

Carto-Elicitation: Improvised Performances/Narratives of Identity, Memory, and Sites of Fascination

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Abstract

This paper describes the pedagogical roots of the work we do, both as teachers and as performers; and how our work reaches beyond the classroom and into community, eliciting narratives and weaving them through improvised dance and music collaborations, eventually onto the walls of an art museum. Our concept was to solicit stories that told of some event that happened in a particular place, and that left a memory that was tethered to that place. We collected stories, pooled our own stories, “pinned” stories to their geographic locations, and then transformed these stories through improvised movement and sound.

Background

We met by chance in an art gallery at University of Regina. Kathryn was installing a show of her work, *The Anthropology of the Discard*, and Terry was visiting the university to do research in the archives. The seeds of this chance meeting grew in multiple directions, culminating in the work we created for the Windsor-Essex Triennial in 2017. We are both academics in the field of education, and performers in our separate disciplines of music and dance. The work we first explored together often included our students and colleagues, as we workshopped collaborative improvisation and storytelling in our university classrooms and performance spaces. The connections between creation, performance, research, and pedagogy, were intentionally intertwined (Carroll, 2006; Eisner, 2002). This paper will describe the pedagogical roots of the work we do, both as teachers and as performers; and how our work reached beyond the classroom and into community, eliciting narratives and weaving them through improvised dance and music collaborations, and onto the walls of an art museum.

In performance work, the performer brings a reflective practice that must be understood as both analogous to, and distinct from, other forms of evidence and text-based research. The creative work is a simultaneous experiential practice that requires preparatory research and knowledge acquisition, and is realized through performance praxis (e.g., practice and rehearsal that integrates and applies the preparatory knowledge to develop an interpretation through iteration, through ongoing formative analysis, and self-critique); and the performance event, when all of the foregoing research, preparation, and interpretation are presented in a public venue which is a fluid research moment during which the performer is actively creating, responding, adapting, and communicating. The performer/researcher can be described as a “mindful practitioner” engaged in “critical reflective investigative praxis which could include practicing theory, practice into theory, practical theory, theory into practice, theorizing practice, theoretical practice” (Stewart, 2006, p. 2). Practice, in this usage, is a living enactment of theoretical

knowledge and lived experience; and dissemination is a simultaneous process with the audience as a necessary coproducer (Woodruff, 2008). The performance can be seen as a laboratory (Wright, 2008), but one which takes place in the public eye (and ear) in real time. Performance produces a theory of possibility where “imaginative insight is constructed from a creative and critical practice” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 20). For the musician or dancer, it is also an act of identity, a constituting performance of self as artist (Smith, 2001). The work we do as musician or dancer is a performance of identity; and an extension of inquiry and knowledge production (Sefton & Bayley, 2012).

Kathryn is a dancer and has developed a body of work using a method that she describes as Embodied Poetic Narrative—embodied performative play with objects and narratives. Her dance/theatre improvisations are often in collaboration with other artists. Terry is a cellist and has often collaborated with composers, artists, and other musicians on new creations. As we first got to know each other, and found common ground in our previous performance practices, it seemed natural to meet in the studio, and to use dance and music to further our conversation. Over the following 18 months, we met and worked together in both Regina and Windsor, ran workshops and open studios with our university students and with other musician and dance collaborators, and gave public performances of our improvisations. One outcome of our collaboration is a process that we have named “carto elicitation”—mapping sites of fascination and memory and recovering stories that have been discarded or forgotten. We transform stories through improvised movement and sound.

Carto-Elicitation: Performance Pedagogy in the Classroom

In our earliest iteration of this process, we worked with Kathryn’s dance students in the Faculty of Education, and dancers from her studio dance classes. We had students draw pictures of “home”—representing however they wished the site of memory that they identified as home (Figure 1). Then Kathryn and Terry would improvise through music and through dance, using the image as a springboard to create a new narrative. This form of artistic transformation is called transmediation, which Darwin (2020) describes as “the process of adapting an existing text into another medium. This distinction is particularly relevant as it highlights the conventions, affordances and constraints of different media, and the diverse logics that govern each of them” (p. 6). The shift from one system of signs and signification to another is important, as “transmediation is a critical act in its resistance to the structure and conventions of an original text, and a creative act in its reimagination of it” (Darwin, 2020, p. 7). Telling a story with words, or by drawing a picture, or by creating a danced improvisation, all work with their own tropes, their own “diverse logics;” so the result is not a translation, nor an illustration, but dwells in difference.

