

Somatic Care Performances: Turtle Disco and Tendings

Petra Kuppers, with contributions from Jessica Watkin, VK Preston, Nadine Changfoot, Cassandra Hartblay and Becky Gold

Introduction: Dramaturgical Methods of Care

This essay engages issues of accessibility, community, bodily pain, and writing in the context of group somatic experiences, experiencing sensations in two performance locations, prior to the arrival of the ongoing COVID pandemic. By using this essay form, I hope to offer a dramaturgy of access/care/performance/practice to hold ourselves, nonhuman others, and the world toward new forms of cohabitations.

Dramaturgy has multiple meanings in different contexts. I am a German person who studied Theater-Wissenschaft (the science of theatre) in Cologne, amid a cohort of people who wanted to be house dramaturgs. This meant that they wanted to help shape the overall production seasons of a theater (or opera, or dance house), acted as a bridge between house style/management/audience development and a particular director, and oversaw the development of programs as one of their core functions. These programs are often akin to small books that collect historical and comparative material about a production, offering insights about a play or production to the audience. This later function, an audiencing procedure, is today still core to my own understanding of dramaturgical concerns: offering glimpses of the production process to audiences, but in my case as a witnessing of happenings that occur without traditional invited audiences.

In my current US context, *dramaturgy* can emphasize other meanings. A dramaturg is often someone who works closely with a playwright or director, helping to shape events within the production context itself—but who also reflects on the production process, its historical origins, and modes of

exclusion and inclusion that might be reproduced. An example here is Dorrine Kondo, who worked as a dramaturg with Anna Deavere Smith and David Henry Hwang, and who writes about institutional incommensurability and conflict as rich areas of investigation during a play's development in her study *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* (2018). In dance, an important resource is Katherine Profeta, who gives a deep account of the rehearsal and production practices of her dramaturgical work with Ralph Lemon. She describes how "the political and historical implications of intercorporeal exchange were often felt in *Geography* and *Tree's* rehearsal rooms. Work on a tricky flight of dancing would frequently spawn yet one more involved cast discussion about the dancers' reasons for dancing, the tensions between individual and group, the notion of "freedom," the residues of colonialism, or the connections between dance and spirituality. These topics bubbled up easily from just below the surface of the daily work, because they were so often implicit in the reasons for why one moved this way instead of that (2015, 204–205)

This kind of approach—supporting, questioning, and offering alternative avenues based on historical exclusion, shifting toward new practices—is the meaning of *dramaturgy* that my current dramaturgy consultant (and contributor to this issue), Alexis Riley, activated when I asked her to describe her role in our collaboration to me. She offered a well-known definition of *dramaturgy*: "I ask questions." Indeed, she does—and excellent ones! And many of them, given our interests, centre on accessibility and processes of power within our production. "Holding ourselves accountable" becomes here a core dramaturgical function: examining our processes with openness, love and criticality, in order to ensure that we align our practices with our wider aims.

Both somatically flavoured performances and disability culture productions can fall within a complicated space for dramaturgical concerns, in particular as far as institutional(ized) audiencing is concerned. Disability theorist Doran George (2019) writes about the complexities of "capturing" somatic performances by discussing somatic practitioner and performer Eva Karczag's negotiation of the politics of theatrical spectatorship. George theorizes Karczag's "situation–response composition" and dancerly agency, and the way that her open, improvisatory performances clash with the apparatus of large theatrical spaces and their audience rules of visibility and

legibility. I align deeply with George's focus on a fragmented (rather than integrated or "natural") embodiment of somatics: Somatic attention can be a form of research, as a dramaturgy that queries accountability and cultural fit, that aims for the moments of chafing, of disconnect.

