

PLURILINGUAL PERFORMANCE PRACTICE IN *NOWHEN*
AND EXPLORING NEW AGENCY FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ACTOR

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents the written component of Alison Wong's investigation into her thesis project: the directing of the site-specific production titled *nowhen*, as a part of the 2021 *Dream in High Park* with the Canadian Stage Company. The directorial approach is outlined in the research paper, including the adaptation of source material from the publication *Living Hyphen*, the influence of plurilingual performance practice, and the consideration of translanguaging as methodology for performance creation. The journal excerpts reflect on the discoveries, accomplishments, and challenges the director, her collaborators, and the performers faced in a process that called upon new working relationships with language, space, and time in theatre-making, while also facing the COVID-19 pandemic. The epilogue highlights key learnings through the lens of plurilingual performance practice as it relates to the representation of transnational identities in theatre.

DEDICATION

To my grandparents, who kept their languages alive in me.
And to Shirley and Alex, who taught me that speaking the same language
is not the same as understanding.

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INTRODUCTION

Canadian Stage's annual Shakespeare in High Park is somewhat of a Toronto tradition, having taken place for nearly 37 years, the summer institution is nearly as old as most of the venues and theatre companies in the city. As a transnational storyteller, I had become obsessed with the idea of place. And the appeal of directing a production in High Park, for me, was the satisfaction of really engaging the context of the place and the ways Toronto audiences related to the place with the storytelling. The task of choosing a Shakespearean text to be dramatized for public consumption in this place, however, was a more daunting task.

My artistic work, over my career so far, has been driven by telling the stories of those who are often not seen centrestage, with a focus on the *transnational*. There are literally no stories that have taken centrestage more than those of Shakespeare. But at the core of transnational storytelling is confronting the ways our stories are shaped by the places they encounter, and in turn, how those places become shaped by the stories that are brought there. Holding true to that tenet became my way in, and led me to conceive of an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Antony & Cleopatra* through a transnational lens that would become my original thesis production.

And then the COVID-19 pandemic happened. A pandemic which, at the time of writing this, is still in full swing and we are about to enter (if not already in) a third wave. I had only just begun to reconcile the idea of directing this Shakespeare production with my politics, when it seemed to be pulled out from under me: there was no way we could have a cast larger than ten (*Antony & Cleopatra* has over forty characters), we won't be able to build a set, and audiences had to be significantly reduced and must be physically distanced, were just a few of the new circumstances created by the pandemic. Not exactly the epic transnational work I had imagined.

So it was back to the drawing board, with an unavoidable feeling that all the work of my first two terms in the program had led me nowhere. And then I remembered - the park! I wasn't nowhere. In fact, over the summer High Park became my anchor. I meandered through its many trails, finding new ways to traverse through the space. I discovered unpaved paths carved by human intuition, began to see how the landscape interacted with the wildlife, and started to build my own relationship to the park - a relationship outside of the terms of the City of Toronto, the division of Parks, Forestry & Recreation, or even Shakespeare in High Park. In this time of being stuck-in-place because of the pandemic, I came to realize as an immigrant and settler how much the movements of day-to-day life (driven by capitalistic colonialism and economic globalization) had previously prevented me from intentionally building a relationship to the place where I lived. That is when a new production started to form in my imagination.

FINDING A CONNECTION TO PLACE

In a time of widespread isolation, a new question I became obsessed with was "what is our relationship to place?". And how can it help us to heal in this time of traumatic emotional displacement. I buried myself in mythology, creation stories, poetry in foreign languages, and what started to surface for me was this notion - Time is what sets us apart, and Place is the thing we have in common.

My thesis production is called *nowhen*. The meaning is analogous to "nowhere", where the combination of "no" and "when" creates the concept of *a perspective unrestricted by time*.

Through a partnership with a literary magazine called *Living Hyphen*, a publication that curates stories, poetry, and visual art from creators across Canada who identify with living a "hyphenated experience", I am leading a core group of collaborators to collectively create a new

theatrical experience for High Park sourced from material in the upcoming edition of *Living Hyphen* with its theme of intergenerational memory and influence.

nowhen is a dramatization of seven stories from distinct origins, weaved across the park and performed in tandem with its landscapes. Through a process of locating the narratives on the physical terrain, the actors guide audiences on a journey, communicating the interior experience of each story through embodiment and an immersion of the senses. Accompanying each narrative is the actor's voice, recorded into a soundscape that audiences experience through headphones on the journey. The aural experience amplifies the elements of the organic world (such as a bird's flapping wings, a bubbling brook, or the sun's rays), augments the narrative being shared, experiments with how text and language is used in common imagination, while making manifest each character's relation to time through movement and tones. The stories then culminate with a convergence in place and celebration, groups of audiences meet each other and bring into the fold, alongside the diverse acting ensemble, their experience from their journeys.

RELATING LANGUAGE AND PLACE

Curating the stories from *Living Hyphen* into source material for the production was guided by language and the theme of navigating language in the stories. From reading over one hundred stories from *Living Hyphen*, it was clear that our memories and association to place are tied to language; the languages we hear in a place and the languages we speak in a place. This led me to think about Toronto and High Park as a "language place". Certainly, English is the accepted lingua franca here but in reality, there is a plethora of languages spoken in the park each day and English as the language of the land that High Park is situated on has a very recent history. It was important that the creation of this work, *nowhen*, and my direction of it, acknowledged and

embraced that fact. I consider the people and language of this place to be the Anishinaabe and Anishinaabemowin. In thinking about my personal relationship to this place as a settler, essentially a guest via colonialism, I have come to regard my responsibilities implied by the treaties enacted here as a part of the necessary work within my creative process. My direction of *nowhen* will include cultivating a shared responsibility among the creative collaborators and cast to decolonize our understanding of the Park through the act of learning together Anishinaabemowin (also known as Ojibway) language and the Indigenous contexts of the place.

“.. language.. remains one of the tools of a people’s survival.” - James Baldwin (78)

Language is also the backbone of theatre. Of course, this includes body language, gesture, aesthetics, and a myriad of other signs or ciphers we use to communicate. But language spoken either through words, or signed, is arguably the primary domain of the theatre as a performance discipline. It is a wonder to me then that in the larger place that is Canada, with our talent pool of actors possessing skills in many languages, our theatre practice is predominantly focused on performance in English or French. This reality is undeniably a result of and perpetuated by the settler colonial past and present of the country. So then as artists, can we separate ourselves from this in our practice? And how does that objective serve our audiences?

Criticisms of multilingual and intercultural theatre performance emerging from late 20th to early 21st century have included the reinforcement of colonial sub- and dominant culture binaries (Knowles 60), and the reduction of cultural intelligibility resulting from targeted translation for English speaking audiences (Silver 202). My production responds by moving away from the Canadian mosaic model of multiculturalism that implies a hegemonic target audience (Meerzon, et al 259), and instead looks to recent theory in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics that turns

to processes in translanguaging and “plurilingualism,” which focuses “on the individual's ability to make use of two or more languages...at varying levels of competence and in varying contexts” to form a composite competence for linguistic expression (Grommes and Hu 2). What I want to achieve in my stage direction of *nowhen* is to empower the actor and their performance through accessing their language abilities, even when the language being used is unfamiliar to the audience, namely not English. The intention is not to help the audience understand in English, but to encourage the audience to understand *sans* English. I believe this exploration will open up an experience of theatre performance that is much more connected to our contemporary globalized understanding of the world, and create opportunities to imagine and express new worlds in theatre.

CHAPTER ONE: THE VISION FOR NOWHEN

THE STORIES

In the summer of 2020, I spent my days wandering through the park. Each time I would arrive at a different entrance to High Park; some well known and commonly used, some of them more obscure. From each entrance I would begin to make my way towards the centre of the park, aiming to reach the amphitheatre. I was reading the park, allowing it to tell me its story through the landscape; characters presented themselves on each path in living creatures, in elements left behind by the intervention of humans, and in organisms growing and thriving out of the land and the water. I found that narratives emerged as my body navigated the space each path carved out. Each path would reveal to me distinct personalities, shifts in tone, and moments of drama. I began to relate these experiences on the path to the material I read in *Living Hyphen*. I saw how a distinct tract held the potential to tell different stories, with this in mind I began to curate a collection of stories that could be dramatized and performed *with* the park and not just *in* the park.

In the end, the source materials from *Living Hyphen* came from ten stories and poems written by ten different authors adapted onto seven tracts. The stories themselves speak to experiences of being Canadian and not Canadian, at the same time. Each tract is also characterized by a linguistic experience – Bangla, Chinese Putonghua, Michif and Ojibway (Anishinaabemowin), Bajan Creole, Farsi, Spanish and French, and Romanian.