The idea of home may elicit traumatic memory as easily as nostalgic longing. It may be complicated by historic displacement, colonialization, periods of mass internment, or cultural erasure. Artists have used many different disciplines to explore issues of identity and place through (re)storying and (re)presenting (Chin et al., 2021; Hill, 2015). As Chin (2021) observes, narrative transformed through art “performs a different form of remembering. Attending to these different approaches to history is not simply an

academic exercise. The different ways that pasts are produced have consequences for how belonging, citizenship, identity, and community are constructed” (p. 269).

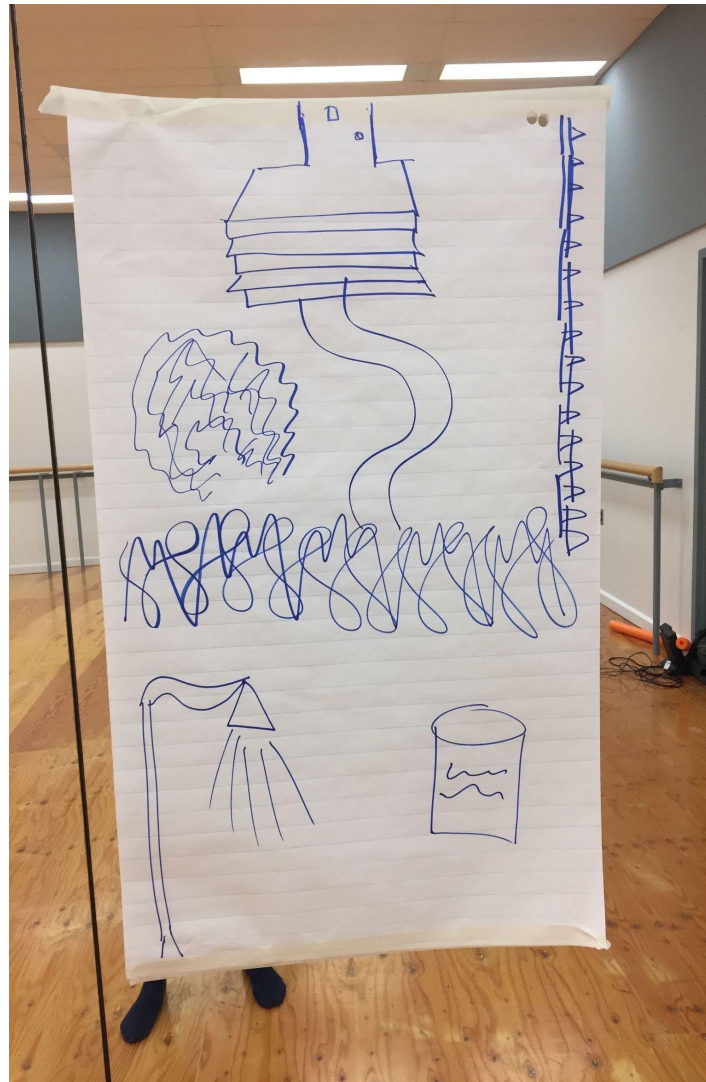


Fig. 1 Drawing of “Home.” University of Regina. Photo credit: Kathryn Ricketts.

The students volunteered to improvise dance, based on their story, or on someone else’s story of “home,” in conjunction with Terry’s improvisations. At the end of class, we gathered to view the drawings, laid out on the floor like memory maps. Sometimes the person who created the drawing would tell a story—the story behind the drawing. Which would be another transformation of the narrative, a different manifestation of memory, tethered to place.

The stories were fragmented and re-constructed through sound and movement, thereby losing some of the specificity and moving into a poetic space where new meaning could be read in the spaces between the words. The narratives travelled in and through movement and theatre vignettes, reshaped and reconstituted through music, creating new meanings by their reenactments (Figure 2). The author of the text no longer owned the story as it created another layer for someone else’s movement phrase.¹ This kind

of surrendering of authorship begins to cultivate a new ecology or culture in the collaborative team, which becomes the mechanics of making a community. Rather than erasure of self and of personal stories, it becomes an accumulation and layering of others within one's own personal framework. There is a sense of a collective generating of creative impulses and a collective sharing and crafting of shared storying.