George writes about the pull between the dramaturgical requirements of contemporary art culture and the focus on the elusive, fragmented, inward tensions of somatic investigations:

Even while evading the productivity on which corporate arts culture depends, . . . Karczag's work can't be dismissed as lacking in skill, because of the virtuosity with which she meanders elusively. This is precisely the dilemma in which [choreographer/dancer Wendy] Perron finds herself when she notes that, despite wishing that she were doing the "inward sorts of things" in her own concert that she identifies with Karczag, she laments that it "would never read" in the larger space in which she will work. (2019, 240)

The dramaturgy of care this essay offers rests in opening up these "inward sorts of things" of somatic performances, using disability technologies like interdependence and collaborative making to witness what we feel and do as people who do not fit the mainstream. This essay aims to make experiential that which "would never read."

The first space is Turtle Disco, a small disability-led arts space in Ypsilanti, Michigan, USA. I co-direct Turtle Disco with my wife, Stephanie Heit, a psychiatric system survivor, dancer, and poet, in the refunctioned living room of our home. We curate somatic (that is, embodied/creative) experiments with fellow queer/crip local folx. Much of what we trial run in Turtle Disco becomes the framework for our international Olimpias practices, disability culture performance experiments.

The second location is one of these international sites: performance research days in Toronto, Canada, which was part of an Olimpias Tendings workshop hosted by the University of Toronto in April 2019.

The method of this essay focuses on bringing us closer to the somatic experience in its enworldedness, that is, as something that notices both inside and out, and inside and outside in contact with one another. Somatic

practices can carry a charge toward community, history, and change (something I have explored in detail elsewhere under the umbrella title “eco soma”; Koppers 2022). As various methods of charting experience will show, our somatic journeys are not just inward-focused adventures into the self—something which “would never read.” Instead, employing a dramaturgy of audience procedures focused on creative, somatic artful glimpses offers evidence of fragmentation, contradictions, contact zones of all kinds, both immediate, focusing on the sensation in the here and now, and ruminative, knitting together sensation with memory. These later functions, memory and temporality in dance, are central to Vida Midgelow’s understanding of dramaturgical consciousness in improvisation: “embodied practices that play with memory.” (2015, 106).

Participant writings in multiple modalities—from poetry to field notes to narrative account to creative nonfiction—all offer different perspectives on how to share sensation/imagination in interlocking journeys of access and healing. I use nonacademic or academic-adjacent writing practices as modalities of witness, as charts of landscapes that touch inner to outer world. I am not analyzing the writings but rather weaving them into my writing as “object/arguments,” as whole instantiations of their utterance, not in need of decoding and interpreting. Part of this method is intuitive, itself artful. The method aligns with older practices like weaving and montaging—practices often associated with otherness, be it female art making, Indigenous work, or other nondominant practices in our current shared socio-political world.

With this, my use of somatic modalities in creative practice is close to Detroit activist and writer adrienne maree brown’s understanding of somatics. She calls somatics a methodology for transformation that helps us understand that change does not come simply from thinking differently (2017, 203). She writes in the lineage of Audre Lorde’s famous essay “Uses of the Erotic” (1978), reminding us that the somatic “process involves shifting what we understand, what we can feel, and what we practice, reconnecting us with the incredible data and resilience of the body” (brown 2017, 203). Working in a group of people who investigate inclusion and resilience, including disability culture practices of surviving stress and offering access to one another, provides important insights into how to live well, in academia and beyond, in changing and harsh climates.

The method invites active readers: As you make your way through the sections, see what happens as you play with your own readerly stance, how judgment and curiosity might intertwine as the text allows you alternative modes of access. In this way, somatics can become part of academic writerly/readerly practice, something core to the arguments of a range of practitioner/academics, as Sima Belmar describes:

Most somatic practices are tied to the healing arts and are a complex blend of physical actions, thinking practices, verbal cues, and hands-on work. As a field, they focus on the efficient function of the self via a “somatic mode of attention” (Csordas 1993), an increased awareness of one’s physical and mental habits. The academic classroom is often a site of “from the neck up” processing, where the body fades into the background of all that mental labour. How, then, does the practice of attending to our habitual modes of thinking, reading, writing, and speaking appear in the classroom? (2016, 92)

What is gained when we add a dramaturgy of somatic attentiveness to scholarly pursuits? How does, for instance, history writing, or work in participatory action research, change when one’s feelings and bodily sensations become part of what is being recorded and processed, experienced and performed?

