Losing and Finding Community in Drama:
A Methodology-in-Motion for Pandemic Times

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Abstract

Our article explores the impact of the global health pandemic on our five-year, multi-sited, collaborative ethnographic study titled *Global Youth (Digital) Citizen-Artists and their Publics: Performing for Socio-Ecological Justice (2019-2024)*. We illustrate how our arts-led, youth-driven ethnographic "methodology-in-motion" responded to a destabilized world by planning, listening, and seeing differently across local and global research contexts through virtual fieldwork. By focusing on reciprocity and the relational, we examine how researchers, youth participants, and global collaborators, managed to "lose" and "find" each other through creative, artistic encounters.

The primary ambition of our Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded project, Global Youth (Digital) Citizen-Artists and their Publics: Performing for Socio-Ecological Justice (2019-2024), which we like to call "Audacious Citizenship," is to respond to the need for new ways of thinking about and responding to pressing environmental and social crises.[1] Can theatre be a powerful voice in the ecological humanities? Can theatre help communities and societies lead to alternative ways of seeing and engaging with the world? Can performance become a site for new imaginaries for socio-ecological justice? We are considering these questions with our community of collaborators: drama teachers, drama students, theatre artists, and researchers in Toronto, Canada, Bogotá, Colombia, Coventry, England, Thessaloniki, Greece, Lucknow, India, and Kaohsiung, Taiwan. And we are asking these questions with drama methods, an artistic-scientific way to come to know the world and how we inhabit it. (See Fig. 1)
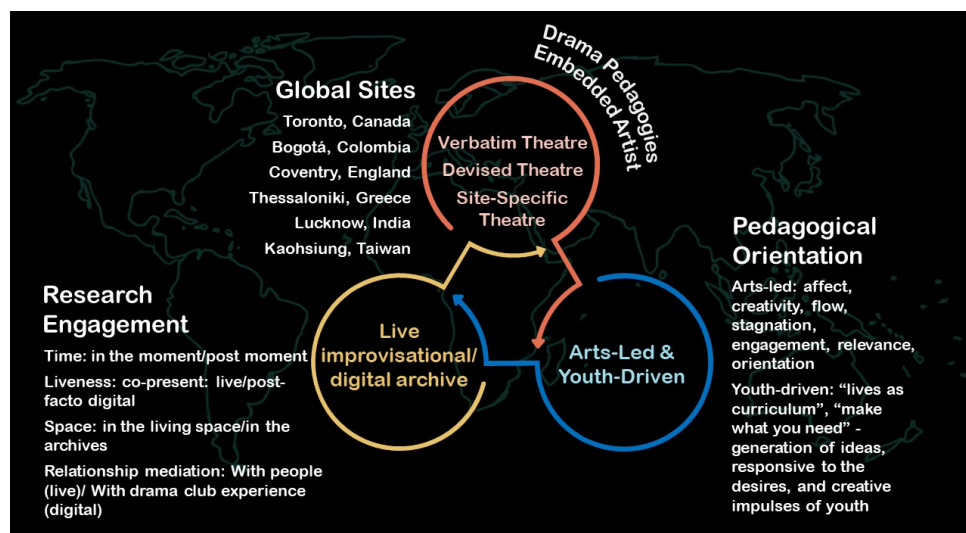

Fig. 1: The scope of the research.

