The Impossible Project

by

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Master of Fine Arts

in the
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Abstract

The Impossible Project is an investigation of the nature of self-identity through a wide range of disciplines. The research began as an autoethnographic study of personal struggle with psychological distress, and extended to a deeper questioning of our societal and cultural assumptions around medicine, and the consequences of these assumptions on how patients experience themselves and others in the world. The primary thrust of the academic thesis was an exploration of these questions through a range of creative, poetic, and performative acts. Rather than denying the truth or validity of modern social institutions and their values, this project strives to find agency in the act of questioning how these structures operate. The sense of self is constantly being disoriented and reoriented through a shifting network of relations between people and structures. The project became a way of revealing the “self” as a process of always becoming more.

Keywords: autoethnography; performance; identity; fractals; mental illness; medicine
To the Dead Illness
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Chapter 1.

The Impossible Project: Defense Statement

The Impossible Project is a process of research and art making that uses my struggle with psychological suffering as source material to explore questions of identity, and ultimately, what it means to be human.

The following statement is a general tracing of how the project has manifested theoretically, methodologically, and artistically since the spring of 2010, when in a brief moment of motivation, part-way through a four year episode of “depression,” I picked up a camera, and videoed myself interacting with a year’s worth of empty medication bottles. I collected these bottles as a record of medications I had taken, but the collection became more than a mere record of my drug history. I had some questions about what collections are and how they operate; I also had questions regarding modes of organization. My mentor, professor Andrew Houston—who had watched me go through several periods of severe depression throughout my undergrad career, and had helped me officially withdraw from school when I was too cognitively incapacitated to continue—suggested that I use my collection of medication bottles as a starting point to explore my personal struggle with “mental illness.” The video attempted to organize the medication bottles in order to find “understanding, orientation, and acceptance.”

I created the short video, “Medication Tour,” in a brief moment of cognitive resurfacing. It was not until the following winter, 2011 that I revisited the rapidly growing collection of medication bottles to create, Twenty-nine Beats Per Minute: Metaphors for Madness, a solo performance piece about my experience of psychological suffering. This was the first time I had been so open about my suffering with friends, family, general public—and myself. My research toward the project included pouring over numerous personal diaries from the beginning of my illness at age fourteen, as well as joining an online “mood
disorders” forum where I became an active member, speaking with people about their experiences and attitudes toward illness and healthcare.

My research revolved around questions of identity. What is the self? Am I my body, my memories, my thoughts? What part of me is me, what part is my illness, and what part is the medications? I used an array of juxtaposed art forms to explore these questions within Metaphors, including role-play, video, audience participation, sound-walk, and games. I wanted to create an experience of what my suffering was like for the audience, and I wanted to expose the stigma around illness and stigma’s utility in our society.

After creating both the video and the performance, I found a sense of empowerment and I wanted to explore what it was about the work that was personally empowering. What most surprised me about Metaphors was how it instigated a flood of responses from people who opened up about their own struggle with illness, and who encouraged me to keep exploring this subject. I wanted to find a way of creating work that was not merely empowering for me, but that became the occasion for others to feel empowered. The work became deeper and broader once it opened up a dialogue with others. This dialogue further exacerbated my notion of the self as an autonomous being—not only was my work opening possibilities for other people and the way they perceive illness, but their responses were raising questions for me about how I might continue to exist with chronic illness in this society. The interactions and reactions I had with my audience during Metaphors informed the trajectory of my study at Simon Fraser University.

My artistic work and theoretical research at SFU began with Of Constant Becoming (2012) – cutting thousands of tiny pictures out of old textbooks, then collecting and reorganizing these tiny pictures in a live installation in the large, glass vitrine at the Audain gallery. I spent over sixty hours during gallery hours, inside the vitrine, arranging pictures across the glass, the ceiling and the floor—tearing down configurations and replacing them with new ones. I wanted to explore the act of creation, or the process of change as being the work of art itself. The artwork was never fixed, and it was never complete as it was always in the process of being made or unmade over time. Passers-by were invited to explore the visual chaos of the box and find their own connection to the work, as the juxtaposition of various pictures allowed for numerous interpretations from individual viewers.
What surprised me about this intensive installation was how it challenged my sense of agency and autonomy in a very real and troubling way. On the outset, I imagined that I would be like a painter at her canvas, painting her picture and choosing what to paint and how to paint it. In reality, I found that, rather than wielding a brush against a canvas from the outside in an authoritative way, I was inside the composition itself—I was, metaphorically speaking, being painted as much as I was painting. My perspective of the artwork became limited to how it looked inside the box. I could not see what the work looked like to witnesses on the outside. The work itself, and my authorship as artist, was called into question in a very experiential way. This question informed my continued research into concepts of identity, agency, truth and complexity, and relationship to the other.

In fall 2012, I began research toward my final MFA performance by collecting over eight hundred pages of my medical records, as primary source material toward devising a work that would continue to explore questions of identity, agency and empowerment for both artist(s) and audience. The more I interacted with the records and invited others to interact with them, the more profoundly I experienced the sense that I had far less agency over myself or my artwork than I thought.

I began exposing my peers to the content of the project through a performance event at Woodwards in January 2013. I revealed the extent of my prescription drug use by placing my collection of medication bottles on the floor, one at a time in a long line across the sixty-foot studio. What was so poignant for me about that event was the silence that settled on the room as the witnesses watched me place each bottle on the floor. That silence hid uncountable unanswered questions—it held the tension of what we wanted to say but wouldn’t, and what I longed to say but didn’t have the words for. I left the event feeling ashamed, alone, confused and uncertain.

I am not ashamed of what I have gone through because that was beyond my control. I am ashamed by something that was made quite real to me after that event: that I hate people with “mental illness” and I hate it when people talk about it openly. This hate and anger consumed me for months, and most of my attempts to use the records to create “art” only made my helplessness, anger, and shame more visceral. The struggle was how to harness this anger in a way that would not alienate collaborators and audience.
My initial proposition for my thesis project was a solo performance based on material generated by student artists in devising workshops where they would interact with my medical records in order to create scenes, characters, dialogue, etc. In February 2013, I did a week of these devising workshops, but left the workshops feeling hostile and angry by responses to the material. My hostility came, in part, from seeing that reactions to the material were so mild compared to the intensity of my own response. Some of the exercises we did were so abstract that they lost all connection to the records or to any of the questions that I was trying to ask. Other exercises simply replicated the violence and objectification that is inherent in the records, offering little room to imagine other possibilities for existing.

I felt alone and misunderstood, and the workshops made it obvious, in an experiential way, why I never talk about these things, and why I have spent much of my life trying to ignore or to deny the truth of my suffering and my implication in the wider system of mental healthcare. I was faced with the reality of my struggle: to be honest with people about my suffering, without somehow confirming what the records say about me. How could I create the conditions that allow others to experience me (and themselves) as processes of struggle, as opposed to individual beings that struggle?

After the workshops, I put the records in my closet and didn’t read them for months. The records disturbed me because, not only did they attest to my objectification under the medical system, but they revealed how I have spent much of my life thinking of myself as an object, and even more shamefully, thinking of other people as objects. Artistic progress slowed down and I spent my time researching human behavioral biology, the history of psychiatry, trauma psychology, hospital architecture, information theory, particle physics, cosmology, fractals, thermodynamics, and chaos theory.

I was looking for ways to make an artwork that might allow the audience to experience this struggle for agency and understanding in a world fraught with the violence of structures and categories whose truth, legitimacy, and simplicity, often go unquestioned. I also wanted to find a way to suffer well.