Assigning these stories to the distinct tracts in the Park came out of a collaborative workshop process with designers Miquelon Rodriguez and César el Hayek and actors Djennie Laguerre and Cole Alvis. Alvis also took on the role of dramaturg in the workshop process as we centered

Indigenous knowledge in the development of the work. This group formed my core collaborators on the work, in addition to the ten writers. With the restrictions of the pandemic preventing us from meeting in person, or on location, we initially worked via the zoom video conferencing platform. To explore the potential scenography for the production, we journeyed the tracts together virtually through video I captured during my summer walks. We investigated the sights and sounds of each path, and imagined the emotions evoked by the changes in the terrain and environment. The zoom medium also allowed us to focus on listening to the stories and then exploring the sounds the narratives invoked in our imaginations. This work not only solidified for us the form of the show – Part 1 on the trails, Part 2 in the amphitheatre – but also launched discoveries into the design of the production.

PERSPECTIVE (PART ONE)

Part 1 of *nowhen* is titled “Perspective”, the audience is divided into seven groups. Each group will walk different tracts from the outside of the park into the amphitheatre. The form reinforces the idea that we each arrive at a place from our own perspectives. As the audience is introduced to the actor guiding them on their journey and the story performed on their tract, they must negotiate how their perspective is now implicated with the performer’s, as well as that of their fellow audience members’ as they begin to share space together. The directorial choice to not have the actors speak aloud in Part 1 is motivated by the desire to emphasize the individual.

Hearing the actor’s voice through headphones creates an intimate relationship between performer and individual audience member. At the same time, this intimate relationship is also implied for all the other audience members in the group as they share in the journey of moving through the park. There is a blurring of what is belonging to the individual and what is common.

The actor has an immense responsibility in Part 1. Each one must know their tract in detail and with confidence. They must anticipate the characteristics of the land as they would the dimensions of a set on stage. Yet at the same time, they must be open to the uncontrollable elements, the changes to the tract that come day to day. I will prepare them in rehearsal to hold the moments of the narrative for the audience which require holding, while also responding to and welcoming the surprises that may come along the way, in the same way as they would in relation to a fellow actor on stage.

As a settler artist working in Canada and directing a piece that speaks directly to our connection to place, I am seeking out ways of working that centres Indigenous sovereignty over colonial worldview. With support from Cole Alvis as dramaturg, we are engaging Knowledge Keepers - someone who has been taught within their community to hold traditional knowledge and teachings, how to care for these teachings, and when it is appropriate to share with others – in our creative process. I also curated a set of guiding principles for the actors (as well as the audience) that were informed by a workshop with Ange Loft that was organized during my research process. Ange Loft is an interdisciplinary performing artist and self-identified “initiator” from Kahnawake Kanienkehaka Territory, working in Toronto. She is also the Associate Artistic Director of Jumblies Theatre and her body of work has included arts based research in treaties and Haudenosaunee history. The core collaborators and myself took one of Ange’s workshops titled “Talking Treaties” in February of 2021 as we were beginning to work with the curated stories and the tracts in the park. In the workshop, Ange shared her research around the agreements between settlers and First Nations peoples pertaining to the land of High Park - Treaty No. 13 or the “Toronto Purchase”. This learning highlighted the determining of mutual responsibilities that treaty-making entails, and unfortunately how these agreements have been

dishonoured in the context of Canadian treaty relations. With this in mind, I realized an artistic work about one's intentional relationship to place could not ignore our responsibilities to the land of the work in question. Therefore, the guiding principles of the work are:

1. We will walk gently.
2. We will listen.
3. We will share space.
4. We will take care of those around us.

PRESENCE (PART TWO)

Part 2 of nowhen is *titled* "Presence" and begins as the seven audience groups emerge from their tracts and arrive one by one into the amphitheatre.

In creating this work with my collaborators, Part 2 consistently remained a mystery to me. The outlines of the content and the feelings of the experience was apparent, but the action was difficult to define. I believe now that this was because this part of the show, being about *presence*, was difficult to realize until we were all *in* each other's presence in the place that was the subject of our exploration. On a workshop day in May we went to the park and split up into two groups, each group started at a different entrance to the park and made our way on one of our seven paths into the amphitheatre. Once we were in High Park together for the first time, the shape of Part 2 became clear.

As the performance moves into the amphitheatre, the actors will lead the audience into three modes:

Arrival – Each group makes their way into the amphitheatre in their own time. They are encouraged to explore the space with curiosity and care. They witness other audience entering and navigating their presence in this shared place.

Convergence – Through sound, language, and gesture, the seven stories of Part 1 come together and are animated in 360 degrees around the audience. The actors revisit moments from their individual stories, and they are recontextualized through sharing and response from the other actors.

Contemplation – The audience is invited to find stillness and rest. They are asked to consider this place as a living entity, and to consider their relationship to it.

At the end of Part 2, the connection and responsibility to place is passed on from actor to audience.

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH PAPER

TRANSLANGUAGING IN PERFORMANCE

As a stage director, I am most interested in ways of making the work, and how that work transforms both practitioner and audience when experienced in performance. In my own practice of transnational storytelling, as stories move from one place to another and are reshaped by their travels, I know the reciprocal forces of their origin places and their destination places (and of the places travelled in between) are not equal. For myself, that tension and teetering of power dynamics is what makes the artistic process of rehearsing and presenting transnational stories so compelling. When the story becomes subsumed by a dominant perspective, however, we start to lose its dimensions. In this thesis work, my investigation is in how plurilingual performance practice can be a methodology to resist hegemony in the telling of transnational stories. In 2001, the Council of Europe published the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, a resource document on language education with explicit objectives to equip Europeans for international mobility and to appreciably develop “the ability of Europeans to communicate with each other across linguistic and cultural boundaries” (3). I personally find it ironic that it required a high-level agency with exceptional funding to articulate with authority what migrant and displaced peoples have known and lived for millennia:

...the plurilingual approach emphasises the fact that as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. (4)

The above statement underscores a shift in the aim of language education away from achieving mastery or fluency of one (or two) isolated languages and away from the ultimate model of the “ideal native speaker”. In the more recently published *Plurilingual Pedagogies*, Sunny Man Chu Lau and Saskia Van Viegen, employ the term “plurilingual” to name and engage with the “plural or hybrid practices” of bi- and multilingual students to “actively challenge inequitable power relations inherent in language hierarchies, reshape the social representations of minoritized language identities, and engage learners in agentive actions for immediate and/or sustainable social change” (6). The volume also summarizes the Council of Europe’s framework into a useful chart on the characteristics of plurilingualism (table 1).

Table 1 Characteristics of Plurilingualism

Characteristics of Plurilingualism	Other terms
(a) switch from one language or dialect (or variety) to another;	code-switching/code alternation/flexible bilingualism/translanguaging
(b) express oneself in one language (or dialect, or variety) and understand a person speaking another;	lingua receptive/intercomprehension
(c) call upon the knowledge of a number of languages (or dialects, varieties) to make sense of a text;	translanguaging as pedagogic scaffolding in a language class/intercomprehension
(d) recognise words from a common international store in a new guise;	intercomprehension
(e) mediate between individuals with no common language (or dialect, or variety), even with only a slight knowledge oneself;	cross-linguistic mediation
(f) bring the whole of one’s linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression in different languages or dialects, exploiting paralinguistics (mime, gesture, facial expression, etc.) and	Translanguaging/code crossing/code mixing/meshing/polylingualism/metrolingualism

radically simplifying their use of language.	
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Source: North, Brian and Enrica Piccardo. The Dynamic Nature of Plurilingualism: Creating and Validating CEFR Descriptors for Mediation, Plurilingualism and Pluricultural Competence. *Plurilingual Pedagogies* (Springer International, 2020), p. 284.

I am similarly using the term “plurilingual” to umbrella the artistic intention behind my work with the actors and other creative collaborators on this production. I will later expand on the process of “translanguaging” as it will apply in our rehearsal process; specifically how accessing varied language abilities in actors can facilitate creative agency, leading to empowered and authentic performance.

PERFORMANCE CONTEXTS IN CANADA

There are playwright-performers in Canada who write for plurilingual performance through forms such as hybridizing languages and non-translation (Karpinski 155). For example, in the recent National Arts Centre remount of Jeff Ho’s one-man show *trace* (2017), of which I was able to attend the world premiere production at Factory Theatre in Toronto, Ho skillfully shifts between speaking Cantonese and English in addition to weaving in musical phrases played on the piano to voice the male characters of the play. And in the works of poet and theatre maker d’bi young, beginning with her first play *yagayah:two.womyn.black.griots* (2003) co-authored with Naila Belvett, young masterfully holds the dialogue throughout the work in her mother tongue of Jamaican Patois both in writing and in performance. Where *nowhen* diverges from works such as Ho’s and young’s is having the performer engage in plurilingual performance when they are not the author of the text themselves.