Fig. 2 Dance improv of a story of "home." University of Regina.

Shapiro (2008) describes the memory inscribed in the body as a kind of surrender. These memories are recognized as tethered to larger socio-political constructs and are revealed collectively, and in this process, Shapiro, with her students, cultivates a shared language. This language speaks beyond them, as the memories and stories resonate commonalities within the human condition. This moves the meaning beyond the specificity of preconceived frameworks of understandings and dialects that may be cultivated within the intensity of a particular collected group. Shapiro (2008) situates this community-building work in a larger context, “To move into global aesthetics means to transcend the art itself and connect the meaning-making process to self and world” (p. 269). In this process, the students learn to use dance as a creative and vital tool for articulating visions of self and other.

Carto-Elicitation: Performance Art in the Gallery

When we saw the Art Gallery of Windsor call for submissions for the 2017 Triennial, with its theme of “Downtown—downtown destruction and downtown renewal,” it immediately spoke to us. Kathryn had visited Windsor in spring of 2016 to work with Terry’s students at the university, and as Terry took her on a tour of the city, Kathryn would hang out the car window with her phone, snapping photographs. What was it that drew her to a particular image? What was it that compelled us to stop the car and peer through the dusty windows of a long-shuttered store? We began to think of these sites, and the way they drew us in, as “sites of fascination.” Terry had moved to Windsor 12 years previously and told Kathryn her stories of Windsor and of the people and places she had come to know. Behind every site of fascination, we began to imagine how we could bring these stories into a shape that could find a voice and a space in the art gallery.

Our idea was to collect stories, “pin” stories to their geographic locations, and then transform these stories through improvised movement and sound. We submitted our work—more of a concept than a “work” at that point, as we had not fully developed how the work would take shape or be “shown” in a gallery venue over several months—to the Windsor Triennial of Contemporary Art 2017. This is a peer-refereed group exhibition in a public art museum. Proposals are refereed by a panel of professional artists. Once our proposal was accepted (Sefton & Ricketts, 2018b), we began “collecting”—soliciting stories that told of some event that happened in a particular location in Windsor, and that left a memory that was tethered to that place. We asked colleagues, students, and strangers to contribute stories. We printed postcard invitations (Figure 3), put out requests on social media, and put out a general call to the public when we were interviewed on CBC radio.



Fig 3. Postcard front: distributed to solicit stories from the public. Photo credit: Kathryn Ricketts.

We continued to develop new stories during the three months of the exhibition, and to upload these to the installation, keeping the dynamic of cumulative storytelling open-ended. By the time the exhibition closed, we had created, performed, video recorded, and uploaded 20 stories to the gallery installation. Some of the stories were as brief as a few sentences on the back of a postcard; others were pages long; one was submitted in Arabic, which we had to have translated. What they all had in common was a sense of located-ness—this event, this memory, happened here—in a place that we could “pin” on a map of the city.

Each story went through two transformations. We read the story in its entirety and then we extracted key phrases or images. We did this work separately, to keep from imposing or presupposing a particular reading on each other.

Simon’s Story: Campbell Street [extract]:

Windsor is strange for me. I am a male international student to do a master program at University of Windsor. I was picked up at the Windsor airport by the landlord who contracted with me for a year, living in Campbell Street. When he drove me on the high express way, I was homesick. Everything was uncertain. The landlord ushered me into my room with my two heavy travel cases. It was 1:00 am and dark outside. Due to the time difference, I was energetic; so, I decided to chat with my parents till morning. I was so hungry but I did not have any food with me. I came downstairs to find something eatable. There were some cold and hard pizza on the table. I took one slice. It was so quiet outside. What was going on? I was afraid to go outside. I spent my whole in the house without no one talking to me. That day was my birthday, July 1. I ate some

cold pizza to celebrate my birthday. My friends and parents all fell asleep. I just came upstairs and downstairs for several times. I realized that I could not do like this anymore because it consumed my energy. The pizzas were almost eaten up by me. I will soon starve. What flashed in my mind was the easiest way to keep energy: sleep. So, I was waked by the sound of the fireworks. I saw what happened through the window. Were those fireworks celebrating my birthday? I smiled bitterly. Gradually, all pizzas were gone. I did not want to go outside because I was afraid of speaking English and getting lost in the street. When my roommates came into the house, I almost “starve”. They explained to me why there was few people and quiet that day: July 1 is Canada day, which is also my birthday. What a coincident!

