

This is the manuscript of a practice-research contribution/series of postcards to the special issue 'Performer Training and Well-Being' of Theatre, Dance and Performance Training (Routledge, 2022; edited by Virginie Magnat and Nathalie Gauthard), as accepted for publication in May 2022.

Giftng together and giftng back: a pluriphony of postcards

Editors: Bryony Onciul and Konstantinos Thomaidis

In November 2020–February 2021, we undertook the research project ‘Giftng Together and Giftng Back’. Our team comprised of two artists and members of the Kumugwe Cultural Society, Jesse Recalma and Karver Everson, two MA Heritage students in the role of research assistants, Malavika Mahesh Murthy and Rory Weaver, and three academics, ourselves and Ann Grand. This project explored the practice of co-learning and international intergenerational reciprocal exchange. We were interested in exploring wellbeing in relationship to difficult histories, land, environment, artmaking, voice and collaboration. The project, supported by a sub-grant from the UBC Research Cluster in Culture, Creativity, Health and Well-Being, was built on a partnership with the Kumugwe Cultural Society, BC Canada who aim to ‘*promote, preserve and advocate for cultural practices of the K’ōmox and Kwakwaka’wakw Peoples*’ (KCS 2020), and the MED Theatre Wild Nights Youth Company, Devon UK who are ‘*a rural community theatre inspired by local ecology, history and the folklore of Dartmoor*’ (MED 2020). It combined two half-day workshops in Devon (one with MED Theatre and one with the University of Exeter’s MA Theatre Practice trainees), with visits to ancestor art and cultural material held in four UK museums (British Museum, Horniman Museum London, Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford and Royal Albert Memorial Museum Exeter). Through a combination of workshops, museum visit, feedback session/discussions and formal and semi-formal interviews, we collaboratively addressed questions around heritage, training, creativity in community settings and curatorial practices.

As the first published outcome of the project, we curated the following series of interconnected postcards. Participants in the project have shared a photograph from the project, alongside a short text that addresses one, or combination of, the following questions:

- Which aspects of health and well-being practices were foregrounded in your experience of the visits, workshops and discussions?

- How can ethnography, curatorial practices and performer training intersect to foster and cultivate health and well-being in transnational exchange between communities?
- Do you have any hopes, aspirations or desires for the future of such reciprocal, intergenerational, interdisciplinary training(s)?

The fluid, emergent, dialogic framework of this publication wishes to honour and foreground a plurivocal approach to this first iteration of the project.



Image caption: Ann Grand, Bryony Onciul, Konstantinos Thomaidis in Vancouver in 2019.

To paddle with the ancestors

Author: Jesse Recalma

Jesse Recalma is a Coast Salish artist and member of Qualicum First Nation. His artworks can be viewed on [instagram.com/saatlamarts](https://www.instagram.com/saatlamarts)

When looking for an answer to a multi-faceted question, it is better when more than one perspective is offered; in this scenario, an artefact is viewed by two artists who have similar lineage of Coast Salish and Kwakwaka'wakw but while I focus on the Coast Salish background, Karver focuses on the latter. Looking at the past is a way of putting together a complex set of puzzle pieces from a number of different puzzles in order to create one image. By having an ethnographer, an archivist, and an artist all looking at the same piece, the diversity of the training accompanied by open-mindedness can help give a strong definition as to what an item is, how it was used, how it was created, and an understanding of how it reacts to its environment.

The paddle in this image has undergone a long history from its roots as a sapling to a piece of history offering insight into the lifestyle of our ancestors. The old people would make sure others would learn by having people spend time in other communities and taking such a trip as the one Karver and myself were on at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum is an example of this type of transnational relation. The image depicts a transnational exchange where two Indigenous people are able to comment on the details of a carved paddle from North America to be included in the artefact's database description. On top of this, one of the best ways we can promote this type of education and work is to ensure that Indigenous peoples have access to these resources so that we can better understand our old art forms as we carry out our work and foster our connection to our historical pieces.



Image caption: Jesse (left) and Karver (right) inspect the handworked details of an old paddle at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum.

Thin places and connection

Author: Rory Weaver

Rory Weaver specialises in archaeology and heritage, with experience in UK commercial field archaeology. He is a University Library Adviser.

But you do want to find thin places: pockets in the landscape where the membrane is so tightly stretched that other worlds might shine through (Overall 2021, 14).

The collection is often about containment on the level of its content and on the level of the series, but it is also about containment in a more abstract sense. Like Noah's Ark, those great civic collections, the library and the museum, seek to represent experience within a mode of control and confinement (Stewart 1993, 161).

Museum collections in the UK are undeniably forms of control as Susan Stewart suggests. However, the collection is also a '*thin place*' where the past interacts with the present. The museum is a place where other worlds can exist and where new ways of living might begin. The people in this picture are not stood in a museum store. Instead, they are standing in a youth theatre in Moretonhampstead, Devon.¹ They come from a range of backgrounds. Each have their own distinctive ways of seeing. What they have in common is that in February of 2020 they all took part in a heritage project with a distinct museum collection focus. The project brought Indigenous artists, young people from the UK and researchers together for a series of workshops. Stories, music and dance were shared reciprocally as a form of learning.