Here is my core argument about this writerly performance witnessing: There is a care experience in this attention to the laminar flows of our imaginations and sensations. Being in the presence of each others’ complexity and translating that complexity in multiple attentions to access creates new richnesses. It allows us to bring our monad, our bounded self, in touch with otherness—a core focus of a dramaturgy of care. This attention opens up sensations like pain, unfolds it as an aesthetic experience, and hence offers momentary, fleeting, but hopefully sustaining relief. This mode of dramaturgical attention, to the care/performance of self and other, can infuse our academic writing modalities—and can open up the genres of academic knowledge production.

Turtle Disco: Amoeba Dance

I am part of an experiment, trying to find relief. My body is on flame with pain. Every few minutes, I have to make conscious decisions about how to move my knee joint so that I can locomote, turn around, or shift my weight on the ground. My joints are freshly inflamed, less than a month into a significant pain flare, my senses still adjusting to the constant deep and fiery pain.

Today, I am running an Amoeba Dance session, and around me, five other movers have their own experiences, lightly led by my input.

We start by dancing with half-decayed leaves which I fished out of the garden. As a warm-up to our internal dancing, we move externally, everybody with a leaf skeleton in their hand, following the movement impulses of branching, thick and thin supply lines, the falling away of material, decay and renewal.



Figure 1. Turtle Disco participant, Denise Leto. Photograph by Petra Kuppens.

Image description: A Turtle Disco participant, Denise Leto, in her nest, on a purple yoga mat, with a cushy and fluffy turquoise blanket draped over her legs. A small dog (allergy-friendly poodle/shitzu-mix Trudi) is on her torso, and Denise smiles as she turns away from exuberant doggie kisses.

In the main part of the workshop, we all make ourselves nests of blankets and pillows, provided in a big trunk at our home entrance. When everybody has created their small movement/stillness space, we dive in. For each of these sessions, I describe three sound patterns that we will practise, letting each vibrate through our bodymindspirits—through the holistic beings that we are. We meditate and micro-move in response.

The practice leans on Continuum Movement, a somatic modality that I have participated in for over a decade, founded by Emilie Conrad Daoud. Though I am not a healing arts practitioner, and do not call my work by this name, I acknowledge its influence on my creative practice as a performance artist. The sound patterns I use are not necessarily part of the Continuum repertoire and are also informed by other somatic/dancerly modalities like BodyMindCentering. All of these modalities function as resources for creative investigation.

Today's three sound patterns include a "dropped O": open and round your mouth, and then make an explosive O sound, originating from the throat, like a cough. Now imagine that O falling into you, rather than being pushed out. You will find that your throat likely opens a bit more, and the small glottal-stop O can travel. Let it travel. If there is movement emerging, follow it. Follow everything. See what arises.

We each explore this sound for ten minutes, in our own nest, and then we write for ten minutes, exploring what came up in this sound/movement meditation.

We'll do the same pattern with two other sounds: a "cave breath," that is, a hollow long O, whispered inside/outside; and a bone breath, an s/z (called Jacques in Continuum Movement): slithering our tongues from s to z quickly, and feeling these vibrations in our bones.

After this hour of sounding/movement and three writing segments, there's an open space, where all three sounds (and more) combine. The two-hour-long practice ends with a final check-in, some images shared, how it felt to be under, to put one's self into this kind of creative trance.

I often mine my own resulting open writings into poetry form. The exercise is one of my core creative reservoirs, a way to open myself to the influences that pass through my life. Below is an excerpt of such a writing, halfway between the initial free write and the final, much more condensed poem (which was eventually published in *Diver Beneath the Street*, a poetry collection, in 2024). It charts what was going on for me that day: pain and bodily discomfort transposed into danger, tightness, the kind of images that come to me when I try to describe pain.

