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The First Thing We Make is the Conditions of our Meeting

A gathering on gathering

THERON SCHMIDT WITH DIANA DAMIAN MARTIN, MICK DOUGLAS, REZA MIRABI, ELLEN O'BRIEN, RAJNI SHAH, VAL SMITH, LIZZIE THOMSON AND JULIE VULCAN

We gather for various reasons. We gather to create, to make a decision, to reflect and to honour, to protest, to learn, to listen to one another. And in the gathering *to*, we also gather. The first thing we make is the gathering itself.

How can we approach that making of gathering as a creative and expansive endeavour? Social movement organizers have undertaken numerous experiments and revisions towards intentional approaches to collective process, from the feminist insight that 'structurelessness' simply masks inherent hierarchies of privilege (Freeman 2013 [1970]), to the deliberative processes of consensus-based decision-making and Sociocracy (see Schmidt 2022). For some activists, these experiments with formal process have been not only the means to an intervention but are themselves the intervention; as the late David Graeber, one of the organizers of the so-called 'alter-globalization' movements, reflected, 'Those new forms of organization *are* its ideology' (Graeber 2002: 70). Intentional structures and creative processes can make distributions of power visible, tangible and available for critique. As Chantal Mouffe writes, 'Instead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion, democratic politics requires us to bring them to the fore, to *make them visible* so that they can enter the terrain of contestation' (2000: 33–4).

More recent activists and thinkers have emphasized an attention to more-than-human worlds for models of collective agency. In *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown (2017) takes inspiration from the life-formations of mushrooms, ants, ferns, dandelions and more in order to suggest 'ways for humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions'. Alexis Pauline Gumbs asks what she can learn as an 'apprentice marine mammal': 'To see what happens when I rethink and refeel my own relations, possibilities, and practices inspired by the relations, possibilities, and practices of advanced marine mammal life' (2020: 9). The editors of *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* collect practices and knowledges that might help develop our 'attunement to multispecies entanglement, complexity, and the shimmer all around us' (Tsing *et al.* 2017: G11).

This gathering here, in these pages, asks what creative makers can contribute to these tactics for gathering. From diverse perspectives, the artists here offer new shapes, forms, maps, diagrams, rituals, scores and protocols of attending to the conditions within which we meet – and the conditions that we make in meeting. When we are in attendance with others, how can we broaden not only what we are attending to, but also *how* we are attending? How can we *arrive together*, in ways that recognize and invite the diversity of experiences from which we come together, that name and acknowledge place and relation, that identify and de-invisibilize power relations, that bring creativity and intentionality to our actions, and that de-individualize and re-distribute relationship? As a mix of practical and poetic suggestions, they are offerings for you, the reader, to take and to try in future meetings – and indeed, are we not always meeting and being met by the world?

Dancer, choreographer Lizzie Thomson wrote the text that appears here soon after rupturing her Achilles tendon. A small death in her ankle. Crawling became her new orientation. An awkward slowness. An inefficient,

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intimate, sensory grounding. An audio version of this work was created for Critical Path, a choreographic research centre located on Gadigal Land of the Eora Nation, and is available at https://soundcloud.com/acknowledgingcountry

Ellen O'Brien is a Guringai (Garigal/Walkeloa) writer. She supports other emerging writers taking part in The Writing Zone programme at Western Sydney University, and is working on longform projects that blend poetic and essayistic forms. She expresses her deep and sincere thanks to some of the people who inspired this piece: Sigrid Herring and her grandmother, Rajni Shah, and Li Zhang.

Rajni Shah's practice is focused on listening and gathering as creative and political acts. They are queer, quiet, trans non-binary and a feminist killjoy. At the time of writing this provocation they work as a tutor and researcher at the Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de Kunsten (AHK). In the text below, they share a small detail from the listening practices they have been working with over the past ten years.

