. What remains here are the Indigenous populations and those too poor to afford a seat on that ship, those who work the earth, those who remember still the songs that ring out and tell us that we belong to it rather than it belonging to us. We are developing new cultures from that space. There are new ceremonies that are being created. These ceremonies, they start off as rituals, individuals

going to locations of heavy extraction. Going to places that have been corrupted and injured by the efforts of the colonizer to leave this planet. And we go there in our human form and apologize. We say we are sorry. We are sorry for the human species. And with these ceremonies, new regalias are developed. Regalias that blind us and make us deaf and prevent us from talking. They remove all the senses that we invested in as human beings and force us to feel once again. Where the land itself becomes the choreographer of elaborate songs and dances, dances in these places that need our apologies; that before they heal, need to feel as though we recognize our folly. These are offerings. Offerings we leave stretched out across this planet in many different forms. All of the notions of land ownership are gone. We Live nomadic. We Live simple. We Live. (“We Live” Audio Transcript)¹²⁹

When I heard the words, spoken as they were from the future, “force us to feel once again,” I was deeply melancholic. I was reminded how a culture of nonfeeling, non-sensing, nonrelating is rewarded and encouraged in modern life. Luger’s words gesture toward healing and entanglement with all life, toward relationship and connection as a mode of repair. I was saddened by how atrophied the senses have become today¹³⁰ and reminded of Machado de Oliveira’s words that “in order to make possible deeper engagements and better relationships we

¹²⁹ A similar exploration is TJ Cuthand’s short film *Reclamation* which examines a speculative post-dystopian future where Indigenous peoples reclaim the land and restore ecological balance after a mass exodus of white settlers to Mars. The film serves as a narrative of healing and restoration in the aftermath of environmental and social collapse.

¹³⁰ Dwayne Donald has explored the impact of colonialism on Indigenous ways of being, specifically noting that colonial strategies often involve a deliberate denial of relationships and a suppression of the senses. Donald argues that this sensory atrophy is a key element of colonial domination, as it disrupts traditional knowledge systems and the relational connections that are vital to Indigenous cultures. His work highlights the need to restore these relationships and sensory engagements as part of decolonization efforts. See “Forts, Curriculum, and Indigenous Métissage,” 1-24.

will need to reactivate capacities for sensing, relating, and imagining that have been deactivated within modernity” (37). The imagined ceremonies in the video show the figures wearing the regalia moving in strange staccato gestures like spinning their heads and dancing at sporadic pace with the land and earth. As the log explains, the regalia have been created to interact and be used as an apology to the land. The regalia’s main purpose is to reignite our ability to attune to our own senses, but also to those of the more-than-human world.



Figure 22. Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Midéegaadi* from *Future Ancestral Technologies*, 2018-ongoing. Amarillo Museum of Art, Amarillo, Texas. Photo by Author, 2022.



Figure 23. Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Midéegaadi* from *Future Ancestral Technologies*, 2018-ongoing. Amarillo Museum of Art, Amarillo, Texas. Photo by Author, 2022.



Figure 24. Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Midéegaadi* from *Future Ancestral Technologies*, 2018-ongoing. Amarillo Museum of Art, Amarillo, Texas. Photo by Author, 2022.

In the gallery, there were seven distinct figures in the centre of the first room (mannequins were wearing the regalia, but they appeared lifelike, and the regalia were also activated through performance and video) and seven single-channel looped videos playing, (featuring performers activating the same regalia that were in the gallery) with sound, which were displayed on the walls of the long rectangular room they occupied. I walked into the room and sat down for a while on the shiny brown tile floor to visit with the “beings”—friends, futuristic tricksters, magical, otherworldly, superhero-like creatures. They emanated a peculiar, playful energy that was mixed with the integrity of a warrior—supernatural and lively—and the humour of a sprite. Their presence in this out of date room made me feel like giggling. There was a kind of incongruity between the whimsical joyful presentation (felted sport helmets as sacred Indigenous attire), the anachronistic room, contrasted with their simultaneous dignity. I began to read them each like a kind of mascot—a person, animal, or thing that is supposed to bring good luck or that is used as a symbolic figure in particular events or organizations.

The regalia were vibrant with bright bold colours and a wacky, maximalist, and eclectic design. They reminded me instantly of Brian Jungen’s *Prototypes for New Understanding* (1998–2005), a series of sculptures that repurposed widely known cultural objects (like Air Jordan Nike sneakers) and recreated and transformed the objects to resemble Northwest Coast Indigenous masks.¹³¹ Both Jungen’s and Luger’s work repurposes materials from the excess of capitalism, speaking to commodification, exploitation, corporate power, and cultural value.

¹³¹ Luger’s regalia are reminiscent of Nick Cave’s futuristic “Soundsuits” which are majestic beings/objects that blend futuristic fashion and sculpture. Cave’s suits were originally created in response to the 1991 beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers and the subsequent riots that erupted after the officers were acquitted. The “Soundsuits” are considered armour for empowerment and protection against these violences. I also draw connections to the work of Toronto-based artist Rajini Perera, whose future-oriented sculptures and paintings explore themes of hybridity and power, often imagining a speculative future.

Luger's suits certainly make visual reference to traditional sacred Indigenous regalia with their elaborate feather-like accoutrements, large jingle bells on the legs and ankles, and ornate horned headpieces and with bright felt strips of fabric and yarn; they also depart from tradition with a futurist flair. Using recycled materials is an important aspect of this work, and Luger collects afghans and crocheted blankets from thrift stores to create the regalia. Luger's materials, such as dead stock fabric, found objects, and clay, are secondary products engaging with capitalism's excess and reflect the artist's commitment to sustainability and reuse. At the same time, the artist has said he chooses handmade blankets as the primary material of regalia because of the love and dedication that goes into creating them, presumably as gifts for someone at some time ("It is my" 2023). Blending these materials within a futurist narrative comments on the destructive relationship between temporality and capitalism. The excesses of capitalism become burial sites in a sense;¹³² thrift stores and city dumps contain discarded materials, the castaway objects of society. Debris and scraps hold history, materials have memory and they also possess the energy of the people who have once used them. In this way the materials used in Luger's regalia themselves perform these discarded histories of excess.

The mannequins wearing the regalia had unusually small feet, which was somewhat perturbing but added to their strange futurist quality. They were playful, and their clothes were like a sweet grandmother's quilt; there was softness to the quality of the horned buffalo headpieces, which were made mostly from repurposed industrial felt and covered the figures'

¹³² So-called "outsider" artist Lonnie Holley (and many other "folk" artists in the southern US) is well known for using dump sites as material source for creating. Holley uses garbage, scrap, and discarded materials to create sculptures; he is well known for using the excesses of capitalism to make art. This of course also reflects accessibility—the artist has always used what was available to him but, Holley has also been known to talk about each discarded object's spiritual power and how he gives these items new meanings through art by honouring their essence.

faces in the videos. It was giving Dolly-Parton's-coat-of-many-colours-meets-majestic-clown-meets-respected-elder-meets-Canadian-hockey-culture: it was confounding and incongruous. The sound of bells jingling throughout the gallery created a mesmerizing effect as the figures on the screen danced in the style of powwow, making me think about dance as embodied knowledge transfer, ancestral presence, trauma, animal spirits, and earth elements. The video I watched most closely featured the figure dancing powwow superimposed over a landscape of water just as it meets the shore, a beautiful blue and pink sunset in the background (the figures of *Midéegaadi* are shown in different videos and each dances with a different virtual landscape behind them). All of these conflicting images and cultural signifiers collided to create destabilizing gestures and imagery: the recognizable powwow dancing, the buffalo-inspired headdress, the colourful quilts, the repurposed leather jackets and worn out shin guards and hockey gloves. In my own "entry log" I jotted down:

Surrounded by these creatures, I find myself in a strange state of mind, as if I have no thoughts—I am just here, present with them—like they have taken my mental chatter away. This museum itself is a strange place. Anachronistic. Everything feels out of date except these figures, these friends; I'm the only one here on a Thursday afternoon, it feels like I might be the only person in this town except for the older man at the desk at this museum—he has been following me around, insisting on describing everything to me, and doesn't believe I don't have questions.

The figures within the *Midéegaadi* installation "exist throughout time maintaining a pledge of accountability to the land and waters that have sustained the Buffalo Nation and in turn the human beings" (*Reunion*). The installation includes audio from field recordings in Oceti Sakowin Camp near Standing Rock Sioux Tribe reservation (where the artist was born and where

the Dakota Access pipeline protests occurred). Luger's artist statement for the exhibition reads, "This exhibition empowers Indigenous people and practices as central to global futures and reflects a future space where we once again live in reverence and respect for our more-than-human kinships" (*Reunion*). Futurism itself is a linear idea, and as Luger has acknowledged, "Indigenous time is not linear. It's a fourth-dimensional space without beginning, middle or end. The things we make are not simply objects but also time machines. Ways of making become embedded in art objects, which then move through time." In this way, Luger's work operates in a continuum, bringing forward centuries-old Indigenous resistance to the practices of state-perpetrated genocide, now reflected in ongoing extractivist interests of the authoritarian capitalist present, and then reaches it further still into the future.

The creatures reminded me of mascots, so I did a quick google search on my phone in the gallery: "etymology of mascot," which led me to a "person or things whose presence is supposed to be a cause of good fortune;" and "sorcerer's charm or 'faerie friend,' good luck piece" (19c); that which is related to enchantment, or bewitchment"); and *masco* "witch," perhaps from Medieval Latin *masca* "mask, spectre, nightmare."¹³³ The regalia called in spiritual energy and ancestral beings through a kind of alchemy, bringing that which is often only felt into the physical realm through their enchantment. Engaging with science fiction's aesthetics and imaginative possibilities, Luger hauntingly projects prophesizing visions of a future world. Conceptually, as FAT travels both backward and forward, this work challenges and empowers humans to develop deeper kinship with the unseen elements of the natural world and is a nonlinear engagement with deep time (and future time).

¹³³ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/mascot>

A didactic panel in the room explained, “this ongoing project looks to customary practices in order to move culture forward. It actively incorporates science fiction theory, storytelling, Indigenous technologies, contemporary materials and the detritus of capitalism to present time-bending landscapes and to prototype new myths” (Reunion). It continued, saying that through

installation and land-based work, the *Future Ancestral Technologies* series develops an ongoing narrative in which Indigenous people develop sustainable, migration-based technology to live nomadically in hyperattunement to land and water. The project also prototypes designs for objects and their use, tests ritual, and conducts ceremonies, advancing new materials and new modes of thinking. Moving sci-fi theory into practice, *Future Ancestral Technologies* conjures innovative life-based solutions for a highly adaptable lifestyle that lives *with* the land, not *off* the land” (Reunion).

The ever-evolving project dreams possibilities for Indigenous futures, and rejects romantic historic narratives of Indigenous people and their culture as ancient. It also critiques current and historic colonial/capitalist ways of life while simultaneously generating hope for a future that centres Indigenous thriving which grows from ancestral knowledges and wisdoms (Johnson-Jennings et al.).

Transmutation

In the next room was a large-scale installation entitled *Transmutation* (2022) featuring a pair of life-sized transparent glass buffalo skulls that contained byproducts of killed buffalo (powdered bone black and calcium carbonate pigments) at either end of a long piece of white paper-looking fabric. This installation acknowledges the attempted annihilation of the

American Bison. Luger has walked all over this fabric, creating hundreds of smudged and overlapping footprints, as described on the didactic, after dipping his feet in the bone black and calcium carbonate pigments (contained in the glass skulls). These pigments are created using charred bison bones. A fan in the room gently fluttered the fabric, which also swayed gently when I walked past it, situating the textile in place, within a temporality of “now” while speaking to a past and a future. The layers and traces of Luger’s bone-charred footprints lost their distinctive lines; one merged into the next and into the next creating almost a single blurred mass form. A palimpsest of land memories, bison dreams, ancestral visions, and stories alchemized to create something new. A field recording played softly in the room’s background: the sounds of a natural gas flare from an oil well created a constant environmental ambiance in the room, directly associating the exhibit with oil extraction, fracking, and drilling, and of course, the site (Texas being one of the largest oil-producing states in the US). Luger states, “the historic images of this era document towering pyramids of buffalo skulls...they communicated a warning to Native people, a haunting commitment to our destruction.”



