**En/Acting Radical Change\: Theories, Practices, Places and Politics of Creativity as Intervention**

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**Abstract:**

Creative arts-based methods and methodologies are, of recent, seeing a (re)surgence in human geography. Much less explored by geographers, however, are creative arts-based methods and methodologies as agents of sociopolitical change or as modalities overlapping with the intensifying work of place-based engagements by critical, racialized, queer, feminist, anti-colonial, Indigenous, differently-abled and/or activists, artists, and scholars. This paper provides a broad historical overview of creativity and arts practice in geography. It then interrogates some of the shortcomings of current scholarship about creativity (in practice and theory) in the discipline. We draw from scholarship and front-line testimonies about arts in, to name a few, Indigenous-led interventions like Idle No More, in recent arts-based actions in support of asylum seekers, 2SLGBTQ or trans, feminist, and sex worker’s rights. We also offer critical geographic analysis focused on the potential and limitations of creativity for re-workings, for resistances, and for critical collaborations. We offer that critical analysis as a way to also understand creative practices as catalysts for forging affinities and alliances. By turning to critical and radical visual, performance, and literary artists working with and in-place to foster sociopolitical change, we conclude the chapter with discussions about what geographers might learn from artists and arts-engaged scholars about creativity as an intervention and agent of transformation.

**Key Words:**

Creative Practices; Criticality; Feminism; Queer Performance

**Feminist Artistic Geographers (not easily) in Place: An Introduction**

We are both artists. We are also both geographers. While we operate in this world as cis-gendered white women, we are also both feminists and activists committed to anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-oppression scholarship, and practices. We are, in short and as best as we are able and being cognizant of all the pitfalls it entails and all the mistakes we will surely make and have made, committed to trying to make the world a better place (McLean, 2016, 2017; Kobayashi et al., 2014; de Leeuw, 2017a).

We do this in part through creative work, and we do it partly through tools we have been trained with as critical social scientists. We do this sometimes with anger, we do it often with love and humour and happiness. We are increasingly trying to make the world a better place, often within and from an academic and scholarly climate (although we also practice well outside the strictures of academic environments) in which excitement is growing about the potential of creativity and arts-based methods and methodologies. While it is not our intent to quash that excitement, it is our intention to bring the excitement into conversation with, for instance, Ahmed’s (2017) call to be a “killjoy” if that “joy” is anchored in or perpetuating normative (especially white) hetero-patriarchal systems of power. We are, thus, especially interested in exploring and highlighting creative work that overtly and self-consciously pushes against the “joys” of academic scholarship, that disrupts naive readings and doings of creative work being carefree or somehow beyond the confines of critical social science engagement. We are interested in finding new grounds, critical and differently charted, grounds of creative practice and thought.

As a poet and literary non-fiction author, Sarah de Leeuw tackles issues of radical female sexuality, ecological devastation, and colonial marginalizations of (especially rural, northern, and Indigenous) peoples and places (2013, 2015, 2017b). De Leeuw’s poetic work has consciously reclaimed the anatomy and desires of a (cis-gendered) woman’s erotic encounters (2013). The work has been censored and lauded, has led to a number of heated conversations during readings (in which attendees have voiced feeling very uncomfortable with de Leeuw’s language), but was ultimately awarded a Dorothey Livesay award for the best book of poetry in British Columbia in 2013. De Leeuw’s works of non-fiction, which are formally experimental as short poetically-informed essays, are avowedly concerned with social justice and anti-colonial feminism: she writes often about her own engagement with colonial violence and her encounters with gendered and geographic violence. Still, and despite politics or liberal progressive ideologies being touted as the death of art (see for instance Perl, 2004), her last book of creative non-fiction was nominated for the most important literary prize in Canada: The Governor General’s Literary Prize.