Julie Vulcan lives and works on Gundungurra and Tharawal country south-west of Sydney. Attuning to and attending to the layerings of place are foundational to the way she practises as an artist, performer, researcher and writer. The always already arrived/arriving is a notion she engages with to bring into focus the more-than-human worldings of which humans are a part. In recent years this work has been influenced by the recovery of her home-place after a wildfire swept through and incinerated the bush in 2019.

val smith (Pākehā, they, queer) is a choreographic artist residing and working in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Their recent projects address Indigenous/settler–colonial collaboration and queer*trans experiences of place, belonging and togetherness. Asterisking was one of many perverse techniques arising through a PhD entitled *Promiscuous Emplacements*. The project was an investigation of more-than/human relationality through a series of performances with marginal urban places across Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Mick Douglas currently lives and works on Djabwurrung and Jardwadjali land in southeastern Australia, and is honorary associate professor of transdisciplinary creative practice at RMIT University. The offering presented here, *Rise*, is a quiet collective action proposition first enacted in 2020 at The Performance Arcade, Te Whanganui-a-Tara/Wellington Harbour, Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Diana Damian Martin is a Roma–Romanian migrant interested in borders, fugitive study, collectivity, critique and the speculative. She is an educator, researcher and artist, co-founder of Migrants in Culture and senior lecturer at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

Reza Mirabi believes that everything – every place, every being, every material – is always already telling a story. To avoid *over-writing* these stories, Mirabi looks for ways to enter into states of listening to *re-write* ourselves into these more-than-human narratives. Listening for him becomes as much a choreographic as a political practice. A process to tap into archives that live in and around us but that have been rendered invisible

We are pleased to meet you here, wherever you are.

– Theron Schmidt

ACKNOWLEDGING COUNTRY THROUGH SOFT TONE

Begin by standing. Notice your verticality. Notice what you are seeing. Stay with this vertical, ocular-centric framing for a moment. Scope the horizon. Notice if your attention is orientated towards a particular direction… and notice if your awareness is privileging the things that you see in front of you.

Consider what you know about this place… and consider all that you don't know about this place…

Leave that now. Soften your eyes, soften your way of seeing. Let your attention fall all the way down to the soles of your feet. Sense the weight of your body, your whole self, falling down vertically towards the ground…

Then slowly find your own way into the ground. Once you've arrived in the ground, find a comfortable way to lie down, or sit down or lean against another surface. Take time to land here…

Soften your joints, your skull, your brain, your teeth, your organs. Pour the whole weight of yourself into the ground. How does it feel to meet this ground?

Play with gently pressing the soft pads of your fingers into the ground. Notice how the ground is responding to your touch. Notice how you are responding to the ground as *it* touches you. Scrutinize the relationship between the two. To touch something is always also to be touched by some thing. Bring attention to all of the surfaces of yourself that are in contact with something else. Notice what you are noticing.

When you are ready, you can begin to explore this place by crawling along the ground… crawling across the floor, the carpet, the bitumen, the dirt, the grass… Whenever you feel like it, take time to pause, rest, lie down or sit on the ground. Go where you want to go, slowly, effortfully, awkwardly, attentively. Follow your own nose. Feel free to continue crawling for the duration of this practice.

Where are you now?

If you feel like it, gently lower your head until it meets the ground. Allow the weight of your skull to rest into the body of the ground. Consider the persistent presence of the many histories and temporalities that make up this place here. Acknowledge that this place's existence stretches back in time… way back in time to what Vicki Van Hout referred to me as 'the time before time'.

In his book *The Lie of the Land,* Paul Carter (1996: 6) writes about the levelling and clearing of the ground as one of the first acts in colonizing a place. 'The result of the ground-clearing', he says, 'was to institute one system of memorialization at the expense of another… it was to actively forget what wisdom the ground and its people might possess'.