Three free writes are interwoven, break each other—this is something I did in the final writing time, after the open space movement. It felt useful to mix the three different free writes, to open up the crusts of each experience, as a way to relieve the pressure of the collapsing tunnel, that tight tunnel underwater mentioned in the second free write. Engaging with the form aligned with opening bodily sensations.

Martín Ramírez comes up here: He is someone I wrote about in my book on medical performances, and his artwork often comes to me when I am in pain. He is one of the most famous American outsider artists, a Mexican artist who was locked into California mental health hospitals for most of his adult life. His tunnel images often appear to my mental eye when I meditate.

Muscle tunnel locomotive round, inmates held at psychiatric institutions, Martín Ramírez sings rip-like architectures of invasion, invagination, holey fantasy scene in the mountain's side.

Underwater cave. Mask sound. Breath beat. Cave snake beneath earth, stone slick with underwater aquifer teaser testers, held at bay but glide right into the next nest, one hollow beneath swallows of giant gullet, vocal cords tight against neoprene black.

Dinosaur bone sticks out of desert cave wall high up in the dry. Skin bird balances on hot wind. Giant stalagmites bite into swamp sun death dinosaur rattle I salt you here I bless you here I compress you here till you reach up in wide arm arc head of jubilation.

The train comes round the mountain. My muscles anchor themselves on bio-bones that stamp me a woman, osteoporosis work jumps up jumps up jumps strength into elephant's maw.

Performance/Care. These writings release me from the single focus, the unavoidability of widespread pain in my body, and redirect my attention. And they also chart the effects of communal dreaming. All around me, in these Amoeba Dance sessions, I hear my co-dreamers sounding and breathing.

Ancient Greek healing practices included lucid dreaming. When I am in our Amoeba Dance, I think of these older forms of providing health care: a darkened room, dreamers tended by healer/doctor/shamans, as Eleni Stecopoulos reminds us in her *Visceral Poetics* (2016). Stecopoulos revisits Western theatre's shamanic ancestor Antonin Artaud and finds correspondences between experimental writing and the modalities and diagnostics of holistic medicine. I am deeply intrigued by these confluences and see Turtle Disco in this heritage: care provided by providing openings into inner and outer caves, allowing issues of personal pain, both bodily and psychic, to flow with wider cultural patterns, from settler colonialism to gender trouble to climate catastrophe. All these topics interweave and relate to each other in the experiences of Turtle Disco practitioners and emerge slant in the writing.

I am not collecting the writings of our local Turtle Disco people. Amoeba Dance is my personal creative motor, and not a place upon which I want to turn an anthropologist's eye. My dancers/friends are assured of privacy, and this is an ongoing practice with no endpoint. But I have other sites where the performance maker and performance ethnologist merge more directly, and where writing can be mined, with permission and loving respect. The scores we work out in Turtle Disco move across into nonlocal art practices.

The Olimpias: Tendings, Toronto

Stephanie and I are in Toronto, a four-hour train ride away, here to work with a number of theatre studies graduate students at the University of Toronto and other performance studies faculty from around Eastern Canada. Our host is Jessica Watkin, at the time a blind PhD student at the University of Toronto, an interdisciplinary artist herself, and by now a frequent collaborator of the Olimpias.

We run a score that emerges from Turtle Disco's experiments. Here is the text of the invitation that we had sent out:

Stephanie Heit and Petra Kuppers explore Olimpias scores and insights from Tendings, small everyday collaborative practices that combine experiential anatomy, disability culture, eco-specific investigations, somatic exercises, and writing. Let's go to the shore, the street, other edge spaces of urban life and insert ourselves, our differences, our breath. This practice nourishes activist interdependent energies and pools resources for community building and stewardship of self and the environment.

The Olimpias is a disability performance artists' collective that creates collaborative, research-focused environments open to people with physical, emotional, sensory and cognitive differences and their allies. In these environments, we can explore pride and pain, attention and the transformative power of touch.