My challenge as a director is to engage the actors in a plurilingual approach to the work when they are not initiating the expression on their own, but rather when they are directed to do so in relation to a text originating from outside of their personal imagination or experience. My

approach will be to invite into the rehearsal room the principles of *translanguaging*, which can be defined as when individuals access different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, into one integrated expression in order to maximize communicative potential (Wei 15). To begin, I must create permission in the rehearsal room to express ourselves in languages other than English. I am preparing improvisational and devised creation exercises to use with the group that asks them to find ways to express themselves and their characters using all of their available language abilities. Translanguaging requires a shift away from the dichotomy of a “source” language and a “target” language when working towards comprehension (16). So even though we will share our varied competencies, with the English language as a commonality, I am curious whether we can work in a way that removes the prioritization of English as the target mode of communication. Throughout the process, I will be guided by these three considerations: 1) how non-colonial linguistic and cultural frameworks, influenced by the performers’ contextualization of multiple languages, can be employed to animate performance; 2) to what extent performance-making processes rely on English language as a hegemonic reference point, and; 3) how those processes can be deconstructed to look at language more holistically as codes of cultural and context specific onto-epistemologies (Cajigas-Rotundo 136).

LANGUAGE AND CHARACTER

The understanding actors have of their character begins with language. *What does my character say?* is usually a starting point for most practitioners working on a text-based production (Hagen 153). Then followed by *what does my character do?* and how does that agree or disagree with what they say. One might move on to examine *what do the other characters say about my*

character? This kind of investigation is immediately informed by the actor's abilities in the given language. The question I would like to ask is: what happens if we open up the possibilities of a character to also having abilities that the actor might have in another language?

If we can build the actor's expression of their character through the production of vocal quality - volume of the voice, timbre, inflection, and enunciation, for example - we can expand upon that expression further by including the actor's ability to access vocabulary in another language, knowledge of dialects, and also use of accent. Applying meta-linguistic discourse in the rehearsal process can unlock parallel forms that exist in an actor's second language and also permit the synthesis of these forms to create new meanings when interpreting a given text. My hope is that this application of linguistics in *nowhen*'s rehearsal process can give a more informed and authentic expression of a culturally hybridized character for the theatre practitioner. It may also expand the actor's agency in defining this aspect of the character's performance if the source material does not give specification to a character's socio-political or cultural identity.

The approach to centre the given text and implied connections to language from that text is especially important because the seven narratives in Part 1 of the performance will exist independently of each other. There are no discernible connections for the audience to make from the other characters they meet in Part 2 to the character they followed throughout Part 1; therefore the actors must shape a perspective through which the audience will experience Part 1, and then I expect the audience to relate to that perspective as they experience Part 2.

INVITING CULTURAL COMPREHENSION

The principles of *cross-cultural pragmatics* will be considered when looking at sociolinguistic applications in the rehearsal room. Cross-cultural pragmatics takes the point of view that

individuals from two societies or communities carry out their face-to-face interactions, even in a shared language, with their own rules or norms at work, which often results in a clash in expectations and ultimately, misperceptions about the other group (Boxer 177). For each narrative of Part 1, I will be working with the actors to identify the worldview of their character using the associations garnered by the choice of non-English words that are included in the text and performed in their recorded performance. Working through these moments, we will improvise gesture and images that we can incorporate to amplify the intention and meaning of these words in their live performance. We will also explore moments where we feel the use of English words may be, in effect, obscuring the sentiment of the author. In these cases we will rely on the actor's understanding of the other language to relate back to possible translated expressions that can replace the English language present in the text for their recorded audio.

In the above process we will establish a worldview for each character, and each voice, on the tracts. In one of our dramaturgical sessions, Cole Alvis introduced me to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's publication *A Knock on the Door*. The document illustrates the impact of residential schools, detailing one of the most reprehensible acts - the erasure of Indigenous languages from First Nations and Métis communities (135) and the intergenerational damage this caused in Indigenous families as the understanding of their peoples' way of life was lost. This tells me that the erasure of language is intrinsically linked to the erasure of worldview and, in turn, to the erasure of culture. If we eradicate the language of a culture, we will absolve ourselves of the responsibility to understand that culture and its peoples.

Our language is tied to our imagination, because it is through language that we communicate what we imagine. I turn to Benedict Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities*, to better

understand the role language plays in the construction of the colonial worldview. Anderson speaks of ‘print-capital’, the media produced in European languages, that made its way across the Atlantic ocean for distribution that perpetuated the sense of “parallel and comparable” communities on Turtle Island to those in Europe between 1500 and 1800 (187-192). These politico-cultural units would actively absorb other groups by way of language-in-print and subject them to a hegemonic nationalism. In Part 2 of *nowhen* I want to imagine a different kind of community where different languages and worldviews might co-exist in performance as the seven different tracts converge, without a hierarchy. Thus my approach with the ensemble will be to avoid using a script, or printed language, as a means to rehearse Part 2, freeing the process from the influence of English language print-capital. We will learn any scripted parts by rote, some spoken text will be devised by the ensemble collaboratively in the language(s) of their choice, and I will also remain open to improvisations and revisions offered by the actors. My hope is that the move away from printed language will open up our ability to receive and build shared meaning with each other through gesture and image.

A REFLECTION ON LECOQ’S THEATRE OF GESTURE AND IMAGE

It is not lost on me as I visualize the combined factors of recorded text and the silent live performer in Part 1, that the actor will be asked to engage in a practice where the physical text is at least as important as the spoken text. We are indeed venturing into the world of mime. The impetus for this choice lies in the need to disassociate meaning from time so that we can bring it into the present, and hopefully locate its relationship to place. In Lecoq’s own writing, he describes “the cry searches for the sign when the latter has lost its memory” (Pavis 141) This thinking has helped me to understand cross-cultural pragmatics in a theatrical sense, where spoken language is only one of many signs that convey meaning. We need to ask ourselves if we

do not have the same memory of language, can we still arrive at a similar meaning, through the “play of the head and the body’s expression” – and I would add their relationship to environment – to complete the theatrical gesture.

LANGUAGES, DIALECTS, AND ACCENTS IN NOWHEN

In order to cast the performers for *nowhen*, I first identified the linguistic contexts presented in each of the stories curated to be a part of the production. This included documenting the use of non-English words and phrases, any references to or depictions of accent in the text, and identifying any milieu of dialect being represented in the writing. I also inferred languages that could be used in the performance of the stories from the biographical information the authors provided. Below is a summary of the languages, dialects, and accents either present in or inferred from the final selection of stories from *Living Hyphen* featured in the production and the tracts in Part 1 where these stories will be featured.

Tract	Title	Linguistic Context(s) Present	Source Language(s) Inferred
1	<i>Visions of Home</i>	Bengali	
2	<i>What's in a xin(g)?</i>	Putonghua (Chinese)	
3	<i>Smoke Signals</i>	Anishinaabemowin	Michif, Cree
4	<i>Accent Tax</i>		Jamaican Patois
4	<i>Speech Patterns</i>	Jamaican Patois	
5	<i>Conference of the Hens</i>	Farsi (Persian)	
5	<i>dead language</i>	Yiddish*	
5	<i>KIN</i>	Yiddish*	
6	<i>En Mi Corazon</i>	French, Spanish	
7	<i>Backgrounds</i>		Romanian

THE CHALLENGE OF CASTING FOR LANGUAGE

The casting call for *nowhen* specifically included language experience as a criterion for each

role, alongside a physical description of the terrain the story would be staged on for accessibility considerations. For all but one of the seven tracts, the gender of the actor was not a deciding factor in casting. Because *Backgrounds* specifically spoke to a queer femme experience, I included the gender in the criteria for that tract. I had naively thought that casting the show based on language abilities would be a straightforward approach, however it posed many challenges in the audition process because after the production was conceived the available casting pool was changed. Originally for my thesis production, an open call was to be put out across the Toronto theatre community for professional actors to take on the roles and then two actors would also be cast from the graduating class of York University's Acting Conservatory in the Theatre Department. The prospect of casting seven actors with specific language experiences from the Toronto area seemed reasonable because Toronto is one of the most diverse language cities in North America. With over 160 mother tongues reported in the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (2011 Census, City of Toronto), one would expect the pool of actors working in Toronto and their language abilities to somewhat correlate to the spoken-language demographics of the city.

Unfortunately, the available resources for the production changed before we started auditions and I was tasked with casting the production with the inverse formula – only two professional actors could be hired to develop and perform in the production, with all other additional actors required to be selected from York University students. Immediately, I knew that the twelve actors in the graduating class of the Conservatory would not have the language experience necessary to play these roles. The curriculum for York University's Acting Conservatory is based almost entirely in English language theatre, as a result, there is no mandate for the actors in the program to have language experience outside of English. In hopes of widening the audition

pool, the casting was opened up to all undergraduate students across York's School of Arts, Media, Performance and Design. As a result, the audition call drew applicants from the Music, Dance, and Visual Arts departments, in addition to Theatre students from across the department's programs of Performance Creation, Production and Design, and the Acting Conservatory. I prioritized casting the two professional actors with seasoned storytellers, Cole Alvis and Djennie Laguerre - performers who were also creators in their own theatre practice and who also had significant experience making cross-cultural performance work.