Figure 25. Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Transmutation*, 2022.
Amarillo Museum of Art, Amarillo, Texas. Photo by Author, 2022.



Figure 26. Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Transmutation*, 2022.
Amarillo Museum of Art, Amarillo, Texas. Photo by Author, 2022.

The wall text read: “When the US Army lost in battle against the Plains Tribes, of which I am a descendent, a different type of war was waged against us. With aims to decimate our food supply and way of life, soldiers and settlers orchestrated a full-on massacre of the buffalo. Between 1945 and 1985, an estimated 60 million buffalo were slaughtered; with the survival of an only a few hundred animals.” Luger has stated:

An entire economy grew up around the buffalo’s annihilation in America. Their hides were valuable and new railroads helped move the goods to urban centers and to Europe. As a result, bones piled up around rail lines. Settler hunters came to a bone-scattered West that reportedly “looked like the Valley of Death.” Where bones covered the ground, bounty hunters collected them into massive piles to be transported, processed and incinerated. Buffalo bones were turned into “bone black” pigments; they were ground up and used in bone china. Buffalo bones were transformed into calcium carbonate, a slow-releasing fertilizer that assisted in the spread of Plains farming. Calcium carbonate is also highly important to steel production and played a critical role in the US domination of global markets during the Industrial Revolution. The historic images of this era document towering pyramids of buffalo skulls; these are testaments to settler might and monuments of conquest. They communicated a warning to Native people, a haunting commitment to our destruction. (“In the new large-scale”).

Those historic images that Luger refers to (the ones with white settlers proudly posing atop or beside massive piles of bison bones)¹³⁴ act as monumental warnings for the future, and point

¹³⁴ The images of settlers posing with piles of bison bones are historical photographs that document the aftermath of large-scale bison slaughter in North America. This mass killing was part of a broader effort to clear the land for agriculture and settlement, as well as to weaken

to the *now* that Luger occupies and engages. The historic photos evoke a stark reminder of the near extinction of bison due to colonial expansion and hunting practices.

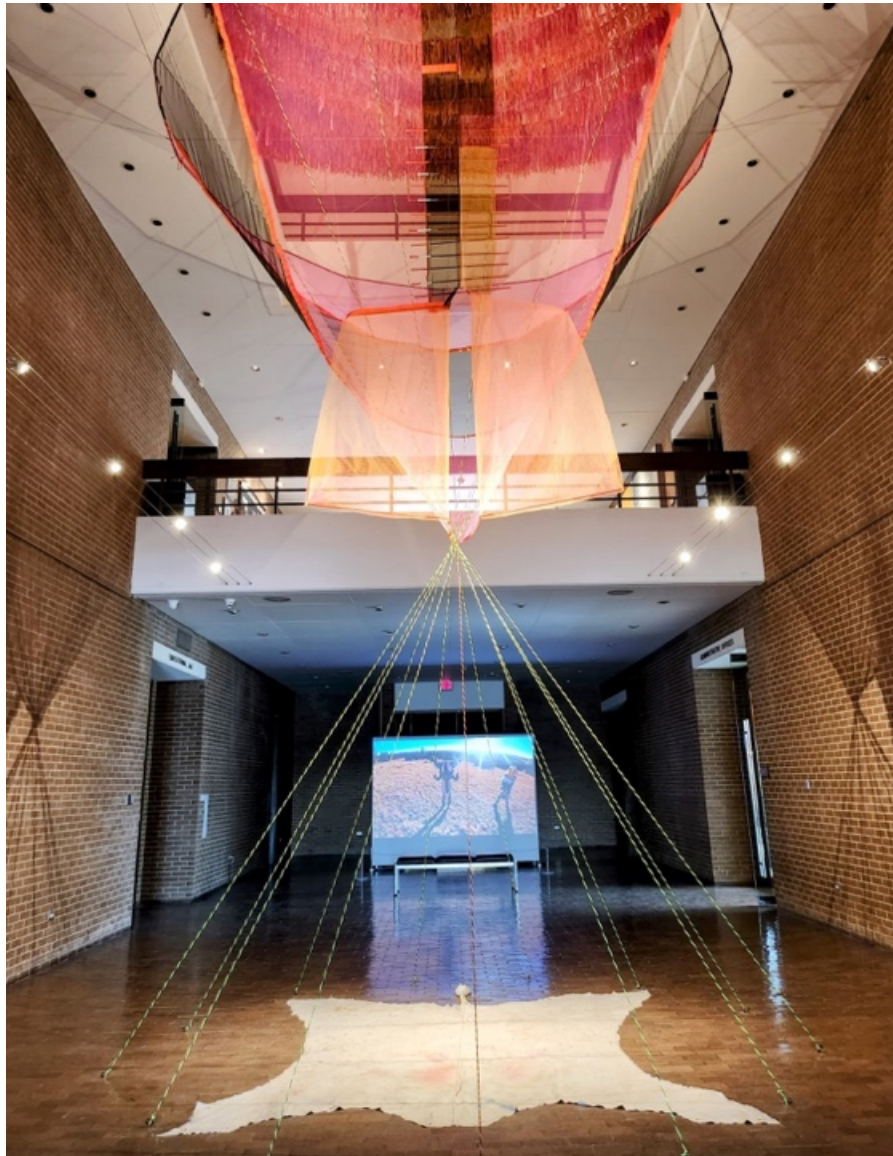


Figure 27. Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Uŋziwoslal wašičuta*, 2022. Amarillo Museum of Art, Amarillo, Texas. Photo by Author.

Indigenous communities by destroying a crucial resource. The bison's near extinction is a powerful symbol of the environmental and cultural devastation caused by colonialism. For examples of these photos, see <https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-american-buffalo/> or <https://www.lubbockonline.com/story/lifestyle/columns/2017/12/15/caprock-chronicles-picking-bison-bones-profit/14825396007/>

Lastly, spanning the three-story atrium of the museum was an installation of a suspended upside-down abstracted tipi made from recycled fabrics entitled *Uŋziwoslal wašičuta* (as I write this, from March to Aug 2024, this installation is on view at the Whitney Biennial of Art, “Even Better Than the Real Thing”), suggesting (perhaps a bit too obviously) that the narrative of history is usually told the wrong way around. As Luger states for the Whitney Biennial program, “this installation is not inverted...our current world is upside down” (Whitney). The *Uŋziwoslal wašičuta* (a Lakota phrase meaning “the fat-takers world is upside down”) installation reveals the relationship between Northern Plains technology and broader forms of knowledge within an Indigenous-centred continuum to dream of a future that embraces speculative fiction as a vessel for solutions and survival. The viewer is invited to witness a future dream space which is not ours to inhabit, but rather asks us to pay attention to our own relationship to place. Through this science-fiction-motivated installation, Luger challenges our collective thinking to consider how we will dream of our collective future.

Luger’s creations continue the dialogue about ephemerality that I initiated earlier in this chapter with Postcommodity’s *Repellent Fence*. Although Luger’s installations are grounded in museum spaces, they share an ephemeral quality with *Repellent Fence*—particularly in how they are circulated through social media, and appear digitally in videos. This highlights the transient nature of futurism and emphasizes the necessity of reimagining relationships with the past and future. Just as *Repellent Fence* created a temporary, symbolic bridge across the U.S.-México border, Luger’s work invites viewers to cross boundaries of time and perception, urging a reconnection with ancestral knowledge. This interplay between the temporary and the enduring, the physical and the conceptual, underscores the chapter’s exploration of the ephemeral and the elemental.

The elemental examples throughout this dissertation—buffalo bones stomped and pummeled in Luger’s exhibition, the spirit of Mashkode Bizhiki’ikwe or “Buffalo Woman,” the still unidentified missing Indigenous woman thought to be in a Manitoba landfill, and the soil collected by the EJI at lynching sites—collectively underscore the profound interconnectedness of historical violence, memory, remains, and materiality. The shards of marrow and phosphorous echo the melting water dripping off Belmore’s ice sculpture and Benesiinaabandan’s empty field memorializing the place of Neil Stonechild’s death. What do these minerals share with Postcommodity’s atmospheric long view of time or the wisdom of ancestors? Focusing on these interlocking relationships helps grapple with and connect the dots of an annihilative past while dreaming of a more sustainable future. By examining these interconnections, it is revealed how material remnants and spectral presences of violence and loss are woven into the fabric of contemporary life.

Conclusion

It can be difficult to envision or believe in any kind of realist outcomes that may viably be produced by art projects that envision utopian futures or attempt to redraw militaristic border lines. I am sure that to some readers the propositions put forth by the artists in this chapter seem naïve or overly optimistic in the face of catastrophic world events and ongoing violence and dispossession. And it is hard to dream of futures when wars rage on, starvation and homelessness persist. Mental health crises skyrocket, school shootings are normal, women are robbed of control over their bodies and their right to make decisions about them. When social housing projects are razed to the ground to make way for developers to fill their pockets, when police brutality seems to have no limit, when mass incarceration is an extension of the plantation

economy, when smoke from wildfires wafts over cityscapes, when industry rapes the earth. But futurism is not hope per se, more of a radical gesture toward imagining different ways of thinking, sensing, and being. It is a way of dreaming *otherwise*: a prototype myth of where we might wind up in a thousand years. Leopold Lambert, an architect and theorist, explains this point, saying “futurisms are not always about hope. Their visions are not wishful thinking or dreamy fables about the possibility of ‘better’ futures. They are instead a manifestation of tactical optimism; a constructivist envisioning that gives itself the means to exist through its very own formulation” (“Futurisms”). The projects in this chapter enact these activations of otherwise dreaming.

It would be one thing to imagine a new future on a deserted island where we could truly begin again, start fresh—quite another to imagine a “new” here, on this damaged planet where we find ourselves intimately entangled in a hot mess. It can also be stomach churning to write and critically situate (these and other wonderful) art projects within the world in which they exist—the capital A art world. The art world (and academia) in their own and similar ways perpetuate (and *are*) modernity’s colonial harms, those repertoires of exclusion, imperial extractions, and (care)less epistemological violence—the circular irony of talking about artwork within these conditions can sometimes become too much to bear. Imagining new realities layered over top of the deeply entrenched systems of violence can feel additive, not addressing the rot at the core (the structural violence that the Americas are built on) or the literal and figurative atmospheres of violence and climate disaster that engulf us.

All of that said, these otherwise gestures remain important as they point to a different imagined reality even within the current and dominant one in which they circulate and exist. They also perhaps point toward the dying out of an old way that is no longer serving a planet

wildly in need of renewal. I am reminded of Jill Dolan's idea of critical generosity as a necessary gesture in connecting the relationship of performance to the project of world-building. For Dolan, this mode of critique allows us to think specifically beyond initial reception and into the near future of potential activism and engagement in the afterlife of performance (or, as I read this, the artwork). I connect this tension (skepticism of futurism but also seeing its rupturous possibilities) to Dolan's assertion that the relationship between what we experience with the artwork and "how we practice our politics, between the world-changing potential of performance and the world changing we might want to do in our communities, remains a site of experimentation at which those relationships are formed and reformed performance by performance, community by community." I recall as well Audre Lorde's anthemic poem "A Litany for Survival" where she describes marginal people as those "who love in doorways coming and going / in the hours between dawns" and as those "seeking a now that can breed futures (lines 6–11).

The works analyzed here carve out space and make way for a now that breeds futures and beyond—dreaming a new world yesterday, today, and always. The projects discussed in this chapter intervene in settler-colonial and imperialist constructions of histories of the land and its memory by revising specific historical discourses that have silenced or erased longer, deeper memories at site. They interrupt forgetting and the disappearing of histories of violence against the land, waters, and Indigenous people by signaling a deeper experience that exceeds linear temporalities and invisible forces that reach into the future. These vibrant elsewhere modes of dreaming also point toward the grave responsibility necessary if ongoing flourishing of life is to be sustained. Understanding that all our complex and fragile interactions are inextricably linked

requires acknowledging our dependency, collective need, vulnerability, grief, and reciprocity as basic elements of being and as being entwined with memory.

CHAPTER FOUR

Weathering: Attuning to and Performing Indeterminacy and Interdependence

In nature nothing exists alone.

-Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

In January 2024 I attended the Blackwood Gallery and Toronto Dance Theatre's co-presentation of American choreographer Faye Driscoll's *Weathering*, which made its Canadian debut at Daniels Spectrum in Toronto's Regent Park neighbourhood. As the program notes stated, *Weathering* grapples with the collective experience of living in the Anthropocene—the geologic toll of environmental destruction resulting from human activity on the earth—while considering its effects on individual bodies and their interdependencies. *Weathering* is a luminous, living and breathing, leaking sculpture of flesh, materials, sound, and smell that is a study of momentums, or that which is thrusting from just beyond the perceivable (“Weathering”). The performance asks viewers to slow down and explores the unstable boundaries between grief, anger, emergency, and eroticism. This chapter investigates how *Weathering* uses aesthetic and embodied strategies to make felt, make known, the often invisible atmosphere of slow violence that surrounds us and that we inhabit. In it, I explain how the performance co-sensitized artists and audience members to the interdependent and interrelated structures that hold us.

Through embodiment, practices of deep attunement, and emphasis on duration and pace, Driscoll enables audience members to palpably experience temporal and scale shifts, clarifying

the stakes of presence. In creating *Weathering*, Driscoll employed an intimacy coach¹³⁵ to foster co-attunement among dancers, emphasizing trust and sensitivity within the group. Driscoll's rehearsals involved improvisational tasks to explore dynamics of proximity, touch, and weight, requiring constant adjustment and response to partners' movements and intentions, fostering interconnectedness and support. She also integrated breath, gaze, and sound to enhance sensitivity and awareness, with vocalizations adding sensory engagement and amplifying the performative experience. This process ensures that the final performance is infused with a palpable sense of presence and relationality, deeply immersing the audience in the intricate interactions and energies on stage.

By fostering closeness to the bodies contracting and surging on the platform—moving slowly, enmeshed all together—audience members undergo a transformation that highlights the significance to attunement and affect. Driscoll and her collaborators pose critical questions: How do we feel the impacts of vast, often invisible events that continuously animate and effect our bodies? How can we get closer to these impacts and become more attuned to these influences? Can we slow down enough to feel subtle sensations of dust, hurt, absence, and plume? (“Weathering”). What possibilities emerge for the body as a monument, serving as both as a mode and a site for attunement to unseen forces? How can we be touched by both the fleeting moment, and by the monumental?

Over the course of the chapter, I investigate how Driscoll addresses the above questions by creating a state of indeterminacy through embodiment; through careful cultivation of

¹³⁵ Transdisciplinary artist Yehuda Duenyas acted as the intimacy coach for *Weathering*. Intimacy coordinators are trained in choreography, consent and boundaries, trauma awareness, gender awareness, anti-racism, human sexuality, mental health first aid, and have broad industry knowledge. Driscoll also employed a fight choreographer.

entangled co-presence between self, audience, and environment; and by attunement to the slow (often) invisible forces that surround and impact us. After my description and analysis of *Weathering*, I then share a portion of an interview I conducted with its creator. In the interview, I specifically asked Driscoll questions about how the backdrop of contemporary life in the face of catastrophe informs the work—such as the bodily effects of climate change on us individually and collectively, and the emotional, environmental, social, and economic malaise most people feel today. Finally, I connect Driscoll’s work with theories of transcorporeality, thick time, and hyperobjects, illustrating how *Weathering* enacts these theories by bringing the body itself into focus as a site of attunement and highlighting the relationship between bodies, environments, and objects.

Weathering explores the relationship between the body and the environment, and examines how our (living beings’) physical and emotional states are influenced by our surroundings. The performance delves into the ways in which we are co-attuned to the natural world and how we are affected by ecological changes and disruptions. Driscoll’s work also addresses the invisible interconnectedness of human and non-human beings, and the ways in which our actions impact the larger ecosystem. Within the context of my broader dissertation, it is important to acknowledge the shift in approach to thinking about sites of violence that occurs in this chapter. Unlike earlier—particularly Chapters 1 and 2—*Weathering*, as a case study, engages with violence in a more abstracted manner, distanced from the political and uneven impacts that these seemingly (to some) imperceptible forms of violence have on different communities. Driscoll’s positionality as a white artist living and working in the United States affords her the privilege of addressing these themes from a more detached, philosophical perspective than the case studies where I have examined violence as it is embedded in physical

sites, such as the US/Mexico border, the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver, or the historical locations of lynchings. These are grounded, tangible spaces where violence has taken place, shaping the land, the people, and the relations that are tied to those geographies. For both Driscoll and scholars like myself, a work like *Weathering* allows for a focus on ecological interdependence without directly confronting the racial and colonial histories that shape environmental violence and disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Throughout this dissertation I have extensively analyzed race, space, and political performance in relation to attunement, which is perhaps why my inclusion of *Weathering* in this larger body of work requires further examining. This leads to a broader question about the expansion of the concept of site, as discussed in the Introduction, explored in this chapter, and developed in the previous one. Here, I have considered both tangible, visible spaces of harm and the more diffuse, environmental contexts presented in *Weathering*. The Anthropocene, after all, represents a global site of violence—one that disproportionately affects communities, often exacerbating racial and social inequities. In *Weathering*, these violences are made perceptible through a sensory experience.

Animated by sounds, movements, scents, liquids, and objects, bodies intertwined in a choreography of crisis and alienation, intimacy, grief, and interdependence, the performance challenges viewers to slow down and to pay close attention. *Weathering* prompts audience members to consider their place within the natural world and their responsibility toward it.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ In *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* and “On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” Karen Barad explores the related concept of “response-ability.” Barad delves into the ethical implications of quantum entanglement, emphasizing the inseparability of matter and meaning. She extends “response-ability” to highlight how humans and non-humans are entangled in a web of relations that demand ethical consideration and responsibility. By examining the nature of touch, Barad

The performance thus serves as a call for greater awareness and understanding of ecological interconnectedness. Driscoll's use of multisensorial attention and the cultivation of presence in the piece offer valuable insight into how we might more deeply practice attunement to the multivalent ways we inhabit Earth.

Weathering

Nestled next to my friend, I flipped through the program, having no idea what to expect, while audience members poured into the space, a buzz of energy and raucous sound. People milled around, looking for seating within the theatre-in-the-round setup; the stage was in the middle of the room, with audience seating on all sides, creating a square. Once seated, audience members could look at the stage in front of them, straight ahead, or side to side, enveloped by spectators—*we are all in this together*. The empty stage in our midst was the focal point, lit up with several discreet black microphones dangling from the rafters above. The stage looked like something between a discarded mattress, a squishy slab of foam, a life raft, and milk toast.¹³⁷ The room settled, and just like that, a dirge-like stream of choral riffs came from offstage, establishing a steady rhythm, reciting body parts in harmony:

Teeth Skin Guts Mouth Hand Diaphragm

Teeth Skin Guts Mouth Hand Diaphragm

Skin Skin Skin Skin Skin Skin

underscores the ethical obligations arising from our interconnectedness, urging a shift from individualistic perspectives to more relational and responsive modes of being.

¹³⁷ The piece was performed by James Barrett, Kara Brody, Miguel Alejandro Castillo, Amy Gernux, Shayla-Vie Jenkins, Maya LaLiberté, Jennifer Nugent, Cory Seals, Carlo Antonio Villanueva, and Jo Warren.

While these melodic words are being sung/said, a single performer walks out wearing everyday clothing—green khakis, unzipped maroon windbreaker, a handbag, and casually steps onto the mattress-stage, which creaks, affirming its spongy quality. His feet sink into the cushiony platform with every slow step, while he looks out into the audience, making eye contact. The song-words create an all-encompassing sonic pulse, an aural landscape surrounding us like waves in an ocean. Someone else appears from a corner entrance dressed in denim cutoff shorts, sneakers, purse. The original person leaves and someone new appears wearing a backpack and vest, brown corduroy pants. Another with a bright silky orange durag, another with a gold winter wrap-around coat, another with a white ball cap; there are belts, watches, gloves, tattoos, ponytails, dreads, keys hooked onto jeans, camo fanny pack, fuzzy white hoodie, glasses, scrunchies, bracelets, mesh T-shirts, cell phones, black leather boots, beige rubber flip-flops: all create a muted pastel palette reminiscent of nineties Gap fashion. The casting is diverse in terms of gender, body size, and race, with a distinctive queer aesthetic—a visual, performative, and stylistic expression that challenges traditional norms and conventions of gender, sexuality, and identity, subverting heteronormative expectations and celebrating diversity, and fluidity. The words drone on, bringing together references to bodily intimacy with more worldly inorganic matter like plastic, minerals, and taxes:

Hand Diaphragm Pupil

Nose Fingernails

Tongue Tongue Tongue Tongue Tongue

Oh, cum

Oh, spit

Oh, fascia

Oh, algorithm

Oh, sweat

Oh, ache

Oh, breath

Oh, liver

Oh, touch

Oh, orgasm

Oh, shiver

Oh, spasm

Oh,

Oh,

Oh,

Blood Tears Dust Gaze Confusion

Rage Fear Stomach Glasses Difficult Surveillance Ache Hearing Steady Howl

Oh, cut

Oh, taxes

Oh, memories

Oh, heal

Oh, origin

Oh, plastic

Oh, minerals

Oh, survival

Oh, fear

Oh,

Oh,

Oh,

Once all performers have made at least one rotating appearance—stepping up one by one, slowly gazing at the audience, stepping onto and off of the stage, then returning through one of the four wings in fluid motion—they too join in, chanting the chorus of words onstage, bringing the acoustics into the raw present. The words are less lyrical now and faster, layered, and staccato:

Oh cable Oh screenshot Oh sniff Oh shape Oh shoe

Oh cervix.... Oh surveillance

Oh searching

Oh synovial fluid Oh frostbite

Oh heart Oh heartbreak

Oh wind

Oh lighting.... Oh nerves.... Oh neurons

We are being invited to understand, to consider the sameness between screenshots and cervixes, frostbite, wind and breath, synovial fluid, and taxes. The chant invites us to think of our bodies right away—our livers and our asses as tethering us to this earth through time. The chanting stops, and a charged and energetic silent stillness follows. All ten of the performers' bodies are onstage now, crammed precariously together in a mass; they still look out at us in every direction. We notice their breath, subtle shifts and sways, glistening skin, blinking. Their bodies together become sculptural, a morphing tableau vivant. What follows is a long, glacial near nonmovement for the first thirty minutes. Incremental motion almost goes unnoticed until you realize the shape of the mass is changing ever so slightly. This incredibly slow-moving first

section of the performance requires patience but is important. While it seems like almost nothing is happening, the energy coming off the bodies is palpable—muscles contracting, sweat dripping off faces.¹³⁸



Figure 28. Faye Driscoll, *Weathering* 2024. Daniels Spectrum, Toronto, Canada. Photo by Henry Chan.

As an audience member, it is difficult to sit through this sedated pace—thoughts take hold (for me: *will this ever end; I hope something happens soon; my legs hurt; there's so-and-so across the room; I'm bored; I should interview Faye Driscoll; that performer has an incredibly muscular body; what is that person's gender; I'm happy in the theatre...*). But after the boredom and fidgeting pass comes an attention to detail, a focus, a remembrance of my own breath. The room has slowed down to a pace that is different from outside the room—the work's decelerated pace asks, what do you *notice*? And why might it matter to radically notice with sensitivity?

¹³⁸ Another relevant case study is Cassils' *Human Measure*, which, like *Weathering*, explores the physicality of the body and the boundaries of endurance. Cassils uses the body as a site of resistance and transformation, similar to how *Weathering* employs the physical presence of performers to engage audiences in a sensory and emotional experience.

Accustomed as we are to constant stimulation and distraction, this first section of *Weathering* enforces and enacts deceleration and fosters co-presence, while radical noticing situates the audience in a *now*, however uncomfortable and mundane, as we sit and watch with attention the nearly imperceptible shifts occurring before our eyes. Audience members are asked to go through their own somatic experience while encountering this work. The pacing of the performance requires a slowing down and enacts a thick time that is attuned to each detail.