In two days in April 2019, we meet at four sites. The first is the former Women's Union of the University of Toronto. We have a Contemplative Movement Practice session there, led by Stephanie Heit. She received the form from Naropa University teacher Barbara Dilley, and adapted it, with Barbara's blessing, into a Contemplative Movement and Writing Practice. The practice involves a query (in our case this morning, "What sustains you?"), an opening meditation, personal exploratory movement, and an Open Space, i.e., time for improvisatory being-together or witnessing, interspersed with shorter meditation segments and writing time.

That afternoon, we move to the Philosopher's Walk on the University of Toronto's territory. It's a daylighted river, that is, freshly uncovered after settler colonial architectures pushed it underground. This winding path through the leafy campus is a well-loved walking route, and we use drift methods to explore its meaning for us: the kind of site-specific dreamy drifting, open to influence, that is associated with the Situationist International, an avant-garde collective emerging in the 1950s in Paris (for an introduction, see Lavery 2018; and Koppers 2018).

On the second day, we meet at Toronto's Lake Ontario waterfront. It is raining heavily, so the water reflections come mainly from indoors, inside the Power Plant Gallery, a people-of-colour-led space in a mainly white art world. We use a disability culture method to explore the gallery. We guide each other through the exhibits, audio-describing what we see to a person we lead and whose eyes are shut.

Two of our participants are blind and/or visually impaired, so this exercise leads to exciting and challenging insights into smell, touch, and other sensory inputs other than sight (and audio description is mentioned a few times in the participant writings' below). The gallery smells stale, and guards intervene harshly into what are to them unfamiliar ways of being with the art work.

In each of our four encounters in the city, we also incorporate writing, similar to the Turtle Disco Amoeba Dance. Unusually, all of our participants are academics, and I invite them to share their writing with me for this collage, for process-glimpses into what emerges in our somatic practices.

In the first session, Stephanie's Contemplative Movement and Writing, we opened with the question, "What sustains you?" Our organizer, Jessica Watkin, shared with me part of her response writing. She is blind, and her work often engages ways of building tender and sustainable community—for instance, in a collaboration with then fellow PhD student and disability arts researcher Ashley MacAskill, with whom Jess worked on podcasts about sustainability and care networks. Jess writes:

Fluidity and fluctuation sustain the practice. Observing my ebb and flow and communicating briefly. There is a quality in interactions where I know I am offering what sustains me outward.

Invigorating moments of armour building and feeling at home with and beside others.

Silence. Silence sustains me. Silence punctuated by natural sounds. Those birds. Those fighting and squeaking birds. That piano. That kneading of fresh air and noise and isolation.

Being individual in a room of strangers. Feeling presence and absence at the same time.

Being alone but not being lonely. Being alone with others. Feeling the quality of not needing and not kneading. But also fresh bread and butter. Fresh eye fresh air. Crisp. The first day of real fall. Real sweater weather the need for sweaters.

This isn't a list. These are statements. These are sustainable praxis benefits these are mind-body methods.

Here is a glimpse of the second location of this first day, the Philosopher's Walk, narrated through the memories and sensations of VK Preston, then an assistant professor at the University of Toronto at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. They are a frequent visitor to this path. VK writes about their own experience with pain, writing toward pain opened up by the experiences of somatic attention, before grounding themselves on the walk.

Pay attention ...

Awake, I still feel the gnaw of the teeth I ground yesterday while sleeping. I give their ache galaxies, supernovas, and regard it. The eye time-travels within. Between the nostrils, air eddies, bordering deep-well eye-sockets.

The face's contours become so deep that free-divers must clutch stones to sink into the unseen, the unknown. They fall like birds flight-diving in the substance of water. The trickle of unseen springs eludes me. I've heard the river's trickle before by night, seeping through the grates between the buildings, sounds of long tendrils growing like curled, green fingers, entwining the iron railing. Like fingernails, there is paint chipped and red. I open my

cheek bones like a jewelry box packed with raw diamonds,
brushing off dust, breathing the air of a park coming alive in
spring.