Guided by the principles of pluri-linguistics and translanguaging, I was specific to note in the audition call that language experience did not equate to a requirement for fluency. The actors did not have to have these languages as their native tongue or be proficient in these languages.

Rather I was interested in what lived experience they had with these languages and how their varied competency with a language other than English could be accessed in our creative process together. Despite these considerations and best efforts from both the school administration and my personal outreach, I still had immense difficulty casting for some of the parts. Notably, none of the performers who auditioned possessed any lived experience with the Indigenous languages of Anishinaabemowin, Michif, or Cree (from Tract 3). This did not come as a surprise as the criminalization of Indigenous languages in Canada's colonial history has successfully perpetuated language loss in Indigenous communities across Turtle Island.

The other role that proved difficult to cast was the actor for Tract 5, which was originally adapted from two *Living Hyphen* stories that included some Yiddish language in their writing (one of these stories being poignantly titled "dead language"). One actor having Yiddish language experience auditioned for the role and was subsequently given the part but then they had to back out from the project due to scheduling conflicts. With no more leads for performers

at York University with Yiddish language experience, I had to reconsider the casting criteria for this role. I enlisted the editor of *Living Hyphen*, Justine Yu, to consult on the casting requirements and whether there was a way to bring in additional voices to the work. Her familiarity with the content and other writers in the *Living Hyphen* community led me to the piece titled *Conference of the Hens*. The themes in this piece (intergenerational trauma, matrilineal kinship, and culture loss) related strongly to the content of the two original pieces adapted for Tract 5. The fact that the piece featured some Farsi language and Persian mythology created an Indo-European linguistic link between all the authors that was also interesting to me. After finding an actor with Farsi language experience I contacted the three authors about my plans to adapt all three stories into one performance for Tract 5. Coming out of the consultation with the authors, I decided that we would remove the Yiddish from the adaptation since the actor did not have lived experience with that language. However, we retained some references to the specific Jewish cultural experience as it was important to the original authors that those aspects of the writing were honoured and that the added Persian perspective offered a cross-cultural relation to those experiences.

Midway through this casting process, I also realized my own oversight of not including American Sign Language as one of the linguistic contexts to be explored with the actors. I briefly considered casting Tract 5 with an actor who had ASL experience to interpret the part, in fact that was how I met Yasmine Amirkhani, who I ultimately cast for the role. However I found that my own experience with ASL as a director was lacking and I was not clear on what resources the production needed in order to provide the necessary support for deaf or hard of hearing actors and audiences. This is an aspect of plurilingual performance I want to investigate further in my future practice.

LANGUAGE LEARNING AS AN ARTISTIC PROCESS

Beyond the inclusion of spoken languages from our lived experiences, I hope to explore language learning as an artistic process with the cast and creative team. Within the context of language and place, I want this work to affirm what has been obfuscated by the colonial project in Canada – that is, the Ojibway language or Anishinaabemowin as the language of the land (at least in the area called High Park, where we are performing) rather than the “official language” of English. With that in mind, the artistic team will embark on learning at least some words, and hopefully phrases, translated into Anishinaabemowin. The intention would be to incorporate them into the production, depending on the confidence level of the actors. Ideally, the first word anyone hears in the performance of *nowhen* will not be an English word.

TRANSLANGUAGING IN DESIGN

In the world of High Park there is a distinct separation between the park itself and the amphitheatre. For many who travel there, the existence of the amphitheatre is a mystery because it is buried behind steel gates, unassuming shipping containers, and overgrown or snow-covered dirt paths. In the summer when there are performances in the amphitheatre, a tension exists between the nature that surrounds the park and the action of the theatre artists within. The heat can be unbearable, the rain interrupting rehearsals and performances, and wildlife traipsing – interrupting the drama by scurrying across the front of the stage – all this is a regular occurrence. While the park itself is a 360 degree immersive experience, the amphitheatre is constructed to force one perspective, from up in the top tier of the concrete seating down onto the timber clad stage. When I consider how these two worldviews come together in *nowhen*, a performance that will take place both amongst the expansive paths throughout the park and in the amphitheatre itself, I am further guided by the concept of translanguaging that we will be using to build the actors' performances. Can a composite expression of the place we are in relationship with through the piece be formed as well through design? If I think of our production as being performed with the park, and not simply in the park, what languages does the park speak and what does it say when we arrive in the amphitheatre?

THE IMMERSIVENESS AND INTIMACY OF SOUND

When I first started walking through the park with the *Living Hyphen* stories playing in my head, I had envisioned actors speaking out loud and telling these stories in time and space together. The device of audio recording the actors' performance of the text came to me as I started considering ways to keep the actors and audience safe through rehearsal and performance during

a pandemic. The realities of COVID-19 paired with the limited physical space and availability of sightlines on each path meant that the audience numbers will have to be kept to a small group.

What motivated me to pursue this format were the possibilities it created to be aware of our experience of time relative to each other on the tracts, and of course the importance of sound in a piece exploring a spoken plurilingual experience.

Sound design, while admittedly privileging hearing audiences, will allow for a distinct tether between actor and audience that otherwise may be difficult to achieve in a highly sensorial setting such as the park. With the actors in their ears, the audience effectively hears an inner monologue, where communication is perceived to flow directly from one to one. I believe this will also benefit the plurilingual experience in Part 1 as the tension between what is communicated and what is understood is contained within a finite exchange between actor and singular audience. The anxiety of miscomprehension is less exposed. I will direct the actors in their audio recording of each tract after we have staged the action on the trail, this is so they will have what is happening (the body and gesture work, movement qualities, etc) and where it is happening in their memory when they are committing their spoken performance to recording.

As I researched other productions that have utilized site-specific storytelling and immersive audio formats, I was reminded of Sarah Fuller and Moment Factory's *Illuminations: Human/Nature* (2017) that took place in Banff National Park in Alberta and Rouge Urban National Park in Toronto, Ontario. This was a very well-resourced production that paired technology with small groups of live audience in very sophisticated ways. In the company's own description of the audience experience they detail how multimedia tools were utilized:

The group explores the park together using their (provided) tool kit. The operation is foolproof thanks to a wireless deployable system that turns the tools automatically on and off, triggering video content, special effects, music and voiceover. With the tools uniquely activated at different spots across the park, participants work together to stage multimedia moments of discovery.*
Source: Moment Factory website.

nowhen will not have the benefit of a multimedia entertainment company supporting its development with their plethora of technological tools, but it will utilize the concept of a roving audience and have the goal of making audio content be responsive to their location in the park. Those objectives led me to further research a project I had learned about in November 2019, when the Sensorium: Centre for Digital Arts and Technology at York University presented the Mixed Reality Performance Symposium hosted by mixed reality producers ToasterLab. I had attended the symposium out of curiosity as a director, at the time not thinking about my High Park production. I was generally interested in learning how technology and digital arts can be integrated with live performance. One of the projects presented in the symposium was an app-based experience called *TrailOff*, produced with Swim Pony Performing Arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. ToasterLab's role in this project was to create a new smartphone application that mapped walking trails across the city and housed audio stories written specifically to be experienced on those trails. The app used GPS to trigger audio content linked to physical attributes on the route. The resulting experience is a one-on-one guided journey through ten different trails exploring the city's landscapes. Comparing this technology with the *Illuminations* concept, what appeals to me about *TrailOff* is the ability for the content to be automatically triggered, as opposed to the audience interacting with the technology in order to play the material.

As we began workshopping *nowhen* in February 2021, Miquelon Rodriguez and César el Hayeck came on board as sound designer and scenography designer respectively. Together with Alvis and Laguerre, we explored the trails virtually from video footage I documented on my walks through High Park, and started to consider what technology we wanted to use to deliver the audio components of the work. What we had to keep in mind was an important aspect of *nowhen* that neither of the previously mentioned projects possessed – live performers. We considered designing a single track of audio on an MP3 file, where the audience all hit play at the same time and the actor would have to time their movements on the trail precisely to what the audience is hearing, or a similar setup but with a large speaker box carried alongside the audience and actor, like in *Illuminations*. But the challenge with this was the unpredictable events that could happen on the trails at any given time disrupting the sequence for the actor, and the unknown pace of the audience groups would present accessibility issues if we prioritized keeping up in space with the audio. We also considered an experience that required instructions to start and stop audio when we arrived at specific moments on the trails, where the actors would animate the space once we initiated the moment together and then moved on once everyone was ready. Dramaturgically, these options were not satisfactory. I needed the experience to feel fluid for the audience, and the story moving in relation to the actor and the park. If we are to “let go of time and revel in place”, I did not want to be ruled by time and leverage the action against the audio needing to be synchronized for actor and audience. We wanted to create an immersive-ness that could feel personal to each attendee and as free from outside intervention in its execution as possible. Knowing these priorities for the design, we turned to our technical director from Canadian Stage, Aidan Ware, who led us to the Echoes smartphone application.