Across the global sites of the research, we endeavour to create an arts-led and youth-driven research ecology, using specific genres of theatre-making (Verbatim, Devising, and Site-Specific), as enabling constraints or structures within which to experiment and communicate. The first year (2019/2020) focused on Verbatim theatre, a mode of theatre-making that is built from direct observation and the exact words of interviewees, carried out by the creators. The second year (2020/2021) was meant to exploit the possibilities of Devising, a theatre genre that uses collaborative improvisation and physical exploration of objects, texts, or ideas. With the sudden and unexpected impact of the global health pandemic, we found ourselves moving to the Zoom space in 2020. Our devising dreams took a bit of a turn as we listened to the "room," and listened for what the students needed. In that Zoom space, students were sharing how they had been engaging in "analog" activities to help them cope: knitting, sewing, reading physical books, cosplay, writing to pen pals . . . and so we found ourselves leaning into performative writing, which seemed a kind of imaginative balm for many of the students as they struggled to imagine from their solo spaces what their plays might look like on a stage inhabited by groups of real people. The following sections of our paper will take a deeper dive into this unexpected space of "making what we need" (see Harvey, 2016) from the space of individual boxes in a virtual, shared space. The third year of our study (2021/2022) is using site-specific theatre to create performances that explore and reflect "place." The pandemic carries on as we continue to ask: what is the nature of collaboration and "closeness" in these harrowing times? For theatre-makers and qualitative researchers who esteem co-presence, are there ways to cultivate proximity that do not involve in-person presence, still even now a tenuous reality?

We will share, in the following pages, how our fieldwork and post-fieldwork research and artistic practices have turned to the digital and the digital archive. And in this space, we have felt vulnerable and felt held; we have lost and found ourselves and each other in some surprising ways that we think might importantly inform both research practices and collective drama work. First, as a network of global researchers, we had to create closeness via regular Zoom meetings, virtually travelling to one another's spaces, where our "checking in" activities became a kind of life raft for many of us. Just like the weekly virtual drama club that we participated in with the youth in Toronto, we found ourselves, as a global research ecology, responsible to one another in surprising ways, upholding each other's realities in ways that seemed to matter. The unfolding of the pandemic through multiple waves varied wildly across our sites, with places like Taiwan seeming to have foregone the worst, at least initially, while Greece was completely shut down without the infrastructure needed after years of economic struggle. England went from dire circumstances to an impressive vaccine rollout, and back again to shocking infection numbers with new variants, while India somehow seemed miraculously unscathed until they suddenly were not. Colombia lived through multiple lockdowns until the social unrest under a repressive government regime became so overwhelming that our collaborators took to demonstrating on the streets, because, as our researcher-collaborator Jorge Arcila put it, "we will either die at home or die in the streets protesting. So, we will pick dying in the streets." And Canada, and especially Ontario, we felt was somehow lacking any form of leadership or clear messaging over many, many months, with expert advice being cast aside as a matter of course. Our Zoom sessions gave us a global picture far more profound than the news we were consuming about one another's contexts. It became a space for holding each other's fears and

uncertainties. And, it also became a site for the exchange of important new pedagogies and aesthetic responses. Reciprocity, sustainability, community.

Our paper invites the reader inside our research and creative processes. We will use our articulations, our images, and our video footage, to walk readers through our research and pedagogical planning. Then, we will reflect on our presence/being there with the young theatre-makers and with our global collaborators, and finally we will share the interesting aspects of our post-field activities, of "seeing differently," through engaging with the digital archive. Using the pedagogical work of an activity we called a "Time Capsule for Now," which was a creative practice that invited all of us to voice those things that were sustaining us in such dark times, we aim to illustrate the intermingling of a creative practice in theatre-making and a research process. Our work with young artists became a "lost and found" space to remember, to renew, to dream, to grieve, and to uphold the words and worlds of others.

A Theoretical Framing for Reading, Listening, and Viewing

Before turning to the research and creative practices, we would like to offer the reader a brief theoretical guide for our storytelling, visuals, and video representation. These theoretical concepts have been useful to us in our work, but in this case, we are trusting that they may act as a guide for the reader's engagement. There are infinite ways in which videos, stills, and words, can be perceived, so the following is an attempt to reveal one possible path for perceiving, one way—as an outsider to this work—of imagining into what was experienced by those of us in it, as an embodied mode of engagement with people, places, and creative work. And naturally, as an autonomous reader engaged from within a distinct cultural context, the reader will have their own relationship to climate change, to the pandemic, and their own histories with creative practice.