We distilled the original story into poetic form, which we then transferred to slides (Figure 4):

***I was picked up at the Windsor airport by the landlord
The landlord ushered me into my room with my two heavy travel cases.
It was 1:00 am and dark outside
I was so hungry but I did not have any food with me.
I came downstairs to find something eatable
There were some cold and hard pizza on the table
I took one slice.
It was so quiet outside. What was going on?
I was afraid to go outside
That day was my birthday, July 1.
Sleep.
I was waked by the sound of the fireworks
I saw what happened through the window
Were those fireworks celebrating my birthday?
I smiled bitterly
Gradually, all pizzas were gone.***

We recorded our performances in the television studio at University of Windsor (Figure 5). Each improvisation was based on, or inspired by, the narrative we had extracted from a story. Terry improvised on cello and Kathryn improvised dance. We set a framework of two to three minutes for each improv. This was a pragmatic decision, to keep the accumulated length of multiple stories from becoming overwhelming; and to recognize the finite attention span of the spectator in a gallery setting. The performances were video recorded by a university video technician. We then edited the video and developed a parallel show of slides which showed the edited story text, the location on a map, and photographs of the area in Windsor. In the gallery, two screens were installed side by side, one projecting our improvised performances, the other projecting the slides of text and images. We intentionally did not “sync” them (i.e., keep the timing so the text on one screen would be simultaneous with the video performance on the other). We did not want the viewer to see the text as “illustrated” by the performance; rather, we wanted the performances and the texts to exist and “breathe” on their own. The occasional accidental syncing of performance and text created chance moments of surprise—of “aha.”

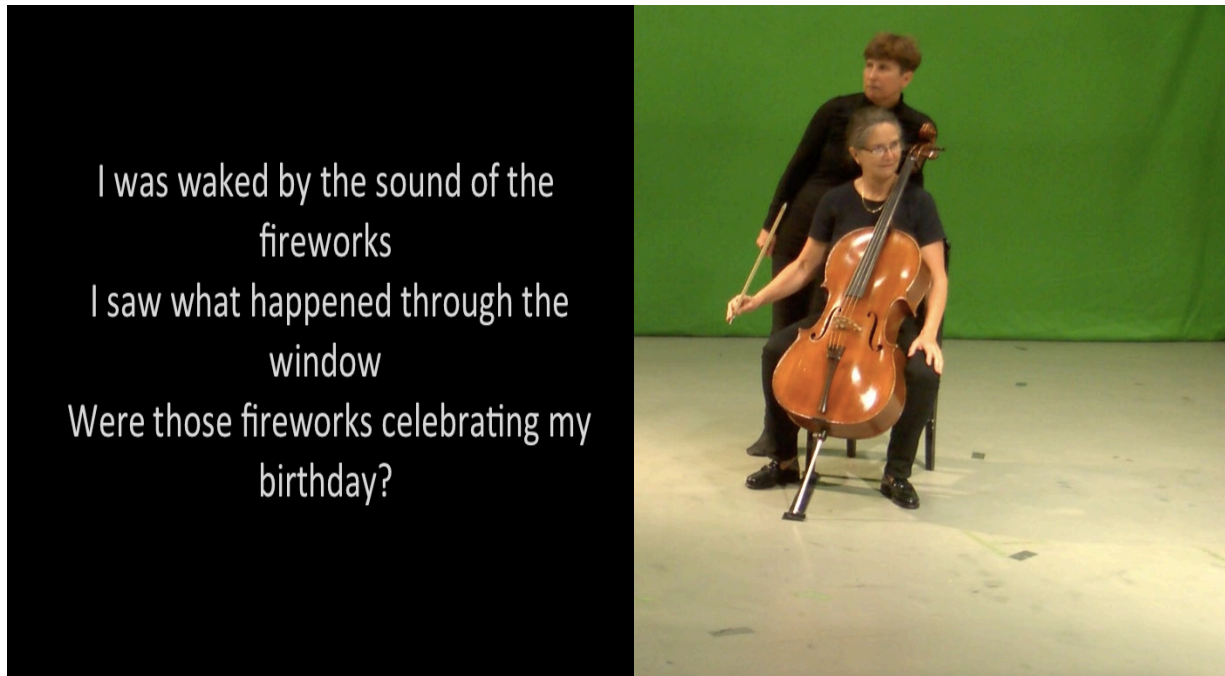


Fig. 4: Slide from Windsor Story: Campbell Street.