As a performance artist and former community planner, Heather McLean critiques the gender, class, and race dimensions of neoliberal urban policies. McLean draws from her experience working within the entrepreneurialized realm of urban planning for five years before she embarked on her doctoral research of creating her Toby the “Tool for Urban” change drag king performances (McLean, 2016). As Toby, she satirizes contemporary strategies to “re-invent” neighbourhoods and cities into “green” and “creative” spaces for young, white urban professionals. Performing alongside *Dirty Plotz* (Tigchelaar, 2017), a feminist cabaret that explores the historic and ongoing exclusion of women in the arts, Toby’s fictitious projects draw attention to the gender dimensions of neoliberal policies. For example, her Toby performances make connections between city officials’ increasing reliance on networks of white male, private sector consultants, leading exclusionary urban “revitalization” projects, and the intensification of racialized and colonial gentrification processes (see Parker, 2017). While working in Glasgow as a post-doctoral researcher, McLean’s Toby performances mapped the connections between the corporatization of the university sector and the policing of disinvested neighbourhoods with revanchist “regeneration” policies. This paper, in the third section, provides an in-depth, thick autoethnographically-informed analysis of McLean’s work to offer site-specific examples of these politicized in-situ creative performances (2016). Although we are both feminist creative practitioners, McLean’s work provides clearer insights (than de Leeuw’s) into ways specific geographies may be mobilized to ensure direct and immediate interventions for social justice and change. Reflecting on the reach and impact of creative writing is more difficult to undertake – readers are, after all, a diffuse audience with whom an author rarely has direct contact. Indeed, this distance, this lack of direct proximity between creative expression and audience, is something geographers working in and through writing, in and through text (which many of us do) might well take account of: creative writing is often a more mediated form of creative practice, in terms of direct politicized immediacy, than other forms of creative work.

In this chapter, and reflecting upon our experience working in anti-colonial, feminist artistic collaborations, we explore the potentials and pitfalls of the current excitement about “creative” practices in geographical research and teaching. We discuss how arts-based interventions offer innovative ways to explore space, place and identity formation. We also demonstrate how such methods furnish feminist, queer and anti-colonial researchers with tools to craft new sites of struggle, solidarities, and co-production that decentre hierarchal and colonial ways of knowing. We also, however, take a critical look at current geographical forays into arts praxis current contexts where scholars are pressured to produce competitive but community-engaged and ‘impactful’ work. We ask: how do we make sure creative arts practice is not a ‘flash in the pan’ trend circulating within academia, a momentary ‘new thing’ that allows academics in search of metric-boosts to publish and then move on? Have creative scholars—including geographers—properly accounted for how to ensure that artists are not ‘sources of extraction’ in a complex relationship that results in an amplification of academic/ivory tower privilege? How, when geographers are becoming artists themselves, do we measure the worth of this output? By grappling with these difficult questions, we seek to work in and against, as well as to refuse, extractive and corporate settler university culture. Such creative reworkings, we contend, present possibilities for challenging historical and ongoing geometries of power and reorganising them to imagine and build new worlds. Following Ahmed, we contend “we generate knowledge from working out the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, including within the academy” (Mehra, 2017).

**Creativity, Creativity: What’s Being Said, Done, and Enacted**

Creative, arts-based methods and methodologies are, of recent, becoming increasingly popular in human geography (Crang, 2004; Hawkins, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015; Madge, 2014; Marston and de Leeuw, 2013). While still studying the creativity of others, geographers have recently engaged in methodologies including painting, photography, bio-art, performance, theatre, and slam poetry as ways to explore geographic thought (de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017; de Leeuw, 2017a). Such aesthetic practices furnish geographers with innovative and relational conceptual and methodological approaches to explore how we make and remake spaces, places and human relationships (Hawkins, 2015). Arts-based methodologies also open up opportunities for critical and reflexive attention to the presence or absence of certain voices, practices, or ways of engaging in thought-making in the discipline of geography (Nagar, 2011; Noxolo, 2016).

Creative inquiries also foster emancipatory action research methods that address the lived and learned experience of under-served and under-represented communities. Critical feminist, queer and anti-colonial scholars have engaged in performance art, dance, spoken word poetry and film projects to critique the race, class and gender dimensions of precarious work, the exclusionary politics of neoliberal urban policies, the prison-industrial complex, and unnatural disasters (Han, 1998; Christian, 2017; Mclean, 2017; Hurricane Season, 2017). Geographers have co-created zines and cookbooks as ways to co-research trauma, transnational queer and trans organising, and migrant justice activism with activists and community organisers (Bagelman and Bagelman, 2017; Ustundag and Donovan, 2017). Moreover, geographers have worked with students and activists to devise critical walking tours about radical activist histories and labour organising (Pulido et. al, 2012).