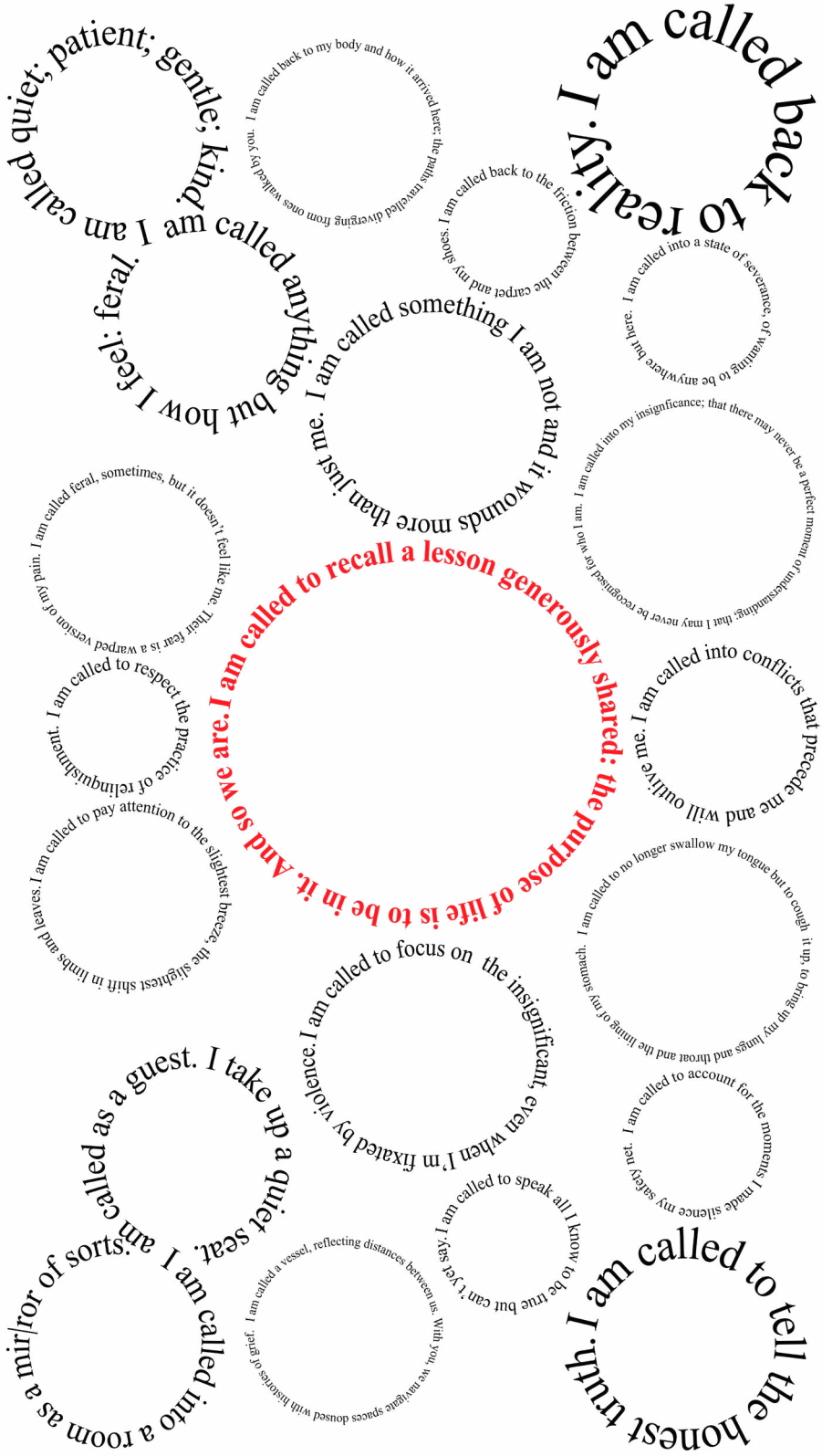
But superficial refurbishments of a place can never eradicate the complexity of the connection to place that we must continue to struggle to comprehend.

This practice that we are working with now is informed by release-based dance practices and fosters a technique of working with a soft tone. This softness has a function. It enables you to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the world, where you can both offer and receive sensory information. This soft tone invites an awareness of our own habituated ways of moving and thinking. The more tools we have for interrogating these habits, the more open we are to sensing multiple histories and ways of being in the world.

Where are you now? Inside? Outside? Is the wind blowing from the water against the skin of your cheeks? Are the rocks from the ground pressing into the flesh of your legs?

Aboriginal feminist and writer Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2016) offers her grandfather's perspective: 'We are part and in and of the land. So you can put on our country anything you like, but we and the land remain, sovereign.'

– Created by Lizzie Thomson in collaboration with Sonya Holowell and Melanie Herbert



– Ellen O'Brien

NO QUESTIONS

It is deceptively simple, but what I offer is the parameter 'no questions'. It's one of a number of parameters I offer when hosting gatherings that prioritize listening, and, in some ways, it is the most important one.

I discovered it while spending a week in a room with Andy Smith, who is a theatre-maker from the UK. We were in a week-long experiment in listening together – a project I had initiated (Shah 2021). Every morning we would arrive, and the idea was to be together without imposing any sort of end goal or narrative. But the first few days always seemed to begin the same way: we would arrive, sit down, and Andy would start by asking me a lot of questions about the project and what I was trying to do.