I began to bring my disparate research interests into discussions with dramaturg, Fannina Waubert de Puiseau, and in May 2013, I extended these conversations into
weekly club meetings with Keely O'Brien and Daniel O'Shea. We discussed existential questions and attempted to engage creatively with the source material and to transform it into possibilities of becoming more than what we are.

At this time, I began to work in earnest alone with the records, and to share my findings at club meetings. I established a new relationship with the records that I hadn’t anticipated. Instead of engaging with them solely as text to be interpreted, I started engaging with them on a physical level: an 11 lb stack of paper. I folded them into paper boats and airplanes. It was thought provoking and destabilizing to fold the records into toys, but it also felt like a futile endeavor.

Folding records into airplanes did not change what they said about me, and did not change the “facts,” but it did reframe the way the records could be understood—something explored further in the installation part of The Impossible Project, “Warning Confidential.” The installation featured me in the glass vitrine at the Audain gallery, folding records into airplanes while a student dressed as a doctor—miked for audience members to hear on headphones—read aloud from the records.

I further explored the physicality of the records by carrying them on my back, everywhere I went, for weeks. I wrote about my experience of carrying the burden of those records. Rather inexplicably, I found myself drawn to a hospital near where I was living. I went to the hospital daily, for months. I wrote about what I saw and felt. The writings became a dialogue, and over time, a play. This part of the process was the most alluring. I felt as though I was being tempted into a dangerous place. I was curious about these characters. I wanted to know who they were and what their relationship was. They were mysterious. Writing this play felt more like a search than a construction. The work and my life seemed to merge in a boundless way that I was never able to replicate so fully in the rest of the process.

What does this play have to do with the medical records? What does this play have to do with me? What does this play have to do with my experience of the medical system?

The play is a safe form from which to explore the overwhelming hate, fear, anger and shame in the records. The play expresses what is missing from the records: humanity, poetry, pain, suffering, horror, fear and loneliness. I could not keep reading the records. I
was struck by the frustrating paradox of feeling that the records are somehow a huge part of who I am, and yet, they say nothing about me or the extent of the suffering I experienced. The records say more about the society I live in than anything about me. I wanted to show my audience how medical culture operates, but to do so, I needed to find my own language to contrast the language of the records. Throughout this process, I have been faced with the dilemma of how to make a social critique about the context or structure of the records without somehow judging and making work that perpetuates political/structural modes of being that I want question.

The play became a form for enacting my story. All I have is imagination. There is no cure for this disease or for this society. There is no explanation outside of the context. That is why I had to make the work, alongside the disease, the bureaucracy, and the institution. Freedom is impossible, struggle is not. I am my imagination. You are invited to see me through the worlds and the characters that I create. That is how I live. That is how I am most alive. I am less boxed up, more complicated.

I also wanted to challenge the audience to use their own imaginations to ask questions and make connections and perhaps find resonances of their own struggles, fears and desires. My hope is that the play allowed the audience to feel their own sense of agency through their experience of the piece—or at least to gain a sense of how complicated our human existence is and how, despite many confines, both real and abstract, there is always room to question and re-imagine how we might exist in the world.

The project could no longer be the solo performance I had first intended. What was going on between the characters, and the act of switching roles for the actors, seemed to be both an illustration and an enactment of the struggle to “become” through our interactions with the other. Rather than denying the ugliness of suffering, and the complexity of anger, pain, and entrapment, I wanted to let these things arrive in the work through the act of performance and creation. I wanted to reveal rather than to hide the struggle.

In the performance of the play, we highlighted the constructed nature of the piece and the process of creation. We performed the play in the rehearsal studio, rather than a more obviously traditional theatre space. Because of this, we were limited with what we
could do with lighting and extravagant set pieces. We performed the play with a sparse set and used the paper records as the main prop and set décor. The blinds over the big picture windows were left open as the audience entered the space to acknowledge the larger world on the streets of Vancouver below us. As actors, we strove for performances that were honest and present. As director for the final weeks of rehearsals, Waubert de Puiseau encouraged us to include ourselves while playing the roles. By doing this, the struggle to switch roles when repeating the play three times each evening became more palpable, and it demanded a visible and present transformation for each actor which the audience witnessed.

The source material that so deeply informs my experience of myself, my experience of others, and the emotional reactions I had throughout the process of making this work, was pre-recorded and played aloud for the audience to hear before the play and during the costume changes. The audience could allow the words of the records to inform and affect how they experienced the play. I wanted the audience to experience how the medicalization of my body happens, and I wanted to give them intellectual space to consider what that does, and how institutions might shape us. I’m not interested in deciding what is right and wrong, or in providing solutions. I am interested in questioning what the problems actually are, and questioning why they are even considered problems.

Freedom from our past, freedom from the choices that we have made, freedom from the judgment of others, freedom from our biology and our cultural shaping—these can never be fully realized. Every choice I make is informed by, and in turn re-informs, the activity of the people, structures, and institutions within which I am deeply connected. There is no escape from this web of relations. However, the struggle to reorient myself within the web is perhaps one way to live in this violent world.

The relation between the characters in the play, and the process of actors switching roles becomes, among other things, both an illustration of, and an enactment of, this struggle to live, to act, and to interact within the confines of structures we find ourselves enmeshed in. These confines are multiple and deeply interconnected. Some of the confines we explored included: medical institutions; our bodies; our memories; our past actions; the walls we put up to protect ourselves and each other from the pain of love,
and from the pain of being misunderstood; and the very fact of being alive and conscious.

Although the struggle that I began with appeared to be a personal struggle, it is very much a shared struggle because none of us are confined to an essential self inside our bodies. We are always becoming more than what we are. That is both terrifying and inspiring.
Chapter 2.

Project Documentation

The Beast that Escaped and a Fine, Fine Flavour

A Play by Calla Churchward, as Performed September 2013

Characters

C
You (a surgeon)
Body

Characters are gender blind but “he” is used throughout the text and may be switched with “she” depending on the gender identity of the actor. The play should be performed three times in a row, with each actor rotating roles and playing each part once. Costume changes should occur onstage between each iteration, and there should be no break for the actors.

Setting

An abandoned bus shelter with a peeling pink poster advertising faded photos of various ice cream concoctions. A small, white towel is spread next to You with a selection of sterile surgical tools, white gauze and a bottle of rubbing alcohol. You is sitting on the curb, conducting surgery on his own leg. C is pacing, sitting, and standing in and around the bus shelter. C has a pen tucked into his shirt. There is a large, cardboard box on the ground in the corner of the bus shelter; it has C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T-I-A-L written in block letters on the side of it and is full of old medical files. A body in a hospital gown lies in the corner or under the bench in the bus shelter.
The Play

C: Did you read that article?
You: What article?
C: About the beast that escaped?
You: No.
C: You know, that light… it was, so striking—this vivid, warm green, almost like leaves and meadows and things… visceral, like a kick in the ribs.
You: Cut it out.
C: I think I’ll do a sketch of the hospital parking sign.
You: How inspiring.
C: I was exploring the hospital the other day, in spirals. Circle around one floor, climb the staircase to the next floor, circle around to the staircase again, climb up, then around for the third time, all the way up to the roof where the helicopter landing pad is. The hospital is constructed like a Cheerio so you can do laps like that. On a cloudless day you can see the escarpment and the highway. It’s a pretty far drop…
You: You haven’t actually been on the roof, have you?
C: I’d like to live in the mountains.
You: Well, we do, look behind you.
C: I mean in the mountains. We’re in a subdivision.
You: You’re in the fucking clouds.