One of my main hopes from this reciprocal project is that those in charge of museum collections in the UK reach out and listen more to Indigenous artists and researchers. Through arts practice we cannot entirely heal the atrocities carried out in the name of 'Britain' or 'Canada' in the past and present. We cannot undo. But we can share experiences, stories and art to propose new ways of seeing the future. This project opened all of us up to the idea that reciprocity through art can create new possibilities.

¹ MED Theatre <https://www.medtheatre.co.uk>



Image caption: MED Theatre workshop Feb 2020

References

- Overall, S. 2021. *Heavy Time. A Psychogeographer's Pilgrimage*. London: Penned in the Margins.
- Stewart, S. 1993. *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. London: Duke University Press.

An awakening

Author: Malavika M. Murthy

Malavika M. Murthy is a conservation architect and heritage consultant in India, with interests in tourism, living heritage and culture.

This training has been highly informative and a grounding experience for me. More such intergenerational training across various cultures opens doors for learning for the youth and helps them connect to their roots through Indigenous art forms. Being a part of such a training has led me to pursue Bharatanatyam (an Indian Classical Dance form from South India) again after several years. I hope that such trainings can be conducted with various communities and cultures to help bridge the gap of cultural separation. Trainings similar to these can provide a platform and access to resources to many Indigenous communities and other world communities to come together to exchange a piece of their history and promote cultural representation.

Training with small groups will help people have a one-on-one interaction with the hosts and participants similar to what I got to experience. Through these interactions I was able to note many similarities between the Indian culture and the Kumugwe Cultural Society. At the workshop with MED theatre and the Wild Nights Young Company, we saw that a group of individuals of various ages come together to express and experience culture. This helped in understanding the nuances and the importance of performing arts and wellbeing. The river song performed by the Kumugwe group highlighted the importance of preservation of natural resources, preservation of oral histories and narratives of people and the community.



Image caption: Part of the traditional regalia used in a Potlatch. As part of the workshop, we visited various museums in London, Oxford and Exeter to look at specific artifacts related to the K'ōmox and Coast Salish culture.

Training as gift exchange

Author: Bryan Brown

Bryan Brown is an artist-scholar at the University of Exeter, co-director of visual theatre company ARTEL, advisor to cultural laboratory Maketank. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7033-4813>

It was an honor to meet Jesse and Karver and receive their songs, dances and stories. Although held within a more formal ‘workshop’ style setting, the days were infused and offered with a sense of the Kwakwaka’wakw and Coast Salish nations’ traditional form of gift exchange and ceremony: the potlatch. While we connected on many aspects of creative expression and began making inroads that might have led to deeper dialogue on the specifics of training for artistic and cultural heritage practices, our time together was specifically focused on making space for these representatives of the Kumugwe Cultural Society to share their heritage with as many people as possible. In so doing, the usual dynamics of a training environment were upended.

The workshops became more of a presentation or performance, but this mirrored my understanding of potlatch. We as workshop participants were there to listen and receive. The training, if one wanted to see it, was in the establishing of a profound sense of care and an attitude of attentive listening. From listening to how Jesse and Karver chose to speak, how they navigated the sharing of their own unique specialisms as well as their differing but equally important respected statuses, I was able to reflect on how all too often in UK or North American white contexts, we don’t allow space for such artful negotiation. These workshops and the extended conversations I had with Jesse and Karver provoked me to consider the environment of training and the expectations that all too commonly accrue to training within late-capitalism’s need for acquisition and progress.

Some questions I’m taking into my work this year from this exchange:

How might the act of training in artistic contexts become less about acquisition and more about the art of gift exchange?

Without discrediting the importance of mastery and pedagogical necessity – how might the conditions for deep reciprocity be enacted in a ‘training space’?

How might our quality of listening change in such a space if we are not focused on what we are ‘taking’ from this moment but rather what we are receiving?

Might such a space of exchange between ‘teacher’ and ‘students’ allow everyone to imagine differently and for such imaginings to inform the work being made to be more ecologically and holistically mindful?

For more reflection on this work, see Bryan Brown’s blog post ‘Training to listen for new Imaginations’: <http://theatredanceperformancetraining.org/2022/03/training-to-listen-for-new-imaginings/>

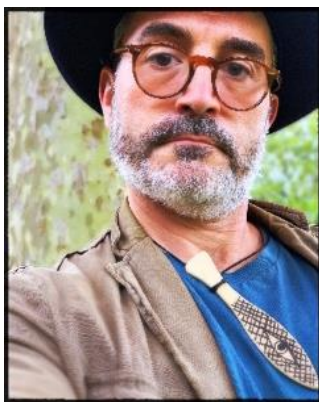


Image caption: Bryan Brown wearing his gifted paddle pendant.

Curating Spatialities of Knowledge-Exchange

Author: Konstantinos Thomaidis

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The visible ‘moment’ of our project – the February 2020 visit of Jesse Recalma and Karver Everson – unfolded as a linear progression of concrete locations:

museum galleries,

collection rooms,

community theatre headquarters,

university studios.