I begin to notice tiny changes: a performer who *was* looking at me at the beginning no longer is; an outstretched finger now traces along a shoulder; a leg shifts, a hand is placed on someone's body, knee, or chest; knuckles graze a belly. Watching, I am reminded of sitting on public transit, touching strangers, observing the crammed bodies on display and yet: Who are they? What has shaped them? What can we know about these *others*? The performance evokes that curiously intimate yet alien experience of being together in public space: shared smells, sweat, temperature, brushing up on each other. When the platform returns to its original position, I notice ways the scene has transformed— everything is different, revealing how change occurs slowly across time. At some point two stage hands or tech crew members hurriedly enter the room and each take a corner of the raft, slowly rotating it—we realize the stage is mobile, making the precariously held bodies even more at risk of unbalance. These two leave and the subtle movements and shifts continue—heads tilt, knees bend, mouths open, bodies edge to one side, a finger between someone's teeth, a head in an armpit.

Crew members return and carefully turn the stage again, giving the audience a fresh perspective, and then leave. The stage screeches with each small gesture and movement. The dancers' movements pick up pace and intensity—they grip arms, smush noses. The levels have changed, with some people standing, and others on their knees or lying down—the acoustics,

which are happening both in real time (the microphones are picking up the sounds of breath) and layered with a haunting audio (created by Sophia Brous), consist of sexual gasps, breath, howls, moans, deep quick exhales, shivers, grunts, quiet screams. The affect is somewhere between arousal and terror. Some performers slowly melt their bodies halfway off the platform and begin pushing the mobile raft in a circular motion—now the stage is always moving. Clothing is swiftly being removed, coats slowly pulled over heads, pants unzipped.



Figure 29. Faye Driscoll, *Weathering* 2024. Daniels Spectrum, Toronto, Canada.

Photo by Henry Chan.



Figure 30. Faye Driscoll, *Weathering* 2024. Daniels Spectrum, Toronto, Canada

Photo by Henry Chan.

Tiny drops of white goop begin to appear, dripping down one performer's leg, another's face (later I learn this is agar agar). Elsewhere it seems like oil is being smothered onto a bare foot; belts are undone, glasses fall to the floor unceremoniously. A performer claps their hands, loudly dousing the stage in a yellow chalky dust; shirts and necklaces are tugged roughly. The sounds range from sexual to scary, intimate to apocalyptic, pleasure-filled to worst-nightmare. The slow-spinning raft continues to move; the dancers' bodies continue to shift, balance, and undress each other. Faces touch, saliva is pulled out of mouths, items appear in mouths, skirts are undone. Feet on mouths, fingers in armpits. Plastic syringes squirt more secretions onto the body, hair is pulled, breasts exposed. The stage is now twirling faster and faster, always changing, rapidly surprising, seemingly disastrously, tongues licking, juices dripping, orifices engaged. Someone is slurping on a strawberry, an orange is peeled, and there is heavy panting on the audio. Reaching down each other's pants, playing with each other's armpit hair, enacting

violence in slow-mo, nylons torn, gaping mouths, someone is sucking on a baby pacifier. Spray bottles appear and performers mist each other and the audience, creating visceral smells ranging from grass or lavender or sex to something akin to barbeque or meat burning—we are all in this marshy wetness together.

Driscoll herself appears, suddenly in the work—spraying the enmeshed bodies with scent, like she is caring for a giant out-of-control plant. She is picking up items that have dropped from backpacks, spinning off the platform; Driscoll here is both caring and performing care and interdependence. Items animated with mysterious appear—a pill bottle, lip balm, a wallet; a brick is perilously held by someone's hand high above everyone's heads, and a rope and wires begin to entangle them, tethering the performers. The raft is ever-accelerating, spinning out of control, clothes are nearly all removed, more chalk claps, fresh flowers are crushed and obliterated in someone's hands, soil and dirt covering the platform and spilling onto the floor—is that magnolia I smell? *Earth to earth, dust to dust.*

Performers climb and mount the heap of bodies, stumbling on top of one another, creating a soft craggy summit. As they turn and turn, the audience begins to feel a dizzying sense of risk. More stagehands appear, seemingly from nowhere, either assisting or increasing the chaos. Driscoll and the performers themselves are now whirling the platform at an alarming rate. The amplified audio of screams, hums, blurs, cries, groans, and wails makes it clear we are hurtling toward a climax. The question is, is it an orgasm or a tragedy?



Figure 31. Faye Driscoll, *Weathering* 2024. Daniels Spectrum, Toronto, Canada.

Photo by Henry Chan.

The performers begin furiously running through the wings, returning from elsewhere, free diving into the stage from every angle, now mostly nude. Tits, penises, asses, folds, creases, hair, sweat, and flesh flop and fly around the space, the floor slippery, the spinning platform only speeding up, the acoustic score amplifying toward a screech. Sprinting, falling, jumping, balancing, yelling, colliding. This merry-go-round gone awry evokes Gene Wilder's Willy Wonka tunnel of terror scene where the leisurely boat heads towards a black tunnel. In we go, with Wonka and his visitors plunging into disorienting flashes of light as Wilder's wide eyes intensify and he hollers "Faster! Faster!" while the kids and grown-ups scream for help, begging to get off the seemingly doomed ship, as a horror-filled montage flashes images like bugs, lizards, and a human eye. Wilder's performance amps up into an insane climax as he loudly spews mad hatter poetry with lines like, "Is it raining? / Is it snowing? / Is a hurricane a-

blowing?” and “Are the fires of hell a-glowing? / Is the grisly reaper mowing?” Just like this wild and enduring cinematic boat scene, *Weathering* loads tension upon tension until audience members are ready to jump.

Dancers are nearly screaming now, grimacing, heads dangling off the mobile stage while it whirls and audience members feel fear—someone is going to get hurt, heads are going to collide, bodies might smash into a hard corner, fly into an audience member, slip on the clothing littering the soaked floor. The atmosphere escalates quickly, and the lifeboat seems to be rocketing around at impossible speeds. Bearing witness to this near-catastrophe makes my heartbeat speed up; I feel panic and stress in my body, and my nervous system senses danger—fight or flight. The body feels most alive and present in extreme situations. Tension builds, and briefly, I believe a dangerous mistake has occurred when the foamy stage begins to shift across the floor, veering off-centre— inching toward one side of the room and nearly crashing into one row of seating. A kind of maternal worry kicks in—are they going to injure themselves, or someone else? I am invested in this looming disaster, as I know I will be, and already am, implicated as a witness and as part of this ecosystem, partaking and being present with these unfolding events and other animal bodies. The boundary between audience and performer seems disrupted, even though this is not a “participatory” artwork per se. There is confusion about who is doing what and even *who is what*, illustrating that we cannot separate ourselves from each other and our surroundings. The dancers are yelling into microphones placed along the perimeter, and the lighting is brighter now, intensifying everything. And even in the highest velocity there are constant micro-events and movements taking place, mirroring the individual moments we all experience while in the midst of forces much more massive than ourselves. Performers’ bodies in perilous positions atop a fast-moving vessel reference and give sensation

to the indefinable psychic space in which we collectively find ourselves (in the world outside the theatre), palpably evoking a velocity that propels us through the work to climax and its aftermath.



Figure 32. Faye Driscoll, *Weathering* 2024. Daniels Spectrum, Toronto, Canada.

Photo by Henry Chan

The revolving ride stops abruptly, the haunting lullaby of screams and panting stops, the dancers slow down, breathing heavily, the mattress soiled. This is the moment after the climax, the collapse in an exhausted, breathing, post-orgasmic haze. The stage is now completely against one side of the quadrant, close to audience members, naked bodies against bodies, staring into eyes, sweat dripping. Slithering off the platform, some performers climb on top of or mount audience spectators, demonstrating exhaustion, sitting on them: legs outstretched on audience bodies, toes reaching, bare asses sitting on viewers' feet, heads resting on strangers' laps. The raft slowly floats while some performers remain on the stage, some lie on the floor. There is no difference here between the audience and performers—Driscoll implicates us, making us

uncomfortable, realizing there is no escape or ease. We are being asked to feel and sense this sweating smelling pulsing seething presence, to be with self and other bodies *as environment*, immersed in our vital entanglements with non-human systems, forces, and flows that shape and hold us. *Weathering* recharges audience members and enlivens their relationship to their own bodies, to these elemental facts of wetness, air pressure, electricity, and interdependence.

Weathering drowns audience members with its reaching, calling, grasping, screaming, howling, scratching, clinging, swirling, slapping, slurping—ever-morphing, sensuous flesh tableau. The performance lasts about seventy minutes, and the dancers hold on for dear life, struggling not to fall off this lifeboat, like holdovers from a lost civilization or marooned bears floating adrift on a melting slab of ice, desperately trying to stay alive in the Anthropocene. Eventually our raft steadies and performers either lie breathless on the mattress or disintegrate into the audience, still sitting next to people in the crowd, draped over legs and torsos. Then, there is a charged pause, a breathing, sweating, electric transformative stillness.

~

Embodied Ecologies: An Interview with Faye Driscoll

After seeing the performance, I had so many questions. It felt overwhelmingly apparent to me that Driscoll was, through *Weathering*, doing the very attunement work I have sought to explore in this dissertation. So in March 2024, I interviewed her on Zoom to ask her about these aesthetic strategies and embodied practices in relationship to the work. Here is part of our conversation (which has been edited for clarity).

Shalon Webber-Heffernan:

This work moved me so much and kept reverberating through my body long after seeing it. There's this recurring image I kept having after watching *Weathering*: when you poke a slug's antennae, it quickly retreats, yanking back in on itself. This gesture of retreat kept coming to me as being similar to the amoeba-like quality *Weathering* possessed. It felt to me that the living sculpture of bodies in the performance "retreated," contracted, or perhaps responded to the conditions of the world by using its collective sensors. What are some of the underlying conditions *Weathering* is responding to or retreating from? What is "the poke," if you will?

Faye Driscoll:

Yeah, I'm really curious about that idea of retreat. I can say that the poke that poked *me* was the retreat from touch in our culture overall and the problematizing, politicizing, and the making of touch as this really dangerous space in our world while sitting inside the thick of the social distance era of time. I had this very guttural sense of envisioning these bodies enmeshed and mashed into each other in the most intimate and problematic ways, reaching inside each other's bodies, dripping, permeable, and not sanitized, as a proposition for a state of existence that I see much more as reality, and that we are often attempting to seal off and to contain our world. That was a big poke for me. And also the current moment, which often feels like a theatre—a theatre of care and protection that's going on where everything is becoming really litigious, or filled with the fear of litigiousness, which I think is creating these systems that are trying in some way to protect folks who've been assaulted or victimized for example, but are kind of creating these whole other problems, and making a scarier world to be in.

SWH:

I love this idea of a “theatre of care and protection,” because even within the art world alone, there is this aesthetic trend where nearly every exhibition is suddenly focused on some notion of “care.” But to me it is exactly that: a theatrics of care, there are so many layers of non-care going on behind the scenes. This leads me to a question I had for you about the way you inserted yourself into the work. I felt like this was a reflection on these tensions around infrastructures of care / not care, support / not support. Can you speak about this and your choice to be present in the work?

FD:

Yeah, I often think of myself as holding multiple roles. Of course [inserting myself in the work] is making visible certain power structures that are present: for instance, that I’m the director and these are the performers. But it’s also complicating that because I’m of service to the work and caring for it and making sure that the space is safe. I’m also present, and breathing with them, so it feels in many ways like they’re coming into me. Like I’m the bridge between the audience and the performer—I’m sort of bringing this membrane or skin layer in and out from between performers and audience. (For clarity, Driscoll is highlighting the dynamic and interactive boundary she creates in the performance. This permeability between audience and performers fosters an intimate connection, making the audience active participants rather than passive observers. The metaphor of a skin emphasizes sensitivity and receptiveness). I’m part of bringing a sense of failure, of things going wrong—there are things that need help, things that need to be picked up, and things really are happening live that I’m responding to. I think it brings this feeling in the room of what is going to happen here? That this is *not* all under control.

And also it is making visible the the making, and this is the same reason why the tech crew is a part of it. That has become an important part of the work, the audience seeing the world-making that is happening, and at the same time you are perhaps getting swept up in the world that is being made and you cannot escape that construction, or the awareness of that construction. Hopefully that makes [audience members] aware of [their] own perceptions; and that's also included in that construction process that you yourself are a part of.

