

**Transgression, Endurance and Spontaneous Congregation
in *Windblown / Raffles: A Dialogic about the Problems of a Particular Centennial Project***

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1. project description

Melanie. (Slides: attention grabbing shots of process – Kathleen's and Melanie's)

2. give a rationale for the concept of a dialogic on this show, its process, and the way we will address these here.

Rather than presenting our papers as monologues, and as we are presenting on the same project, we decided to combine our work in a kind of dialogue, about process, place and the problems of this project. We thought in some ways our perspectives on this project, our feelings about its successes, importance and so on, might be better served as a woven juxtaposition. We hope that in some ways, for some of you, our approach reveals that which isn't really acknowledged – that which is sublimated in the process of creating any show.

3. challenges of collaboration, the problems of this show.

Melanie: various levels of collaboration: Knowhere vs. Ponteix, producer vs. Artists on-site, secular reality of Ponteix vs. sacred fantasy of the parish. Quote from Dwight Conquergood.

4. driving, being lost and death

Ponteix is about a five-hour drive south-west from Regina. A drive through expanses of prairie and farm fields that makes one wonder at times if you've gone too far.... A kind of: "*No really it's time to turn back now, this is as far as we should go. It's time to turn back...*" kind of place. (**show slide of Canadian prairie highway**) On my first visit there in July 2007, we arrived late in the afternoon. Our journey was prolonged by a botched attempt at a shortcut. Lost in the dust of the open prairie, in the sun, we were panicked, but near dusk, as soon as we arrived, we were warmly welcomed by the nuns.

6. Secular artist in a sacred place

Not being a Catholic, nor even a practicing Christian, I was taken in by the mystery and bearing of these women (the nuns). All of them were elderly, and many of them had worked in relief projects around the world. They all seemed to have retired in Ponteix. In particular, I remember my first conversation with Sister Mary Paul. After dinner, we sat together for about 20 minutes talking, and she told me about the work she

had done that week. Three parishioners had passed away, and Sister Mary Paul had shared with me the experience of being with these people just before they died. All had been elderly, all had lived full lives, yet the experience of facing death in this community is especially hard; as the population dips below 500, the people of Ponteix become anxious about the future. This conversation had a huge impact on me and on the direction of this centennial project.

7. Melanie relational aesthetics, etc.

My conversation with Sister Mary Paul and my relationship to her and to her faith in the face of death and adversity, got me thinking about another Catholic, a lapsed Catholic named Michel Foucault, who has said the following about the term “transgression”:

Perhaps one day it will seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought. But in spite of so many scattered signs, the language in which transgression will find its space and the illumination of its being lies almost entirely in the future” (Foucault as quoted in Stallybrass & White 200).

For Foucault, transgression is the interrogation of boundaries, a study where what is in question is the limit rather than the identity of a culture. But, as Allon White and Peter Stallybrass remind us, “cultural identity is inseparable from limits, it is always a boundary phenomenon and its order is always constructed around the figures of its territorial edge” (200). It was agreed among the artists involved in this project, as well as among representatives chosen from the community that hosted us, that the focus of *Windblown / Raffles* would be to explore the kind of boundaries that Foucault understood as thresholds of knowledge. Beginning with the notorious wind in this area, we wanted to explore and understand survival for this community – despite the remoteness, the challenges of a rural, agrarian existence, and again the challenges of the weather in this dry, windy place; we wondered what gave them faith at this time in their history – the celebration of their centennial – to live, to thrive, in “next year’s country” and carry on.

7. Melanie’s line about performance of possibilities.

8. How Ponteixans endured us

As a group of secular outsiders who had come to participate in this community’s celebration of survival over the past one hundred years, there were many thresholds, but above all there was a faith that this event would provide the potential for a better understanding of how this community may thrive in the future, based on a better understanding of its past. It was brave of the community to invite us; indeed, our presence in the town at the time of such a celebration posed many challenges to our hosts. Perhaps not surprisingly, they responded to us in the same way that any community might respond to a challenge with an unpredictable outcome, a heavy snow fall, say, or – as our title suggests – the force of the wind: **they endured us** and ultimately I think they appreciated us (-- didn’t they? Well, they’re not here to say, are they?).

9. Melanie's line from D. Conquergaard

10. Transgression exposed as counter-sublimation

Our performance pressurized the domain (**by “domain” I mean a manifestation of power exercised through place**) of Ponteix's Catholic community in such a way that the political unconscious of this town was revealed as well as the repressions and social rejections that have formed it. In *Windblown / Rafales* transgression illuminated a kind of reverse or counter-sublimation that exposed the discursive hierarchies and stratifications of bodies and space that the dominant Catholic part of the town has produced as the mechanism of its symbolic dominance (White & Stallybrass 200-201).