Fig. 5: Recording studio: Video still.

Collaborative work begins, proceeds, and creates, through a process that is distinctly different than sole authorship. Negotiation and navigation between the inner imaginary of each collaborator is a constant. In our current work, *Stories of Windsor*, we included an additional “unknown” collaborator—stories that were contributed by others. We began the process by each telling our own story, a story that was in some way rooted in place, in an actual site in Windsor. We then reached out, through friends and colleagues and social media, to invite stories from the public. This method introduces a random and unpredictable element, which prompts the next stages of response, translation, and improvisation.

Performance has duration. Live performance is a different creature than a video recording of a performance. Our work uses both of these modalities. The art object is the installation of video screens and projections, and the archived and looped recordings of video, images, and texts. While the videos have duration as a material aspect of the medium, the spectator controls the length of their own engagement with the art object. During live performance, duration is an essential element of the creative act, and is eventually determined by the interplay of each of us as we execute our art practice, as we performatively structure the narrative, and as each of us arrives at a sense of when the story is “done.”

What is “place” in the context of this project? Is it a site in the body? or the space mapped out by the dancer in motion? or the acoustical space filled by the sound of a musical instrument? or the built environment of the city, or of a room in a house? or the place of memory—once a physical location but now possibly only remaining as a trace in the mind? We began our research for this project by driving through the streets of Windsor, taking photographs of old signs, wrought-iron fences, dusty bottles in store windows, factory smokestacks. Objects are like fascia between the land we occupy and the meaning we infuse it with. There is a relationship between the object and the body, where history is both remembered and constructed.

The “real” world” in which we find ourselves, then—the very world our sciences strive to fathom—is not a sheer “object” from which all subjects and subjective qualities could be pared away, but is rather an intertwined matrix of sensation and perception. (Abram, 2012)

Carto-elicitation directly connects personal narrative to place. It burrows into eidetic memory—the smell, the feel, the taste of some moment in the past—to elicit a vivid image imbued with sensory and emotional meaning. We map the stories, knowing that these stories will provoke more stories, and it is this shared tracing of interconnected lives, both local and beyond, that continues throughout the living installation of this exhibition. In a small way, it is an attempt to recover some of what has been lost: “Post modern life is characterized by the erasure of history and the loss of social memory” (Deutsche, 1991, p. 201).

Kathryn: As a dancer when trying to remember a piece of choreography, I often go back to the exact place and orientation in the studio to help provoke the memory. With this project, I am fascinated by how the location is what holds the memory and there is an act of generosity and sometimes reticence, as our storytellers excavate through place to the narrative. To continue the metaphor, I feel that both Terry and I are like archaeologists brushing the soil away from the shards of memory and carefully cataloguing them but not without our own choice making in preserving what is essential to our re-imaginings of the story.

In our trans-mediation of the story from text to sound and movement, we filter the story through our own lived experiences and this fusion of both private and combined choices complexifies this process. The next layer is those who witness these performances then hold another iteration in their ‘read’ of the performance and this will often act as a catalyst for another story and so the cycle continues. The stories I work with are not necessarily and often not manifesting linguistic/vocal but rather kinaesthetic/performative. I believe that within the body we store information that is meant to be resuscitated not necessarily or exclusively through spoken or written language.

Terry: The question people most often ask about improvisation is, “how you do it?” The mechanics of improvisation are not easily explained. The intersection of text/story and music/dance performance are not two realizations of the same idea. We never talk about what we are going to do before we do it. First, we each read through the story, as we have distilled it. Then we enter the studio space which contains only a chair for me to sit on, and a “green screen” behind us. Sometimes I make the first “gesture”—a sound or a note on my cello, plucked or bowed, scraped or hit. Sometimes Kathryn begins, and her movement becomes the first “utterance” that I respond to. Improvising with another person is a conversation, but we are conversing in different languages. I always hold the story in my mind, like a tableau, or a series of tableaux. So, although part of what I do is influenced by or in response to Kathryn, I also am allowing the story to manifest itself through the sounds I am creating, and the gestures used to create the sounds.