Long pause in which C continues to pace upstage in front of the dirty, reflective bus shelter glass. He stops to inspect the poster.

C: Birthday cake flavoured ice cream. It sounds horrible. I especially despise marshmallows. And making ice cream with the flavour of cake is really just being cheap about the whole cake and ice cream experience.
You: Cut it out.
C: (C picks up a sheet of paper and starts folding it). What is smooth if everything is so turbulent up close? What is solid if everything is made of little gaps? What is stillness if you can never hold onto something without it changing?
You: Are you talking about ice cream?
C: I’m talking about stuff in general.
You: What do you do that’s so… ‘turbulent?’
C: I design traps. (Beat) And cages.
You: Who hires you to design cages?
C: No one, it’s a hobby.
You pulls a crinkled and bloodied piece of paper out of the large incision in his leg and examines it critically with a pair of forceps.

C: (looking disgusted) Did you just pull that from your leg?
You: Tumor.
C: What do you think about this whole global warming thing?
You: Never heard of it.

There is blood dripping from the page and spreading across the white towel. You sets down the paper and begins to sew up the gaping wound in his leg.

C: I have a question for you, since you’re a doctor. All the mummified people, their bones from temples that are excavated and dug up… do they—I mean, do their bones—have sensation? Can they still feel our fingertips when we touch them?
You: Cut it out.
C: Hey, I’m getting a tattoo.
You: Yeah?
C: Yeah, one of those tiny ones. Just one word. Maybe two. You know, so tiny you need a magnifying glass to read it.
You: Those don’t exist.
C: Sure they do. And even if they didn’t—though they do—technology is moving so fast that it is ahead of our imagination. I’ve imagined it; therefore, it already exists.
You: What would be the point in having a tattoo that small?
C: The point isn’t the tattoo—it’s the magnifying glass. (Beat) You wouldn’t get it. (Pause) Hey, when do you think the bus is coming?
You: It’s not coming. They don’t use this stop anymore. They’ve diverted the route.
C: Oh.

Silence. C watches as You stitches up his leg. You is aware of being watched but he keeps his eyes on his task, even though he could do it blindfolded. You is not ignoring his companion. C finishes folding the paper mouth. You finishes the last stitch and crumples up the white towel, drying his hands of blood. You turns to look at C for the first time and stares at him intently for the duration of the exchange.

You: What are you folding?
C: A mouth (Demonstrates) It’s going to eat you…
You: Cut it out.
C: Is it my turn now?
You: What would you like?
C: A pair of prosthetic angel wings.
You: Really.
C: Yeah, but I’d like them detachable.

You continues to stare but says nothing.

C: I’d like to be able to take them off and look at them, maybe prune the feathers, clean them… (Pause as both look at each other deeply). You know?

You: (Reaches over to a piece of paper and begins to fold an airplane). If they weren’t detachable, I could fill them with blood vessels and they could actually grow feathers for you to prune… and they’d be self-cleaning.

C: How would you do that? Stem cells?

You: Fractals.

C: Right.

You: Bifurcations.

C: Isn’t that a tree branch thing?

You: That too. (Beat) Look at where the clouds meet the sky. (C momentarily scrutinizes the sky). That smallest increment between where the sky ends and the clouds begin. You have to look close. But the closer you look, the more difficult it is to tell where the boundaries are, or if there is even such a thing as a ‘boundary.’ You could magnify the boundary forever and never discover the actual fold—or, you might find that everything is already the fold. (Glides the plane to C). That is fractal.

C: I hate math. (Beat) Oh crap. My pen exploded.

You stares. A large, black inkblot begins to spread across C’s shirt; it looks exactly like a Rorschach. Both gaze in silence at the blot and then look at each other. They each know what the other is thinking but they aren’t going to say it.

C: (while continuing to stare into You’s eyes) The sky is very blue today.

You: There are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on all the beaches in the world.

C: No there aren’t. (Beat) Why did you bring me here?

You looks away but does not turn from C.

C: Your collar is folded funny. Can I fix it for you?

You wrenches at his collar and turns away. You takes the rubbing alcohol and swabs it on a large area of his upper thigh on the opposite leg. He picks up a sterile knife and inserts it into his flesh—he is about to perform surgery on himself again. C notices this and half inhales and half winces as though about to say something and then deciding against it.

C: How was the hospital today?

You: How was the hospital? How…? What an interesting question. How is a hospital? I don’t know. I really don’t know. I haven’t a fucking clue how the hospital is.

C: You mean you haven’t been talking to the walls?
You: (attempting to be patient). I am fully capable of talking to walls, I just don’t listen to them!

C: (Referring to the operation) Doesn’t that hurt?

You takes a swig of rubbing alcohol.

C: I saw you on Level G, in front of a nameless door. (Beat) It has a code lock and a window. The innards of the hospital lie within that room: a vast space full of hot water pipes, air intake shafts and piles of clutter lining the walls. A small refrigerator, a dusty incubator, and long metal stakes for who knows what purpose. The elevator down the hall endlessly rises and falls, beeping and creaking. You enter this room alone. You walk alongside the piping, looking for something, but you aren’t sure what. You’ll know when you find it. You walk along the far side of the massive room, the side farthest from the door and not visible through the little window. No one goes down there much anyway. You’ve never been caught, except maybe just that once: “It’s such a beautiful day, why don’t you have lunch with us at the picnic table?” “Your shift is over now, why do you keep hanging around this place?”

You is poking around inside his own leg. He can sense that C is watching.

You: Tell me again, how green was that light.

C: It’s cold out here.

You: Tell me how you knew the rise and fall was actually the wind and that you had stopped breathing?

C: I like this neighbourhood though—quiet, calm, not a lot of traffic. Hey, do you get to travel in the ambulance much?

You extracts another tumor from his thigh and looks at it closely.

You: No. Just that one time. I’m a surgeon. I primarily spend my time in the hospital, in the operating theatre.

C: I’d like to repurpose an ambulance as a camper. I think that’d be really creepy.

You sets the tumor next to the other one and begins to stitch the gap in his leg.

You: I learned how to do stitches by practicing on myself you know.

C: You could have practiced on me.

You says nothing and continues his work, but he remains very affected by C’s words and his presence.

C: Do you ever go back and read about me?

You: No… not much. Sometimes, maybe. Yes.

C: What do they say about me?

You: That I fucked up.

Long pause in which You continues to sew up his leg and C watches with a mixture of disgust, awe and respect.

C: There are tears on your cheeks.
You: No. It's just rain.
C: If you're a surgeon, can't you afford to drive a car?
You: I'm not waiting for the bus.
C: Why haven't you heard of Global Warming? It's kinda a big deal.
You: I find vehicles confining. They make me claustrophobic.
C: You don't seem to have trouble getting in the MRI machine to check out your insides.
You: That's different, it isn't moving anywhere. I'm stationary—And I'm supposed to be.
C: I don't think I've ever heard you talk about this.
You: Can it wait?
C: I was just going to ask the same question. Do you ever ask your patients what they think about in the waiting room?
You: No.
C: I examine knock-off impressionist paintings of country houses and gardens in full bloom, sail boats and quaint landscapes. I am the only one here. Who else is there to stop and look at these paintings? To contemplate the faded brushstrokes—greens and blues turned to grays? There is a painting of two little girls in a garden. A steep set of stairs on the hillside divides the painting in half. One child stands behind a toy wagon. The girl's eyes are brown smudges, like melted candy bar scraped across her face. A second girl, with no facial features, sits partway up the steps. Then there is a blurred and indistinct shape. No face, no arms or hands to distinguish it as a person and yet, it reminds one of a human form—a phantom. Overall, the painting is ugly and insignificant.
You: What are you doing?
C: Writing a critique of hospital paintings. (Beat) Another, smaller painting is more striking. It depicts a country hillside sloping down toward a riverbed. The impressionist technique is used to make the trees in the foreground look somewhat real. Patterns of light glancing off shifting leaves become painted shards of a shattered colour palate. One tree appears to be dead—its fleshless arms, scabbed and twisted.
You: Cut it out.
C: What word should I get for my tattoo, do you think?
You: I haven't a clue.
C: Okay, let's say it can be up to four words. How 'bout that?
You shrugs but doesn't answer.
C: (C walks over to the box of medical records, picks up a folder, then sits down in it so that his legs dangle outside of the box. He begins to leaf through it.) Hey, maybe we can find a quirky couplet in one of these old things.
You: Don’t read those.