This was fine, and it worked as a way of settling into the days, but we also sensed that we needed to break the pattern. So, on the third day, Andy suggested we try spending the morning with no questions. We had no idea it would do anything more than invite a different start to the day for us. It turned out to be a revelation. We continued to use it for the rest of our time together, discovering entirely different ways of being in the room together, and a transformed mode of listening. And I have kept working with it ever since.

People are often surprised that I would suggest this parameter as it seems a little cold, especially in a roomful of strangers. Questions, after all, are a way of being curious about another person.

They open things up.

This is what I thought too.

But in my experience, so much attaches itself to questions, including a strong expectation of a particular kind of answer. The question is already shaped by the asker, what kind of body they bring, their assumptions, fears, hopes, and the way they already perceive the askee. They are often unable to hear anything that falls outside of what they already expected to receive. In the questioner–answerer relationship, there are always unacknowledged power dynamics.

The small questions are, I find, the most telling. When I have been without questions for a while and someone ends their statement with, '… don't you think?' or '…isn't it?' I can feel my heartrate change. Those phrases are, without intention, laced with coercion and assumption of sameness. And they land differently in different bodies. Bodies that have experienced being policed or surveyed to greater or lesser degrees. Bodies that have learned to pass. Bodies that have learned to survive by agreeing before knowing their own answer.

In listening sessions, I invite people to express their questions as statements of curiosity: 'I wonder what…' or 'I am curious about…' or even, 'I am experiencing a strong emotion right now…' Instead of pointing their responses or enquiries towards a particular person or statement, each person is invited to take responsibility for their own words. Slowly, the need to respond also quietens down: instead of continually preparing what I am to say next, I become more able to listen, and to speak, when I am ready.

'No questions' asks me to be in my body, and to speak from that place. It changes the choreography of attention in the room by inviting each person to speak from their desire. What emerges is not always easeful or harmonious. In fact, in my experience, it can often feel both painful and surprising. And, at the same time, it opens the possibility of listening.

I invite you to try it.

– Rajni Shah

AWAITING OUR ARRIVAL

How often do we describe being in a place waiting for things to arrive? Waiting for a bird, a creature, a sound, a scent, a feeling or a change. Waiting as if we are the pivot, the centre, the arrival point. Waiting with the expectation of delight or disappointment. How might our perception shift if we considered that it might be somewhat the reverse? That in fact the things we wait for have arrived and it is they who are waiting for us. Maybe they don't wait in the human way of promise; rather they wait for our release into the influx of the always already arrived/arriving. After all, arrival is not an endpoint – and in this way the heavy weight of expectation can be ceded and replaced by an attunement. Whether it is a post-fire land, a drought land, a flood land, a toxic dump land, an algae bloom, a plastic island, a melting iceberg, a meeting place, a building, a room, it is no different. In the dance of within-place things are always arriving and receding regulated by their own rhythms. For each shift or change, whether atmospheric, terrestrial or compounded by human action, there is no similitude, there is no normal, there is only the process of already arriving. Perhaps our hubris has been to create the fantasy of normal. There is no ideal arrival; rather there are the pulsating flows of recognition. Even if the qualities of place differ, or at times are punctuated with explosive forces, there is always the slow churning of the already arrived/already arriving. Not separate, they are joined across a continuum of space–time.

Feel the hums below your feet, the pitched air movements as they navigate around and through the terrain. The thrums of lives past embedded in sediment and circulating in atmospheric swells. The flows of moisture, air, scent, radiation and breeze swirl around and through your body. They emanate, and continue to emanate from sources propelled and gathered long before you came to stand here. Below, the sediment of fire and flood, forest and bones slowly churn. Aided by bacteria, actinomycetes, fungi, worms, nematodes, ants and a myriad of various sized burrowers and tunnellers. As you stand you survey the ground registering what you can see. But what of the things you can't see? What of the subsurface seedling reaching with delirious desire towards the surface? It is already here. Arriving and receding the plants and trees create arcs perpetually linking one sphere to another. Arrive and recede. Through their stems and meristems, branches and fibrous roots, trunks and primary root the larvae, lerps, nymphs, hoppers and spiders travel. Alongside these soft and hard frameworks critters and birds rest, nest, forage and feast. A perpetual motion of arrival and recession.

You are within place. Not on, not in – within. You have arrived.

– Julie Vulcan

*

ASTERISKING

A performance matter of non-cis-nificance. Activating the asterisk * in a bodily unfolding of queerness and transness in action.[1]

Let's start with your indexing finger on the star symbol of your device's keyboard. A touching to sensorially attune with the asterisk.