Many critical geographers engaged in creative practice take inspiration from relational, arts-based scholars in performance studies, queer theory, and disability studies who are unsettling and re-working what ‘counts’ as theory, practice, and activism. For example, McLean draws inspiration from queer, feminist performance theorist and artist TL Cowan (2012; 2017). As the character Trixie Crane, a retired soccer mom public speaker, activist scholar TL Cowan engages in sensual, politicised, and hilarious alter-ego performances to craft queer worlds and forge solidarities. For her, cabaret is a “vital, if incoherent, form of entertainment and social commentary, a community-building, sustaining a transformative site of political activism and aesthetic innovation” (Cowan, 2012). McLean is also motivated by Alex Tigchelaar, feminist performance artist, theorist, activist, and founder of sex worker arts collective *Operation Snatch*. Having curated feminist and queer cabarets for years, Tigchelaar contends that alternative performance spaces have historically provided room for angry and politicised women, LGBTQI and disabled artists, as well as artists of colour, who have been pushed to the “fucking crazy making margins” (Tigchelaar, 2013). These margins, however, are understood as generative spaces where minoritized artists can voice their frustrations and “bring into existence a reality that we didn’t see elsewhere…hacking together our own existences” (Cowan, 2017). For geographers engaged in creative practice, then, we wonder about the politics of centering, surfacing, and potentially making mainstream the creative works and practices of others. Are there risks of uncovering, of outing, of engaging artists or the spaces and places of artists? What might the limits of our scholarship be, or the ethics of leaving something alone? Does bringing into academic forums art that is produced in marginalised spaces threaten the generative power of creativity?

Tigchelaar’s observations echo the late Muñoz (1999) who claimed that cabaret is a particularly radical space because it makes room for queer artists of colour to engage in acts of disidentification. Disidentification refers to the efforts by artists of colour to situate themselves both within and against the various dominant discourses of a disempowering white supremacist, heteronormative, and ableist culture. Through these acts, artists co-opt, recycle, and re-think violently encoded discourses to include and validate minority identities. Artists also craft radical counterpublics, or ‘communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere’ (Muñoz,1999: 146) and challenge the white heteronormativity of majoritarian cultural production through these performative interventions. Following Nyong’o (2013), such acts of fabulation override our rational brain and unlock and unleash “novelty in an otherwise deadlocked symbolic order” (cited in Cowan, 2017).

White settler colonialism is, in many geographies, a deadly and deadlocked symbolic order that perpetuates violences against Indigenous peoples across time and at various scales (Tuck and Yang, 2012; de Leeuw, 2017a; Hunt, 2014; Simpson, 2017) Non-indigeneity continues to pervade the discipline of geography (Hunt, 2014; Hunt and Holmes, 2015). The majority of contexts in which Indigenous arts-based scholars produce work, or in which Indigenous geographers metaphorically undertake creative work (like dancing) (Hunt, 2014), remain very non-Indigenous, very white, very heteropatriarchal, and very colonial. Some of these spaces and contexts are, therefore, not conducive to de-colonial creativity: put powerfully another way, decolonization remains a metaphor, a myth at risk of re-centering Euro-white supremacy (Tuck and Yang, 2012). As Indigenous scholars engaging in performance-based and visual work are pressured to translate their practice into text-based scholarship digestible to colonial institutions, they become ensnared in colonial hierarchies that value the written “archive” over the embodied and performative “repertoire” (Taylor, 2003). Indigenous scholars also find themselves hindered by colonial understandings of knowledge creation and ownership as academic granting bodies and journals emphasize single, principal investigators and solo-authored articles. Metis scholar and artist Zoe Todd (2017) writes, “in euro-american academia, the arts, media, politics, and literature we are enthralled, obsessed with two things: ‘innovation’ and individuality…the triumph of individual will to manifest something new new new.” For Todd, these regimes exclude “whole teams of human and more-than-human beings who make certain projects or ideas possible” (2017). Nishnaabegartist and theorist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) also critiques the violence of colonial knowledge hierarchies that favour individual theory makers. Simpson works with Indigenous scholars, activists, artists and community members to generate knowledge through a “combination of emotion and intellectual knowledge with the kinetics of our place-based practices, as mitigated through our bodies, minds, and spirits” (2017: 30). A praxis that involves “her body and her life”, she draws from Nishnaabeg practices of “hunting, fishing, harvesting rice and medicines, making maple syrup, parenting, and storytelling” (2017: 31) as sites of community-engagement, critique, and analysis. She also draws from the “painful and uncomfortable knowledge” that she carries which is the result of existing as an Indigenous woman in the violent context of settler colonialism (2017: 31). Working within this context, the colonial university’s emphasis on producing ‘outputs’ by individual researchers reinforces deeply violent practices that negate the rich, embodied knowledge of Indigenous women scholars and the communities they work and learn with.