C: Oh come on… I won’t read it out loud. What harm can it do? (C settles on a page and skims through it, murmuring to himself.) Good words, good words… (Something catches C’s eye and he stops skimming to read more thoroughly. After about half a page of reading he speaks while continuing to read). I can’t read this.

You: Well then don’t.

C continues reading.

C: (still reading) I can’t read this.

You: Well then, fucking DON’T!

C: Do all of them sound this way about me?

You: Why don’t you read that Birthday ice cream ad again?

C: (still engrossed in the file). This is sick.

You: Your hair curls when it’s humid. When it rains. (You finishes the last stitch and wipes his hands on the towel, glancing back at C as he does so). Stop trying to forget I’m here.

You cleans some of his surgical tools. He is preparing to work on his abdomen.

You: What’s your actual name? I can’t remember. My mind goes blank when I try to think of it.

C: (Pause. C looks back down at the records) Lindsay.

You: No it’s not.

C: Who cares?

You: I delivered a Lindsay a few days ago. You aren’t a Lindsay.

C: I thought you said you were a surgeon. What were you doing delivering babies?

You: I am a surgeon. It was an emergency. There is a certain method to these things.

C: (Still distracted by the record) I can tell.

You: I wanted to study the brain, but after you, they transferred my residency. They were worried about me.

C: (C closes the file and tosses it aside) What? Could they see into your soul better than me? (Pause) Who’s been following you?

You: You have.

C: I don’t like the smell of the place. I’ve only been admitted three times, but since meeting you, it feels like I’ve been here forever.

You: (Genuine) I’m sorry about that.

C: No, no, it’s not your fault. It’s just this feeling I’ve got, you know? Like I’ve been run over by a car.
You: A train, actually.
C: I’m speaking metaphorically. *There is a rather awkward pause.* What’s going on?
You: You were coming up with a clever phrase for your tattoo.
C: Right.
Pause. You continues to cleanly and efficiently sort through his guts as he prepares to extract the next tumor.
You: *(offers)* Moon Ditch.
C: Don’t they call that a crater?
You: No. No.
C: Tell me something else about the stars. I couldn’t see the stars from my hospital window. Maybe, if I had a telescope. But who are we to meddle with the cosmos by looking so deeply into the cave where the stars are kept?
You: Who else is there to wonder at the universe? *Beat.* The sky may as well be completely black. Someday it will be. Everything will spread apart, burn out, and become the same. It doesn’t matter if it happens now or in the future, the switch was flipped long ago.
C: You’re ruining the mystery of it!
You: Not really. We may be small, but we’re flipping our own little switches all the time, moving bigger, more distant things than we can know.
C: Do you think there was ever a time when the night sky was made of stars? Bright white with tiny patches of black instead of the other way around?
You: Maybe, up close.
C: Fractals, right?
You says nothing
C: I can’t decide whether I love people or if I just pretend to. Whether I am capable of it, or in denial.
You: Do you have to decide?
C: I’d like to know.
You: Cut it out.
C: What’s the worst thing that’s ever happened to you?
  *The body begins to laugh. The laugh builds to hysterical heights and stops.*
C: I’ve got a rock in my shoe.
  *C gets out of the box and empties his shoe on the ground. You turns back to check on his companion. C is busy and when he looks up from his shoe, You has already turned back to his surgery, extracting another tumor from the same gap in his gut.*
C: I was in the hospital cafeteria. It was pretty much empty. I was sitting alone at one of those big, circular tables with about eight unoccupied chairs around me and I started watching this guy, across the room. He was maybe in his late fifties, eating by himself. He was wearing one of those blue, backless hospital gowns and he had an I.V. drip with him. He was left-handed—held his spoon in his left hand. He was eating soup. I couldn't tell what flavour though because he was pretty far away. He appeared to be reading a newspaper or a magazine or something. There was a small carton of chocolate milk next to him with a straw sticking out of it. One of those, you know, white with red stripes, and a bend near the top. He never drank the milk that I saw—just the soup. He ate slowly and had a slight tremor but he was very much in control. He didn't seem to be aware of his surroundings—he never looked up from the newspaper, and he never noticed me. After a while, I realized that he was quite short—his legs just barely touched the floor and he was swinging one of them back and forth under the table.

A group of female nurses walked by, wearing scrubs and those puffy, blue surgical hats and they momentarily obscured my view of the man. As they passed, I noticed something peculiar. His I.V. drip was no longer draining, but was now, actually filling with a dark, red liquid. (C is gradually becoming more distraught as he continues his story. You begins to stitch up his abdomen but he’s very tense and is having difficulty). It looked like blood but I couldn't tell. The man didn’t appear to be affected by it. I studied his face, his forehead, and his downcast eyes and, uh, uh, his, his face began to... fall away. He appeared to be chewing on something—a piece of chicken or noodle, or whatever—and every time his jaw moved, his face became a little more loose until it was saggy and dragging downward and... melting off of him and just as the whole thing was about to drop, (hesitates) he looked up. He looked up at me. Our eyes met, and he saw me in a way that I couldn’t hide. Here I was, with my hands flat out on the table in front of me, my eyes locked with this guy’s and his face splashing into the soup bowl below him...

(It is agony to go on but he can’t stop). His neck muscles sort of relaxed and his head jerked forward so that he looked down at his face in the bowl! I... I kind of panicked and found myself running across the cafeteria and pulling this guy up by the scruff of his neck. (Terrified) I held his body in my arms, I don’t know what I thought I was going to do...

You: Stop it!
C: ...my heart was racing...
You: Please.
C: I looked at this guy’s head (Fighting tears)... his eyes weren’t there anymore!
You: Don’t keep talking about this...
C: I couldn’t find his pulse, not a breath or a sound...
You: This is horrifying!
C: Then I realized (with a mixture of disgust and terror) that he wasn’t even warm anymore.
You has stopped working on his stitches and is bleeding freely from his abdomen. He holds the towel up to his wound

C: (breaks down completely). I tried... I tried to put his face back on.

You: Please! Please! Why are you doing this to me?

C: I stuck my hands in the soup but I couldn’t tell which part was the soup and which part was his face—

Both: —And which part was my hand.

C: (suddenly calm). I have something to tell you.

You: (tosses a tool across the curb side). I don’t want to hear anything else.

C paces for a moment. You removes the towel to check his wound. He pours rubbing alcohol on it and then continues to stitch it up while listening.

C: I was arrested a couple weeks ago for loitering on hospital premises. They questioned me for about an hour, then released me without consequence. They had no grounds to keep me, they just felt that my “wandering” was suspicious. I’m on the surveillance tapes during all hours of the day. They showed me, I saw the vids.

You: What reason did you give for being at the hospital?

