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love as rupturous as I know it to be

Article, Shalon T. Webber-Heffernan



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Abstract

This is a reflection on my experiences and the outcomes as curatorial resident with Vtape's Curatorial Incubator v.16 Living in Hope program 2020-2021. The short essay poetically contemplates the curatorial program that was delivered online in the spring of 2021 entitled love as rupturous as I know it to be (artists included Ursula Biemann, Shelley Niro, prOphecy sun, and Sharon Isaac). The series of videos considered the potentialities of love and spiritual hope as curatorial premise, as well as relationships that exceed those that are strictly between humans to include those that exist between plants, animals, land, and waters—considering place-based, inter-species and otherworldly relations in practices of deep care.

Keywords: care, curation, motherhood, relations, spirit.

Becoming a new mom in a global pandemic has been an experience that's shaped me in ways I cannot yet know, but know are extraordinary. My heart's new colossal capacity has prompted me to consider anew a genuine ethics of care that reaches beyond the performative care I see unfolding in a variety of cultural and political settings today. *love as rupturous as I know it to be* was a month long online video series I curated at Vtape in Toronto as part of the *Curatorial Incubator v.16: Living in Hope* program. The exhibition pondered caring otherwise, prioritizing action while envisioning a radical unbounded love. Intuitively, instinctively, and uninterested in aesthetic distance, I selected works that spoke to me viscerally. I was guided by a desire to explore relationships that exceed those that are strictly between humans to include those that exist between plants, animals, and things, and merge into minerals, energy, land, stars and waters. Curator Tarah Hogue once described how the work of Michif artist Christi Belcourt

“nurture[s] relations through kinship networks that are place-based, inter-species and otherworldly, and in turn demonstrates, through beauty, strength and wonder, that other (to colonial capitalist) ways of being in relation to one another and to the earth are both possible and desperately urgent” (2017). These other ways of being have inspired me in thinking through what a hopeful future might feel like.

As a lower-class tween growing up in rural Ontario with little to no cultural outlets or means of exploring even remotely divergent paths, I was lucky enough to have met and befriended a woman who came from the city and opened a bookstore in my very small town. This woman serendipitously gifted 13-year-old me a book entitled *Behaving as if the God in All Life Mattered* by Machaëlle Small Wright. In it, the author claimed to see and hear invisible forces of nature and offered methods of attuning with these collaborative spirits. Being naturally prone to whimsy, healing and anything that transcended the bounded life I had come to know as a small-town girl, young me devoured the book. In retrospect many years, cities, and countries later I now see that this one book was part of an unfolding constellation of signs that would guide me over time and has stayed with me on a perpetual quest to "see" and "hear" the invisible forces of the more than human world—a vision I brought forward in this curatorial set by putting the following works into dialogue. The assemblage of videos included in this exhibition consisted of Ursula Biemann's *Acoustic Ocean* (2018), Shelley Niro's *Tree* (2007), prOphecy sun's *Traces of Motherhood* (2006) and Sharon Isaac's *Dancing with Naango* (2018). A brief meditation on each of the works follows.

Ursula Biemann, *Acoustic Ocean*, 2018.



Figure 1. Still from *Acoustic Ocean*, Ursula Biemann, 2018. Image courtesy of Vtape.

I close my eyes and imagine the calmest cold waters—a profound solitude.

The midnight blue sounds and vast environment of Ursula Biemann's *Acoustic Ocean* evoke meditative, magical thinking in deep time. Sonic frequencies and fin whale vocalizations swell in my heart. The absence of a sea butterfly's heartbeat foretells of things to come. A whale's memory chamber holds secrets of an ancient future. A dolphin's ghost is free and swirling away from all entanglement. Biemann's oceanic video installation probes the acoustic dimensions of marine life in the North Atlantic. Located on the Lofoten Islands in Northern Norway, the video centers on the performance of a Sami marine-biologist-diver who is using a model of a submersible equipped with hydrophones and recording devices. In this science-fictional quest, the aquanaut's task is to sense the submarine space for sonic and bioluminescent forms of expression and feeling—interconnected relations between marine, human, scientific, energetic, and digital worlds become enmeshed.

Shelley Niro, *Tree*, 2006.



Figure 2. Still from *Tree*, Shelley Niro, 2006. Image courtesy of Vtape.

In a dream I had, a pregnant woman was a tree and in her grasp was every kind of plant. She was the holder of wisdom, pain, and all the love in the world.