Philosopher's Walk

This pathway sways like a stream, liquid beneath our feet, a slow
s-curve of fitted stones beneath trees that are not yet blooming
into leaves and blossoms. Wrought iron snakes open the path. A
wader wavers in thought, dream, remembering the snakes at the
gates. Open.

This trickling site wends between institutions and disciplines: the
Western art-music conservatory, the museum of natural history
(architectural crystals erupting through its roof and wall), the
university, high-Anglican on the Oxbridge model, crowding this
sacred, buried stream masquerading as a pretty path and
dedicated by the colonials to the philosophers.

This afternoon, colleagues stretch out on grass, photographing
sky and bare branches, heads rested in rhizomatic roots. The wail
of sirens unsettles the little agreements of the lolling crowd. It's
the first day of spring. The wind stirs. My paper lifts like a sail as I
write, and I remember my observation options are method. I lie
out on a park bench, lingering between institutions, watching
musicians and lovers trail past, arm-in-arm.

Some of VK's research work has focused on a different form of ethnographic
ambling, for instance in the environments of Salem, Massachusetts, tracking
the de-animation of magic in the offered engagements with witchy traces in
tourist shop paraphernalia or museum displays. They are a practitioner as
well as a theorist and historian, and these mixed sensibilities become clear in
the pages of their process writing, in particular in their attention to the
historical layered-ness of the path and its river, and their experiences of
healing practice, the layered-ness of their own body.

On the second day, we are in the Power Plant gallery, by the waterfront, and people lead each other. Here is an account of the experience by Nadine Changfoot, who teaches in political studies at Trent University:

The Power Plant: I felt comfortable and confident being led by Cassandra. I so appreciated the rich detailed descriptions she provided and had I appreciation for the complexity of the art being described. Cassandra's descriptions of the galleries helped me understand the scale of the place. I did feel a bit queasy not being able to see, but I also felt a strong sensorial appreciation of the vastness of the space. The woozy feeling came from the echo and the stale air. I felt I wasn't being oxygenated enough. The description of the large windows that faced the lake somehow helped me connect to outside air and water, something which helped me feel a homing of sorts. I feel comfortable beside, and on, and in water during warmer weather, but also in winter when water becomes cold and freezes. I feel it in my body. I longed to touch the art or feel it and hope that the gallery will provide more access through tactile pieces or vibrating access to the art. . . .

When I was leading Cassandra, I was moved and confronted by the limits of verbal description I could provide. I wanted to know what Cassandra's preferences were in terms of entry into the pieces and affect she was drawn to or compelled by. I found myself offering choice toward the end of our 20 minutes. . . . The intimacy of the guiding and being guided felt warm. It had depth. Arm in arm there was a coziness, snugness, a sense of safety and I daresay friendship and intimacy in those moments that was refreshing with possibility, or at the very least a beautiful memory. I would like to create this experience for others.

Nadine Changfoot works in experimental health/care settings. She is a research stream lead and management team member of the project "Bodies in Translation (BIT): Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life," (SSHRC Partnership Grant 2017–2024). This project is co-directed by Dr. Carla Rice, Canada Research Chair in care, gender and relationships at the University of Guelph, and Dr. Eliza Chandler of Toronto Metropolitan University in critical disability studies. In Peterborough, Nadine leads storytelling workshops in which short multimedia videos are made by older community members, including artists, healthcare providers, and aging and disability advocates who experience intersections of aging, disability and multiple differences, including gender, race, sexuality, and class.

Bringing these kinds of research foci to our Olimpias engagement proved an exciting encounter, and offered reflections on the space of artful experimentation, access attention, and writing practice.

And here is Cassandra Hartblay, in turn, in her experience with Nadine, using a different form to capture her fieldnotes. Cassandra is a cultural anthropologist at the University of Toronto, and works at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Health and Society. She is well used to fieldnote writing, and to charting her experiences in real time. She works with disabled people in Russia and the Russian-speaking former Soviet Union and creates theatre scripts as part of her performance ethnography practice, so an ear toward capturing nuance and experience directly are central to her practice.