The corporatized neoliberal colonial university also presents practical, everyday challenges for Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers (de Leeuw et al 2013), including art-based scholars committed to decolonization through creative practice. Because this is a relatively small sub-field within geography, only a small number of scholars can review this work. Academic publishing regimes also foster the production of “fast scholarship” (Great Lakes Feminist Collective, 2015) or the creation of work within a short amount of time. Last (2015) captures these contradictions as she writes, “I came to geography, or to academia, from a background in fashion design. In a way, I feel like I’m still battling the same problem of fads and fashions. Academia, too, has ‘hot topics’, and while these may be justified by a need to present an urgent response, the need for responses and the urgency of a topic do not always map onto one another, especially when it comes to issues that don’t go away – unlike academic indicators of ‘hotness’ that tend to change very quickly.” (Last, 2015). Indeed, even well-meaning research produced within this context can result in “fraught and violent collateral damages” (Todd, 2017) including the exploitation of precarious scholars, roughshod ethics, and a lack of trust from communities that researchers are engaging with. Administrators and professors also reproduce settler colonialist discourse in the ways they approach academic writing. In the UK, for example, university administrators and funding bodies often refer to knowledge ‘pipelines’ and encourage researchers to ‘pump prime’ for competitive research. They also warn researchers not to fall behind and become ‘leaky pipelines’. Contemporary geographers writing about colonialism continue to use languages and logics that were the very tools of settler colonists who did so much to violent disrupt the lives and spaces of Indigenous people. Despite the upsurge of creative practices in the discipline, we have done little to change our story/research-telling methods (de Leeuw, 2017a).

Other tense and contradictory realities also continue to (de)limit the politics and possibilities of creative activities, despite the somewhat ‘joy-filled’ lauding of creative methods and methodologies. Current administrative pressures to produce work that promises to make an ‘impact’, or create measurable change in communities, continues to reinforce hierarchies and exclusions for geographers engaging in creative, arts-based research. Feminists critics charge that the impact trend, another technology of governance in the neoliberal “audit culture” (Pain, 2014), reproduces particularly masculine and colonial power/knowledge relations. These critical scholars also question the extent to which researchers can engage in meaningful participatory research with communities because this work takes time and relies on the unpaid, gendered, classed, and raced emotional labour of community members, activists, and artists (Pain, 2014; Great Lakes Feminist Collective, 2015). In her writing on embodied research ethics, Audre Mitchell claims that, in some ways, “impact” and “knowledge mobilization” can engage broader communities and publics and raise awareness of important issues that can help in broader efforts to decolonize knowledge. She simultaneously cautions, however, that these trends posit knowledge as only beneficial if it is available to the public and can “expose knowledge to predation, instrumentalisation, (willful) misinterpretation or violation” (Mitchell, 2016). Referring to the work of Indigenous scholars, she encourages researchers to consider refusing to divulge information in cases in which exposure is harm in itself. Furthermore, as universities increasingly forge public-private partnerships in urban regeneration projects with think tanks, corporate-backed arts festivals, and third sector groups, scholarly funding bodies tend to favour arts interventions that align with impact strategies (McLean, 2016). Within this context, arts-based research risks becoming another flash-in-the pan trend in a system where commodification, consumption and competition has become “hardwired into academic production through institutional demands” (Pain, 2014).

Geographers also reinforce colonial dynamics by negating fleshy, messy bodies in their arts-based interventions. As an example, eco-poetry written from a place-less standpoint often lacks “fleshy, material, guts, and tendons; any embodied, physical, intertwining of people—especially diversely constituted and positioned human subjects—with the physical environment” (de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017). As a result, such work negates the feminist and queer potentials of risky border crossings, messiness and contamination (de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017). Furthermore, when geographers do not expressly and purposefully reflect on authorial power, gender, and race identity, they are always at risk of naturalising a Eurocentric colonial performance of “universalisation and rationalism” (Sundberg, 2014) and the colonial god-trick like authorial placelessness (Haraway, 1996). Such standpoints risk reproducing white supremacist and colonial hierarchies of what counts as artistic and theoretically rigourous (de Leeuw, 2017a).

Moreover, geographers practicing arts-based methods rarely employ critical modes of analysis so well established in social and cultural geography to reflect on the politics of their work or their work’s implications (de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017). In our experiences as symposium and workshop participants on panels about arts-based research over the past few years, we have noticed that such conversations are often bereft of reflexivity about the contradictory politics of the hierarchal, heteronormative, and colonial spaces in which we produce this work. Panel and workshop participants on community theatre, yarn bombing, gardening as creative practice, and participatory arts interventions meant to enliven public spaces, for example, rarely grapple with difficult intersectional discussions about white privilege, colonialism, citizenship status, ability, or *class*. And rarely do arts-based researchers expressly concern themselves with the vexing politics of representation, coloniality, and race. We are, then, a very long way away from decolonising geography: we are a long way from a discipline that does not (re)produce gendered, racialised, heteronormative, able-bodied spaces and privileging. Our creative work exists in, and dialogues with, these oppressive spaces and contexts. Should we not commit to political and ethical imperatives identified by queer, anti-colonial and Indigenous geographers with respect to Indigenous people and their lands? If creative work does not do this, is it at risk of supporting and perpetuating hierarchies and exclusions? What are the implications of this when thinking about creative methods and methodologies within the disciplinary expectations of academic geography?