The Echoes app is a free platform created by self-described “sound mapping and spatial audio experts” (“ECHOES”). It allows users to create stereo, binaural, 3D audio, and ambisonic geolocated soundwalks without any coding knowledge. Essentially, we can use the app to make the entire park a soundstage through shapes on a map that are geofenced and will trigger audio content as listeners physically walk inside of them when they are accessing the audio walk from the app on their smartphone device. Each tract in Part 1 will have an Echoes audio walk guiding the journey of the audience as they move in tandem with the park and the actor. As we arrive into the amphitheatre space where we can control the sound experience for a group of audience all at once through the amphitheatre sound system, the individual Echoes experience will transition into a shared sound experience for Part 2 and the audience will be asked to take off their headphones – landing into a sound design for the amphitheatre. The world of the play opens up into a space where the awareness of sound becomes present for everyone together. I plan to incorporate elements from each tract’s sound design into the sound world of Part 2, giving both the actor and audience something to anchor to as the stories converge in place.

A ROUND-ABOUT THEATRE

To amplify the feeling of arrival stemming from various directions I want to keep the action moving constantly all over the footprint of the amphitheatre site. The audience will be encouraged by the actor who they followed into Part 2 to roam freely: move onto the stage, in front of the stage, off the edges of the tiered seating, up across the bunker at the top, and all throughout the space. Then they will be encouraged to find rest anywhere on the site, not just in the designated seating area. I will stage the action of Part 2 all throughout the footprint of the site, aiming to disprove the privileged position of the physical stage architecture which is a

strictly human intervention in the park. We will also utilize the multi-directional speaker system to generate the circular feeling of movement throughout the space. My goal is to activate and draw in the presence of the park, even as we enter this contrived theatrical space; and to recontextualize our perspective in the amphitheatre, regarding the entirety of the space as playable. I expect this will create something akin to a theatre in the form of a “round-about” with actors moving along the full perimeter, and action branching off to other areas, while most of the audience sits in the centre of it all. Our set and costume design will give the feeling of encompassing the entire space, drawing the attention up and away from the assumed focal point of the stage.

IMPRINTS OF THE PARK

If we consider the Park as a performer in *nowhen*, it is important that the design elements we add to the space flow freely across the contexts we create. In the same way the sound design is characterized by a fluidity through time and space, the set, props, and costume must have a similar feeling. César and I both agree that these elements should all be made from the same types of organic materials, “cut from the same cloth” so to speak. And while we will not have set pieces on the paths in Part 1, the Part 2 set in the amphitheatre must echo our experience from earlier so the challenge is to create one cohesive element that can be incorporated into the performance as costume, prop, and set. I am also curious about how the Park can imprint itself on to these elements. For example, allowing the costumes to absorb the mud as it’s dragged on the ground, or picking up the dirt and pigments from the plant life as the actor moves through the Park. To me, this imprinting is a meditation on transnational storytelling – a physical representation of the traces that remain with us when we move from place to place and vice versa

– the traces of ourselves that we leave behind.

THE CHALLENGE OF SHARING SPACE

Responding to the changing parameters of making live performance in the pandemic was a running theme throughout the preparations for this production. Major adjustments to the vision of this work were made to accommodate the sharing of space with other artists and other work happening in the park and specifically, in the amphitheatre. Midway through the development process I was informed that there would be a fully programmed festival happening in the amphitheatre during the summer months, of which *nowhen* would be one of many performances and productions taking place in the space. The production logistics for *nowhen* would now have to be amenable to the other activities, which are very different circumstances from the singular marquee summer presentation in the amphitheatre I was originally tasked with directing as my thesis production. As a result, we are continually making revisions to our preliminary designs. Notable compromises we have made so far in the process include shifting our performance time to the daytime and losing our twilight ending for Part 2, reimagining a set design that can be installed and struck each day in thirty minutes or less, and significantly reducing our expected rehearsal time in the amphitheatre itself for our production schedule.

CONSIDERING THE AUDIENCE

Central to the question of “why am I making this work?” is the audience experience. I am making a performance work that intentionally challenges the assumed conventions of theatre in North America. Firstly, comfortability with languages other than English in a performance setting is brought to the forefront. There will be no surtitles. There will not be translators. But this is not foreign theatre, this is an attempt to make theatre with the land. It is as local and, at the same time, transnational as this assimilated settler immigrant theatre maker can imagine it to be. Secondly, there will be no assigned seats, and the lights do not go out so that your focus is directed only toward the stage. The audience will have the agency to look wherever they please, in daylight, and their ability to move with the actor will impact the pace and rhythm of each show. Finally, the performance is not meant to conclude at the end of Part 2. In a piece that asks us to consider our relationship to place and the myriad of ways that relationship manifests (through language, sound, physical imprints, memory, travelled terrain), my desire is that the audience will leave our performance and continue to enact the relationship building to place that we as an ensemble of artists will work towards throughout the duration of rehearsing and performing *nowhen*. By embodying the show alongside the performers, experiencing all its challenges and (hopefully) rewards, my hope is for the audience to continue the exploration of our relationship to place as they make their way out of the Park.

CHAPTER THREE: DIRECTOR'S JOURNAL EXCERPTS

June 14, 2021

Today we had our first day with the full company, minus Djennie who had a conflict. Getting used to so many bodies in space after so long in the pandemic was a bit overwhelming to be honest. We started our day in the pavilion of the nature centre. It was challenging to have Elder Pauline with us over the phone on speaker in the middle of the park instead of in person, while I completely understood why she wasn't comfortable with being there in-person. It gave us a kind of awkward staggered start all together. And I felt like my attention as a director and the one leading the process was split between being present and also being with Pauline. I am, however, very grateful that we were able to centre a different way of starting the theatre making process together. She reminded us about the power of the land of High Park and of how much it could teach us in this process.

The group was quiet, reserved. I felt like they were not very considered in their readings, most were a little flat in front of their peers compared to our initial conversations moving through the tracts with their individual stories the week before. Perhaps there was a nervousness to be with people in-person again as well. It made me realize how green the majority of the cast actually are. I am glad that I did the one-on-ones with everyone last week before the full company, I think it gave them a better sense of the project as a whole.

We walked Tract 7 together as a group and it was very informative since we were basically a group of ten. Thinking about the shape of the experience for the audience and how their relationship to the narrative will shift depending on how close they are to the actor at any given point on the tracts, and how some tracts create more staggered moments because the path

itself is more narrow. I have to really encourage the actor to actively lead (and have motivation to lead) while holding character.

We spent the afternoon working on movement. It is really important that the actors feel confident in their bodies moving through the terrain of the park, especially after over a year of reduced mobility for many folks. We studied our own gait and considered how our bodies are shaped as we move amongst the backdrop of the park. We explored how to hold our bodies in comparison with the grandeur of nature - the tall trees, the expansive sky, the fullness of bushes. We learned about and practiced holding our pelvic bowl in a balanced position as we move in order to give more access and control to the other parts of our body. This work will be integral to the physicality that we build on the tracts.

July 19, 2021

I am sitting at the beginning of Tract 4 and I'm waiting for the first official day of rehearsals to start. I'm nervous and I am eager. I am eager to know the park more, better, I am eager to practice listening and working with the park.

I'm scared that what I want to investigate with language and place and the relationships in between is going to blow up in my face. I want so badly for this cast and their audiences to understand how much this place has helped me get through the last year and a half. And how much it has helped me begin my journey of understanding my responsibilities as a settler.

Today I'm going to try to remember to start slowly, to sit in the unknown, to disrupt my own assumptions and habits. We are going to begin in the body, and on the land. We are going to let the park have it's say, and practice listening. We are going to move with intention and with an awareness of our presence. We are going to consider our understanding of time, and how it

relates and shifts and changes what is experienced here. Time here is cyclical. Returning. Informing. Reflecting.

About a month ago the park was covered in caterpillars falling from the trees hanging in the air. Some of them didn't survive. Now the park is swarmed by gypsy moths, I wonder if some of them saw us then and recognize us on our return.

Language will help us move through the blocks put up by our colonial masters. Translating, translanguaging, transphonating, these processes will help us feel our way through one worldview into another. I hope in this process we also learn the language of the park. The ways in which the park speaks to us.