C: I... I said I didn’t know, really. I guess I usually wait for you to finish your shift. But most of the time I’m there, your shift is far from being over and sometimes you’ve already left. (Beat) I think I’m actually looking for something.

You: What are you looking for?

C: Sometimes, when I hold still, I can feel their fingerprints all over me, stuck to me like snails.

You looks back at him.

You: (gently). There’s rain on your cheeks.

C: (without looking up) No. It’s just tears.

There is silence as You finishes the stitches and bandages himself.

You: Are you afraid of me?

Pause as C watches You prepare his surgical instruments and clean his arm.

C: You like being misunderstood, don’t you?

You doesn’t answer.

C: (sighs) Let me know when your shift is over.

I love you.

Break me.

Silence as You makes a new incision in his forearm.
C: I took to lurking outside the building where the parking meters and street lights are. I took to sketching on the back of some of these records: trees, people getting off the bus... I still go into the hospital on occasion to use the washroom and the Coloplast hand sanitizer—maybe that's where the smell of the hospital comes from. A man recognized me from the bus shelter outside. He wanted to see my sketches. **(Delighted)** He wanted to know if I was an artist! He told me he loved nature and that contemplating nature was like having a conversation with the divine.

You: I don't believe in god.

C: Tell me something—

You: —I'm not ready yet. **(Beat)** That article... what kind of beast was it that escaped?

C: Imagine if we had trees growing from our heads?

You: That would be very inconvenient.

C: Now that I think of it, I don't think it was a green light at all.

You: What was it then?

C: It was... I think it really was the trees. For the first time in years, I was seeing trees and their image kind of hit me like a light. Like arms of light.

You: I thought you said the green was warm.

C: Trees are warm. They exude heat when they grow and use energy. Metabolism, photosynthesis... the second law of thermodynamics.

You: Everything we see is made of light.

C: **(Pause)** It's funny how much trees are like men.

You: Except they don't scream.

C: That's the most distinct difference you can think of? I was going to say, 'except they don't build machines.' **(Walks over to the records, picks up a stack, and waves them).** How many trees do you think make up these pages? Do you think it's a whole forest?

You: I don't know.

C: Yesterday, I was passing by the cafeteria. I didn't go in. The lunch menu posted outside displayed the soup of the day for each weekday. I checked the date; it happened on a Friday: Italian Wedding.

You: I thought you weren't supposed to be in the hospital anymore.

C: I'm not going there to gawk at sickness. I'm not going there because I want to look at weakness, deformity and disease! I want to find the place where life begins and routine collapses. Where we desperately want to be with each other and somehow make it all worthwhile.

You: It's not okay to go there just because you're lonely! **(Silence. You has taken out another tumor.)** I love to hear you talk but I do not understand you.

C: That beast in the article...
You: (You sets down the tumor and commences with the stitching). What about it?

C: I thought I saw it in the hospital the other day.

You: On your way to the washroom, or the Coloplast dispenser?

C: It was clinging to the edge of the Service Use Only elevator. I stepped a bit closer to see what it was, then turned to look out the window because it wasn’t in the elevator alcove at all—just its reflection on the steel doors. It was outside, in the courtyard, hanging from one of the trees above the picnic table. It was caught in a trap.

You: They don’t set traps in hospital courtyards.

C: It had been struggling, I think. It was in a contorted sort of position. I couldn’t quite figure out where each part of it was and how they related. (You begins to perspire and wipes sweat from his forehead). I was watching the wind kind of tilt this thing back and forth and it started to spin. I thought the head was sort of tucked away from me. It was dark looking and at first, I thought it was hairy but there was a smooth, shaved part—like the back of a neck. As it began to sway in the wind, part of its sleeve dropped—I was sure it was a sleeve with an arm in it, but it didn’t look like that was where the arm was supposed to be. (Once again, C is hypnotized by the image in his mind and becomes increasingly distraught). Then I realized that the neck wasn’t really the neck after all… there was a foot dangling… and the elbow wasn’t at the right angle...

You: (earnestly trying to calm C)...some animals have inverted joints...

C: …its chin was between its shoulder blades...

You: This isn’t happening...

C: …the lungs and blood vessels reaching, like sticky fingers… there was something stringy and glistening dragging on the ground… and some feathers… then very rapidly, in my brain, all the body parts started coming together. The chaos began to coalesce but I wasn’t prepared! I turned back to the blurred reflection in the Service Elevator—

You: —The doors opened.

C: And you were standing there, leaning against the wall, the rest of the elevator crammed with empty food carts and a food staff person in teal scrubs. I wondered if maybe it wasn’t so hard to love someone after all. (Pause) What do you see when you close your eyes?

You: Traffic. [Miles and] miles of traffic.

You picks up a paper tumor and eyes it closely. C is watching You over his shoulder. You takes a bite of the tumor. It is grotesque. He proceeds to eat through the entire tumor, listening to and sensing C but not looking at him.

C: You don’t have to do that. That could be a cancerous tumor. Listen, you’re hungry, I know. Why don’t you let me buy you an ice cream? We don’t have to stay here. We can go to this ice cream place with the Birthday Cake flavored ice cream—I’m sure it’s still around...

You continues eating.
C: I’m standing in the pitch-blackness of a hospital washroom. The light switch is near the door, but you have turned it off and are alone in the darkness. You run your hands along the cold edges of the porcelain sink. You’ve already washed your hands a hundred times today. The bacteria from the surface of your skin is swimming in the spinal fluid of the hospital’s drains. You’re so beautiful standing there in the dark with your hands on the sink. I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking of all the bodies you’ve ever stuck your hands inside.

*While C speaks, You finishes chewing the last bite and wipes his bloody mouth on the white towel.*

C: Do you love someone?

You: No.

C: *(C sees what is coming speaks cautiously and gently)* Why don’t you get another surgeon to do that for you?

You: No.

C: Do you love someone?

You: No. *(Pause)* Yes, but don’t let it get you.

C: What?

You: *(authoritative but gentle)* I need your hands.

C: My hands?

You: *(more forcefully)* I need your hands. Give me your hands! Your hands!

C takes a small step backwards away from You and trips over the body.

You: *(Suddenly angry, screaming, almost terrifying)* Can’t you remain silent? Can’t you hold my head? Can’t you cover my ears with your hands and block out every sound of the last fucking five seconds? Can’t you just leave me alone?

C: I can’t breathe.

You: This isn’t my fault! *(You starts throwing surgical implements through the bus shelter glass and it begins to shatter. You is powerful and angry yet somehow fragile, covered with spider-like stitches and pink scars from where he has removed tumors from his body. He will not be stopped.)* Don’t take it that way! Don’t hate me for it!

C: *(stepping away from the glass)* I don’t hate you.

You: Awake! Awake! I’ll resuscitate you.

C: Are you out of your mind?

You: I’ll bring you back to life, to the fucking life that we’re all living.

C: You should go home and get some rest.

You: I’ve watched you all your life! It doesn’t look like that!

C: You’re shaking!
You: This isn’t supposed to happen.

C: The switch was flipped long ago!

You: Don’t tell me anything!

C: You’ve been awake for over twenty hours, your shift is done.

You: Are you kidding me? This shift is not fucking over—

C: (Quietly) Oh my god…

You: Can you just fake it? Can’t you just do a really fucking good job of faking it?

C: I thought that I might die all alone and I was scared of that. But I was even more afraid of remaining alive that way. (C remains at a distance from You).

You: Don’t touch me!