SWH:

It was surprising for me because I was sitting on the other side of the room and at first I actually thought you were an art writer, so I did not know what the hell was going on when you began picking objects up. I was so confused, and as someone with a lot of exposure to performance, I was surprised by my surprise! Even when the stage began to slowly drift and move, I whispered to my friend sitting beside me “the fucking stage is moving!” because I genuinely thought it was not intended. Also, something interesting happened the night I saw *Weathering*. The people closest to where the stage was migrating toward seemed, in my assessment, like a couple on a first date, as if they didn't know each other well. The man seemed extremely uncomfortable with what was happening—the stage moving toward him, the nudity, the implicated nature of the show. People who go to lots of performances usually expect something weird is going to happen. But this guy, he seemed so distressed and that was interesting, watching this moment of genuine unease, as an audience member myself watching another audience member.

FD:

Yes, also [the performer] Miguel was naked and crawling; I think that was a moment we all witnessed. Miguel was making choices in that moment. Like how to go near but not touch or be in proximity to that person's discomfort.

SWH:

It is such a poignant moment of possibility in live performance. While I do not think this work is site-specific per se, I am curious in which ways you perceive the body (or bodies in this case) as a site. Obviously, the work *is* the body and rooted in bodily presence. I have been thinking about art that responds to literal sites of violence in my research, so I am curious about the body *as site* for attuning to violence in this current moment.

FD:

There is an essay by Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker called "Weathering: Climate Change and the 'Thick Time' of Transcorporeality." The authors talk about this idea of "thick time," this way of considering ourselves inside a temporality where we are inside past, future, and present simultaneously. And that we are considering the site of our bodies as being... it is not that we *are* the weather, but that we are in this really active intrarelationship with the world and worlding. There is a thickening in the work that feels like it is connected to this.... geologic time, this time of consequences hitting us that maybe started a century ago, or of being inside impacts. And realizing that we are here and now but also we are like the nodules of rate time at the same time (in physics, rate time is about understanding how different aspects of motion, like speed and acceleration, change over a period of time). Everything that is present right now is the culmination of everything that ever was, you know, so I think the work is attempting to

be inside this thickening, and the liquids, the smells, the plume of it all. It has generated this sensation between audience and performer, or the sense of being seen as an audience, and seeing, and me coming in and out, and the sound swirling all around you, making it feel like it is an atmosphere, a density that we are inside of. So instead of saying site specific, I might say we generate a site through all these elements. All the bodies are sites that are like mountains, geologic, and then also so too are all the bodies of the humans in the room that night. And the swirl of the soundscape that is being made live all creates a site together.

SWH:

I watched something online where you were talking about the work as responding to the “momentums that are thrusting from just beyond the perceivable” (“Inside”), referring to the unseen forces that drive the interactions and experiences within the performance. This “just beyond the perceivable” is so interesting to me; what is that for you? Maybe it is that thickening that you’re talking about, or tuning in to the atmosphere of deep time.

FD:

I think it’s connected to the idea that we are not singular. We are made up of so many things and we think and perceive ourselves as these.... faces and personalities, representations and identities. The work is an attunement to these complex ecologies that we are. And it’s also connected to the Timothy Morton–type thinking around “hyperobjects”—how can we sensitize to things that are so much larger than us, that are moving and impacting us yet are just beyond the perceivable, that are acting upon us and through us, and that we are also agents of simultaneously? There are these morphologies that happen inside *Weathering* that I feel [are] related to this. The images are very

emergent and they are often in a state of indeterminacy. There are things you see someone do in the performance that look like one thing, maybe look like sex, but oh actually it's violence, oh actually they're falling, oh actually it's care.... It's *that* state. That's part of it, that things are not what we think they are. And it's related to the things that *are* happening; for instance, we could say, "that's patriarchy" or "that's racism." There are all these forces working on all of us all the time that we are all swimming in and we don't know. The long arm of it is around our throat or on our bodies in all these different ways. So it's kind of like would it even be possible to slow down enough to feel it, to sense these forces? And when you're inside of all these impossibilities, how are you to be, how are you to connect? How are you an individual or an agent?

SWH:

There are a lot of inherent impossibilities—how to really be in an experience let alone tune in to these larger forces impacting us all the time.

FD:

Yes, and there is so much grief there. There's this life force there all the time living through me and I can't even fucking feel it or slow down enough, and I so badly want to be in presence and focused attention with my life, and I struggle constantly to.

Weathering tries to be in some other kind of temporality, in presence, a way of being.

SWH:

In some ways I see *Weathering* as a kind of embodied pedagogy—it sort of teaches everybody in the room at least for a while to be present, to tune in, and to question, what is happening? The audience is having this internal, somatic experience; the work is forcing us into presence; there is this amazing transference happening between the

performers and audience. There are all these constant conditions.... like patriarchy, climate, violence and racism.... How do we lean into the discomfort and sensorial aspects of these conditions?

FD:

Yeah, and we expect so much of ourselves in the midst of forces that are so much more powerful than us. And in this live performance, with us all sitting in a room, being in the circle, surrounded by other humans, the rotating stage—this all creates an immersive environment. Various senses are slowly engaged, making you confront your desire to either escape or be present. You find yourself in a dynamic interplay, a dance with these impulses. I was reading this book called *Non-Things: Upheaval in the Lifeworld* by Byung-Chul Han which talks about how destabilized we all are inside of a digitized culture that we're basically only stabilized by the table and chair that we return to. We're stabilized by architecture. We know that we're in the bank now, and we're going inside to do something here; we're in the grocery store now. Human beings know to go to sleep because the sun goes down. So we're inside this time where we are just in relationship to information constantly, and information will never stabilize us—it is in constant motion. So, I've become more and more obsessed with the importance of liveness. There's so much hubris in thinking that I can watch Netflix all night and still fall asleep easily (*laughs*). There's hubris in believing in our own power, that we can just overcome these powerful things by posting about them on Instagram, but no....

SWH:

You could look at this performance as a structural object, something monumental. There are all these conversations around problematic monuments these days. How do you understand *Weathering* as monumental?

FD:

I absolutely have thought of what it means to monumentalize something, and how we conceive of our bodies throughout time. And the representation of the body since Paleolithic times to now, this obsessive self-representation that we're in and the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, or about what humans are, through this process of not just monumentalizing but any representation throughout history, and how we're in this moment—how are brains in relationship to images of ourselves through social media? We're in this dance upholding these beliefs about ourselves and these images about ourselves. It's so obsessive and so refracted, obviously, with the amount of imagery that we're engaging with and the amount of other faces we're engaging within our own selves. I'm curious about what that's doing to us, and I think in the piece, a lot of the things we (Driscoll and the dancers) talked about were these moments of transition or moments of slack-jawedness that [are] in between when you pull your face up, say, from kissing someone and there's still some drool on your face—the moments you would never monumentalize, moments we wouldn't put [in] a selfie of ourselves out there, or the sex that would not be in porn—or, well, probably some porn somewhere (*laughs*). But this bodiliness that cannot be captured or that isn't living in the didactics of constant representation and performance: it *is* performance, but it's also always kind of trying to feel into it and question it, critique it, while being in it. [It's] being inside of something

and peering out and seeing you there watching me, so it's trying to be in a dynamic state with that which gets flattened. And also I think there's just forms and shapes that bodies do that are evocative and ancient.

SWH:

In an online interview you did with Bill T. Jones ("Bill T.") you talk about entity shifting as a choreographic method, this thing about feeling like somebody else; it's different from pretending to be or acting *like* someone else. You see this all the time with people who spend a lot of time with each other, who start using similar gestures. I'm really fascinated about what happens in those moments where beings kind of merge or the way the performers were so intimately entwined. They've obviously spent a lot of time with each other. There's such an amorphous thing that happens in the performance.

FD:

There was just a lot of really intense layering that we did. There's, I think, the underlying gameness and curiosity there, and not a sensibility of 'I need to be a diva or look good,' and a willingness to work and get into things. And we just spent so much time inside the material with deep "bones" of a structure and then layer upon layer upon layer of image and practice that they can call upon. And 'multiple appointments,' as we say, like you know, you have to do this at this moment with the belt, then over here with the agar....

SWH:

It's interesting as a spectator wondering how the performers knew what to do, when or what the choreographic score was. I was constantly surprised by how items were getting

pulled out of secret places, like, how did I not see this happening? The subtlety of the shifts and changes was amazing.

FD:

I think the rotation really creates this condition of things never being able to be fully revealed. There's always something obscured from your view. It's something we work a lot on, we call it 'misdirection.' So, if I'm going in this direction, I'm never going to just go in that direction. I'm going to move in all of these other ways that make you think I'm going to do something else, so it's a kind of sleight of hand. There's always going to be something you miss. There's no central vantage point that you can lean into, there's no one truth. My ongoing interest is really in this mutually emergent state, of things also colliding, and creating an occurrence, as opposed to something that feels like it must happen or it was determined that it should happen.

Interconnected Temporalities: *Weathering's* Thick Time and Transcorporeality

In dialogue with this interview, the next section visits some of the theories Driscoll introduced, and explores the connections between her performance and these ideas. A significant characteristic of *Weathering* is its exploration of interdependency. The ten individual bodies that intimately make up *Weathering* morph into a single entity—there is no “star.” The proximity between self and others within the performance replaces the myth of the hero with a representation of our interdependencies. Together, the group members become an attunement machine, a portal; the performers are sensory physicians tuning in to the in-between spaces, gaps, and terrors that dwell between deep intimacy and the vast unknown.

The performance connects smells, sweat droplets, heavy breathing, sexual intonations, dirt, balance, imbalance, chaotic sounds, heartbeats, and other elemental forces that this dissertation grapples with: ice, air, atmosphere, soil, ancestral insistence through minerals, touch, a past that is not past, stone, screaming, hauntings, environmental decay, and empty fields. *Weathering* highlights the interconnections and interdependencies between these embodied, elemental, *and* systemic forces that shape and impact collective life. Through embodied aesthetics, the performance works to make the slow violence of the Anthropocene visible. It materializes and embodies the metabolic digestion of violence that occurs over time, showing how the unseen courses through our bodies and how we feel and process them. A salient way to look at this concept is through the lens of theories of thick time and transcorporeality.

Bringing these ideas directly into the body, new materialist and environmental scholar Stacy Alaimo has theorized transcorporeality as the “human and nonhuman natures butting up against one another in a literal contact zone” and “interfaces between human bodies and the larger environment” (2). This continuous fluid space between humans and nonhumans means that our bodies are connected to the environment and other living things in ways that are hard to “see” or perceive. *Weathering* enacts this idea through exploring how bodies are not separate from the environment but are part of it. Thick time emphasizes the interconnectedness and layering of human and non-human experiences across temporal and spatial dimensions, revealing the deep entanglements that span both immediate and extended periods.

As Neimans and Walker assert, transcorporeality is different from a theory of adjacency or being nearby; rather, it is a “mutual worlding through material overlap and transit, and incorporations of all kinds” (565). As explained in the glossary of terms in the performance’s

companion reader, written by *Weathering*'s dramaturge and scent designer Dages Juvelier Keates, this transcorporeality suggests that:

[t]he temporary home of the body is always transcorporeal. Many species make a body, from the fungal networks in our ears to the demodex mites who crawl out from their eyelash burrows to romp on our faces at night, the human and non-human are deeply co-imblicated. We are not discrete forms interacting, rather we are made from intra-actions. The body (human, oceanic, planetary) has never been singular or autonomous: rather, we are intra-vidual. We are not who we think we are. In *Weathering*, we open the great maw of the corpus to take a longer look inside, catching a glimpse of the body as always multiple; entangled, unfurling open and into others. ("We Are So")

Transcorporeality implies that the body is inherently interconnected with other species. We are not separate entities interacting, but rather, we are formed through interactions. The body, whether human, oceanic, or planetary, is never singular or autonomous; we are always part of a larger, entangled whole. In *Weathering* this concept is explored by examining the body as a complex, interconnected entity with each other and with other invisible forces that impact us. In the essay Driscoll references in our interview ("Weathering: Climate Change and the 'Thick Time' of Transcorporeality"), Neimanis and Walker define "thick time" as the "transcorporeal stretching between present, future, and past, that foregrounds a nonchronological durationality" (561). The intervention Neimanis and Walker make expands upon the cultural imaginary of climate change, enabling us to think about human bodies and climate as not separate; they ask readers to think of ourselves as "weather bodies, mortally caught up in the whirlwind of a weather-world, in the thickness of climate-time" (561). They argue that doing so creates possibilities for ethico-political engagement, opening up a different, more responsive orientation

to climate change. Situating the performance in a transcorporeal “thick time” demands “attunement to and acknowledgement of these other temporalities, and a more humble, generous, and self-reflective understanding of how our own weather may bear upon that of others” (562). Like Driscoll, Neimanis and Walker attempt to reduce the distance between the enormity of climate change and the immediacy of our own flesh. Doing so makes for a more palpable, tactile relationship.