Slowly press the key down and in. Carefully locating the typographical symbol on the page. Be guided by the * . Sensing with care, utilize the space bar, enter, and tab keys in a playful choreographic emplacement of the * ***** * . Your fingery testing sees–feels the connective spaces between star-bodies.

Try out different fonts and sizes. Notice how limbs/tentacles appear and disappear, reach and contract.
* * * ✻

The timing of your * allows a more-than*human voice. An agency of accent. Try holding the asterisk key down to ********** see what happens. Embrace these proliferative elements of space and time.

We are together manifesting many stars and starfishes. Across our performance pages of blue skies and oceans. We are prompting meta-dimensions to extend and ripple into (spacetimes otherwise flattened). Unbounding cishetero norms, boundaries and regimes, asterisking prompts the perverse and bent extension of relations, bodies, genders, sexualities.

Let's slow and focus. Zoom in on one asterisk-starfish as far as you can to with-ness its fuzzy pixelating edges.

What if you were this asterisk? A starfishy forming. An other-than-human becoming.

Pause in this unknowing.

Begin to dance the tentacular feltness of our relations with place.

Fall lightly out of chair. Fall into the performance happening away from keyboard.

Pay attention to any blurry sensations at the zones where body meets place, meets desk/table/chair/floor.

Notice the performance taking place under desk, to touch the corners of room, edges of window, the crack of roads and hidden surfaces. Those tender moments with the discarded hair of animals, unvalued plants and forgotten atmospheric elements.

Sensing our complex arriving-with these marginal elements, things and places. We are now of an asterisking. Let's begin again with the tentacular reaching of the * .

Many tentacle-limbs are possibilizing multidimensional movement in performance. Any which way all at once. A rippling. Radiating. Through limbs, spines, head, tail, nodules, nipples, cavities.[2]

Softening the reach now, to yield. We return to pool and rest, regenerate together in a pleasure practice.

The * , a momentary gayYay, shimmering in celebration of our sensorial co-perversity. Shifting normy value systems to see performances of the hole/whole/holy.

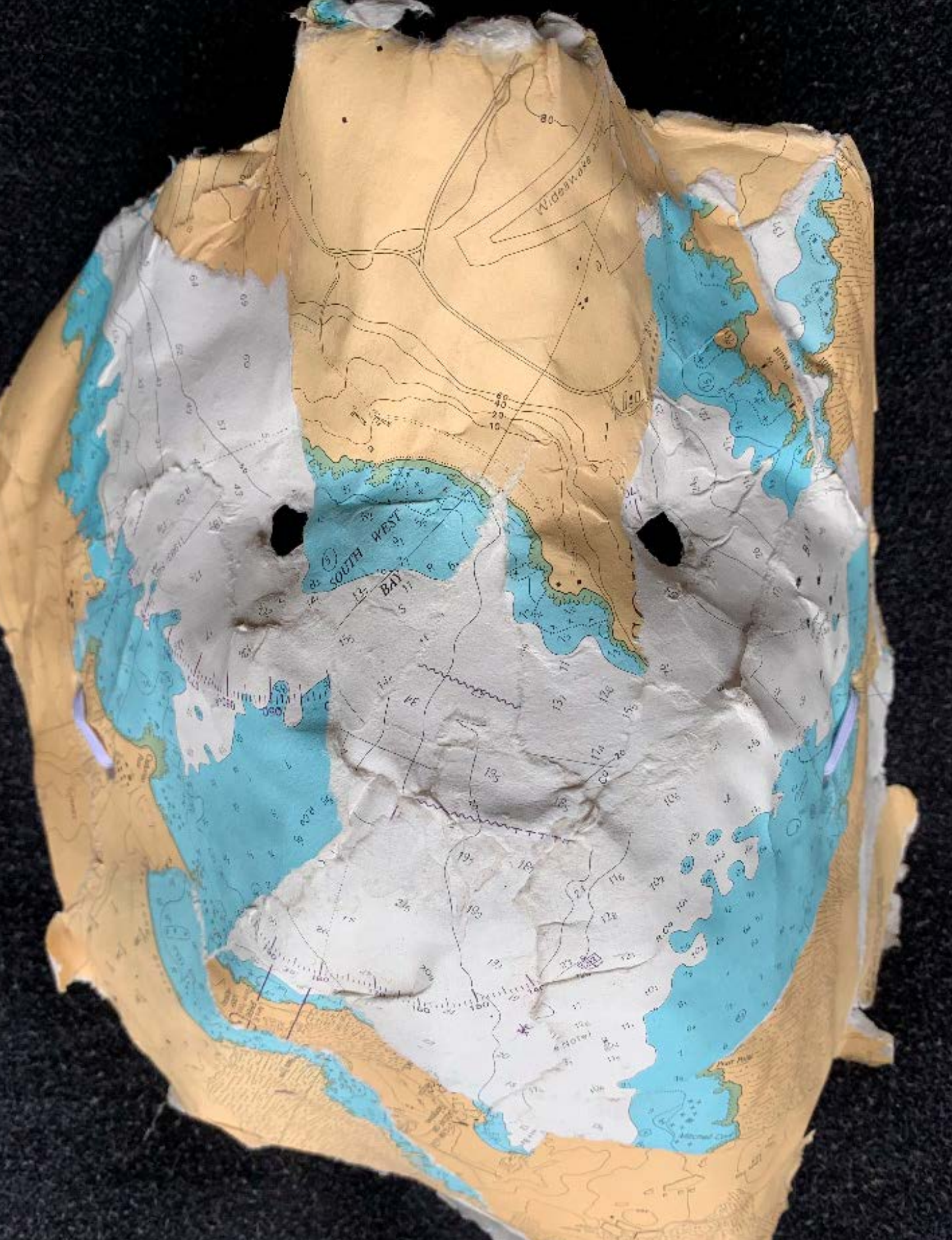
A gentle holding of the yearn to connect, to know, to belong. *ing is desiring that roots and roars. We are of this multi-centered reaching, returning and grounding. The * connects us to our queer and trans ancestors. Opening portals to past and future relationships with people, practices and places.[3]