Day one was very overwhelming. We started working with Abrianna on Tract 4 and I wasn't entirely anticipating the consequences of having wardrobe join us. While it was really helpful to have the costume mock-ups, it was a lot to be thinking about all at once, from the start. I had wanted to focus on the vocal performance and making notes with the actors about how we want to record come Wednesday. That was what I hoped would be the focus of the first two days of rehearsal. I quickly realized I had to be getting the vocal performance notes and blocking choices at the same time as I was listening and thinking about notes to the sound design, as well as the geolocation of those sound cues, in addition to addressing questions from wardrobe as we were working with and interacting with a costume. It was stressful to think about all of the questions that César had and also to consider the suggestions that he made around staging to help maintain the integrity of the costume when we were only just beginning to block things out. I need to rethink clearer boundaries from other departments in this first week of rehearsals.

When we started working in the afternoon with Djennie it was clear that we were not going to have enough time. Djennie is an exceptional artist and I am so enamoured by her ability to absorb the way that the other actors work on their tracts and integrate the thinking in her own approach. However, at the same time Djennie takes more time to process my directions. And I struggle with the energy that Djennie brings to her physicality in rehearsal. I completely have faith in her ability to bring it for the performance, but her pace in rehearsal is something that I have to actively be aware of and not try to rush through. I want to see her leading the audience and taking charge of the story, her character is very active. In fact, she has an activist's spirit, living through revolutions in both Peru and Quebec. But as we began work today Djennie's action is often sitting beside or behind the group. I know this is because she is absorbed in learning the moments right now. Her tract is also one of the most physically challenging because there is a long steep hill to climb, so I know she is budgeting her stamina already. Djennie is also worried about her Spanish and I am considering not putting any more Spanish in the piece than what is already there, and instead utilizing more of her French abilities.

We hardly got through what we set out to do in the second half of the day. We started lunch late and that ate into rehearsal time. In addition to starting late Hasib also arrived late. He is a very quiet energy, I can tell that he thinks really hard about what he's doing and is prone to intellectualizing. I think there may be a nervousness, especially with working in front of others. He is the youngest of the cast after all. This is going to be something that we have to work to overcome. I need to find out more about what makes him tick. I asked him to review Tract 1 on his own tomorrow morning, encouraging him to really be confident in knowing the text and be very aware of the environment that each moment takes place in now that we've worked through

it together. Right now, he feels like the least embodied performer compared to the rest of the group. And I really want to help him break out of whatever it is that is holding him back.

Karolina is very confident and has done a lot of prep on Tract 7. I'm really encouraged by this and I'm hoping that it means that I can spend less time coaching her vocal performance and we can do most of that work quickly and efficiently in the recording booth on Wednesday. We've worked together before so I trust how she'll respond to my direction, I just want to make sure she is pushing herself and getting out of her comfort zone.

Tomorrow's going to be challenging because we have less time. I think I will try to worry less about the sound design and costuming, and instead focus on moving through all the text and getting to each drafted bubble in Echoes with the intention of setting each moment for the vocal recording.

Having the support of the production team is invaluable - I'm learning to delegate tasks, compartmentalize, and allow people to take over and do their jobs. I have to remember to keep doing this because there's a lot happening all at once.

July 19, 2021

There was a real sense of calm about being able to work in a rehearsal hall. As much as I miss the park today, I felt like I was in a space that was holding the work and the players and gave us the ability to focus. I think the distractions in the park are less about the park and more about the people and all of the things that are happening in the park. I had a chat today with Aidan our Assistant Technical Director about how much activity there is this year because of all the programming. And in our project, it is so nice to be able to have breathing room, have joy, have rest, have questions, have love, have space to listen, have feedback from the park, have a

focus and priority that is not human centered. I want to create a room where my collaborators feel support and freedom at the same time. I want them to be proud of their work, I want them to burst out of their skin when they are moving through the park. I want them to feel like when they are moving with the park that they are becoming a part of the park, that they are giving themselves over to the park.

Today we recorded tracts 4, 6, 1, and 7. Megan worked with Cole, Yasmine, and Felix in the park to review their tracts from yesterday. I'm so grateful that Megan reached out and came on board as assistant director. This whole process would be impossible otherwise, needing to be in seven places is a logistical nightmare.

Abrianna had a lot of clarity in our recording, she intuitively offered where she felt she should speak in Bajan dialect as it's not explicitly offered in the text. I think it helps that her narrative specifically talks about accent and how it is used to portray elements of the characters in her story.

Djennie, as expected, was nervous about her Spanish abilities. But she has a good ear and I pulled a lot of references for pronunciation from the internet for her. What I didn't expect was how much her own experience with her native land Haiti and the political turmoil there drew her to the experience of her character's experience in Peru. We dived deeper into this connection, relating the imageries and settling on the critical moments we felt should be in Spanish rather than French or English.

Both Hasib and Karolina really did their homework coming into the recording. As I had encouraged everyone to do, they came ready with moments they had thought about and phrases they considered that would be suitable to substitute text from their scripts. For Karolina, she was one step removed from the language because even though she had been around Romanian

speakers in her community, she had no native connection to the language. Her mother tongue is Polish. I wish we could have given her more support, a language keeper to work with, but thankfully she is really resourceful. I had Hasib really lean into the reflective and nostalgic quality of his narrative, drawing out different interpretations of the opening phrase that we can transform and revisit as we move along the tract.

The language work is rich and I'm learning so much about this process from each cast member. I think this approach is giving us a good foundation to approach the Aniishinaabemowin learning we will do all together next week. As rehearsals go on, Cole and I are trying to organize a substitute language keeper to work with us because Elder Pauline has had a personal incident, something quite scary it seems, that means she has to take some time off indefinitely.

July 23, 2021

Today was a tough day. The realities of COVID, a partner who is also an artist and cannot afford to not take work when it comes along, plus a dog that is having an unhappy time recovering from surgery - this all meant a morning that was completely kiboshed.

I ended up arriving an hour late to rehearsal and everyone was really understanding. It was a reminder that life is real and time is a concept that we can't really separate from as currency. Still, we got a lot of work done today.

We covered the physicality that we will use in Part Two, once we are all together in an ensemble. It was really useful to review the basics of walking and gait that Jazz had led us through the first time we were all together, which was also the last time we were all together. Strange to think how we haven't been in the same space all together for over a month! And it

was really important for the actors to be able to explore and experiment with that physicality in a studio this time, because it gave them a sense of privacy and it allowed them to explore more freely without the judgement of public spectators at the park. I have to remember to revisit walking and gait and connection to the earth when we are back on our tracts away from one another.

The group is very open and engaged with the instructions that I give them and I am so grateful for that trust. Part 2 is unconventional and I know that there is some anxiety about not having a script. When I asked at the end of the day during our check-in if anyone had any lingering questions someone specifically asked “will we ever get a script for Part Two?” I’m worried that my plan to create more agency for the performers through absence of written language will actually manifest anxieties.

I must remind myself to trust in this process I’ve set out. I shared with them the reality is the written words for Part Two is only about one page long. I believed in them to learn this without it being printed out. The intention of Part Two is to be connected to place as an ensemble and sometimes the written word has a tendency to supersede awareness of place and each other - often written words take us to other places.

July 24, 2021

I feel like we ended the first week on a good note. We have the first half of Part Two roughly sketched out, and the group seems to be taking to the process of sitting in the unknown. I am becoming more attached and certain to the idea of learning Part Two together without a script. I know that that feels like a challenge to some of the cast but there is something important about dismantling our attachments to the written word and the hierarchy that it brings.

I think that there is something about language in its spoken state versus it's written state that allows for more openness. The actors have been very generous in offering their own language experience in the creation of Part Two and I'm very happy with how it's happening organically. There is a reciprocal respect and a wanting to have clarity around new languages that are shared and I'm trying to balance the importance of taking our time with that, and also the momentum of building and creating the work.

I continue to struggle with Hasib. I am much more aware now how green he is to the rehearsal process. And also how much he lives in his head versus in his body. I'm going to dedicate more time working with him specifically and encourage him to be more bold with his choices. We spent some time working with the membrane today and I asked each actor to find three different moments on the membrane and while Haseeb moved to different parts of the membrane, how he was interacting with it was pretty much the same each time. I thought he was disengaged with the task. Then in our debrief he shared he was very excited about his discovery. Perhaps what I observed was his attachment to that discovery, not wanting to let go to find something else.

Preparing in the rehearsal hall versus being in the amphitheatre is going to be a big transition. Even today we took the work outside, first into the courtyard and then later into the parking lot. Each time, with a bit more space, we discovered new ways that the movement and choreography work with the distance between people. We finally get some time in the amphitheatre on Monday, there will be many discoveries next week.

I'm still nervous about the Aniishiinaabemowin learning. We've connected with a new translator but they haven't responded to Cole's emails in a while and I don't know if it's going to

happen in time. I'm trying to trust the process and not be pushy. I want the actors to feel confident in their learning and I don't want it to feel rushed or like an afterthought.