Here the idea of transgression is being applied in an unusual way (**show slide of transgression**); the term, as Steven Dollimore suggests condotes “a powerful ritual or symbolic practice whereby the dominant class squanders its symbolic capital so as to get in touch with the fields of desire which it denied itself as the price it paid for political power” (Dollimore as quoted in Stallybrass & White 201). This process is often associated with carnival or other carnal events where socio-political status is abandoned in pursuit of the fulfillment of appetites. In *Windblown / Rafales* the appetite revealed, I think, is a profane death-drive. Transgression often happens in pursuit of that unattainable surplus of enjoyment, whereas in *Windblown / Rafales*, the abject is exposed; in the shadow of the church, a scene of neglect is realized in a dying town; that is, a materialization of a kind of problematic enjoyment around which the drive circulates.

As the performance moves from place to place in Ponteix, beginning in the Notre Dame D'Auvergne Church, then across the church's grounds to the site of an historic hospital, through an orchard, out in pilgrimage through the town, and back to the Parish Hall, relationships of power within as well as between each of these “domains” are revealed. According to White & Stallybrass, domains are crucial to the process of sublimation of unconscious drives. As the performance of *Windblown / Rafales* moves away from the domain of the church, a displacement of the site of liturgical discourse occurs in the form of an imaginary dialogic between the sacred and the profane; in this sense ‘between’ is an examination of what Linderman identifies as a “limit-text” or that which queries boundaries that are repressed in other texts (Arya 32). Here the spectator performs an act of faith in the way they endure the journey of the event, but also in the way that the event destabilizes the domain of the sacred.

Briefly, I want to use the first two parts (called stanzas) of the performance as examples:

Stanza One took place in the church, a place usually reserved for solemn, sacred reflection, prayer and religious ritual. After a significant amount of negotiation, the parish council and Father Raymond (the presiding priest) approved our performance in this space. The text was a secular mass, resembling both folktale and sermon, as it celebrated significant people, whose humble efforts helped shaped the town's creation and prosperity. The performance included three silks, symbolic of the French flag and prominent in French Canadian Catholic imagery; we used these silks to materialize many aspects of the story. We also used dried Russian thistle, again to symbolize, but in this case the thistle represented a kind of sublime hope that this community has always shared, about its survival, about itself. In the 1930s, during the worst draught in history in

this region, this thistle was all that would grow. So people and cattle alike would eat it, and little else. Now that the town is on the verge of extinction, people think about the Russian thistle and what it represents more than they ever did. Finally we used Kantoresque mannequins, or puppets, as we called them. Kantor's *Dead Class* was an important influence on how we represented our *association* to the more alien aspects of the Catholic ritual in this community, as Kantor states, "***The mannequins, and the actors who animate them confirm the dualism of the Sacred and the Profane, or more precisely, of the tamed ritual and the distortions that destroy its order***" (as quoted in Krzysztof 104).

Moreover "...***The faces of the mannequins lure us into a cozy world of home, while simultaneously suggesting a pseudo-life of dead movement, of death imitating life. The mannequins are at once relatives and at once baggage of the fears and obsessions that each person in the congregation takes with them into death***" (as quoted in Krzysztof 107). Here the body is a promise and a failure of life. The physical score between the actor and puppet is solemn, respectful and contemplative, yet the way in which the puppets materialize death reveals the closeness of the community to this state and challenges the metaphysical approach of the church to its presence.

Stanza Two focuses on the role of the nuns and the dying body in the faith of people in the survival of the community. Here the spectators spend time with three women, as part of a slow procession through the parish hospital. They bare witness to the convent hospital as a site where death is not denied, rather it is the focus of faith, as Melanie Bennett's text suggests:

Last Rites

The last Utterance of the reprobate or rogue

Blood pouring out of cavities from the Spanish flu.

***The priest coming to anoint the sick.
A ritual of transformation to the bedside.***

Bread for the trip across the abyss.

The act of putting the sick at the centre of the ritual.

Taking away the curse of affliction.

***Transforming them from objects of repulsion to individuals worthy of honour.
(Bennett from Hospital)***

Here, both the conventions of the centennial and the church are subverted in that the materiality of an actual dying body is presented as central to a mass presided over, in this case, by women, not a man, and not in his domain of the church, rather this mass happens in the hospital.

11. Melanie addresses cracks and contradictions of process of work on stanzas in church, hospital and parish hall

12. a note on empathy and relational dramaturgy

Our use of empathy here reflects the perspective of open systems design developed in the social geography of Richard Sennett, who is “inspired and excited by places where he does not belong and by people who are not like him” (Sennett 11). His approach to designing environments for cosmopolitan existence provided useful inspiration for the dramaturgy of this project because of the way he articulates empathy as a relational link between people sharing the same space and navigating the power differentials and ethical dilemmas of cultural difference. In his work, Sennett is also concerned about the agency of the migrant, and as a ‘migrant’ to the community of Ponteix, the following passage by Sennett was useful:

“My version of cosmopolitanism names something positive in the psychology of migration, views the migrant as more than a hapless victim of necessity. A distinction first drawn by Adam Smith, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, helps elucidate this positive view. Sympathy he understood as identification with the ways of life, and particularly the suffering of another, as in the adage “treat thy neighbour as thyself.” Empathy he took to be a different kind of regard: curiosity about lives the observer cannot pretend to understand. Empathy of the Smithian sort is the positive experience migrants can have of a foreign city (or town)” (Sennett 11).