First, a research project so filled with diverse cultures, languages, geographies, intersectional identities, generations, political cultures, aesthetic practices, global North-South issues of power and access, we knew that developing our capacities to learn together, to surface our different histories and onto-epistemologies, would be the best way to build our research network and any resulting artistic products. Our instinctual turn to diversity (of perspective, social positioning, creative and research methods) is conceptually related to the current agricultural "permaculture" movement; planting polycultures to nourish, protect, and strengthen crops (see Solkinson & Chi, 2017), which itself learns from the deep wisdom of Indigenous traditional ecological and land-based knowledges (see Simpson, 2014; Wildcat et al., 2014). Environmental scientist Robin W. Kimmerer, of European and Anishinaabe ancestry, searches for synergies between Indigenous and scientific ecological knowledge at the intersection of nature and culture in order to find sustainable models for "the philosophy and practice of reciprocal, mutualistic relationships with the earth" (2002; 2012, p. 317). Our research interests also concern human stewardship and caretaking of a shared earth, but it is additionally the notion of "mutualistic relationships" with our collaborators (and their collaborators in each local environment) that paints for us not simply a reciprocity between constituents of a group, but a series of concentric circles of collaborators who are "in relation" with the spaces and people of individual sites as well as in a cross-site conversation about shared and different concerns; a "polyculture" of desires and vantage points. As the reader traces the work of our

Toronto team, it is important to keep in mind that local contexts in each site are planning and experimenting in similar, different, and culturally specific ways; each site is building local relationships among artists, teachers, youth, and researchers. And we are all reflecting, through our shared research questions and our theatre-making, on our greater relationship to the earth, its nurturing and its difficult reflections of negative human impact, like COVID-19 and climate catastrophes.

As well as "seeing" (reading, viewing videos), we wanted this article to especially invite "listening." In their work with a performative walking practice and dance documentary film, Jess Allen and Sara Penrhyn Jones (2012) have pointed to the dominance of the "visual," both culturally and in performance work, as the primary way of experiencing (see Mohr, 2007). However, Mohr (2007), suggests that the "listening body" is "engaged in finding its constantly changing relationship to the environment" (p. 193). Allen and Penrhyn Jones further put their "listening bodies to work" with their spectators and thereby felt compelled by the deeply personal things people felt able to share with them. We, too, have found, especially in COVID times, that listening, an active listening as a somatic practice, can invite profound affects and deeply intimate sharing. Many factors no doubt led to what we experienced as a deeply intimate context for sharing and creative imagining in our Toronto virtual drama club and with our global collaborators in our Zoom space, but listening, or the listening body, was a critically important one, as we hope our embedded media below reveal.

Lastly, and relatedly, collaborative ethnographic researchers Duncan McDuie-Ra and colleagues (2020) have asked an important question: how do researchers speak to the affective properties circulated during collaboration? As readers attend to our account here and watch the videos, and listen to what is intimately, joyously, tentatively, and courageously shared among collaborators, we invite them to consider what "affective inventory" (p. 1) is amassed and what it might tell us about our research concerns, our artistic work, and the social relations of our inquiry. McDuie-Ra et al. speak to the challenge of reading affect in collaborative research due to the ways that affect can be both personal and "transpersonal" in how it is located in, or expressed by, a particular person. They advise that as soon as you

> [. . .] draw upon cultural-linguistic repertoires to identify a feeling as emotion, emotions then become embedded within power relations. We can read the discursive and symbolic elements of 'affect' and 'emotions', but our interpretations will always be shaped by our own affective biographies and cultural linguistic memberships (Wetherell, 2015). (McDuie-Ra et al., 2020, p. 1)

So how do we tease apart the complicated affects we feel in collaborative work, especially when the boundary between self and other can become so porous, yet also shaped by historic relations of power? And importantly, how do we resist the pressure in mainstream qualitative research to separate out the affective biographies of collaborators in order to make sense of all that is happening between and within people? One preliminary "answer" we have to this profoundly complex undertaking, is to share our affective biographies explicitly with one another, to be "listening bodies" to one another in ways that reveal the social, artistic, and power relations, as well as remaining attuned to what these affects afford us and how they may also delimit what is ethical to ask, and to know. And as with McDuie-Ra et al., we actively resist the impulse to smoothen our experiences or troublesome affects, before, during, and after,

our research encounters. What follows, then, is one channel through the critically important, and unpredictable, affective landscape of our study.