Sometimes we do two “takes” if we feel that we haven’t quite captured it the first time—whatever “it” is—but without discussing it. This is an almost entirely nonverbal process.

The gallery location allotted to our installation turned out to be a significant factor; indeed, it became its own “site of fascination,” a space that inflected our creative work as it was in process, shaped the look and impact of the installed artwork, and inspired the performances and further narratives that took place there. We thought of it and talked about it as “our space.” From our first conversation with the curator, we had a territorial sense of how our work would inhabit a particular space. First, we were allotted a “nook,” defined by a half wall and an adjacent wall. We imagined the work in that spot, and we were

initially startled to realize that our work, based as it was on improvised movement and sound and on a sensorial and emotive response to oral history, was going to be presented as two “cool” screens. When Terry suggested projecting maps onto the floor, it began to reincarnate as three-dimensional; and when we proposed live performances, it grew a living, breathing body. After the curator offered us the entire space of an end gallery, our imagination filled that room, with darkness and with images and with performances. We each imagined it differently. When Kathryn arrived in Windsor to record our performances, and we visited the gallery and walked the space again, one of us had a vision of two screens talking to each other across the room, while the other imagined the screens side by side. We ultimately decided on two screens side by side, but not synchronized, with the historic maps projected onto the floor in a continuously changing loop. Once installed, the audio from the videos, projected from two speakers—the sound of cello and of dancer’s foot fall—spread out, lapping up against other artworks, insinuating our performances of place into the entire exhibition.

The generous exhibition space allotted to us provided enough room for third and fourth elements. The third element was made up of archival maps of Windsor. Terry visited the map archives in the Windsor Public Library, and with their help and permission, photographed multiple historic maps of Windsor, from the earliest arrival of European settlers, through its urban growth and transformation in the 20th Century. These images were then enhanced to provide exceptional resolution, so they could be projected from the gallery ceiling onto the polished cement gallery floor. The map projections rotated in random order.

The fourth element was live performance (Figure 5). For the opening of the exhibit, and again during the exhibit, we performed live(d) improvisations in the space that was lit by the two screens and by the map projection. Spectators gathered around the perimeter of the area lit by the projected maps.



Fig. 6: Windsor Stories: Public performance. Photo credit: Jaclyn Meloche, AGW Curator, 2017.

In the gallery, just off to one side of our screens, a box was located where the public could submit “postcard” stories of their lived experiences in Windsor. For each live performance, we took stories from this cache (Figure 6), read the story aloud, and then created an improvisation.

The following is one of those postcard stories, and our reflections on our improvised performance:

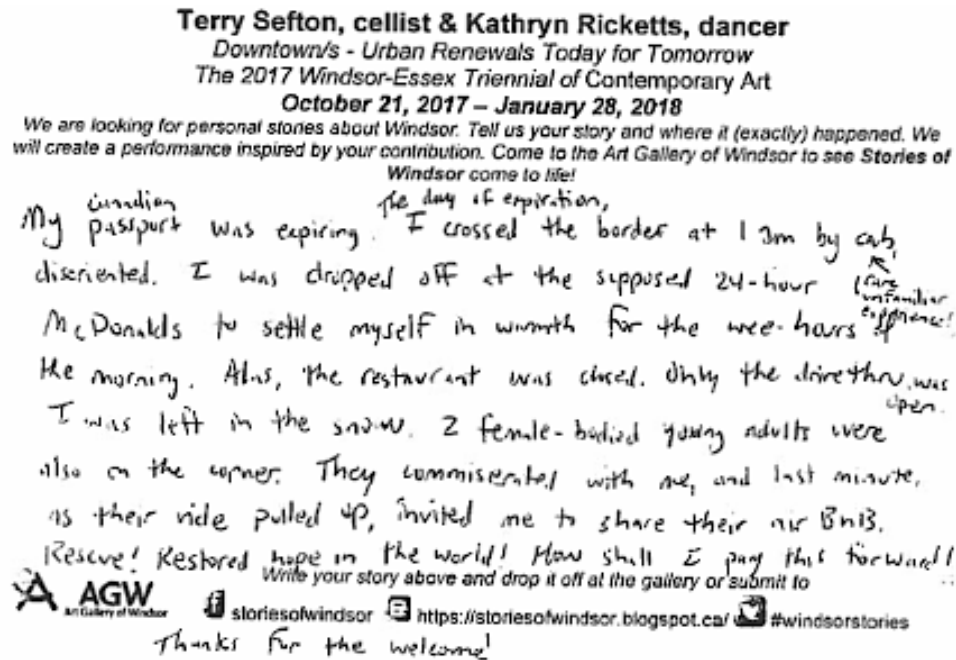


Fig. 7: Postcard verso: submitted during the gallery exhibit.

Kathryn:

I am moving with the idea of crossing the border at 3AM by Cab with an expired passport...disoriented. My movements are weighted as I cross from one threshold to another but my neck and head is spinning in my disorientation. But I start to hear Terry's music indicate the end of the story ... Rescue, restored ... I need to shift from my weighted turning to something that is light and linear to join her where she is in the story.

Terry:

We are performing in the Windsor Art Gallery in a space just 20 feet or so from the “prow” of the gallery, from windows that look over the Detroit River to the City of Detroit, the river an historic barrier to so many who sought refuge in Canada. The fragmented sound of strings plucked then silence then rapping my knuckles on the wooden belly, hitting the bridge of my cello with my bow – how precarious this passage from one side to another, and then, unexpected, the bow finds the string, smoothly draws out a sound that endures that resonates and wraps around the place we have created, as Kathryn reaches out, pulls at the last loose thread and weaves us together.

We assume the reader/spectator will take away their own interpretation. In leaving the exhibition open to new stories, by inviting the spectator to contribute their own story, we invite the unknown Other to join in the creative act:

What is it today to think or to imagine, to construct or to design, in relation not to “things made” but to “things in the making”?... To think about things in the making is... to think, and think of ourselves, “experimentally.” (Rajchman, 2000, as cited in Elsworth, 2005)

Research as performance and performance as research is a “queer” ground of inquiry, uneven and indirect, a zigzag process of connecting meaning with intent with translation with discovery with construction, and so on. This creates a zone of responsibility for the spectator. The outcome, in analytic terms, is a subtle change of atmosphere, a realignment of molecules, a being-ness that cannot be what was before, a growth of interior landscape, that finds new rooms in the dream house. At its core, at the site of its happening, is an intersection—of performer, of witness, and of space, in time.

What we tried to create together on this shifting terrain of narrative is a glimpse into the dim corners and the forgotten shops, into quiet stories of almost forgotten memories, of a place that now informs the next place. This space, and this time, was Windsor, Ontario, 2017. *Stories of...*, the performative re-imaginings of place and time, could be resituated and performed in any other place, wherever sites of fascination exist, wherever place is preserved in memory, and stories are shared. Each of the many stages of transmediation within a creative process serves as a highly individualistic approach to the subject matter. These interpretations will access or trigger personal associations which are integrated into the work, allowing for surprising material to surface. The unexpected outcomes are what we believe is the magic in this process of animating text or story, and ultimately what facilitates emotional meaning making, translated and transformed through movement and sound. Carto-elicitation and open-ended creative collaboration provided the key to taking specific linear narratives, pinned to a particular place, and moving them out into a broader terrain of possibility and interpretation.

Note

1. “The choreographic process may be divided ... into three phases: gathering together the movement material, developing movements into dance phrases, and creating the final structure of the work.” (Britannica, n.d.).

Acknowledgment

This paper is adapted from a catalogue essay published for the 2017 Windsor-Essex Triennial (Sefton & Ricketts, 2018a).

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Kathryn Ricketts has been working for the past 40 years in the field of dance, theatre and visual arts, performing and teaching throughout Europe, South America, Africa, Australia, and Canada. Her work in studios, galleries, theatres, and environmental sites focuses on social/political issues through the languages of dance, theatre, text, technology, and visual art. Her Doctoral research furthered this into areas of literacy, embodiment, and cultural studies with a method she has coined Embodied Poetic Narrative. She is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina and Director of the Field office.