Shelley Niro's *Tree* is a tender film that acknowledges the import of spiritual connectivity while illuminating the pernicious nature of slow violence. The atmosphere of Niro's film is austere, barren. A woman personifying earth bears witness to the murderous fallout of capitalism, warfare, ecological destruction, and spiritual collapse. As she roams the empty streets, the film layers images of flashing rings reminiscent of a nuclear mushroom-cloud, explosive fire, and the neon lights of corporate takeover—all signifying collapse. The landscape is no longer being cared for and the woman mourns for what has happened to the world and its inhabitants. In her 2013 book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that "grieving is a sign of spiritual health. But it is not enough to weep for our lost landscapes; we have to put our hands in the earth to make ourselves whole again." (327). It seems the woman is attempting to do just that as she listens with a broken heart to the visions of earth. Eventually her body transmutes, returning to

eternity, to wholeness. We intuit that she may return once healing and the balance between humans, land and water have been restored through processes of care, love, and kinship between all creatures, living and non.

prOphecy sun, *Traces of Motherhood*, 2016.



Figure 3. Still from *Traces of Motherhood*, prOphecy sun, 2016. Image courtesy of the artist.

I've been reflecting on the ordinary, day to day elements of motherhood, like eating cold curry at 10AM on zero sleep while my baby screams—trying to approach these less than fabulous moments with openness, mindful attention, and awe. The entirety of life in a single moment.

prOphecy sun merges minutiae with magnificence in her video art practice. sun uses smartphone technology to capture task-like movements, and improvisational gestures as she walks with an unruly atmospheric weather balloon and a small child (her own) through vast, open land. Like a lullaby, a recording of her voice hauntingly singing calmly loops. *Traces of Motherhood* is part of a multi-channel video and sound installation that considers how the body responds to the agency of things in the world—sun wrestles with the large yet fragile balloon, alluding to the complexities inherent to the maternal relationship, defined and weighted as it is by a love so

sharp it pierces. In the video, the land works synergistically with sun, pushing back, holding, as if it is in turn taking care of (mothering) sun. *Traces of Motherhood* contemplates non-human sites such as trees, land, atmosphere, as performing entities and the environment as an active collaborator. The work emphasizes temporality and our ability to sense and perceive different forms of media that are visual, aural, and tactile through collaborative kinships.

Sharon Isaac, *Dancing with Naango*, 2018.



Figure 3. Still from *Dancing with Naango*, Sharon Isaac, 2018. Image courtesy of Vtape.

My daughter stares with wonder at the leaves flitting in the wind and reaches out for their succulent green flesh.

Sharon Isaac's film *Dancing with Naango* makes me think about matrilineal lineages and of place. I watch it and wonder about dance as embodied knowledge transfer, ancestral presence, trauma, and the healing properties of joy. Isaac's film traces her daughter's journey as a Jingle Dress dancer, and is a gentle dedication to her Great Grandmother, Naango (Star). The film is an oral and visual retelling of the reasons her daughter dances and the deep importance of maintaining her Ojibwa traditions. The distinctive rattle and clink of the metal cones and the hopeful prayers invoked through the dance spark a tingling sensation. The gestures in this work

overflow with jubilation and are sensitive to that which cannot be encapsulated through words. There is a quality of light that shines with undiminished luster.

The title of the series, *love as rupturous as I know it be*, is an excerpt from an essay by Karyn Recollet (2018) that imagines cosmic kinship and considers the potent magic of dark matter—the vibrant power of dreaming otherwise. Recollet’s essay is astral, radiating a cosmic hope; it exhales, “dark matter is magic; it is that wondrous active presence that is moving, vibrating, surging... formulating, ideating, creating...” (2018). It is a celebration of radical decolonial love. I chose this sentence as the curatorial title for these videos because it encapsulated everything I felt as a new mother holding my sweet baby in the beginnings of a global pandemic: a rupturous, vulnerable, terrifying love. To rupture is to breach or disturb (a harmonious feeling or situation), to burst suddenly. These videos symbolize an ethos of generosity—a central tenant for intimate practices of care in a world wildly in need of renewal. They simultaneously index the grave responsibility necessary if ongoing flourishing of life is to be sustained. Understanding that all our complex and fragile interactions are inextricably linked requires acknowledging our dependency, collective need, grief, and reciprocity as basic elements of being. Transformation calls for a rebirth of the world as we know it and it begs for new ways of understanding the interconnectedness of all things through a lens of care and an ethics of love. It demands we are brave enough to face the troubling vulnerability and shattering affective burden of living in hope.¹

¹ An abbreviated version of this article can be found in Vtape’s forthcoming digital catalogue for the Curatorial Incubator, v.16: Living in Hope, 2020-21.

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About the Author

Shalon T. Webber-Heffernan is a curator and doctoral candidate in Performance Studies at York University where her research examines site specific performance projects that have responded to issues surrounding borderlands, space, and disappearance throughout the Americas. She is currently Educator-in-Residence at The Blackwood Gallery with the 2021-22 Curatorial Consortium and was Curator-in-Residence at the Curatorial Lab @ Sensorium Centre for Digital Arts and Technology (2019-2020) where she is also a Research Associate. She has worked with Toronto's 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art as well as grunt gallery in Vancouver and is currently writer-in-residence for the project *PUSH.PULL: Intersections of QTBIPOC Cabaret and Performance Art*. Other writing has recently appeared in *Peripheral Review*, *Performance Matters*, and *LabCritica*.