Overall I do feel like we are approaching the cultural learning with rigour and that it is connected to the thesis of the piece. The conversations, however, have led us to a kind of sombreness and reverence for the meaning of the work. This week coming, I want to focus on embodying the connection, and the joy and affirmation that comes from seeking that connection with place. Even in the vocalization work that we did today, there was a tendency to stay in a very meditative and slow pace. What I am seeking in Part Two is a buildup of energy allowing the vocalization to thrust us into a jubilation to be in space with each other. To feel held by the space together and fortified. Maybe that's too much to ask for in this moment of COVID.

July 28, 2021

I feel so defeated today. I feel like the Aniishinaabemowin translation work and language learning in this process is not going to happen, I feel like that was so much a part of my intention and not being able to do it feels like a failure. I am reminded of friend and colleague Lisa Karen Cox, who is so wise and recently encouraged me to leap towards failure. Well today I feel like I am free-falling towards it. Cole and I have lost contact with the new translator, they haven't given a reason why, they've simply stopped responding. I worry we may have misstepped with some protocol. And I feel like I have no right to push for this, while at the same time I feel like I should've done more to line up the translation work. I feel like a naïve and ignorant settler. This is a humbling reminder that this kind of artistic exploration necessitates relationship. And if I'm not able to secure a language keeper for the work, I cannot and will not force this into the process.

The rest of the cast don't know how defeated I feel right now, I've been trying to keep this part of the process - searching for Elder Pauline's substitute - out of their minds. Hoping that we would get an answer soon. Saying we would dive into the Part Two language learning soon. I don't know what else to do.

I'm increasingly frustrated about our time in the amphitheatre too, it is such a physically demanding space and the heat is making it even more challenging to get the inertia I want from the movement in the first half of Part Two. I think repetition will be key to getting them comfortable, but I don't have enough time to run things, we keep having to adjust the entrances and exits for the Greetings Medley. I also have to keep safety a priority, while thinking about speed and timing. Plus I had expected to have the set installed by today so the cast can start working with it in the amphitheatre, but instead it had to be fitted during the four-hour window we were allotted on deck, eating up our rehearsal time. We are getting such limited time to actually rehearse in the amp.

The work we did on the tracts today - it felt really good. We spent the morning on Cole's tract, Tract 3. And it was the first time through just allowing her to run top to tail with the sound/tech as we go. There is a very calm and embracing shape to that tract that makes the journey really enjoyable. We need to work on the early transition going from the sound foyer into the land acknowledgement and the amount of time we spend in the land acknowledgment. The area by the log is now overgrown with beautiful tall wildflowers, we need to figure out whether Cole can manage to step through that gently with the current staging. During the scene with "the one who sits in the centre" the Echoes sound bubble is happening too late and it's pushing the bubble that comes after that into the wrong spot. The moment going through the gate off the path is beautiful and that sound theme can be drawn out even more. It feels like most of

the moments after we return back onto the dog path all the way up to the stairs are roughly in the right place, I'm happy about that. The sound theme that's happening underneath it all can be different however, I'll have to talk to Mickey about rethinking that build. The Hawks moment after then is perfect, so wonderful. And the last line "Welcome back Northern Thunderbird" needs to have more presence, perhaps some kind of filter on the vocals but also a connection moment between Cole and the audience. I'm so pleased with the progress we have made on the tracts.

July 29, 2021

Disaster. I don't know who to blame or if there is even anyone specifically to blame. The city halted our rehearsals today, stating that we no longer have approval to be on the paths because they cross "Environmentally Significant Areas" in the park. Today is the first time I've ever heard of this regulation, and I had submitted these paths to production to be approved months ago. We are one week from opening and I may have to go back to the drawing board and try to conceive of a *nowhen* that doesn't happen on the paths. NOT ON THE PATHS? That is the whole point of the show. To be performed in tandem with the park as we MOVE THROUGH THE PARK ON THE PATHS. I cannot believe that this is happening.

The only possibility I can see of moving forward without actors being on the paths is if we can still send the audience out on the paths somehow. And then perhaps I can incorporate some of the Part One staging into Part Two in the amphitheatre? Because just Part Two on its own right now wouldn't make any sense. This is a nightmare.

We already had so much to catch up on. We were rained out this morning so we lost time on the set/in the amphitheatre. And we moved rehearsal to the Berkeley, which was good

because we had to do some language work with Anishinaabemowin and recording the land acknowledgments. But I still need time on some of the tracts, and I was hoping to get through the rough shape of the I AM medley into the end of Part 2. Instead we took the rest of the day off, because I have to decide what our next move is.

Is there a version of the show that we can salvage for next week? Or do I push all of this into another term at York and reimagine the work entirely for a fall production? A part of me feels like pushing the show has the benefit of the work getting the attention and resources that it deserves from production. Right now it feels like we are a “bit” show, squeezed in between a hundred other things going on. Am I actually getting to stretch as a director or am I just solving logistical problems left, right, and centre? Would we be in this situation if there hadn’t been twenty other things programmed leading up to our production? My production was supposed to be the only thing happening in High Park originally, I can’t help wishing that was still the case.

It is not lost on me that one of the values guiding us throughout this process has been “learning to share space” and that is what I have been constantly challenged with in the making of this production. How is this going to change my relationship to place now? What is this teaching me about that thesis in the work?

July 31, 2021

We got back to work today. I can’t even think about the train wreck that was the last two days. The saving grace has been starting the language learning process with Awanigiizhik. the new language keeper with whom Cole has connected us. That has kept me focused.

I took the opportunity to keep our precious four hours in the amphitheatre today and go back to work on Part Two. A lot of moving, working out our frustrations.

The next two days are “dark”, I will be re-staging Tract 2 at the behest of the city. Thankfully, all the other tracts can remain on their paths.

August 5, 2021

Today would have been our opening. Instead we are still catching up with ourselves. Because I can only be in one place at a time, I have to see the tech dress for each tract in its own individual run. There is a benefit to this because it gives all the other actors many chances to run through their performance. But I can’t help but feel disconnected to them. Today I saw the tech dress for Tracts 1 and 2. Felix especially has adapted very well to the re-staging of Tract 2. We ended up transplanting much of what we’ve worked on onto Tract 3’s geography. It means there is a bit of a hiccup at the start because two audience groups begin at the same entrance to the park now. I’ve tried to smooth out how the beginning works with the stewards that have been hired to assist the audience on each tract. It is challenging to convey in a brief orientation the nuances of a piece that is so much about locating yourself in relation to place at the beginning. I wish I had more time to train them, work with each of them like they are cast members as well.

Hasib seems to be much more comfortable in living in the moments of his story. There are parts that he would previously blow right through that he is really sitting in now. And his connection to the transforming costume pieces are much more clear. However, I’ve given him the note to not go too far within, that he still needs to be aware of the audience and is conveying the story for them as much as for his character. We work a lot on him staying active in his breath, especially when so much of what the audience sees is his back as they follow behind him.

August 6, 2021

Mel Hague (dramaturg and Associate Artistic Director at Canadian Stage) came by to sit in our run yesterday and gave me a note to think about - that the ending to Part Two was not working. She believed the audience needed a clear punctuation at the end, an opportunity to give their applause, a curtain call. Right now the ending leaves too much confusion, a big question mark. The cast invites the audience to close their eyes and enter into reflection, then they quietly leave from their marks at the membrane, at the outer edge of the amphitheatre and “disappear” into the Park. I think the point Mel was trying to make is that this feels like the cast abandons the audience, when they’ve been craving performance for months and to go on this journey there should be a reward at the end. Something to mark the event. I understand this dramaturgy, but I disagree with it. I think the piece needs to remain open, we cannot be complacent about our relationship to place and so we cannot congratulate ourselves because the journey is not actually complete.

The audience has to continue the relationship beyond the conclusion of the performance by the actors, so I thought of a way to bring more clarity to this intention through the staging. Instead of the cast exiting from the membrane, they will move into the centre of the audience for the final invitation. My goal is to create a gesture towards a colon “:” rather than a question mark “?” at the end of the performance. Audience members who have their eyes open may be inspired to applaud before the cast files up and out of the amphitheatre (mirroring the way our journeys began on their individual tracts). And if the audience has their eyes closed, they will hear and sense the movement of the actors leading from within the playing space to out towards the Park.

We didn’t have time in the amphitheatre to rehearse this new staging today because there was a cabaret performance programmed during the day. So instead we rehearsed on a field outside of the amphitheatre. I’m confident the cast understands it, I just wish they had more

opportunity to rehearse it “on deck” for their own confidence. We will run it top of day before they get into costume for their dress rehearsal tomorrow.

August 8, 2021

We’re just about to start our first show with audience which is also our dress rehearsal and our opening. We were rained out for our dress rehearsal yesterday. It’s been a wild learning journey with a lot of curveballs. Dealing with inclement weather, not having enough time to adapt, it’s really taught me about what to fight for, and how to anticipate my own needs as well as the needs of others. I don’t know how today will go. I’m disappointed that there isn’t a full realization of the vision that I had, but at the same time I’m really proud of these actors and of the work that we’ve accomplished. The creative team has been really supportive especially being constantly thrown so many obstacles. At the end of the day what matters to me is that there is a feeling of connection to place, and a rethinking on what that means to everyone that experiences the show. I guess we’ll find out for the first time if that is effective in this first full performance today.