Still, I cannot help but think of the wider cartography of spaces that underpinned, informed and materialized in our work:

- The Mary Harris Memorial Chapel, where visiting researchers from UBC, Canada, and some of us from Exeter, UK, listened together and broke into songs of tradition (Summer 2018);
- The UBC Campus yard, where Anishinaabe/Métis artist and scholar Vicki Kelly guided us in acknowledging the Seven Sacred Directions (Summer 2019);
- The MED Theatre workshop, where I taught voice and chorus towards a performance interweaving Devonian and Mediterranean mythology (Autumn 2019);
- The Exeter Drama studios and immediate surroundings, used daily for intercultural performer training provided for the MA Theatre Practice students who were to attend Jessie and Karver’s work (Autumn 2019);
- The home/departure places (be they countries, cities, villages, houses) of our colleagues, students and participants in Canada, Greece, India, China, Ireland, Australia, the US and the UK;
- The colonized trajectories of objects across oceanic trade lines, across temporalities, across places of everyday use and sacrality and environments of profitable exhibition;

- The narrated – factual, referenced, customary, mythic or imagined – landscapes of the artistic material gifted and shared in the workshops: the river, the woods, the voicescape of the echo in the songs and the dances performed (February 2020);
- The cross-over between spaces of imposed solitary thinking during the pandemic and spaces of online communal reflection in the months that followed the visit – spaces-turned-places by probing, imaginal revisiting and conjuring future potentialities (March 2020-present).

What activates – for me, at least – the stratigraphy of these spatialities *beyond* temporal conflation, cultural collusion or structureless enmeshing and *towards* future ecologies of sharing and gifting are the nagging questions our project’s participants and collaborating artists kept asking about the meanings, ethics and politics of spatial schemata:

Why does this dance move in this, but not that, direction?

How do I position myself in a room to better activate call-and-response?

Which point in a circle of sharing do I occupy and what stories do I bring to it?

Which configurations mean active participation?

Which shapes become reminiscent of one-directional information transfer?

Such questions –yet to be fully explored– identify the locus of our future investigations into exchange, wellbeing and the arts at the precise intersection of

place as lived spatiality

with

space as a scenography of knowledge-making.



Image caption: A moving space, yet-to-be-explored: woods around UBC campus during University of Exeter researchers’ visit in 2019.

Sketching unexpected moments that shape practice

Author: Bryony Onciul

Bryony Onciul is an *Associate Professor in Museology and Heritage Studies, University of Exeter*. Author of *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice*. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7500-0054>

Our project brought together young Kumugwe Cultural Society members and artists, with MA heritage students, academics and drama groups to explore cultural connection, awareness and exchange. The project had two parts. The first focused on four UK museum visits to reconnect with ancestor art and historic K'ómox and Coast Salish First Nations cultural material. The second involved two drama workshops to enable collaboration and sharing of culture and practice. In my postcard, I want to focus on the less visible, quietly intended but generally unreported interstitial moments. The in-between spaces that connected the organised events. These periods were often transitional, moving between locations on foot, by car or train, or between periods of the day, eating together, relaxing in the evening, morning coffee. In these more fluid informal spaces, the dialogue changed and became richer, deeper, more aspirational and future orientated.

Visiting the Tate Modern, which was not part of the planned schedule but squeezed between events, was transformational as Jesse and Karver sketched on an orange wall of carpet creating a momentary installation, wiped away by the next tourist keen to make their mark. It created a non-verbal space to reflect on the challenges and possibilities generated by visiting historic First Nations ancestors' art held in UK museums and it gave inspiration for what could be done in future workshops together. Travelling on the train between the British Museum, London and Pitt Rivers, Oxford, I was struck by the active drawing in sketchbooks reflecting on spindle wheels; the discussion of hopes for future generations of Kumugwe Cultural Dancers; and the laughter we shared playing dice. Walking through the streets of London the collections we had seen in storage came to life through discussions of carving, protocols, dance and community. Driving through the Devonshire countryside and up onto Dartmoor opened up new perspectives on place and connection. Sharing food and trying different cuisines, we bridged unexpected cultural differences about tastes and expectations. These interstitial spaces where relationships are fostered, are the social humus that feeds and nurtures rapport and will support and sustain our collaborative work.

These events occurred in the month before Covid-19 reshaped collaborative work, moving it online and limiting opportunities for informal connections and unexpected shared moments. In response, we should place more value on the in-between-spaces – physical and temporal – that bind and shape us. Building them into research designs and workshops as essential productive practice will create more opportunity to breathe, share, imagine, discuss, enriching the quality and integrity of our work. It holds space for face-to-face, generous, respectful, thoughtful sharing, aimed at uplifting and upholding rights and relations. Our project was a small step, just a beginning, and yet the discussions and feelings resonate.



Image caption: Karver Everson and Jesse Recalma sketching on Rudolf Stingel's Untitled 1993 orange carpet interactive installation at the Tate Modern, London, following a visit with ancestor art and historical cultural material held in storage at the British Museum, February 2020. Photographer: Bryony Onciul.