(You collapses inside the shattered bus shelter, next to the box of files. He takes the box into his arms and clings to it. C looks on from the curb but doesn’t move to comfort him. Eventually You sobs and C unplugs the light).
Gallery Installation- “Warning Confidential”

“Warning Confidential” is considered Part 1 of *The Impossible Project*. It was a gallery installation that took place in the glass display case outside of the Audain Gallery in the lobby of the Goldcorp Centre for the Arts in Vancouver. Inside the display case was a box labelled, “Warning Confidential Medical Records/Patient: C.” Scattered about the box on the floor were stacks of Calla’s medical records, many of them folded into paper airplanes by Calla herself during the live portion of the exhibit. There was a pre-recorded soundtrack of Calla reading the records out loud, and this soundtrack was played on headphones outside of the gallery for people to listen to. For 1-3 hours a day, the installation was live. A volunteer reader wore a lab coat and a stethoscope and sat in a chair, reading aloud from the records while Calla, wearing a blue hospital gown, folded the records into paper airplanes, or simply sat and listened. The person reading the records was miked to the headphones outside of the gallery so that the content could be heard by gallery goers.

This piece acted as a window into the content of the source material used to create *The Impossible Project*. The installation highlighted the dehumanization and objectification that many people suffer in the medical system.
Image 2.1. “Warning Confidential” September 7, 2013
Image 2.2. “Warning Confidential” detail
Image 2.3. “Warning Confidential” September 4, 2013
Image 2.4. “Warning Confidential” September 7, 2013
References


Appendix A. Research/Background Essay

Autoethnographic Performance and Deleuze: Possibilities for Agency and Empowerment Through Becoming

Introduction
The purpose of this paper is to map out contemporary theory regarding the nature of identity, and subjectivity, and to apply these theoretical concepts to an understanding of autoethnographic performance. By exploring how the self is constructed within a flux of relations, autoethnographic performance may expand our sense of agency within systems of control, not merely by illustrating the act of deconstruction, but by offering experiences of creation. Using Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s theoretical notions of the rhizome and the concept of “becoming,” I explore the potential for a personally and politically empowering autoethnographic performance methodology of art making. The theory of the rhizome is a useful way of thinking about the potential for agency because the rhizome conveys an approach to conceptualizing the “self” as being constituted of, and within, a range of possibilities. First, I provide a theoretical framework of Deleuzian ideas, which illustrate the way I conceptualize the art and act of performing autoethnography. Next, I discuss some of the discourse surrounding contemporary ethnographic performance, and autoethnography. I conclude by emphasizing how autoethnographic performance has the potential to be personally and collectively empowering.

Theory of the Self as a Rhizome
Using Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the rhizome as a map, I orient my understanding as to how autoethnography and performance may operate as methodologies toward an experience of personal and/or collective agency and freedom within cultural and societal structures of control. Agency may be had by conceptualizing “identity” or “self” as a state of possibilities rather than as being constituted of a fixed essence. The rhizome is a movement of these states; “it can be defined solely by a circulation of states” (Deleuze and Guattari, 21). The rhizome is empowering because it is creative potential. The rhizome is empowering because every point of the rhizome is
connected to every other point (12), therefore one’s sense of “being” is not restricted to oneself, but is forever becoming more than oneself. The rhizome is empowering because it has no structure (12), it is not a slave to a linearity of time, and it generates nothing that we can know (12); it just does. A self that simply does is most actively alive.

The self, in a rhizomatic sense, is always “becoming” with the world rather than “being” in the world; it is about motion and flow opposed to explanation and ontology. The self retains a shape and a material substance when it is identified as a point in a system in relation to other points (25). But, for one to experience agency and empowerment, one must let go of conceiving of the self as a point in a system, and must re-conceive of self as constantly between points in a state of becoming. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari take this idea one step further to characterize the rhizome as being made up of lines because “speed” or movement “turns the point into a line” (Deleuze and Guattari quoting Paul Virillo, 24). There is a blurring of points as they become over time. Rather than being made up relative to other points, the “self” is made of/with the other points. It is important to note that a becoming self is not developed as a relation between things as in relativism; in fact, the self is not “developed” at all for nothing ever “develops” in a rhizome (25). There is no progression in a rhizome because a rhizome has no beginning or ending and always moves and expands from the middle (21). Each point in a rhizome is connected to every other point (7), so as a self “becomes” between points, it is really becoming with points.

The self exists with the world as a multiplicity. There is no unique “One” within a multiple of other unique “Ones.” As soon as we have labelled and separated an individual as unique, we have imposed a system or category that restricts an individual to a single, unified entity in relation to what they are not. In her analysis of history scholarship, Joan W. Scott discusses the importance of how an identity is constructed by historians rather than what that identity is (791). Scott reflects on the limitations of personal agency when people become identified with particular categories: “each category taken as fixed works to solidify the ideological process of subject-construction, making the process less rather than more apparent, naturalizing rather than analyzing it” (792). The rhizome, in contrast to being an organizational structure, is the process of becoming. Agency arises from a rhizomatic sense of self as the nexus of creative potentialities that they are constantly opening up to.
I argue that for the possibility of agency, one must relinquish a sense of ontology and essence of the self, for a notion of the “singularity.” According to Deleuze, a singularity is “[t]he critical threshold… between two states of being, i.e. between boiling and not boiling… such [that]… it is impossible to decide whether the object is in one state of being or another” (Buchanan, para.1). This singularity is not so much a division or a separation between states but rather a deeper continuity among states as possibilities for each other. The rhizome does not reduce everything to the same (Delueze and Guattari, 12); it is made up of differences; it is a multiplicity, a movement or expansion of possibilities in all directions. Like the singularity, the rhizome is unanswerable. And like the singularity, the rhizome—and in turn, my conception of “self” as a becoming-self rather than a being-self—is immanent to a number of states.

What is compelling about Deleuze and Guatarri’s characterization of the rhizome is that they do not deny the operation of hierarchical systems or structures of control within our daily lives. What makes the concept of the rhizome so descriptive of a state of freedom and agency is not simply its creative potential despite systems of control, but its creative potential with and through an interaction of these systems. Deleuze and Guattarri describe systems, or structures as “tracings”—which operate as transcendental frameworks—and they describe rhizomes as “maps”—which operat[e] as… immanent process[es]” (20). A tracing is an organizational device. It could be as simple as an x-ray or as complex as psychoanalysis as a way of diagnosing mental disturbances (13). A tracing implies a fixed ontological self whose being is constantly compared in a relation to a transcendent ideal. The map, like the rhizome, does not ask what something is but rather, how something does. It is the rhizomatic sense of self as an immanent becoming with the world that is the occasion for agency and creativity.

Tracings limit agency because they are reductive, whereas maps are productive. Deleuze and Guattari use psychoanalysis to illustrate this point. The practice of Freudian psychoanalysis involves specific interpretations of behaviour based on a model of the unconscious mind and desires. This model is a tracing. Psychoanalysis signifies meaning and explains phenomena by “tracing” it in an authoritative manner and it isolates and fixes an individual as a “One” within the multiple opposed to a multiplicity, thereby limiting his sense of immanent becoming. If we think of the self as a multiplicity, we can see how psychoanalysis limits agency because “[w]henever a multiplicity is
taken up in a structure, its growth is offset by a reduction in its laws of combination” (6). “Schizoanalysis,” is the rhizomatic conception of psychoanalysis; rather than explaining and describing the unconscious, schizoanalysis “produce[s] the unconscious, and with it new statements, [and] different desires” (18, original emphasis). One aspect of Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization of the rhizome and “becoming” that is useful in terms of thinking about the experience of agency and freedom is their rejection of a utopian ideal through their description of how a rhizome operates as a map as opposed to a tracing. Their efforts are not to offer answers or strategies against political systems of oppression, but to keep asking how we are becoming with these systems.