Weathering responds to that which is perceived as spatially and temporally distant yet is indeed not (environmental suffering, social and economic injustice, racialized violence, political chaos...). The decelerated temporality of *Weathering*’s first half followed by a manic progression to chaos reflects the slow pace of change itself, the passage of time more broadly, and the brisk rate of descent into calamity. This deeply embodied work makes known that our bodies and temporalities are implicated and part of these atmospheres, that we are not separate from our/the environment; it demonstrates that we are inseparable from our environment. In this regard, the performance is a monument to the obfuscated violence wrought by climate change, toxic drift, deforestation, oil spills, and the ongoing environmental aftermath of war, forces that occur gradually and often out of direct sight. It is “slow violence,” Rob Nixon explains, because it is so readily ignored by a hard-charging capitalism, while exacerbating the vulnerability of ecosystems and of people who are poor, disempowered, and often involuntarily displaced, as well as fueling social conflicts that arise from desperation as life-sustaining conditions erode (*Slow Violence*). Employing aesthetic strategies of pace and embodiment, *Weathering* attempts to attune to these out-of-sight forces while also honing into the intensely private revealing how individuals relate to these impacts.

The performance not only reflects the interconnected nature of life as proposed by thick time but also embodies the principles of transcorporeality, illustrating how human and non-human natures are deeply intertwined and co-constitutive. *Weathering* performs interdependence and connectivity through bodily and infrastructural entanglement. Driscoll's choreography is characterized by its intense physicality, fluidity, and constant flux. The slow, deliberate movements of the first half of the show, emphasize performers' connection to the ground and each other. Over time, the choreography becomes increasingly complex, vigorous and violent with bodies intertwining, slamming against one another, supporting, and reacting in ways that highlight their interconnection. The choreography reflects the idea that individual actions and movements are deeply connected to and influenced by the collective.

The performers in *Weathering* navigate spaces of both intimate care and extreme risk of harm, illustrating the delicate balance required to maintain cohesion amidst chaos. The choreography, which includes hurling bodies across a stage in constant motion, evokes a palpable sense of fear and intensifies the audience's shared sense of responsibility. This work demands attention to the here and now, with seemingly irrelevant objects like tubes of lip chap, fanny belts, agar agar, or spilled pill bottles bringing a focus to detail. It emphasizes closeness and change through micro-movements and bodily shifts, the sweat, tears, groans, and bodies holding one another. *Weathering's* pace exposes how violence subtly permeates our lives, often unnoticed, while also showing its sudden, calamitous escalation. As Keates writes, "What is closer feels inevitable, what is further feels less likely. The immediacy of somatic sensation draws us back from the abstraction of disaster and makes it real, as catastrophe" ("We Are So"). The performance also highlights our discomforts and irritations through its choreography of closeness, deceleration, and velocity, as seen in the audience member disturbed by the

performers' sweaty proximity or my own boredom in the first half of the work. Driscoll emphasizes the importance of sensitizing to these so-called invisibilities, revealing how we collectively engage with them. This focus on the unnoticed shifting elements of performance aligns with theories of infrastructure explored by performance theorist Shannon Jackson.

In her book *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Jackson explores similar notions of pace by using the concept of the “turtle walk” to illustrate how certain performances bring attention to the often unseen and unacknowledged infrastructures that support them. Drawing from Walter Benjamin’s idea of the turtle-walking flâneur¹³⁹ and analyzing a performance by community disability activist Petra Kupperts, Jackson argues that the turtle walk—a slow, deliberate movement—emphasizes the various elements that enable or hinder an action from taking place. This prompts an examination of the hidden systems, physical structures, and social practices that underpin public performances and social interactions.¹⁴⁰ By drawing attention to the supportive frameworks that facilitate participation and inclusion, Jackson reveals the interconnectedness of visible actions and their underlying supports.

Jackson states that the turtle walk “calls attention to the things around the action that allow it to (or prevent it from) occurring” (5), which is reflected in Driscoll’s choreography that foregrounds the detailed, often invisible aspects of performance and life. Driscoll’s work reveals

¹³⁹ Benjamin’s description of the fashionable turtle walks appears in “The Arcades Project,” a significant contribution to cultural theory and urban studies, offering insights into how we perceive and interact with the spaces around us. The idea of the turtle-walking flâneur encapsulates his approach to understanding the intricate and often unseen dimensions of modern life.

¹⁴⁰ Jackson’s analysis aligns with and is engaging with community performance artist and disability activist Petra Kupperts’ performance work. Kupperts’ work also emphasizes the visibility of often overlooked infrastructures, particularly those that affect marginalized communities. Kupperts’ art and scholarship frequently focus on making the invisible aspects of social and physical support systems visible, advocating for inclusivity and accessibility in public and community-based art.

how violence and support are intertwined in the infrastructure of daily life, emphasizing how bodies, actions, and support systems are deeply interconnected. This exploration aligns with Jackson's and Kupperts' ideas about how performative acts can uncover and critique hidden infrastructures. *Weathering* pushes this idea further by emphasizing the nuances of these interdependencies through its deliberate pace and attention to small details. In this decelerated way, *Weathering* deepens awareness of the complex interdependencies that sustain our social and physical environments.

I connect this analysis of the turtle walk to *Weathering*, as we see a similar engagement with the idea of infrastructure and its (in)visibility. Driscoll's work emphasizes interdependence and connectivity through bodily and infrastructural entanglement. The choreography in *Weathering* makes explicit the often unseen labour and support systems that enable the performance to occur. We see this, for instance, when Driscoll has the stagehands come out to turn the stage, or when Driscoll herself appears, picking up fallen items and mopping up spillage. Further, Driscoll's use of slow, deliberate movements and the presence of small, seemingly irrelevant objects (such as tubes of lip chap, fanny belts, agar agar, and pill bottles) draws attention to the minutiae that support the performance's scenic dimensions.

Everything about *Weathering* made me want to cry for reasons I could not quite identify—as if the work was touching something nascent in me that I had not tapped into, or was not able to articulate with words, perhaps performing something that lies beneath language. The performance made me feel inside out—present, vulnerable, and raw. It made me feel everything I didn't know I was feeling, all at once. Tender—as if my heart was outside of my body. There it was pulsing, gyrating, fucking, and screaming on the stage in front of me, screaming toward all

the tangible intangibles of the current world: an elevated heartbeat and breath that ultimately merged with that of the audience.

Intra-Action and Hyperobjects: Attuning to the Entanglements of our Times

Ecological studies scholar Timothy Morton coined the term ‘hyperobjects’ to describe entities that are so vast in space and time they defy traditional ideas of what a thing is.

Weathering can be seen as a response to these forces. Morton describes the difficulty of perceiving hyperobjects like the climate crisis due to their complexity and abstract nature. He calls them “strange strangers” because they have impacts that cannot be fully comprehended and are distributed across time and space (61-67). Hyperobjects are difficult to grasp because of their scale and complexity and because they are intricately interconnected to multiple other objects and systems. Examples include taking out the garbage yet never seeing the landfill; the internet, with its vast network of interconnected servers spanning the globe. Plastic pollution, ubiquitous and which persists in oceans, and organisms. Global warming which spans centuries and involves numerous factors like carbon emissions, tidal currents, weather patterns, and nuclear radiation, which are invisible, long-lasting, and hazardous. We could also consider systemic violence and/or racism in the same way, as it is embedded in various societal institutions, such as education, criminal justice, and healthcare, and is perpetuated over generations. Its manifestations change over time—from overt segregation laws to more covert institutional biases—demonstrating its temporal nature.

Weathering connects to the concept of hyperobjects by embodying and making perceptible the overwhelming and often invisible forces that shape our world. Driscoll’s performance highlights the interconnectedness and scale of these forces, creating a sensory and

emotional experience that brings the abstract into the tangible. By focusing on the body's responses to these immense and pervasive influences, *Weathering* bridges the gap between the indecipherable nature of hyperobjects and our immediate, lived experiences. This performance underscores the difficulty of perceiving such vast phenomena while emphasizing the importance of attuning to the subtle, often overlooked impacts they have on our lives.

All of this said, I am reminded to consider how race, class, or other socio-political markers show up in writing about this work—or, more importantly, when and how they do not. While I have been careful to foreground the racial identities of the artists and activists in earlier chapters, linking their positionalities to the ways they engage with particular violences, I have left Driscoll's whiteness largely unmarked in my analysis. By not addressing her whiteness, I inadvertently naturalize it, risking its invisibility (remaining unmarked) in a way that I have not done with the other case studies—enacting the very issue this larger work cautions against. Driscoll's positionality as a white artist living and working in the United States undeniably shapes her ability to engage with themes of slow violence and environmental harm from a more diffuse vantage point. This allows her to explore these themes without directly confronting the racial and colonial histories that contribute to environmental degradation—a privilege not necessarily available to other artists examined in this dissertation, whose work often emerges from their lived experiences of racialized or class based violence.

A discussion of what occurs out of sight necessarily recalls the Saskatoon freezing deaths, or “starlight tours” in Chapter 1, where Indigenous people are dumped at the city's edge. Or, Chapter 2 which explores the lesser-seen spatial dimensions of the carceral system and plantation economy, through an analysis of the exhibition “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration” and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. Geographer and

filmmaker Brett Story asserts that prisons are, “by design and definition, spaces of disappearance. They disappear (or attempt to disappear) the people inside them. And they are themselves increasingly disappeared from the dense social spaces where many of us live and move around” (167).¹⁴¹ Story explains how prisons are often built far from urban areas, even often redacted from Google Maps; this is similar to other ‘no-go zones’ or military black sites—clandestine detention centres operated by a state, where prisoners who have not been charged with a crime are incarcerated without due process. Other prisons still, Story reminds us, “are so disguised in their built form that they are commonly mistaken for warehouse or logistic compounds, thus blending seamlessly into the bleak scenery of rural and peri-urban deindustrialization” (167). As discussed in this dissertation’s previous case studies and reiterated here, these “out of sight” examples perform erasure: they, along with the pervasive ideologies that accompany them (e.g., that prisons keep bad people away, or that climate change isn’t real) conveniently “disappear the social crisis that they are tasked, in practice, with resolving: poverty, unemployment, political dissent, inequality, uneven development, and other social calamities inscribed in the landscape by racial capitalism” (*Prison Land* 168). These interconnected and often imperceptible forces create the very conditions of our existence.

Driscoll’s *Weathering* engages with the concept of nonappearance, inviting audiences to see and feel the often invisible forces that shape our lives. The performance communicates that we cannot divorce social and cultural conditions from environmental factors, and compels

¹⁴¹ This brings to mind performance artist Cassils’ project *In Plain Sight*, a collaborative public art intervention that uses skywriting to highlight and critique the hidden infrastructure of immigration detention in the United States. Partnering with artists, activists, and organizations, the project inscribes messages above detention centers and sites of erasure to raise awareness of these often-invisible facilities. The ephemeral nature of skywriting parallels the transient and overlooked realities of detained individuals, symbolizing the invisibility of marginalized groups and the fleeting nature of public attention.

audiences to confront the violences that haunt our times, often immersing them in discomfort. By placing viewers in direct, often awkward, interactions with the nude or panting performers and the environment of danger they create in the space, we are being asked to be present with these strange encounters. The audience's discomfort is palpable as the stage moves toward them, creating a sense of unease. For instance, the awkwardness intensifies with naked performers making sweaty eye contact, and the sense of boredom experienced in the first half of the work forces viewers to sit with their feelings. Audience members are physically engaged as they get wet from the spray, as they smell the bodies performing, and are touched by naked flesh, preventing them from remaining mere voyeurs and instead insisting they become active participants in the performance.