**The Potentialities and Pitfalls of Critical Performance: McLean and *Toby Sharp***

As a feminist artist and researcher, I (McLean) engage in collective performance interventions to explore the contradictory politics of neoliberal policies that promote competition, consumption, and individualism (2016; 2017). Working alongside other feminist artists, I examine the impacts of market-oriented arts-led regeneration policies on under-represented artists of colour, Indigenous artists, disabled artists, and women artists. I also investigate how, within a context where even politicised art interventions are consumed as spectacle, feminist and queer artists can become ensnared in exclusionary gentrification dynamics. Performance art also, however, furnishes me with ways to explore feminist and queer “affinities and alliances” (Nagar, 2014). It also provides artistic strategies to playfully and performatively re-work and resist hegemonic values. My work is inspired by a range of performance artists and theorists including King (2011: 2001) who write about ways critical feminist and queer women artists engage in radical aesthetic and political praxis to continually resurface, again and again from the margins, to resist their erasure.

Over the years, my forays into art-based practice have included performing *Toby Sharp* in activist cabarets in Toronto and Glasgow. Toby is a satirical character who draws attention to and satirises the rise and influence of masculinist neoliberal planning policies (Parker, 2017). A composite character, Toby is based on the well-resourced, confident cadre of white male urban consultants I encountered working for five years as a community planner before I embarked on my doctoral research. Working in the urban planning field, I often collaborated with high-profile architects and planning consultants who (from my perspective) in somewhat cavalier or with self-referential motives, dropped in to disinvested public housing neighbourhoods. Their aims were to lead projects meant to ‘reinvent’ people’s homes, parks, schools, and community centres into ‘higher-end’ condominiums, commercial spaces, and cultural facilities amenable to middle class professionals. Replicating plans they shared via global consultancy networks (McLean, 2014), their calls for arts-oriented real estate development could only be read as ‘art-washing’ over the violent displacement of dynamic working class communities that were once home to new immigrant families, single parents, seniors, and disabled residents.

Between 2013 and 2014, I performed Toby in a series of TED Talk-like performances as part of the *Dirty Plotz* cabaret. Conceived of by Tigchelaar, *Dirty Plotz* explored the intersectional dimensions of gentrification, the everyday violence of settler colonialism, and the role of witchy, queer humour in forging feminist solidarities. In my bawdy performances, Toby presented a range of fictitious urban revitalisation projects as a way to satirise the connections between entrepreneurialised cultural policies and the privatisation of urban planning processes. The fake projects included the *Rex-Rose* *Hoagie Hub*, a participatory project that was part of the fictitious Toronto International Art Biennale. The *Hoagie Hub* project encouraged residents from the affluent Toronto neighbourhood of Rosedale to construct a large-scale sandwich with residents from the disinvested inner-suburban neighbourhood of Rexdale. A celebration of sandwich artistry and economic development, the project encouraged residents to collaboratively build a hoagie, as well as to purchase organic cheeses and meats from the project’s various corporate partners. As Toby enthusiastically recounted the *Hoagie Hub,* he described how the sandwich was eventually suspended by cables over Liberty Village, a “revitalised” neighbourhood in a former Toronto brown field site featuring yoga studios, high end coffee shops, securitised condominiums, and greenspaces for young professionals (Catungal and Leslie, 2009). Behind him, an image of a phallus-like sandwich hovered over the city skyline as he proclaimed that the sandwich symbolized “the power of community.” With clownish and grotesque humour, Toby signalled the masculinist politics of urban consultancy expertise.

The hovering hoagie was inspired by corporate-sponsored festivals animating Toronto with participatory arts interventions meant to market the city’s ethnic “diversity”, including the high-profile *Luminato* festival. Spearheaded by powerful private sector consultants to transform Toronto into “the most creative city in the world” (McLean, 2014), *Luminato* has featured a range of community-engaged activities meant to animate downtown public spaces and parks for the past decade. The primary goal of these activities is to encourage Toronto residents to take part in “re-inventing” Toronto into a cultural hotspot for tourists and culture industries. For example, one year the festival partnered with *President’s Choice*, a brand of Loblaws Companies Limited, a large-scale Canadian food retailer, to host an enormous community buffet. Marketed as an interactive arts intervention meant to celebrate diversity the buffet was an opportunity for festival-goers to enjoy President’s Choice *Memories of Marakesh* couscous and *Memories of Bangkok* noodles in a trendy downtown neighbourhood. As part of the event, participants could even sign their own *President’s Choice* plate to share on a collective wall.