– val smith

[1] Remembering the asterisk of trans*, looking to the work of transdisciplinary scholar Eva Hayward (2008; 2010; Hayward and Weinstein 2015; Hayward 2017).

[2] A queering of the somatic modality Navel Radiation (Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Body Mind Centering).

[3] This work has been developed on Ngāti Whātua lands in Aotearoa. I acknowledge and give thanks to tangata whenua who have stewarded these lands across the generations.


SOUTH WEST
BAY

rise

---

planetary contract

This being will bear silent witness to the incoming tide.

This being acknowledges the moon and its pull upon the waters of this planet as the moon and earth and sun and the other planets rotate.

This being acknowledges and honours your ancestors and all ancestral knowledge and ancestral beings.

This being acknowledges and honours the sovereignty of traditional custodians of this place, and their knowledge and wisdom of living deeply interconnected with the waters, lands and skies of this planet and the stars beyond.

This being acknowledges that one belongs to one species amongst many species and forms of life that inhabit the lands and waters and skies.

This being commits to listen to the wisdom of all people and all species and all forces of life and to live justly with them.

This being will bear silent witness to the incoming tide.

This being invites you to join in performing a thirty-minute shift of bearing silent witness to the incoming tide.

This being will stand and will be seen and will be counted by future generations as bearing witness to the incoming tide.

This being accepts that if one is unable to continue to bear silent witness to the incoming tide, one will not be judged or judge others but will endeavour to be kind to oneself and to all beings living and learning differently.

These beings – in kinship – will bear silent witness to the incoming tide.

Sign / Mark / Signature of Being:

Place:

Moment:

- Mick Douglas

CĂRARE, CĂRĂRAT | SPECULATIVE TOPOGRAPHIES OF ARRIVALS

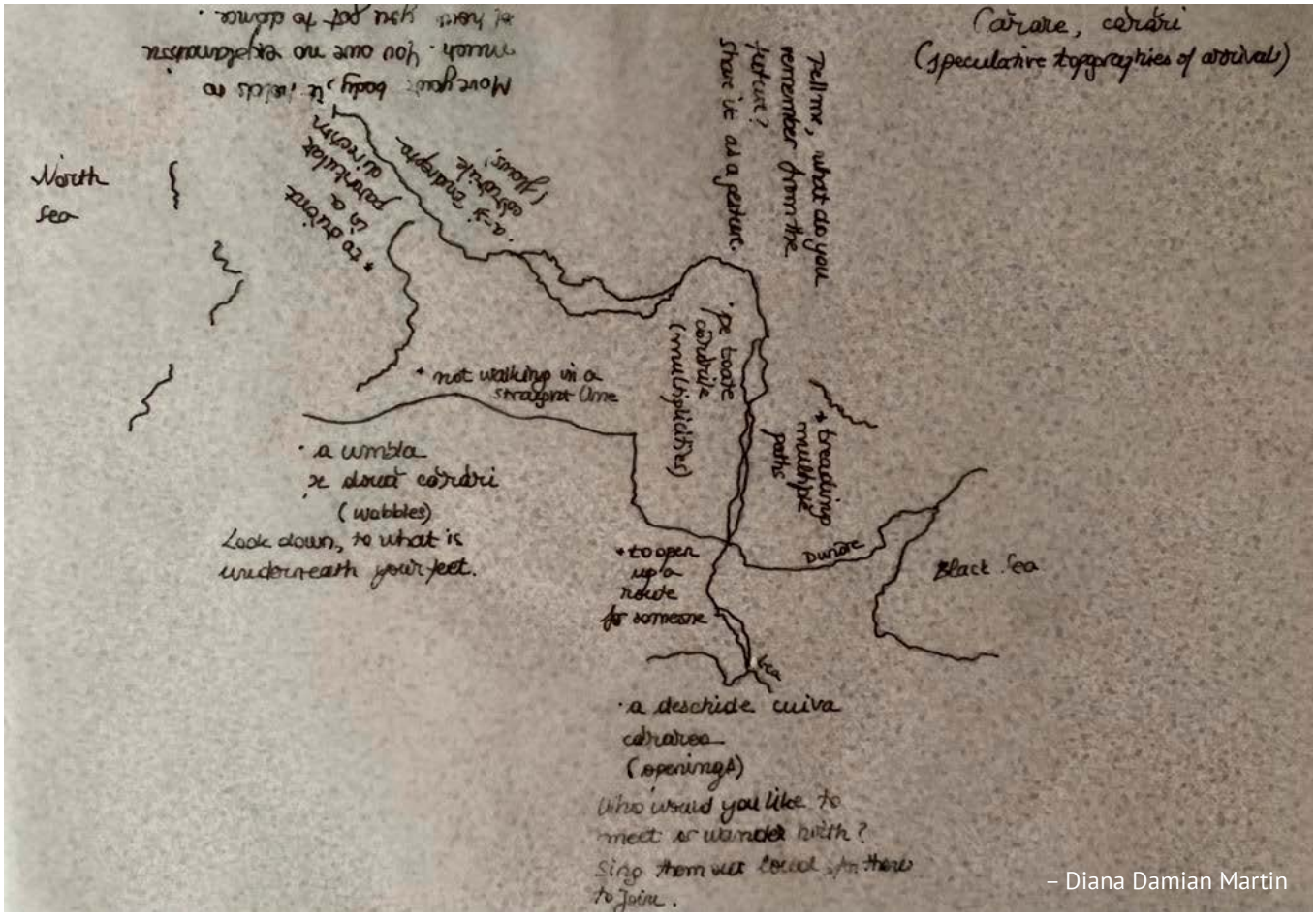
Study, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten propose, is 'talking and walking with other people, working, dancing, suffering or some convergence of all three' (2013: 111). I think of arriving as a process of collective study – a convergence. A cărare in Romanian means a narrow path that you can only travel by foot – it is often used as a stand-in for pathway, usually off-road, muddy, a bit broken, a bit forgotten, between places. Cărare also means the parting of your hair – that line that divides into two uneven or equal parts. There is then, always a pathway on your body, already, that you can make and unmake.

You follow a cărare in the mountains or the marshes, not to arrive anywhere in particular, but to move (to wander). I think of Carpathian Mountains, dried up streams, riverbeds and edges of oceans and seas (the Atlantic, the Black Sea, the North Sea), beaches blown by sand (in the Danube Delta, close to Tulzy, in Odessa). I also think of ancestral wanders – a cart moving through the Ottoman Empire (*cai sans*?), a fugitive, a labourer building rail tracks (Ferentari), a neighbourhood that once was (mahala). Cărare is thinking of arrivals always *as movement*. I carry the invitation of roots and routes (Gilroy 1993) to tend to the cărări that we always bring to any act of arrival, and the knowledges that emerge from their intersections. I have learned of arrivals as borderless, peripheric – arrivals are always movement, even when they are held they are incomplete, upended, illegalized, or otherwise welcomed, invited. There is much that tries to regulate arrivals, and resistance is always in the joy of movement, however speculative, however resistant.