And there was threat of rain again. With the threat of rain (even a light drizzle) the show can continue but the set cannot be installed, something we were told only in the first week of rehearsal. So the audience walked in to Part Two with the set of Musical Stage Company’s *Blackout* onstage. And the *nowhen* actors have to mime all the interactions they have with the membrane. I admire the cast for their commitment to the performance, they moved beautifully in Part Two even amongst the confusion of being literally in a different world from the production.

I can't help thinking that this obfuscation of our intentions - the relationship we have been striving for with the park - is kind of poetic. It so aptly represents our own confusion with place, with our responsibilities to it, and with our exploitations of it.

And here we are now, contractually I'm not to give any more notes after opening, yet I haven't actually seen my entire production come together. It feels unfinished but it will continue on without me, and quite honestly, I trust this cast (with our stage manager Laura) now to continue the work we started. Maybe it is hubris that assumes I can "finish" this work anyway; it did not start with me and it will not end with me.

CHAPTER FOUR: EPILOGUE

I will never think of High Park the same again. After this production, I imagine the same is true for the rest of the creative team and all the actors. And my hope is that we touched each audience member in a similar way. I believe we made something significant this summer, something that drew us out of our isolation and collective uncertainty and brought us together for a passing moment in time to connect with something more remarkable - place. I also believe the methodology I applied - the exploration of plurilingual performance practice – made this possible through a deepened commitment to listening and relating in the creative process. This epilogue reflects on some of what went well, the challenges I faced, and what I might do differently.

PLURILINGUAL LEARNINGS IN PART ONE

City interference aside, Part 1 of nowhen came beautifully together. Each tract, and its associated story, had specific obstacles and rewarding outcomes in the plurilingual process.

Working on Tract 2 became heartbreaking by the end of the rehearsal process because it was difficult to let go of the work we accomplished on the original path to which this story was assigned. While we were able to transplant some stunning moments, I personally felt that some of the staging decisions became almost like placeholders for the original ideas. For example, the opening section that was conceived on a double-path, two paved walkways side by side that led into the park from the streetcar loop at the end of Howard Ave; the actor and I created a choreography moving along, back and forth, between these parallel paths that gently established the existential limbo of the character. This was such a site-specific staging choice, that when we had to relocate the staging, I found it really difficult to achieve the same effect without the subtle

"doubleness" prevalent in the landscape we were working with. In the re-staging, which essentially shadowed the original Tract 3 path, we ended up re-creating that moment in an area with two fallen logs that were off to right of the walking path. Unfortunately, the feeling was more removed and less embodied as an audience member because you were watching the actor from a distance instead of following closely behind and retracing the same steps. I realized in the re-staging that the "doubleness" we established in the original helped to centre our experience of the Putonghua and English spoken in this narrative. This quality of doubleness is further emphasized by the counting sequences that switch back and forth between the two languages that come up multiple times on Tract 2. We decided to really lean into these moments with gesture, trying to focus the audience's attention and hoping to attune them to the language difference.

The actor on Tract 4 had a very clear sense of what the authors were speaking to in the portrayal of accent and code-switching within Afro-Caribbean communities, which allowed us to make clear decisions about the performance early on and to focus more on building the emotional arc of the character in performance as well as defining the separate character of the mother in the story. The choices of when the actor was speaking in accent, and which accent, were very collaborative on this tract. The actor effectively utilized accent in their decision making to clarify the narrative for themselves and to give a strong delivery of it in their performance. This was also one of the more physically accessible tracts for audience, which meant that audience were intended to stay on the paved sidewalk while the actor would go on and off trail. We played with the tension of the actor leaving the audience and returning to the audience. This also allowed us to explore with distance and scale in the imagery, we established the idea of shame in relation to proximity and restricting the ability to see the actor. The motif then gradually transformed into liberation and joy, with the Bajan-accented moments taking place as the audience passively

witness the actor's free and exuberant movements in far-off tableaux and the "neutral" North American accented moments taking place when the actor was closer to the audience and movements were limited to the set path.

There are a few things I would do differently in Part One if I were to mount this production again. I would spend significantly more time with each actor individually. Ideally in the beginning, I would spend an entire day on each tract in the park. Because we were so pressed for time, we really had to respond to our impulses in the space and make decisions quickly. I often felt the pressure to cling to a strong discovery, evolve it quickly, and set it as blocking. Whereas if we had a bit more time, there would have been space to for the actors to ruminate, perhaps even change their mind, and transform their discoveries into stronger offerings. Additionally, I would add time after this individual work to do table work as a full company and revisit our stories together, have them intermingle their plurilingual approaches early on so that it might encourage and embolden their choices.

I received a lot of important feedback during the short run of the show. But the most important and meaningful to me ended up being that which came from the authors of the original stories. It was one of my primary goals to honour their stories and connect them to this place through the work. One email I received was from the author of Tract 2, who also brought their parents to experience the show. She shared that all three of them were very touched to hear the lines spoken in Mandarin and English, and asked her to reach out to me with their appreciation. I personally met the author of Tract 1 after one of the performances and she was visibly moved at the experience. She had not expected inclusion of her language, Bengali, to be spoken and she felt that it had made everything in the telling the story come to life.

PLURILINGUAL LEARNINGS IN PART TWO

I am proud of the language learning as creative process we accomplished in Part 2. I admit when we were in the process, I was very concerned about the cultural sensitivity of the work and following the appropriate protocols for working with Indigenous knowledge. I cannot express the immense appreciation I have for the team in approaching this work with utmost care and trusting me to lead them through it.

The approach we took in learning Aniishinaabemowin in Part 2 was informed by our work with Elder Pauline, who introduced us to the Ojibway (or Aniishinaabe) teaching about the Seven Life Stages. When we initially shared the seven narratives for Part 1 with her, she had suggested how each one might relate to each of the seven stages. I began to study this teaching and in consultation with Cole Alvis as dramaturg, identified themes in each piece that connected to the stages outlined in the teaching. This connection in each piece was an important entry point into how we approached the stagings for Part 1. Each one of these narratives that was arriving on the land from elsewhere had an immediate interaction with the teachings through these thematic attachments. This also helped each actor understand the role of their story in the collective whole, and only from this understanding were we able to proceed with the language learning.

With all the actors, we affirmed each story's connection to the teachings. Cole and I shared this work with our new language keeper Awanigiizhik, and they generously translated and recorded themselves speaking a phrase for each of the seven stories, and a phrase that connected them all. The group learned everything together. It was rudimentary work - building shapes with sound and imbuing the sounds with their meaning as we made them. This process bonded the actors,

they supported each other with pronunciation, rhythm, timbre, inflection. It was a beautiful collective effort.

It is important here to note that the intention of studying the teachings and the language in this creative process was not about becoming teachers ourselves, nor to enact any kind of authority on these knowledges through the performance, and neither was it about dissemination. The purpose was to enact the responsibility we had as guests to observe, listen, learn, and honour.

What I have learned is that there is a tremendous amount of grief around language loss in Indigenous communities. I am grateful to all the knowledge keepers we encountered who taught us patience, diligence, and humility in this process. Unsurprisingly, this grief around language loss is also felt in non-Indigenous linguistic communities in this land known as Canada. Overall, working with actors who have language experience other than English illuminated the potency of bringing their linguistic competencies into the creative process but also the sensitivities around language work and how actors may be best supported through these processes.

PARTING REFLECTIONS

If I had to do it all over again, I would have worked to understand the language skills available in the talent pool I was casting from much earlier. Definitely before I curated which stories I wanted to include, so that I could select the stories with the talent in mind. I would have also planned better for the tracts, and thus the actors, being spread out all over the park. I realized really quickly that being in multiple places at once was not only impossible but also necessary. It was divine intervention that Megan Legesse reached out to me and offered her time as Assistant Director on the project for her own professional development. Much of Part One would not have received the rigor and attention given to it if it had not been for my being able to work with the

actors individually and then hand them off to Megan to rehearse what we worked on further. I am immensely grateful for her contributions and the efforts made to ensure her participation.

Finally, I am so pleased that many of the audiences I witnessed ended up staying in the amphitheatre at the end of Part Two and took their time to be in reflective meditation. I am glad that I kept the integrity of that gesture for the final moments of the performance, and resisted the craving for applause at the end of a show. Many audience members stayed long after the actors had changed out of their costumes! Some folks would be looking about admiring the surroundings, while some had their eyes closed, and others would lay back seemingly lost in their own thoughts. Then they would gently make their way out and back into the park. It was a true sign to me that through this work, we were able to let go of time together, and just be with each other in place.

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