This perspective is supported by Hal Foster, as Melanie has mentioned, who stresses the importance of reflexivity but he also stresses the need to get other parameters of the relationship between art-researcher and subject, just right. For example, in response to the “dangers” of too little or too much distance, he

advocate[s] parallax work that attempts to frame the framer as she or he frames the other. This is one way to negotiate the contradictory status of otherness as given and constructed, real and fantasmatic” (Foster 203).

The ensemble working on this project concurred that we would try to practice this kind of empathetic, self-reflexive approach in the creation of this event. In part I think we were successful in that I think the community truly appreciated our work; in terms of the critical validity of our work, I welcome your reflections.

13. Melanie will describe the process to the pilgrimage

14. Framing of vision on the pilgrimage and the discovery of the *sinthome*

I want to address an important challenge to vision in the spectatorship of the Stanza Three pilgrimage in *Windblown / Raffles*, but unfortunately I will only be able to touch on a couple of aspects of the tour. Concerning vision, Anna Fenemore reminds us, “the act of spectating is fundamentally a spatial act...” the site-specific dramaturgy of *Windblown / Raffles* strove for this relationship to what our spectators saw in

performance; instead of establishing a relationship that was *static, singular, bodily suppressed*, our performance attempted to develop an experience of the work that was replete with the possibilities of an experience that was *affective* and *alterable*; where there was a means of discovering a pleasure and a *realisation* that is linked not solely or primarily to the external visual object but to the pleasures of the self and others as spatial / social object (Fenemore 103). In particular, our approach to the Pilgrimage was an attempt to address that which is denied in the static, singular and symbolic performance of this community – in the church.

Here was an attempt to dislodge spectatorial experience from a purely visual object into the arena of the spatial object. This is done through addressing the two types of visual experience described by Martin Heidegger. First, there is “epistemological vision” which features spectatorial distance, objectification, a frontal point of view. Significantly these all feature as major tactics of normative theatre practice in establishing a certain relationship to its spectator, but this frame of a relationship can also be seen in the way a congregation experiences the mass performed by the priest in church. Martin Jay asserts this epistemological vision to be the “assertoric gaze,” a way of looking that is “abstracted, monocular, inflexible, unmoving, rigid, ego-logical and exclusionary” (Jay 148). In contrast there is “ontological vision”, whose primary feature is embeddiness, where, as Jay articulates,

The viewer is situated within a visual field, not outside it; his (her) horizon is limited by what he can see around him. Moreover, his relation to the context in which he is embedded is nurturant, not controlling (Jay 148).

This is the “alethic gaze”, which Jay argues is “multiple, aware of its context, inclusionary, horizontal, and caring” (Jay 148). In the way we structured the Pilgrimage we attempted to establish this relationship to the town and to our spectators, our colleagues and confidantes on this tour, that emphasized the proximity and vulnerability of the alethic gaze.

The Pilgrimage featured our performers creating relational animations of various objects on the tour site; for example, Eugenie Ducatel animated the town’s community notice board, situating herself and her own information between what was actually a neglected space and our spectators; Derek Lindman hung paper money on a newly planted spruce tree, one among three, just off Centre Street. An allusion to “the Money Tree” a famous sermon given by Father Royer, the founding priest of the town, to new settlers in the region, it warns of living wisely. The tree used by Lindman is an obviously unsustainable import from a distant place, and he created an association between himself, his knowledge of the tree’s origin, and the problem of finding sustainable solutions to the town’s survival. Finally, we experience Regena Maller’s story about her Uncle Jimmy at 141 Centre Street. Maller performs a memorial to an uncle who died due to complications of his alcohol addiction, away from their family, and this was the same situation – so we were told – about the former inhabitant of 141 Centre Street; a man who had tried to make a go of an accounting business, but a lack of success and an addiction to alcohol forced him to flee to Swift Current, where he passes away.

In the window of 141 Centre Street, we witnessed the ultimate example of the sublimation of that which has been denied as existing in the town by the Catholic parish. In what remains behind the window of apartment on Centre Street, the degrading state

of this premises act as a kind of materialization of the subject's trauma and evidence of a perverse enjoyment (alcoholism) enjoyment, we can see how the decayed state of this premises reflects a kind of open wound of the community, a "kernel of enjoyment" as Lacan would say, that simultaneously attracts and repels us.

In *Windblown / Rafales* the appetite revealed, I think, is a profane death-drive. Transgression often happens in pursuit of that unattainable surplus of enjoyment, whereas in *Windblown / Rafales*, the abject is exposed; in the shadow of the church, a scene of neglect is realized in a dying town; that is, a materialization of a kind of problematic enjoyment around which the drive circulates.

Finally, with death and decay as the 'white elephants in the room' of this performance, we had wonderful conversations with people about their concerns, their worries, their dreams and plans. We asked people to **think about the Future of Ponteix**, and in this we gave spectators on our tour and those of us in the company an opportunity to cast an aletheic gaze on these individuals who we had spoken to, had share stories with, and got to know.

15. Melanie asks some important questions, to conclude.

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Notes:

Vertical theatre (Brazil). A show based on three towns, based on the preface “Br”, migration, etc.