



Amala Poli //

*I find, when I write, I don't want to write well-made scenes, narratives that flow, structures that give a sense of wholeness and balance, plays that feel intact. Intact people should write intact plays with sound narratives built of sound scenes that unfold with a sense of dependable cause and effect; solid structures you can rely on. That is not my experience of the world.*

*(Chuck Mee qtd in Kuppers 4)*

Recently, I had the privilege of participating in a three-day intensive Disability Culture Performance Workshop by Petra Kuppers, an internationally active disability culture and community performance activist.[1] [2] Through the first two days, we gravitated toward themes of care, movement, and home to guide our collective approach to the activities and discussions in the workshop. The workshop encouraged us to actively think of disability culture as a process, one we could participate in and engage with from our particular subject positions and as allies. Kuppers states in her book *Disability Culture and Community Performance*, “Boundaries, norms, belongings: disability cultural environments can suspend a whole slew of rules, try to undo the history of exclusions that many of its members have experienced when they have heard or felt ‘you shouldn’t be like this’” (4). In this article, I explore the workshop experience in terms of holding space and breaking the “should” aspect of academic structural expectations, unlearning rigidity, embracing fluidity, and self-care.

Various explorations guided our experience of disability culture, from movement scores guided by music to explorations of the museum space and undoing structural expectations as consumers of

culture, replacing them instead as creative inhabitants of space. The local Museum of Ontario Archaeology was the site of our first group activity on the third and final day of the workshop. I chose this activity, the Alternative Knowledges tour for discussion here, as the museum experience is often guided by the written plaques next to artifacts, demanding our attentions, structuring knowledge and consumption of the various kinds of stimuli within the museum. Guided by Petra Kupperts' gentle suggestions, individual participants meandered into different corners of the archaeological museum, choosing artifacts to present them to the other participants. This exercise disrupted the conventional expectations of the museum space, as each of us created a two-part process. We first presented our chosen object or image in its historical context to honor it in its own right, and then added a creative element that speculatively guided the rest of the individuals through a new and imaginative experience of the chosen artifact. As someone who always experiences a sense of urgency and panic in museums, trying to consume everything that the museum offers as knowledge, this exercise challenged me to disrupt conventional expectations imposed by habit and structure, situating me as an active part of the space and inviting me to explore my creative abilities. This is in keeping with how disability culture can invite individuals to engage in unexplored or unusual behaviors and think about the practices that sustain hegemony, thereby facilitating inclusions that can challenge historical exclusions (Kupperts 4). It also gave us occasion to co-exist in a space of respectful attention and care, listening and absorbing each others' creative and imaginative energies together.



*[At the Museum of Ontario Archaeology, London, Ontario during the Alternative Knowledges tour]*

In the first exercise, Kupperts encouraged us to break free from the expected norms of academic settings that involved introductions by name and academic work/research and invited us to partake of the Mihimihi practice of the Māori tradition by introducing ourselves through our mountain, river, and people.[3] The exercise transformed a group of strangers/acquaintances into a

small community of people holding space for each others' stories. It gave us room to performatively and metaphorically transform some deeply personal facets about ourselves into a metaphorical mountain or a river, capturing a nugget of our personal struggles and the motivations that keep us moving in the world. The energy in the room palpably shifted from the new awkwardness of strangers coming together in a workshop to a shared intimacy and acknowledgement of each person's presence and uniqueness. Personalizing the introductions thus transformed our journey onwards in the workshop.

I was first introduced to "holding space" by Professor Antoinette Cooper at Columbia University during a Writers' Workshop for the *Synopsis* in-house writers. Cooper talked to the group of writers about the transformational power of holding space, as stillness, through pausing purposefully and meaningfully. Though hard to practice due to the impulse to "fix" while we listen to the stories of others, Cooper explained how holding space could create spaces of safety and support as well as pockets of nourishment. At the disability culture workshop, the process of holding space felt possible through both movement and stillness, as we experienced movement scores through music guided by our individual impulses. One part of a movement exercise involved gently holding space for other performers as they explored the music through their own movements.

Most of all, part of the workshop's exercise continues for me presently as I write this piece in a different style about the learnings from the workshop, resisting the urge to bombard my reflection with theoretical and academic background knowledge. The discussions with Koppers and our explorations during the workshop often returned to challenging exclusionary structures and playing with form. I find that much room for play exists in holding space for form, and perhaps a starting point involves breaking some self-set convention about writing in a detached and impersonal way.

### Works Cited

Koppers, Petra. *Disability Culture and Community Performance: Find a Strange and Twisted Shape*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Cooper, Antoinette. "The Transformative Power of Holding Space: A Workshop" *Synopsis Writers' Retreat*, 22 November 2019, Columbia University, NY. Workshop.

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[3] Koppers had obtained prior permission to reproduce this practice in disability performance contexts. See here for more information on Mihimihi. [5]