Answers are reductive. But how to speak without answering? This is the risk that Deleuze and Guattari take in writing about the rhizome. They do not deny that structures, models and tracings exist, nor do they deny the power structures, oppressions and dead ends created by these tracings; rather, they emphasize the importance of always putting the “tracing... back on the map” (13). Linguistics is a system of communication that Deleuze and Guattari use to “trace” their ideas. Language is helpful to communication and can be creative and productive but it must also be understood as creative because of its failures to apprehend. By reflecting on their writing, as a rhizomatic process, Deleuze and Guattari begin to put the “tracing... back onto the map.” Writing is a process or “passage,” rather than a container for knowledge dissemination. Deleuze and Guattari elaborate:

the problem of writing in order to designate something exactly, an exact expressions are utterly unavoidable. Not at all because it is a necessary step, or because one can only advance by approximations: an exactitude is in no way an approximation; on the contrary, it is the exact passage of that which is under way. (20)

Through their writing, Deleuze and Guattari are constantly subtracting the “exact” or the known and definitive, from their argument—not in order to undermine their work, but in order to occasion the possibility of their work becoming more. Their writing is “forever rearranging” its meaning with the outside world (21). It is the process of writing/reading and assembling a book in relation to the outside world that creates a sense of freedom and becoming. Deleuze and Guattari state that, “[t]here is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made... We will never ask what a book means, as a
signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things” (4, emphasis mine).

If we return to the self as a multiplicity functioning much like the book, we can begin to see how connections describe what possibilities are available to a “becoming” self, rather than signifying what constitutes a unified self. Suddenly it is apparent that agency is not something acquired through successful interpretation and communication of signs and systems; rather, agency is experienced through asking how an “entity” (such as a book, or a person), functions in the world and becomes with other “assemblages” of entities. A self with agency is not an essential, cohesive being merely capable of gaining or losing agency within dominant systems. Agency is not a mastery of systems, but the creative play between ever shifting multiplicities.

Within a rhizome, there is no central unifying force, only a play between heterogeneous elements (multiplicities) through territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization. A territory is like a frame; it isolates characteristics of its subject matter from the chaos of our world; for instance, a garden might be the territory of a flower. “Deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization” describe the creative process of taking a subject out of its frame of reference (deterritorializing), and putting it into a new framework (reterritorializing). Deleuze and Guattari use the relationship between a wasp and an orchid to illustrate the movement of “de” and “re”territorialization. When a wasp lands on an orchid, it is deterritorialized, as it becomes a part of the orchid’s reproductive system; the orchid is reterritorialized when its pollen is transported to another flower (10). The wasp and flower form a rhizome which is forever becoming as the wasp and flower “de” and “re”territorialize each other. Deleuze and Guattari stress that this is not a matter of signification (10). The wasp does not signify the flower nor vice versa. Rather, the wasp and the flower become through each other.

Agency and empowerment are exemplified in the “[p]rinciple of asignifying rupture”—a principle which describes the creative movement of “de,” and “re” territorialization as a characteristic of the rhizome (9). An “asignifying rupture” describes a break in the pattern of a signifying system, or “territorial” framework of signs. It is important to note that an “asignifying rupture” should not be thought of as a “point” of transition from one framework to another; rather it describes the action of becoming through the connection with other multiplicities (9).
The Emergence of “Performance” and “Auto” as Strategies for Ethnographic Research and Presentation

The genre of ethnographic writing began as an approach to representing qualitative data from research on the cultural and societal attributes of an “other” person or group of people (Spry, 2001, Cerwonka, 2007; van Ede, 2009; Tedlock, 1991). Over time the legitimacy and ethics of ethnographic representation as an “objective” or “factual” form of knowledge creation has been called into question (Spry, 2001; Castaneda, 2006; Waldram, 2009; Tedlock, 1991). Increasingly, ethnographers have turned to self-reflexivity within their writing in order to contextualize their observations of how other people operate within different cultural milieus (Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007; Tedlock, 1991; Okely, 1992). By critically evaluating one’s own position within a given social/cultural context, ethnographers can begin to show the complexity of knowledge formation as something which is produced through interactions rather than discovered. Different ethnographers illicit different responses from their research subjects, and different ethnographers will make different observations and interpret their observations differently depending on the socio-cultural framework from which they have arrived. Contemporary theory of ethnographic representation is more concerned with fluctuations in meaning, the merging and emerging patterns of cultures in dialogue, and in the deconstruction of power relations between people and cultures, than in providing a document that preserves a sense of an inherent identity or history of a particular people.

Contemporary ethnography, practiced in a rhizomatic sense, focuses more on how meaning is made as opposed to revealing a fixed cultural structure or authentic life-way. One way that ethnographers have begun to research in a rhizomatic style is by using performance as a strategy of presentation. Some of the most notable contributors to the theory of ethnography as an inherently performative practice include Dwight Conquergood and Victor Turner. In her chapter on performance ethnography, D. Soyini Madison describes Turner’s conception of culture as a process of “becoming” opposed to a particular state of “being” (157). Conquergood’s scholarship regarding performance ethnography, assumes Turner’s conceptualization of culture as “processual” and advocates for an embodied, temporal and experiential research practice rather than a more authoritative, “scriptocentric” strategy for describing cultures and identities (Madison, 166-7).
By conceiving of ethnographic research as a performative practice, both in the field and in the sharing of the research, the ethnographer is made aware of the constructed nature of meaning. If we take “performance” to mean the embodied act of representing “self,” we can see that like the rhizome, people do not enact an essential identity; rather, they are always becoming more. In ethnographic research, meaning is being made rather than found, and the potential to make meaning is an act of de/reterritorialization. Performativity also suggests a “dialogue” among “researcher,” “researched subject,” and “audience”—a dialogue that, through the self-reflexivity of the ethnographer, reveals the becoming more, of all parties involved (Madison quoting Conquergood, 167). A focus on processes at play during ethnographic research also reveals the constant movement of who is playing what role at any given moment, i.e. who is the “other.” How often do we switch from being the ethnographer, to the audience, to the researched subject... or, more likely, are we all three at once? By unmaking problematic fixed categories or roles, hierarchical structures are constantly shifting and rupturing, thereby opening up more possibilities for being in the world.

Conquergood uses the concept of performance as a way of grappling with deeply political and ethical issues of how ethnographers represent the subject so that the subject’s “voice” is heard. Madison refers to performances that consider these questions as “performance[s] of possibilities” (172). The performance of possibilities strives to allow the subject’s voice to be actively experienced and witnessed by the audience, not simply through sharing the subject’s perspective, but by allowing the subject to be seen as an “embodied, historical self that constructs and is constructed by a matrix of social and political processes” (Madison, 173). It is this act of constructing and being constructed that the performance of possibilities strives to make the audience aware of. Audiences that are aware of their own implication within constructed political structures are more likely to find agency to act in politically empowered ways.