While journalists have celebrated *Luminato* for transforming neighbourhoods into zones of interactive creativity attractive to tourists and arts enthusiasts, critical artists have fiercely critiqued the festival. Some charge that *Luminato* relies on an army of unpaid interns and celebrates the gentrification of disinvested public housing neighbourhoods. Critics also claims that it glosses over racialised inequalities in the city as it promotes “diversity”, what Catungal (2016) refers to this as “the tendency for urban placemakers to create consumptive spectacles of race that reduce people of colour and their cultures to spices that can liven up boring urban space.” Moreover, critical artists charge that the festival signals the marketisation of cultural policies: public arts funding is increasingly directed to public-private partnership-funded “arts carpet-bombing events” (Mclean, 2011) that make a big impression but do little to support artists and communities in any sustainable or even meaningful way.

Performing Toby with *Dirty Plotz* at Buddies in Bad Times, a queer theatre company in Toronto, was a praxis-oriented research journey that deepened my understanding of the potential of cabaret for re-working and resisting neoliberal values (Cowan, 2012). In each cabaret, Toby performed alongside an eclectic mix of politicised feminist artists who veer from the comical to the serious. The line-up included Nari, an Egyptian spoken word artist whose fierce and rhythmic poetry calls out white liberal celebrations of multiculturalism circulating in mainstream Canadian politics; Tigchelaar’s *Operation Snatch*, a sex work collective that critiques the racialised violence of liberal feminist efforts to shut down strip clubs and massage parlours; and Canon Cook, an Indigenous artist whose performance-based work addresses the ongoing violence of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canadian cities. Together, our individual performances collectively uncovered and resisted racialised and settler colonial neoliberal logics. We also engaged in politicised feminist acts of disidentification (Muñoz, 1999), re-working and resisting majoritarian values, through performance. By working in concert with other feminist, queer, and racialised artists beyond the academy, my creative work is also held accountable in ways I rarely find when working with other (primarily) academic practitioners—even if those academics are working with artists.

Since 2014, I have performed Toby in Glasgow in activist cabarets including *Fail Better*, a politicised cabaret that showcases the work of under-represented working class artists, disabled artists, and artists of colour. For *Fail Better*, the world-travelling consultancy expert gave a talk about various fictitious projects he was spearheading including *BAWBAG,* a community-university partnership in Glasgow’s disinvested East Side neighbourhoods. Referencing Scottish slang for the “sack of skin that holds a man’s testes,” as a Glaswegian friend explained, this satirical initiative brought together banks, developers, the Home Office, IT companies, and universities. With grotesque humour, Toby drew attention to the links between the policing of working class and racialised migrant communities within urban ‘regeneration’ schemes, the competitive masculinity of consultancy-led planning, and the gender dimensions of think-tank ‘experts’.

By performing Toby and attending cabarets like *Fail Better*, I have learned about the rich arts-activist scenes taking place in Glasgow. At *Fail Better*, performances have included spoken word artists and musicians contesting Dungavel, an inhumane detention centre located only a few hours from the city (McLean, 2017). The evenings have also featured disabled arts collectives critiquing the brutal violence of benefits sanctions and cuts to community services with music, performance and spoken word poetry.

These collaborative and performative experiences have enriched my research on feminist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist arts activism in Glasgow and Toronto. Tensions have emerged, however, when I attempted to translate the work into writing within a neoliberal colonial university system. When I wrote about performing with *Dirty Plotz,* for instance, I in some ways played into knowledge hierarchies, rendering collectively produced work into sole-authored articles. I was also particularly uncomfortable profiting as an academic researcher by writing about the cabaret in a moment when Canada’s Bill C-36, the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, criminalizes sex workers as it restricts access to where they might conduct business. Within this context, I risk reaping the “rewards of making edgy art” (Tigchelaar, 2017) with sex workers when “sex workers themselves remain endangered by ideologically driven policy” (Tigchelaar, 2017). I also became entangled in colonial processes as I wrote about my Indigenous collaborators’ performance work that explores deeply personal trauma and resilience. Echoing Smith and Todd, my drag king practice became complicit in an extractive publishing regime that translates collectivist performances work into the scholarly “repertoire” (Taylor, 2003) that upholds the myth of individual achievement. Moreover, some of my feminist colleagues, researchers who write about performance interventions, warn me to downplay Toby on my CV and in job applications. A few have warned me that he is “too weird”. They have even cautioned me not to be “too weird” at conferences, and that I won’t be taken seriously as I describe flying phallus-like sandwiches, if I enact Toby literally foaming at the mouth as he describes his joy of innovation, of hubs and planetary knowledge leadership. Meanwhile, my colleagues and I are increasingly pressured to attend professional development workshops. One was led by private sector consultant (his claim to fame is coming up with a marketing strategy for a cat food company) about how to brand our work, compete with our knowledge, and perform the ‘global research expert’—nothing ‘weird’ here!