Presence and Absence: Creative Encounters of Process and Practice in the Field

We describe that affective landscape, the methodological architecture, and relational ecologies, that structure our research and creative practices as a two-team approach, two different ways of "seeing," "listening" and "experiencing." We have researchers planning for the field, witnessing and experiencing "live" encounters with our participants, as well as a post facto team that engages digitally with collected data and artefacts. These two distinct perspectives offer us a complex engagement with our unfolding work, positioned as we are to ask what we can learn "in the presence of" and what we gain when we are "absent," without the performative pressures of conducting research in the moment.
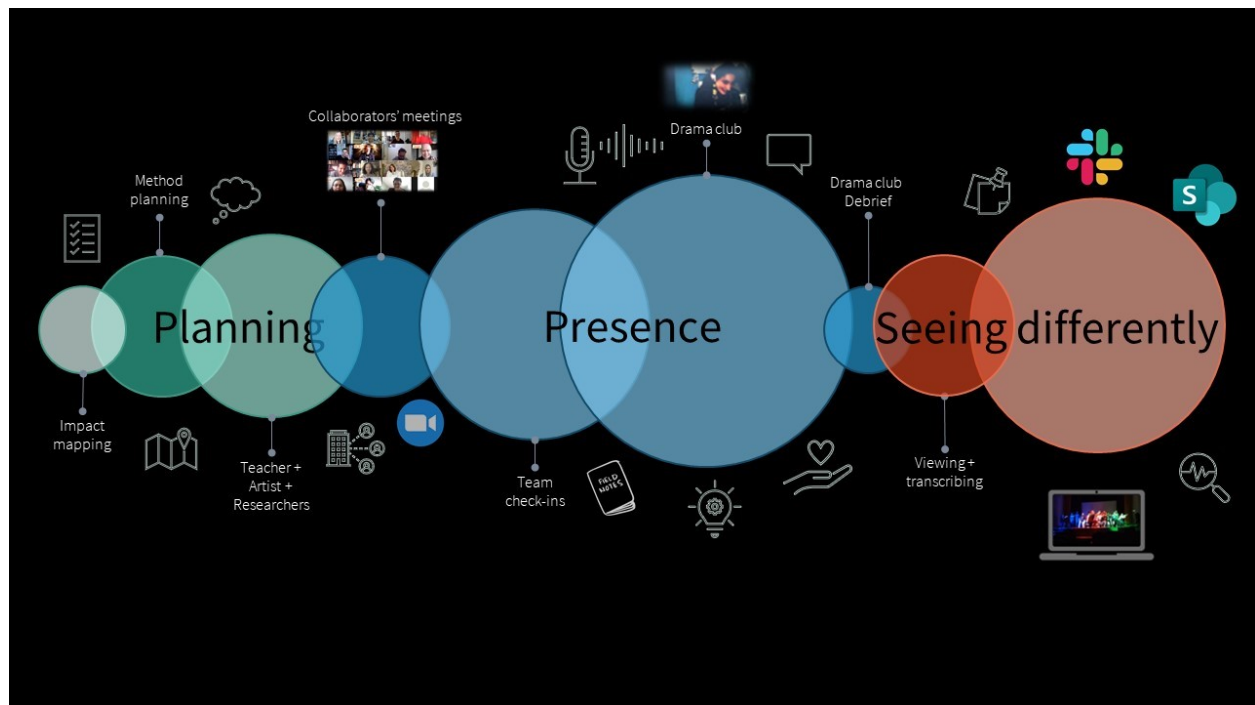

Fig. 2: Methodology-in-motion.