Indeed, *Weathering* highlights our fundamental entanglement with conditions, the natural environment, and sociopolitical impacts. The ensemble creates a sensory machine for attuning to forces larger than ourselves. This resonates with Sharpe's critical understanding of atmospheres of violence, wherein she calls *weather* the "totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live" (*In the Wake* 111). Similarly, Neimanis explains, "weather is context and milieu—both pervasive and often unnoticed—with which human bodies must contend" ("The Sea"). *Weathering* makes these atmospheric conditions visible and tangible, immersing us in the environments we inhabit. While *Weathering* may not address sites of violence or disappearance as explicitly as other works in this dissertation have, it grapples with the invisible effects created by these phenomena alongside the infrastructures that uphold them. Neimanis's idea that, "as an embodied experience and agentic force, weather moves, scars, imprints" ("The Sea") clarifies how these invisibilities press upon us, and how, by noticing them, we might begin to act in relation to them (as opposed to passively accepting). In *Weathering*, the abstracted

climate crisis represented onstage mirrors the other slow violences discussed in this dissertation, commenting on the interconnectedness of environmental and social injustices.

Weathering features diverse bodies, sweating and moving in close proximity, forcing audiences to confront their discomfort and complicity. This inseparability relates to other scholars' discussions of phenomena such as "settler atmospherics," described as the "normative and necessary violences found in settlement—accruing, adapting, and constricting indigenous and Black life in the U.S. [and other] settler state[s]" (Simmons). It relates to the "socio-atmospherics of power," the ways power dynamics are embedded and manifested in the environment and social interactions (Choy and Zee 210-220), and where to quote Neimanis, "racism and colonialism are understood not (only) as discursive constructs, but as material phenomena that imprint on bodies (like all weather). We are reminded that air quality is a question of environmental justice, and that the weaponization of air and breath targets certain populations differentially within settler capitalist white supremacies" ("The Sea"). These atmospheric conditions that hold and shape and impact us are also there entering our orifices (like air in our nose and mouth), held by molecules that surround us (like soil, or water), but are also made and carried by and through "human bodies that channel power and violence into the air" ("The Sea"). How do we attune to the atmospheric conditions of colonialism, imperialism, and/or capitalism?

Feeling and understanding the resonant forces of these "unseen" political and environmental impacts is an important method of investigation for bringing these so-called invisible forces into cultural awareness and perception. Even when happening out of sight, these forces affect, move, haunt, and impact our social, political, psychic, and spiritual space. I connect this haunting to Morton's theorization of how hyberobjects act, and I perceive a relationship

between the two and the topics discussed in this dissertation thus far: Black and Indigenous disappearance, but also ancestral insistence through earth, water, fire, air, weather and possible imagined futures, as was explored in Chapter 2 with the case study of the Equal Justice Initiative's Soil Collection Project. Included in the performance's companion text (*Durations of Soft Details*), are key terms that make up *Weathering* that assist in understanding the work. It offers this definition of hyperobject:

The term "hyperobjects" describes events so massively dispersed through spacetime that they transcend our ability to conceive them: the Anthropocene, Styrofoam, capitalism. Constituted by myriad discrete actions, like turning the ignition of a car, multiplied across billions of people, billions of times, hyperobjects become much more than the sum of their parts. Something has begun, and we are facing inevitable consequences too large for us to conceive, like a slow moving car crash. Global warming is the culmination of a whole shit ton of actions piling up, like microplastics in the intelligent bodies of seas, whales, grandparents, partner's ex lovers. Our bodies are soft durations made up of each other: moving, winding, billowing in gatherings of meals, ancestors, viruses, heavy metals, intoxications, orgasms. (*Durations*)

Simply, hyperobjects illustrate the complexity and enormity of our collective impact on the planet, highlighting the intricate and often imperceptible ways we are all connected. *Weathering* was a balm for the soul; it said YES! That is true what you are feeling—YES! You are feeling the real impacts and the grief and the dissonance of everything that is so much larger than us. It affirmed these massive out-of-sight events coursing through us, those abstracted horrors, those psychic/emotional/collective/social/embodied dissociations brought on by war, terror, political deceit, feelings of ineffectiveness, environmental degradation; floods, fires, melting ice caps,

mass extinction, infrastructure collapse, food deserts, housing crises. *Weathering* affirmed for me our collective need to compartmentalize in the midst of these gigantic forces and makes visceral the paradoxical overwhelm of TikTok videos peddling Instagram influencers selling Botox and lip fillers SWIPE dismembered children SWIPE starving people lying in the cold streets SWIPE dogs chasing sharks SWIPE a woman fleeing violence, SWIPE a politician making a promise.... Through pace, embodiment, and sensuous imagery, *Weathering* brought all of this into a wet and fleshy immediacy, and into relation with our own bodies, our human corporeality, our skin. It screamed YES! It is all fucked and YES! What you are feeling in your bones is valid and true and important and you should follow that to get closer to the source of some kind of action.

Can we slow down enough to really attune to the tensions, to recognize the slow violence that surrounds us, the disappearances haunting our times, the terrors, collapses, crises? Can we sit still in our discomforts and inhabit painful realities? The blood-sweat-tear-guts-shit-crying-screaming-moaning that is all part of this human experience on earth? If we do so, will it reveal what seems beyond the perceptible as real, animated, as having the critical potential to propel political action? *Weathering* validates our profound experiences and emotions in response to the overwhelming forces shaping our world, urging us to slow down, recognize, and act upon the critical realities we face. Keates uses parts of the companion text for the performance to situate it within recent events. Specifically, the essay explains how climate collapse informs the actions of this live art.

Referencing physicist Karen Barad's "intra-action," which poses that agency is carried through the energy exchanged between and against forces (*Meeting*), Keates writes,

Our bodies are weather systems—the contractions of wind in our breath, the

translation of sunlight into sugar in the plants that become food, the rivers are in our bladders, sluicing forth hormones and medications into wastewaters, filling future aquifers. We are made of time, from the minerals of our bones to the salinity of our teardrops. We are not merely ‘in’ the world, in weather: we are of it, we make it. As intra-active agents, ongoing ephemeral archives of what is and what has been, we belong here. (“We Are So”)

Keates is suggesting that we are integral parts of the world and its weather systems, embodying and influencing the environment through our existence and actions, that we ourselves are ephemeral archives of life and time.

Weathering enacts Barad’s concept of intra-action, emphasizing that beings—such as bodies, environments, and social structures—emerge through their interactions rather than pre-existing them. In the interview above, Driscoll mentioned her effort to create a porous membrane in the performance, highlighting Barad’s idea that “the other is not just in one’s skin, but in one’s bones, in one’s belly, in one’s heart, in one’s nucleus, in one’s past and future” (393). This approach aligns with Timothy Morton’s theory of hyperobjects, entities so massively distributed in time and space that they transcend localization. By exploring these entanglements, *Weathering* inquires into the profound aesthetic, environmental, geopolitical, philosophical, sexual, social, and technological questions, all necessary to address how we live, think, act, build, sense, and move together towards an imperiled future.

Neimanis extends these concepts to feminist theory and environmental humanities, particularly in relation to water and other ecological matters. She highlights how intra-action elucidates responsibilities arising from these interconnections. This perspective shifts our understanding from viewing relationships as interactions between separate entities to recognizing

the co-constitutive processes that shape our world and our place within it. Consequently, *Weathering* becomes a performative exploration of these very engagements, addressing how we might navigate and respond to the intertwined crises of our times. Driscoll's embodied experiment is attempting to make connections between our tendons, guts, brains, blood, puss, membranes, organs, marrow, and big tech, global warming, social media, economy, the military industrial complex, complicity, selfhood, peeling back identities. Concluding this dissertation with *Weathering* made sense to me, as it centres the body as a critical site for attunement. This expands the concept of the body beyond a vessel of personal experience to include its role as a locus for communal and atmospheric interaction. I see *Weathering* as a performative and embodied inquiry into the critical realities we face, including those that have been brought up throughout this dissertation. It urges audiences (and its performers) to attune to the subtle but pervasive effects of hyperobjects or hyperviolences on our lives and bodies.

Weathering throbs with transformative potential by creating a sensitive environment for audience and performers to come together in co-presence, emphasizing the need to feel impacts closely within ourselves.

Conclusion

Returning again to my student's question, explained in the Introduction of this dissertation—"but, where do they go?"—referring to missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, I wonder about the atmospheric violence, its velocity or slowness that constitutes this current time, and wonder if we can attune to it as well as the ongoing impacts these pressures have upon us. How can it be that Indigenous freezing deaths, the missing women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, traces of lynching deaths contained in the EJI's soil collection, violent

disappearances in the border region, and annihilation of buffalo so often remain “just beyond the perceivable”? For the communities directly impacted by these violences, these occurrences are not beyond perception but an immediate and pervasive reality. These communities live within the violence, experiencing its visceral impacts in their daily lives.

For others, these violences might seem distant or invisible due to various social, geographical, and political separations. The artists, activists, and community groups discussed in this dissertation focus on making these violences perceivable to a broader audience. They probe how these distinct atmospheres of violence elementally relate through time and need to be attuned to. As Keates states in the companion reader, “to render the world sensible, we need to come to our senses” (“We Are So”). Centring the body, immediacy, the senses, and the haptic, *Weathering* asks its audience members to open themselves up to the impact the work has upon us; indeed, it “stays with the trouble,” as Haraway would say (1), and as the other projects in this dissertation have asked us to do. This approach emphasizes the necessity of recognizing and engaging with these violences not as distant or abstract events but as urgent and immediate realities that demand our attention and action. Through *Weathering*, the body (and bodies) becomes a site where these intangible forces—historical, socio-political, and environmental—converge, prompting a deeper attunement to the often unseen yet felt impacts on our collective and individual selves. Ending with *Weathering* emphasizes the continuous, dynamic interplay between the body and the world and its ability to attune, highlighting the potential for embodied practice to reveal and respond to these layered complexities.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Attunement, Grief, and Collective Responsibility

In this dissertation, I have explored attunement as a sensory experiment in tracing how the ghostly aspects of social life become manifest, focusing on select sites of violence amidst an overwhelming abyss of others. The vast number of potential case studies itself is telling. There were many sites I wished to include in this dissertation, but ultimately could not. For instance, I wanted to write about the Memorial March for Women of Juárez, also known as “Ni Una Más” (Not One More), an annual event held to honour and remember the women who have been victims of femicide in Ciudad Juárez, México. The March is part of a larger social movement advocating for justice and raising awareness about gender-based violence and systemic neglect. It serves as a powerful statement against the ongoing violence and impunity faced by women in the region, connecting local tragedies to broader issues of human rights and gender equality. The Memorial March in Juárez parallels Vancouver’s DTES Valentine’s Day Memorial March, mentioned in Chapter 1, as both events honour missing and murdered women and demand accountability for the systemic injustices contributing to these tragedies.

I interviewed carver Mike Dangeli, from the Nisga’a, Tlingit and Tsimshian Nations, about his Two Sisters memorial totem poles that honour missing women from British Columbia’s Highway of Tears—a 724 km length of Yellowhead Highway 16 where many women, predominantly Indigenous, have disappeared or been murdered. Dangeli shared with me that the totem poles and their accompanying ceremonies “make the intangible, tangible.” These totem poles are not only cultural artifacts but also act as powerful symbols of remembrance and activism, transforming grief and loss into a visible, communal acknowledgment. While I could

not include the full interview due to space constraints, Dangeli's work deserves further study for its cultural and social significance.