Similarly, after moving to the UK, I discovered that my community-engaged arts practice has been a particularly valuable supplement within the university’s audit culture. Since moving there, my colleagues have pressured me to prove that my Toby performances with groups like *Fail Better* make an “impact”, or shift attitudes and make measurable change in Glasgow’s arts scenes. However, I am particularly uncomfortable instrumentalising my soft-shoe drag performances within this accounting regime. How can I claim that I made an “impact”, or changed people’s perceptions, in a cabaret made up of a mix of politicised and collectively-produced projects? By stating that my comedic drag performances shift people’s perceptions, don’t I reproduce a highly individualised and masculinist understanding of artistic production and pedagogy that I critique in my performance interventions and research? Finally, I would not be honest if I didn’t note that rendering my queer-feminist performance, inspired by angry and politicised women artists into a measurable ‘outcomes’ for my CV and for on-line citation systems, crushes my soul.

I remain uneasy claiming that my Toby performance makes an impact in Glasgow’s activist-arts scenes. My hesitance stems from the fact that I have shared the stage with artists who are understandably distrustful of university researchers building cultural and symbolic capital off the unpaid and emotional labour of women artists, artists of colour, working-class, and disabled artists. As I write this, I think of a queer disabled poet who I met through *Fail Better*. In her performance poetry, she vividly recounts the harrowing experience of having her benefits sanctioned, an experience that left her unable to pay for heat and food. At other disability activist events, she has expressed her frustrations towards entrepreneurial arts funding bodies that consider her work “too radical” to fund, and towards masculinist activists who have ignored her work as “too artsy” and not radical enough. As a result, she continues to survive as an artist working from the margins. Living and being between worlds. Any claims to have made an “impact” by performing on a stage with artists like her would be an act of institutional violence. I would reinforce deeply colonial and extractive dynamics that I strive to contest, not benefit from, through my work. Furthermore, from a relational feminist perspective, impact agendas that claim to make change for marginalised disabled, working class, and deeply precarious residents and residents living in limbo without citizenship status have set up a system where academics profit directly from communities increasingly punished by the same neoliberal systems imposing corporate agendas on universities. Following Ahmed (2017), our work as critical scholars should be to consistently play the role of “killjoy” within this particular conjuncture.

As Nagar contends, however, “if people sitting in unequal places will not come forward to build alliances then gulfs between our intellectual and material struggles will continue to widen” (Nagar, 2014: 148). Her insights echo feminist and queer anticolonial researchers who seek generative possibilities and opportunities for crafting alliances within the contradictory power dynamics of the neoliberal and colonial university. Her ongoing work, as well as the work of a rich network of feminist, queer and Indigenous scholars, reminds us that ethical, caring, reflexive, fraught, and joyous collaborations are key. Todd captures this generative potential as she writes:

A focus on fostering strong relationships within academe and beyond, and an insistence on celebrating those relationships—rather than only celebrating singular voices -- inherently disrupts the attempts of consumerist-capitalist academic structures to burn through our lives like brush fire…. let’s make sure we also nurture and foster a culture of joyous and raucous co-celebration of the relationships which make our time here possible (Todd, 2017).

For me, collaborating with *Dirty Plotz* artists has been such a raucous and joyous journey. As a university researcher, I have done my best to embody an ethic of co-creation: I check in with artist-collaborators, I send them drafts to read over, and I seek out funding opportunities to materially support these collaborations. Inspired by feminist researchers, I also continually seek out possibilities for feminist, alternative impact that foregrounds the perspectives of marginalised communities in co-produced research (Pain and Gaynor, 2017). I also refuse, however, to translate some of the performance work I have engaged in, or write about the artists that I have encountered in my practice. Because their creative work speaks back at violent colonial neoliberal structures, I am deeply uncomfortable translating Indigenous, trans, and women of colour artists’ and disabled artists’ practice into measurable research ‘outcomes’. Although these are small interventions, such everyday ‘doings’ are part of “an active, emergent, and evolving praxis” (Barker and Pickerill, 2017) that we try, fail at, and try again as we negotiate exclusionary university structures. Refusal and disengagement can be powerful tools in creative and arts-based realms: perhaps if more geographers simply refused to entangle creative practices with academic spaces and expectations, creative practices would not risk being interpolated into metricising schemes upon which neoliberal institutions so increasingly rely. Might there not be something radical and activist in simply not offering our creative practices, our work, up for institutional scrutiny?