The past year (2020-2021) has also strengthened another methodological principle that is significant for our work. Our metho-pedagogical (see Gallagher & Wessels, 2011) practices are a relational and responsive mapping to the changing conditions we find ourselves in alongside our participants—what we have come to call our "methodology-in-motion" (Cardwell in Gallagher et al., 2020). We liken our methodology to a reflexive choreography where we recognize our "embodied and affective reactions as essential components that determine our research encounters just as they help determine our evolving pedagogies in the field and our subsequent ethnographic analyses" (p. 176). This methodological approach was troubled and tested as the global pandemic unfolded around us. How could we be "in motion" when the world had ground to a halt? How could we adapt our drama methodologies—those embodied and relational experiences in community—to what we initially perceived as the severe limitations of a virtual landscape? In the following writing, images, and video excerpts, the reader will come to understand how our arts-led creative explorations became a shared life raft for both our local and global research communities. We followed where the youth led, as they shared their worries and

concerns about COVID-19, as well as their desires and hopes that sparked unexpected and intimate opportunities for drama in digital spaces.

Planning for the Field

With in-person fieldwork not possible for Year 2, our teacher-collaborator "Mr. B. " invited us to participate in his weekly Zoom-based, after-school drama club at Cityscape High School, our research site in downtown Toronto. This diverse group of youth from across all grades (9-12), identified along the gender/sexual orientation spectrum, some with learning exceptionalities. Over the course of nine months, the drama club became an important "world" for all of us, where a committed sense of interconnection sustained us by virtue of our shared experiences and the listening space we cultivated. Not always easy or comfortable, this transcendent connection illustrated what can happen in unexpected places and "in between" spaces, like the Zoom room where we were simultaneously both present with, and absent from, each other. These experiences brought to life what Rothko (2004) describes as "liminal and live encounters that can be expansive and pushes outwards in all directions or it contracts and rushes inwards" (p. 47). Living with constant uncertainty and in the grips of a global pandemic, our world seemed to pulsate between the two, requiring deep responses of care, responsibility, and trust from researchers, participants, and global collaborators, alike.

The video excerpt below illustrates the initial planning or brainstorming sessions that framed our creative explorations in the field that followed. Always leaving plenty of room for our youth collaborators, the research team worked alongside our teacher-collaborator, Mr. B, and embedded artist Andrew Kushnir, to come up with pedagogical ideas to structure our drama methods. These lively meetings evoke Deleuze and Guattari's use of the rhizome as an "acentred, non-hierarchical, open system, ruptured by lines of flight which go off in all and any direction" (Deleuze and Guattari in Taylor, 2014, p. 243). This Deleuzean "logic of the AND" which allows for multiple entryways, is essential to both our imaginative planning process and to what transpires in the field (p. 244). In the following video, we come up with ideas about "what has sustained us" during the pandemic that ultimately becomes our imagined Time Capsule for Now project, picked up across our global sites.

Fig. 3: "Time capsule for now" activity (This thumbnail shows the Toronto research team members planning the "Time capsule for now" activity. Top from left: Mr. B, Lindsay Valve, Nancy Cardwell; Bottom from left: Kathleen Gallagher, Christine Balt, Andrew Kushnir). Click here to watch the video.

"Live" Encounters in the Field

From our planning stage, we craft a unit, a collection of ideas that we take into the field where we help create the conditions for youth to "make what they need" in response to their lived experiences (see Harvey, 2016, p. 35). Our roles in the field are often fluid as are those of our participants. We move between being experts and seekers of knowledge in our collaborative drama-making. There exists a strong current of reciprocity here, a multi-directional flow of support, comfort, discomfort, encouragement, critique, and spontaneous creating. The field can be an intense, beautiful, and challenging, space. We experience the affective, the "being with" and "being present"; we see things and we miss things as we attend to what is happening moment to moment, responding spontaneously and recording it—through field notes, through video and audio capture, through written researcher reflections and through our weekly post-class or club debrief sessions that happen immediately afterwards—our first round of sense or meaning-making as we marvel and wonder at what just transpired.