I didn't want to miss anything
I liked the way of falling into a painting sideways that came from
hearing Nadine's description as it unfolded and her own eye
wandered across a canvas
It created a totally different experience
I want to know the architecture and the light. I want to know what
things are made of
Nadine tells me what size they are
The ground feels very hard, harder than when my sight is guiding
me
I have no idea where the edges of the space might be
I orient myself by impressions of light
The rain is gloomy, the gallery feels gloomy too
When Nadine says "dark" I don't know if she means colour or tone
We entered both galleries backwards, so we found out who the
artists were at the end
I loved the tulips [in Alicia Henry's multimedia collage]. Describing
them made me love them more
The weather was getting angrier
Nadine was concerned about what experience I wanted, but I
wanted her to choose.
I wanted to live inside of her whims
I wanted to experience the artworks in a car she was driving

I wanted to find out what drew her in, where her eyes settled,
what descriptive vocabulary was comfortable (dimensions), what
was challenging (words for primates)
I wanted her to slow down
But I didn't tell her.
Why rush? Breathe. I'm not going anywhere
The immense proliferation of detail in the artworks? ... how will we
ever do it all justice?
Sighted, we didn't encounter prejudice
No one bothered us

At the end of our Tendings performance weekend, we stand in a circle, in
public space, eyes closed. We lead ourselves into trance, listening to the
water outside in the harbour, to the patter of rain on the roof.

Then we let movement impulses take over—easy to do after two days of this
kind of sensory immersion, as we are all warmed up into improvisatory space.
More unusually, we combine audio description with our eyes-closed
movement practice: We call out what we are sensing, what goes through our
mind, creating a kind of continuous murmur that in turn influences the
movement.

The first witness is again Cassandra Hartblay.

Petra sits
containers—skin—Stephanie says—
think about the water inside & out. Touch every part of your
container
I find a place in my neck and the back of my head where the back
of my hands fit, elbows toward the ceiling, akimbo.
I'm shy about touching other bodies
I want more time to explore the space.
I feel joy & delight & settled breath from the others. I feel avo
toast in my belly.
holding my eyes closed to explore feels
dreamy, napping and walking—and
dangerous—edges are more complex—

door flaps, ropes, permeable plants. I want solids, surfaces, coolness, light sources.

The lettering on the wall is not stenciling, but vinyl appliques, I discover.

I am relieved not to be in the circle first. In the circle is slow, reaching, exploratory movement. joyful, little plants.

I perform my duty as an edge.

But also, I have back up: a solid wall behind me. To my right, Alex is not so lucky, the cavernous hallway opening behind her back.

But she holds firm. Stephanie begins to describe what the movers are doing, quietly to Alex... but we I open my ears to eavesdrop, hungry for language. Soon it is my turn, I take over [describing].

VK is kneeling, then Jess is crawling & touching our ankles VK is standing and with Becky back to back & front to front and so much touching, proximity. Giggles. so much—everyone is moving at once, it's hard to know which movements to describe. I default to those that explain sounds.

I say "It's a lot of touch. You can hear Becky giggling."

Alex says, smiling, "I can hear Becky giggling."

The second witness is Becky Gold, who writes in poetry lines about her sensations of being in the circle. Her PhD research at York University at the time focused on promoting self-advocacy and creating critical activist art with neurodiverse artists based on their own lived experiences. Her work also engages with explorations of care and interdependence between people with and without disabilities. She speaks directly to the medicinal, the healing aspects of our Tendings practice:

In this space

I am held by strong backs

Nuzzling necks

Warm hands

In this space I am sustained by whispering voices announcing presence

Reminding me that I am not alone

Not floating

Laughter sustains

Medicines of joy and security in vulnerability permeate and envelope us here

Together.