Arriving in the classroom,
Or perhaps, in the meeting room.
Or the space where we accidentally find ourselves in, together.
The immigration queue,
or on a walk in the neighbourhood oh, how funny to meet you here, I didn't know we'd cross paths.

Even in the classroom,
The meeting room
The space we accidentally find ourselves in, together
The immigration queue
Arrival is always of place and movement.

I call on roots and routes as shifting arrivals – a speculative study on gathering, so to speak. So I took the Lea and Danube rivers to cross the paths between the Black and North Sea; instead of a cartography, I unfold a speculative topography of multiple paths that weave through 'arriving', almost imperceptibly. As you gather together, I invite you to draw your own speculative topographies, inviting the knowledges that shape your movement.



– Diana Damian Martin

When I start thinking about gathering, what I think is important is to embrace the ritualistic in it. This means two things: on the one hand, to already acknowledge the ritualistic of this constellative work of coming together. And the second is, through this embrace of the ritualistic, to allow for it being shaped even deeper. When we come together we are always *already* in a certain constellation, a more-than-human constellation. The minerals, the micro-organisms, the smells inside, outside, the vibrations… they are all present as well. Our histories. Our memories. Our feelings and pains. Other places. Other beings. Other forms. Other times. To come together is an ongoing process – it is complex and im/possible.

So, in acknowledging that this is already happening, I am curious how we can stay with this a bit more. I've been reminded of the significance given to rocks and stones where my family is from in Rojhelat Kurdistan. Kermanshah Province is a very stony area, and a lot of the cultural practices are about placing rocks and stones. Some stones are kept inside the villages in certain spots. It almost seems like the houses were placed in relation to the stones and the rocks and the mountains. And then stones are also moved in relation to time passing. So, there's this understanding that we are always also in relation to these stones, we are always in constellation with these stones and they are of course affecting how we as humans relate. By acknowledging how we are in constellations with stones invites not only different materialities but also temporalities.

And there's a certain ceremony that my grandfather told me about, in which dervishes are creating what is called an azim, where stones are tied together through a Bazum. Bazum is a string that is used to carry babies, usually by the mothers, and this string is then given to the dervishes, and they tie it to rocks. I'm looking at this ceremony that my grandfather told me, and through that memory imagine new rituals of how we in this moment come together in relation to stones and the times and memories, the materialities and wisdom and how we can tie our narratives and lives into their constellations.

I've been further sitting in these weeks with this question on gathering, in a particular moment, after the murder of Jina (Mahsa) Amini, that is also directly tied to Rojhelat Kurdistan. We are now in a small group of friends organizing a lot of gatherings that are either directly an act of protest; or they are in preparation of a protest; or they are in solidarity with a protest; or they are to hold one another in the midst of all the emotions that come with a protest, or the emotions that make the protest a necessity. There are so many urgent things about this kind of coming together and really seeing one another, which I've noticed in these last weeks. With many people I feel I have already built a friendship in a very short time.

And also, especially in gatherings of a lot of people – at times hundreds, at times thousands – there is of course no complete agreement. We are agreeing to be together, but there are limits to that. The protests are particularly *against* something. They are against the regime. They are against the oppression. But they are not together in what we imagine afterwards. They are not together in what are the tools with which we fight. They are not together in a shared perception of history. They are not together in feminist principles or practices. They are not together in the different traumas that people carry. And they are not together in age, necessarily. Therefore, the protests also have been a place for strong debate, strong exchange, tensions and even fights.

There are all these aspects that gathering provokes. This negotiation of a common-ness, of what is our common ground. Where we can not agree. Where agreement can be violence. And also, where we are listening to the more-than-human. Listening to the dead. Listening to the past. Listening to the future. Listening to the unknown present. The pain, the confusion, the hope. Somehow in protest there can be an integration of all of these things.

There can be an integration, by standing together and trying to understand how we can participate and how we can not-participate. We are in a moment of undoing and so the stones that have previously been tied in careful ceremonies, placed in relation to time passing, the same stones are now being thrown fearlessly demanding new constellations. The idea of protest and revolution and uprising are questioning in a way that I've rarely experienced. It's a very physical and urgent form of questioning. This confronting of limits, confronting of agencies, of our agency. And always hoping that somehow it reaches other people that are not gathering with us here –

– Reza Mirabi

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