What really stands out "in the field" across this year of "presence" and "being present" with our local and global research community has to do with these unfolding new and unexpected ways we can be together across countries, languages, cultures, context, a climate crisis, and a global pandemic. For us, these discoveries have become new "measures of closeness" (Barad, 2012) and new ways to measure closeness—understandings that were not available to us before. The year offered us the particular paradox of being both present and absent at the same time. We had not been challenged like this before —to live in isolation, in bubbles, apart-together, to work in virtual spaces and to be "live" in 2D. While we had to work harder to make that "liveness" felt in cyberspace, this visual landscape became a kind of new space where remarkable things could happen—things that might not have happened "in person," like the Time Capsule for Now project. There was a strong current of risk and desire threaded through this sharing, a desire to be more deeply known to each other, and a desire, perhaps, to hold and inspire each other. The Time Capsule for Now activity was so full of meaning when we experienced it with the youth, that we repeated this creative prompt the very next week with our collaborators at our first global meeting of the fall. The video excerpt below illustrates that sense of sharing, and how things unfold in our local field and in our global research network.
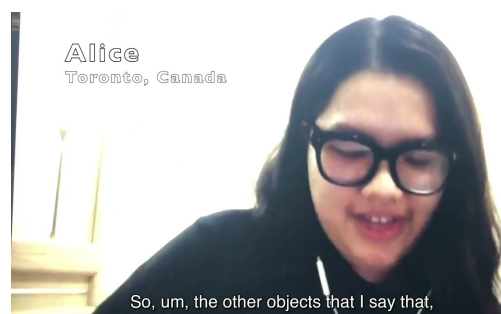

Fig. 4: The thumbnail features Alice, a youth participant from Toronto.
Click here to watch a video of youth participants and global researcher-collaborators share their pandemic "time capsules."

Quantitative Methods

It is not only our ethnographic field work that is "in motion," but our quantitative surveying as well. This work is in deep relationship with our ethnographic and our applied drama methods. The survey is not a tool to quantify our discoveries or to simply corroborate our qualitative findings. It is, instead, in conversation with the conceptual interests of our study and is also following the interests and preoccupations of our youth participants and global researcher-collaborators. It is a malleable tool less concerned with statistical significance, but more interested in the survey's capacity to place our individual youth participants in a fuller context (social, political, domestic) beyond the singular sites of the school or club in which we come to know them ethnographically.

Team member and quantitative specialist Lindsay Valve writes about the value of differences between sites that compel an adaptive and refractive approach to quantitative analysis. What she calls a "refractive approach" works contrary to standard survey tools that often minimize variation, creating a linear path to impact or outcomes, captured at one moment in time. Instead, our approach stays alert to refractive impulses, desires, ideas, and responses, taking place in "real time" and at multiple points to further inform, as in an iterative process, our "methodology-in-motion" and to reveal variations or aspects of the qualitative data that may be hidden from our perceptual frame.

> Embracing instead of resisting difference allows us to leverage the local site context as a meaning-making backdrop to guide the generation and analysis of data. This flexibility enables a more realistic representation of a global frame, while preserving the complexity, texture, and nuance of each site . . . bringing us closer to our collaborators and participants, by offering a new dimension of intimacy found at the intersection of global and local experiences.(Gallagher et al., forthcoming)