Additionally, I wished to write about the Chattahoochee Brick Company Descendants after meeting with a few of the group's volunteers in Atlanta, and learning about their efforts to remember individuals subjected to brutal conditions and forced labour through convict leasing.¹⁴² This system allowed private companies and individuals to lease prisoners from the state to work in various industries, including railroads, mining, and agriculture, effectively perpetuating a form of slavery under a different name. I also intended to cover the Moore's Ford Bridge lynching reenactors, who commemorate racial violence in the South through their public performance. However, a dissertation has its limits. As I reflect on these missed opportunities, they serve as a reminder of the expansive scope of violence across space and time. This dissertation has examined how grief, trauma, and memory shape our understanding of violence and how these experiences, often embodied in artistic practices, create spaces for communal healing and resistance. But it is equally important to consider how these practices relate to more traditional forms of direct action. The Memorial Marches in Juárez and Vancouver, for example, represent a form of public grieving that is simultaneously a form of activism, unsettling the binary between grief as a passive state and action as an active one. The rituals of remembrance in these marches call attention to structural violence while mobilizing participants toward justice. They serve as a reminder that grieving itself can be an act of resistance, a way to collectively reckon with systemic violence and demand change. Several of these and other omissions are acknowledged

¹⁴² The Chattahoochee Brick Company, active from the 1870s to the 1930s in Atlanta, Georgia, utilized convict leasing, a post-Civil War system that perpetuated slavery by leasing prisoners, primarily African Americans, to private companies for forced labour under brutal conditions. The Chattahoochee Brick Company Descendants group works to honour and remember those subjected to this inhumane system. <https://cbcdescendants.org/>.

throughout the footnotes, highlighting the scope and complexity of the subject matter through the sheer abundance of potential examples.

Throughout this work, I have interpreted haunting and abusive systems of power through various artworks, performances, community activations, and conversations, embracing methodological fluidity with the currents I have encountered. I aim to illustrate how the deeper, often unseen elements of structural, environmental, and historical violence manifest in ways that demand our attention for meaningful historical redress to occur. From the seemingly empty Saskatoon field and the dripping ice in Belmore's sculpture, to the streets of the Downtown Eastside, the DNA embedded in soil, ancestral wisdom spanning centuries, and the mineral traces of bison, all converge to expose an enduring landscape of violence. Amid increasingly violent conditions and environmental uncertainty, the urgency of adopting aesthetic and sensory strategies to attune us to the world around us seems imperative. However, there is a need to be cautious of not getting pulled into the undertow. Being sensitive to violent forces permeating our surroundings can be engulfing, and opening oneself up to the pervasive forces surrounding us can be distressing, as they seep from every corner, creating a maelstrom of uncertainty.

The air we breathe is invisibly shared but unequally distributed, with its qualities and intensities experienced differently across time and space. Again, Sharpe's concept of violence being as pervasive as weather comes to mind (*In the Wake*). The widely circulated last words of Eric Garner, who died in 2014 after being placed in a chokehold by a New York City police officer, were echoed again in 2020 following the death of George Floyd, who died while being "restrained" by police officers in Minneapolis. The phrase, "I can't breathe," extends to other systems of violence, including the collective quality of breath impacted by environmental degradation, the inability to breathe in war zones, or the suffocating conditions faced by

migrants, to name only a few examples. For many, the layering of militarism, industrialism, and capitalism has always been palpably felt; particularly on Indigenous lands and through Indigenous bodies.

When I began this dissertation, I made the first of many visits to The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia, a memorial dedicated to Dr. King's legacy and his work in promoting civil rights and social justice.¹⁴³ Returning many times during this project, I witnessed archival photographs, Dr. King's personal artifacts, historical documents, multimedia displays, and educational panels. Each visit deepened my understanding of pivotal moments in civil rights history. I was particularly struck by the images of the "I AM A MAN"¹⁴⁴ protest from the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike,¹⁴⁵ made famous by Ernest Withers' 1968 photographs. Despite these images being taken during the 1960s, we still hear the recurring proclamations today: "I Can't Breathe," "Black Lives Matter," "I Am a Man." "Hands Up, Don't Shoot"; "I Am Essential," "Hear Me, See Me." These phrases—fundamental

¹⁴³ The King Center, founded by Coretta Scott King in 1968 in her home's basement, contrasts with the grand National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Alabama. This monument, now located in the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Park since 1981, retains a grassroots feel, emphasizing community and nonviolence. It includes King's birth home, the Ebenezer Baptist Church, and the couple's final resting place. The center focuses on promoting King's philosophies, managing extensive archives, and played a key role in establishing the Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday.

¹⁴⁴ Glenn Ligon's painting "Untitled (I Am a Man)" (1988) directly alludes to the actual signs carried by 1,300 striking African American sanitation workers in Memphis, and to Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. Ligon's use of oil and enamel, materials that disintegrate when mixed, reflects his exploration of history as a mutable and fragile process in both personal and collective memory.

¹⁴⁵ On a rainy February day in 1968 in Memphis, two Black sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death when the compactor mechanism of their trash truck was accidentally triggered. On the same day, 22 Black sewer workers were sent home without pay due to inclement weather, while their white supervisors were paid for the day. Two weeks later, over 1,100 of the city's Black sanitation workers began a strike for job safety, better wages, benefits, and union recognition. They carried signs reading "I Am a Man," demanding respect and fair treatment.

demands—are words that should not need to be said, yet they highlight the work that still needs to be done. These enduring cries for justice reveal the persistent and pervasive nature of systemic violence and inequality and highlight the need for ongoing work to address and rectify these deeply entrenched issues.

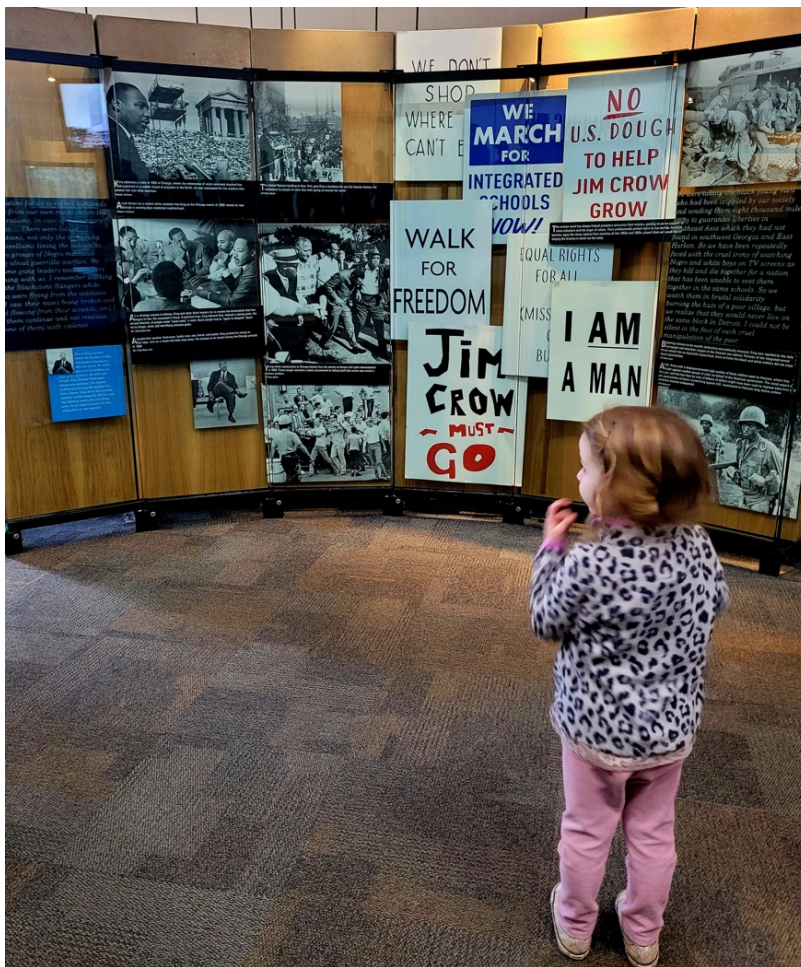


Figure 33. My daughter stands inside the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, surrounded by exhibits. Atlanta, Georgia, 2024. Photo by Author.

Psychologist George Bonanno’s phrase “coping ugly” (*The Other Side*) describes how coping with extreme life events can be counterintuitive and nonlinear. The idiom highlights that coping strategies are often messy, raw, and even socially frowned upon, emphasizing the complexity and diversity of human resilience. Similarly, Cindy Milstein in *Rebellious Mourning*

presents grief as a collective and rebellious act that can inspire social justice movements.

Milstein insists that mourning, particularly for marginalized and oppressed communities, is inherently political, challenging dominant narratives and power structures.

The act of attuning to grief and violence, as explored throughout this dissertation, is not just about individual experience but about collective responsibility. The artists I have discussed unsettle expectations about where the political resides, demonstrating that grief, when embraced, can fuel movements for justice. As Freeman House writes in *Totem Salmon*, “To witness mindfully is to grieve for what has been lost.” This idea encapsulates much of what I have aimed to explore in this dissertation: attuning to sites of violence requires us to know, feel, and grieve the histories embedded within them. House shares the following insight, “In one ancient language, the word ‘memory’ derives from a word meaning mindful, in another from a word to describe a witness, in yet another it means, at root, to grieve. To witness mindfully is to grieve for what has been lost” (201). This encapsulates the intent of my dissertation, *Attuning to Sites of Violence: Performing Spectral Relationality Across North America*. Performance, presence, attunement, and grief are interdependent. The violences, erasures, disappearances, ecological suffering, and inertia in these pages are interconnected, requiring us to know, feel, act upon, and grieve this knowledge.

Attuning ourselves means grieving for the loss of wetlands, destroyed forests, declining whale populations, floods, and eroded soil. Grieving world events, war, police violence, racial terror, political deceit. Grief and mourning are ethical activities, and as Andrea Fatona and Caroline Seck Langill state, these rituals “allow us to hold the past and loss in dynamic tension with the present, permitting events and objects to take on different sets of political and social meanings” (12). Deep investigation often uncovers the constructed, framed, or systemically

rigged nature of site or events, revealing resistance to confronting social injustices and raising questions about which bodies, non-human species, and spaces are deemed precarious and grievable (*Frames*). This exploration of grief and the precariousness of life leads me to a deeply personal reflection.

I debated whether to include this, as it is intensely private. Since beginning this research, four people in my close social circle have taken their own lives; all of them artists and thinkers, deeply sensitive souls, and acute observers. I cannot help but reflect on the relationship between deep attunement to our collective environments, and extreme pain and melancholy when we begin to see, sense, and unravel the troubling threads linking much of the violence of our times. The challenge of the work in this dissertation is that it requires us to delve beneath the surface, to interrogate appearances and deconstruct power relations shaped by political ideology and systemic violence. Meditating on how the intensely personal and the incomprehensibly vast are intertwined in grief for what is lost, I recognize that our collective grief can deepen our understanding and connection to the world, driving us toward meaningful action and solidarity. Echoing this idea, Fatona and Langill paraphrase Butler stating,

Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or indeed, among us... The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or rather, when through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being. (16)

Butler's insight is crucial for a dissertation on attuning to sites of violence and following spectral relationality. I have sought to highlight how collective embodiment and the creation of shared spaces of appearance can reveal and transform the invisible bonds and histories of violence that shape our interactions. By expanding knowledge about loss, political violence, and the

possibilities for agency and action, this dissertation fosters new understandings of attunement, performance, and disappearance. Moreover, this work advocates for a sustained engagement with grief and activism, emphasizing the interconnected nature of life and the urgency of our collective actions and responses. In doing so, it calls for a radical rethinking of how we perceive and respond to the legacies of violence, ultimately aiming to cultivate more empathetic and active communities.

Written during the AIDS crisis in the U.S., art historian, critic, and activist Douglas Crimp reflects on the interdependence of activism and mourning through what he calls militancy. Crimp emphasizes that collective grief can fuel activism, arguing that mourning is not separate from political action but deeply intertwined with it—a perspective I share. In the context of this dissertation, I argue that attunement to sites of violence—whether through aesthetic, performative, or memorial practices—functions as both an act of mourning and a catalyst for justice. These artistic practices are not passive gestures; they actively engage with histories of violence, making visible what is often obscured or erased.

Crimp underscores the necessity of mourning and cautions against the dangers of neglecting it. He recognizes that the violence we fight is deeply entangled with the psychic, emotional, and embodied mechanisms of society, asserting that we must confront the unspeakable violence that permeates the world we inhabit. As Crimp states, “if we understand that violence is able to reap its horrible rewards through the very psychic mechanisms that make us part of this society, then we may also be able to recognize—along with our rage—our terror, our guilt, and our profound sadness” (148). Deep engagement—or attunement—with the sorrow of our times, as explored in this dissertation, reveals that embracing grief is not merely an act of remembrance but a powerful catalyst for action, justice, and transformation.

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