The last witness is Nadine Changfoot:

Last Tending

7 min people inside the circle with eyes closed, movement; people encircling are the witnesses and keep people inside safe.

Starting out being inside the circle, I felt safe, comfortable, and excited to explore. I immediately wanted to discover and experience the boundary that was itself made of people standing in the circle. I wanted to touch the people on the boundary. Asking for their permission to touch was important to me for their own care. I didn't say I wanted to touch them for shared-care, yet I would do so if we were to do the activity again. I felt some people were more reciprocal of touch than others, perhaps and understandably it takes time to establish physically knowing one another through touch.

Midway or toward the end, I found myself describing out loud the touch I felt, using words "soft, grounding, warm, tender." Feeling community on the inside came as I crouched down on the floor to join a person also on the ground, reaching out to feel feet of those on the perimeter. Saying "grounded" felt good. I felt grounded, wanted to feel grounded. The inside began to feel more playful with sounds of laughter. Discovering and re-encountering people inside the circle, Becky, VK, felt very nice.

As witness, it was so lovely and beautiful to observe people on the inside express themselves. There was more audio description from those moving on the inside. The temperature and descriptions of hands was said aloud: "warm, soft, cold, multi-hands, hand sandwich." Alex said she felt like an elephant and made an elephant noise. She also said someone is touching me in a private place and "I don't mind; I like it." Petra: "My head is lounging on someone." Stephanie: "I'm a lounge." Cassandra: "I'm lunging my left leg outside the circle and it is touching something." Jessica: "your foot is touching Petra's scooter." People exploring people on the inside and space outside the

circle, the perimeter of the circle. The circle didn't move, but maybe it would with more time together.

I felt my inside and outside became blurred in that I felt safe to move into touch with people both inside and outside.

This is the closing circle of our Tendings weekend (figure 2).



Figure 2. A group of bowed heads during the Tendings closing event.
Photograph by Petra Kuppers.

Image description: A group of bowed heads, a moment in the closing event, when we were all seated around our (writing) tables, in a public space. Hands reach out, lay on top of one another, tiredness and restfulness in the head gestures.

We release ourselves here, having put our senses in touch with each other, our environment, our being enworlded. "Being imprinted": discourse generation happens in the afterward, in the montage, in the assemblage, in the coming together of disparate elements and off-shoots of experience. We use narrative, field notes, and poetry to assemble and agglutinate, to translate and make accessible what happened—and something carefully flowers. This is a tending, a care-taking, of self and other, outward directed, gathering new insights for new moves.

Conclusion

In these two sites of engagement with tender bodymindspirits in complex inner and outer worlds, writing charted paths for witnessing experience. We created performances for and with each other: somatically dense, fragmented, critical, sometimes chafing, sometimes bridging. These are all small practices, often enacted in public, but not through spectacular performance: They draw on specific networks nourished by community and friendship—in the first case, the local circle of a small town in Michigan; in the second, the circle of disability-interested scholars in the Canadian East. Secondary audiencing in essays like this one and poetry extend our small-scale and personal insights to more people, to an international witnessing—a move in keeping with our dramaturgy of care, our future-oriented revisions of what performance can mean for tender bodymindspirits.

Our practices offer responses to the challenge posed by feminist theorist Donna Haraway, whose work asks us to envisage what life might look like at a future point.

Camille [a fictional entity of the Children of the Compost, a collaborative web of speculative narratives hosted by Donna Haraway] came into being at a moment of an unexpected but powerful, interlaced, planetwide eruption of numerous communities of a few hundred people each, who felt moved to migrate to ruined places and work with human and nonhuman partners to heal these places, building networks, pathways, nodes, and webs of and for a newly habitable world. (2016, 137)

In our dreamerly practices, we rehearse for these small cooperatives, small communities, healing and recharging caves. A dramaturgy of care extends our webs out toward you, the readers, our next ring of audience—may you write in response, chart your own complexity, and may these sensings/performances/writings move us closer to acknowledging the riches of all of us humans, more-than-humans, sites, in all their complexity.

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