**Still Messy, Still Dirty: Some Uneasy Creative Conclusions**

We are reticent about conclusions generally: they suggest a tidy summary, a kind of wrapped-up cohered set of finalities. While we have presented a series of notes on overlaps between critical geographies and creative practices, we are loath to close with any set of summaries: in many ways, creative work in critical geographies is still too new a domain for such conclusiveness. Instead, we pose a series of questions with tentative provocations, which we hope many more generations of critical creative geographers will grapple with and expand upon.

Perhaps one of the most prescient questions, which has been woven throughout this paper and that remains for us—and for many critical feminist queer creative practitioners and geographers—concerns an *ethics of creative practice,* what Audre Mitchell refers to as “lived experiential ethics*”* (Mitchell, 2016). This is particularly sharp in realms of co-creation, especially when academics with non-precarious employment, academics with secure work, engage in co-creation with artists or marginalised peoples in peripheral or fringe spaces and places. How, we also wonder, do we manage to work creatively and politically? Moreover, how to we respect and amplify the voice of underrepresented artists when we produce under “constant surveillance and production mania” (Mitchell, 2016) of a colonial university system that materially rewards individual researchers and “impactful” scholars producing “measurable” creative work. For us, creative researchers speaking back to the extractive university system offer us hope, humour, and tactics for crafting collectivity. Todd writes, “I reject the idea of the academic rock star and offer instead the academic rock arena, all blaring guitar and laser-light and fist-pumping glory as we revel in the power of our collective badassery… without these myriad relationships there could be no singular triumph. And without these relationships, the work we do would be pretty dull and dreary” (Todd, 2017).

Finally, we want to hypothesise, to project into the future, where lively, vibrant and bad-ass creative geographies might be in five years, in ten years. Again, we have no answers: indeed, we suspect that definitive and clear answers are at odds with the potential of creativity and more in-line with a closed, tactical approach to making and sharing knowledge that is exactly what we are suggesting critical practitioners in creative geography might want to avoid (see too de Leeuw et al., 2017). We want to leave things open-ended, unconfined, unfinished. We thus have a creative call, a song-word-work textual geo-graphy we can only hope lifts (even a teensy bit) off the page and into the world—a world we sincerely hope will see more social and spatial justice in the not too distant future. In keeping with creative practices themselves, and with our hearts and minds solidly turned toward and tuned into generations past and present (and future) of the hardscrabble-still-not-compete work of radicals, of feminists and rascals, of queer or differently-abled peoples, of those living racialised geographies and those living the marginalisation of contemporary colonial violence, those “hacking” the worlds they want to see (Cowan, 2017) we offer

this

this incompleteness, this not very much but what we have. Right now. We offer ourselves with our best intentions, knowing full well that’s just how that proverbial road to hell was paved. We offer our love our joy and our love of the killjoy. We offer our willingness to support and scream and also stay silent and refuse. We offer drag-kinging and queening and tricksters and poets of all shapes and sizes. We offer anecdotal work, storytelling, “weird work”, insights that might be dismisses as irrelevant. We offer the awkwardness, the sweat, the dirt, and the things that elude all that seeks to professionalise us. We offer our willingness to be refused, to fail, to have our support turned down. To not be enough, to be too much. We offer ourselves, we offer to move the hell over, to shut up, to yell to perform to write to do nothing and love your nothing too. We offer that we can’t offer enough. That we can’t. And we sure can’t do it alone. We offer that especially. That we need you, we need each other. We offer that even if we’re trying to do what we can, and will do just that, we offer what we can. We offer to know, what we can, that we live in impossible places and moments and we offer to try and understand. We offer all the offerings we have on offer, to laugh with you and cry with you and to be ignored by you when that’s what’s right for you. We offer our hope. Our hope that something wild and wily and irreducible and impossible is never bucked up lassoed down quantified reduced metricised made palatable and sanitised and churned into something offered not with care. We offer to care, we offer our care. We offer to recognise it’s political, yes it is, and it’s just not good enough pretend we can side step that, so we offer too a sly sideways stepping, a little jig, a jot, an itsy-bitsy giggle, but we’re still roaring angry too, and we offer we offer we offer we hope, please, please don’t try to place the creative too particularly, don’t try to map it too carefully, too clearly, don’t. We offer. This. In hope.

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