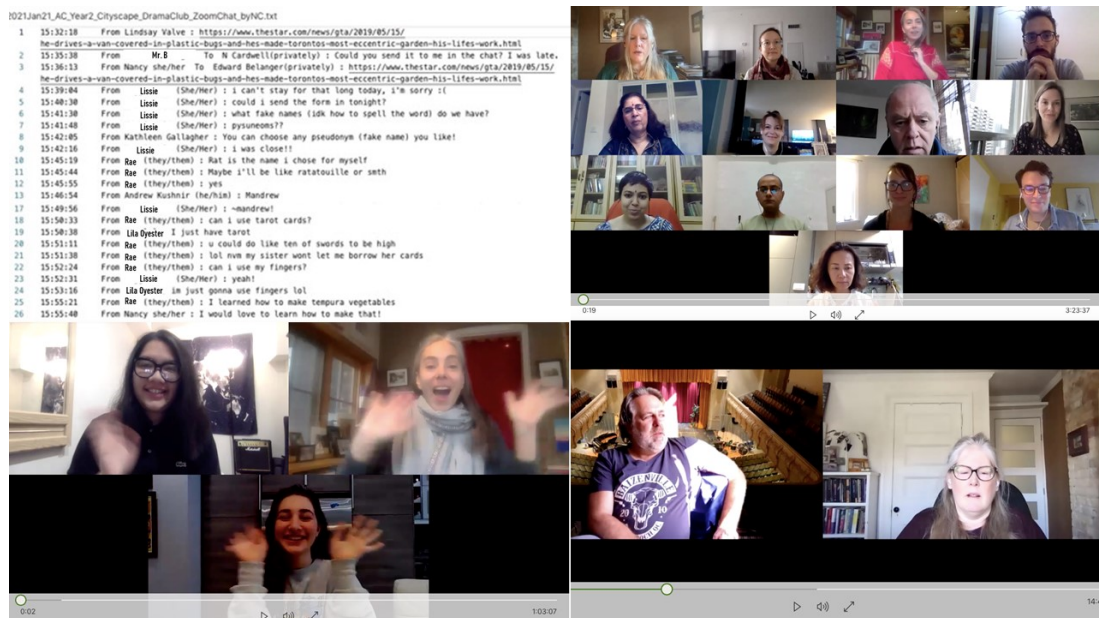## Seeing/ "Being With" Differently: Deferred Reciprocity

Fig. 5: View that the post-facto team sees.

After the time in the field (in-person in year 1 and virtually in year 2), the post-facto team then has the compelling experience of watching the process and relationships of the drama club from a later time and different space. Through the recordings, the post-facto researchers see both the researcher-participants and the youth-participants in the drama space, and witness the post-class debriefs of the researchers, which are often commentaries on the subtler tensions or moments of surprise within the classroom. While the in-field researchers are always both participants and observers in the field, hyper-sensitive to the needs of the moment and poised for action, the post-facto researchers watch from afar, without any immediate reciprocity expected from the people in the video. The post-facto team constitutes the first audience to the stories that the in-field team tells, and ultimately become coauthors of the stories that we (researchers, participants, and collaborators) tell together.

As the classes shifted online in post-pandemic times, the video data available to the post-facto researchers was in the form of Zoom recordings. The Zoom platform, "was built primarily for enterprise customers" (Yuan, 2020) and keeps us aware that it is primarily a business initiative, with its restrictions on non-paying users. In spite of the widespread apprehension about creative engagement over Zoom (or other online platforms) and misgivings about how this would restrict possibilities, what unfolded was not simply a lesser alternative to in-person engagement, but a distinctly different platform where new rules of engagement could be set. While Zoom has increased its revenue manifold since 2020, debuting in Forbes's list of the largest public companies, it has also allowed people around the world to share their worries and dreams, across distances magnified by the pandemic (Messamore, 2020). In our most recent Zoom meeting with our global collaborators, one of our collaborators, Urvashi Sahni, shares how her India-based NGO Study Hall Educational Foundation (SHEF, 2021) had been battling the pandemic situation. Apart from providing people material support in the form of basic necessities, she also talked

about "holding each other very hard; providing all the compassionate, caring listening . . . " Such communities of care, based on active, empathetic listening, were created on different levels within the project.

The virtual drama club was always more about the experience of being-in-relation than it was about producing an end-product. The Time Capsule for Now activity, for instance, focused on shared-realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, experienced acutely by youth-participants as well as researchers. The activity seemed to be an end in itself, a version of "check-in" that did not have the pressure to make something beyond the world of itself. The researchers participated in this as the youth did, creating space for each other and sharing vulnerabilities and dreams. The videos feature researchers worrying over how their flat was not clean enough to showcase, or they were unable to keep plants alive before the lockdown, or how they are not an early riser. To the audience of these stories, these informally shared and ostensibly unimportant pieces of information come across not as self-deprecating comments, but as assurances to the youth that the research team members, too, struggle to cope in demanding times. This acknowledgment on one of the very first days of researcher presence in the drama-club was crucial in the formation of this shared platform, where the post-facto team continued to witness complex and intimate offerings over the school year. The check-ins became not just an activity, but a ritual of sorts, repeated in each class and in each global collaborators' meeting, opening, for each of us, windows to others' worlds.