Another practice with potential for occasioning personal and political agency that has become more popular in both anthropology and performance studies, is the study and presentation of the researcher’s self in relation to a social/cultural context—the practice of autoethnography. In fact, autoethnographer and professor of performance studies, Tami Spry, asserts that the “primary goal” of autoethnography is to instill a sense of empowerment and “efficacious potential for researcher, researched, and
reader/audience” (“Performing Autoethnography” 712). Successful autoethnographies reveal the many facets of the autoethnographer’s self as shifting and changing over time in relation to cultural structures and interpersonal connections. Most autoethnographers begin their work by reflecting on an experience that has had a substantial effect on how they define themselves and identify with the world. Autoethnographic writing can be empowering for both writer and receiver of the work because it comes from a self that is real and embodied and yet it shows at the same time how constructed and “unreal” that self actually is. According to Norman K. Denzin, “[t]hrough writing and our talk, we enact the worlds we study. These performances… instruct our readers about this world and how we see it” (422). The revealing of this constructedness of self and this constructedness of cultural worldviews is empowering because it suggests that we can change.

In her book, Body, Paper, Stage, Spry expounds on the potentially empowering nature of the combined practices of both performance and autoethnography. Spry organizes much of her conceptualization of autoethnographic performance around what she defines as the “performative-I” (53). The performative-I is the narrative point of view, or “voice” of the autoethnographic performer; it can be understood as a rhizome, or multiplicity. The performative-I, like a rhizome, is a “self” that is in movement and constantly (re)defining itself by becoming through its relations with the outside (i.e. other multiplicities). Spry characterizes the performative-I “by a heterogeneous subjectivity and a collaborative epistemology” (53). By “collaborative epistemology,” Spry is referring to how we shape our idea about our selves and our worldviews through a continuous process of negotiating interactions with others—a “co-performativity” (53). By showing co-performativity at work—or better yet, enacting co-performativity—through performance, an autoethnographer can actively remake meaning, thereby empowering themselves through creative becoming.

Spry emphasizes that the performative-I disposition is not concerned with establishing an individual identity (59), rather it is concerned with problematizing the concept of a coherent identity by showing the messiness of the self as it “becomes” through a “multiplicity” of other’s and their stories—to use Deleuzian terminology. Performative-I autoethnography does not try to solve problems or harmonize differences or conflicts through a sort of collaborative “consensus or emotional connection between [the self]
and other” (Spry, 59). Rather than offering solutions to problems, perhaps a performative-I disposition does what Deleuze and Guattari would call “putting the tracing back onto the map” (13). As described above, the map is a rhizome and a way of (re)orienting oneself through relations. A tracing is a fixed structure or pattern. There is no denying that we are constantly organizing our world with “tracings” and hierarchical structures that empower some and oppress others. By “putting tracings back onto the map,” we can re-situate and realize the potential for other possible tracings, or ways to make meaning. Performance can demonstrate how tracings can be placed back on the map, and because of the embodied nature of performance, it can do the re-mapping of tracings and stories. The presence of bodies together in creating a performance as it happens is potentially empowering because the live bodies are “doing the personal politics of culture through embodiment” (Spry, 67); this is how performance can be more than a pedagogy about interrelations.

Autoethnographic Performance
Does the Political and Becomes Empowering

Like Spry, I am not convinced that agency lies in the act of telling one’s own side of the story. Nor does agency lie in the self-reflexive critique of one’s identity as emerging from a flux of relationships and intersections of power structures in various contexts. Although both of these acts are essential to what an autoethnography is, I want to map how autoethnographic performance is empowering because of its ability to be creative as opposed to merely educational. In the following section, I elaborate on aspects of autoethnographic performance that contribute to its potential for empowering performer and audience by unpacking some of the terms and concepts that Spry uses including “empathetic connection,” “meaning-making,” and “aesthetic accountability.”

By creating an autoethnographic story with and through others, I argue for a practice of performance that actively realizes the audience as collaborators. In reference to her autoethnographic performance, “Goldilocks,” Spry writes, “[my] aim is not to persuade but to engage in collaborative meaning-making with the audience” (126). Spry suggests that it is through an empathetic connection with the audience that allows the audience to shape their own meaning in the performance (126). Spry does not elaborate on how this “empathetic connection” is achieved, although I see a connection between her use of the term “empathy” with the concept of “becoming.” Empathy is achieved through the
performer’s vulnerability. Making oneself vulnerable is not simply about sharing one’s experiences—it is about allowing the other to create oneself. Vulnerability is about acknowledging that we are a part of each other’s stories, that we are constantly becoming more and becoming other. There are more possibilities for writing and re-writing our identities when we expand our conception of our “self” into a weave of becoming with others. Some methods for exploring vulnerability in practice might include realizing the autoethnographic performance through collaboration with others in a devising process, and performing reflections and re-tellings of one another’s stories. Another more obvious space for vulnerability is between the auto-performer and audience. Vulnerability means listening to the other more than expressing a self. Possible methods for more vulnerable intercreativity between performer(s) and audience may include audience participation, more intimate audience settings, smaller audiences, and a general respect for one’s audience and their capacity to interpret and experience the performance.

According to Spry, the methodology of performative ethnography can be empowering because it is a form of “meaning-making” that “forg[es] knowledge with others to dismantle and transform hegemonic performativities” (126). I would like to suggest that more than meaning-making, it is the experience of performance that is potentially transformative in itself. Experience is transformative because we are always implicated in our experiences, experience is how we happen with the world; it is not about how we organize our lives to make meaning out of them. Experience is immanent and so is performance. Meaning comes after experience. It is in the immanent possibilities for un-making and re-making of meaning that agency lies. It is in the realization of the possibilities of constant “de” and “re” territorialization available to us at any given moment, that provides empowerment.

Through autoethnographic performance, the epistemic and the aesthetic/literary are “becoming each other” in a Deleuzian sense. It is in the art of performance, or in the beauty of an artwork as it comes to life, that the occasion for the sense of empowerment resides. The “literary” aspect of performance reveals the permeability between “fact” and “fiction”—or the “de” and “re”territorialization of the self in a flux of becoming. Spry cites the scholarship of Gingrich-Philbrook who uses a quote from Murray Krieger to illustrate this “aesthetic accountability.” Krieger states that, “[the aesthetic] alerts us to the
illusionary, the merely arbitrary claims to reality that authoritarian discourse would impose upon us; because, unlike authoritarian discourse, the aesthetic takes back the ‘reality’ it offers us in the very act of offering it to us” (109). It is in this action of taking “back the ‘reality’ offered… in the very act of offering it” that art does, that art lives.

Conclusion
As a live, embodied act, performance collapses time into the present. Thereby, it has the ability to bring conscious awareness to the immanent possibilities that expand and multiply moment by moment as the audience realizes their agency in creating the performance. By performing the self through others—through both collaborators and audience—successful autoethnographic performance is identity formation; it does not simply describe a “being,” but is a “becoming.” Autoethnographic performance has the potential to become an empowering act, not through the sharing of a personal story or the outlining of one’s shifting position within social hierarchies, but through the active experience of being created.
Appendix B.

Video:
The Beast that Escaped and a Fine, Fine Flavour

Creator, Producer, Designer
Calla Churchward

Co-Directors
Calla Churchward

Fannina Waubert de Puiseau

Lighting Designer and Technical Director
Jaylene Pratt

Description
This is a full video documentation of all three iterations of the play, The Beast that Escaped and a Fine, Fine Flavour, performed on September 7, 2013. In rm. 4270, at the Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, downtown Vancouver B.C. The recorded voice-over at the beginning of the play and during the costume changes, is Calla’s voice reading aloud from her medical records.

Filename
The Actors

1st Iteration

C: Calla Churchward
You (a surgeon): Keely O’Brien
Body: Daniel O’Shea

2nd Iteration

C: Daniel O’Shea
You (a surgeon): Calla Churchward
Body: Keely O’Brien

3rd Iteration

C: Keely O’Brien
You (a surgeon): Daniel O’Shea
Body: Calla Churchward