Team member Christine Balt (2020) has written, in the context of a previous research project (see Radical Hope), about her encounters with the video data of participants she had never met, coming later to that project, during the post-fieldwork phase. She talks about the "relational screen" of the video recording device. As a post-facto researcher, she looked at the camera captures of the researchers who were moving around the drama space, participating as well as recording activities in the room, and Balt appreciated the lack of "objective stance" of the camera. (p. 161) As our research moved online, the "relational screen" was replaced by the objective Zoom screen in which people appeared in their small squares. The recordings, generally in grid-view (all participants visible at once), show data unmediated by the subjectivity of the in-field researchers. However, the data available was still transgressive. Each little box in Zoom—for those who had their cameras on—were windows onto different worlds. Like a proscenium stage, every item within these tiny frames seemed to signify something beyond itself. Each book, flag, poster, or wall art in the background, and later Zoom virtual backgrounds, invited readings. The boxes became their own small "plays," each sharing designs of living that provoked curiosity and communicated significance.

On Zoom, we generally see a "medium close-up" view of a person. In cinema, a medium close-up is a shot that,

> [. . .] showcases the face of a subject, letting audiences see small nuances of behaviour and emotion while eliciting a higher degree of identification and empathy; the slightly wider framing [than the close shot] also lets body language convey meaning by the inclusion of a character's shoulders. (Mercado, 2013, p. 41)

Informed consent to this recording of a personal space of being implies trust in those to which this recording would be revealed. This trust calls for a sense of responsibility for the witnesses of these personal spaces, the post-facto researchers watching the medium-close movies of shared intimacies.

The post-facto and the in-field teams have regular "meaning-making meetings" together in which inferences, questions, and hunches from our differently situated observations are exchanged. The post-facto team and the research participants, however, do not directly meet each other, but they interact, in a way, once removed. The in-field team brings the nuances of the drama classroom to the post-facto team and takes back to the classroom and the youth participants the ethos of care of the larger research team, including the global collaborators, thus connecting global communities of care. Gallagher has called this phenomenon "deferred reciprocity" (Team meeting, May 19, 2021). The mediation of such a deferred reciprocity slows the process, giving us more time to think about, and to appreciate, what we share. This slowness is a deliberate part of the methodology of the project, as it creates a space for deeper engagements and interaction within and across our various communities. And, importantly, a carefully slow movement interrupts the race to "findings" or answers, letting "relationships grow at the speed of trust" (Steinem, 2015).

To Conclude

As with so many research and artistic projects during COVID, we too "pivoted," the word now commonplace in our vocabulary. It is an especially suitable word for us because it signals movement, a shift from standing still, an about-face, a new direction. All of these things came to pass in the context of our global collaborative ethnography. With our global collaborators, we reached out more often and in surprisingly intimate ways; we were helpful to others and felt held by them in return. With our youth participants, we let the theatre-making take a back seat while we found a way to embrace the uncertainty of the time and gently turn towards the fear and concern that were inescapable. We came together in our isolation. Apart-together.

All the while, the theatre-making stood quietly in the background, an old, patient friend waiting to be invited in, whispering, "make what you need," friends; we can make this drama space anything we want it to be. And so, the research followed the whisper of the theatre, taking its cue in turn from the gentle and supportive pedagogy of the teacher, Mr. B. And we, the researcher-participants, chanced breathing our own worries into the space, and then, deeply benefited from the care and compassion we found. We lost our research plan, but we found ourselves and each other. We became the listening bodies we needed to be for one another. We created what was mattering to us. And, in that seemingly dispassionate Zoom space, we became highly attuned to our "affective inventory" and it did not steer us wrong. The space itself became a community project, a "work," and our research and theatre-making, are likely forever altered.

Note

1. Audacious Citizenship Project (2019-2024). Click here to listen to a soundscape of the "Voices of youth participants, global collaborators, and Toronto research team members."

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