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# *Rotten Spring*: An Auto-Ethnography of Power Dynamics in a Performance Art Collective

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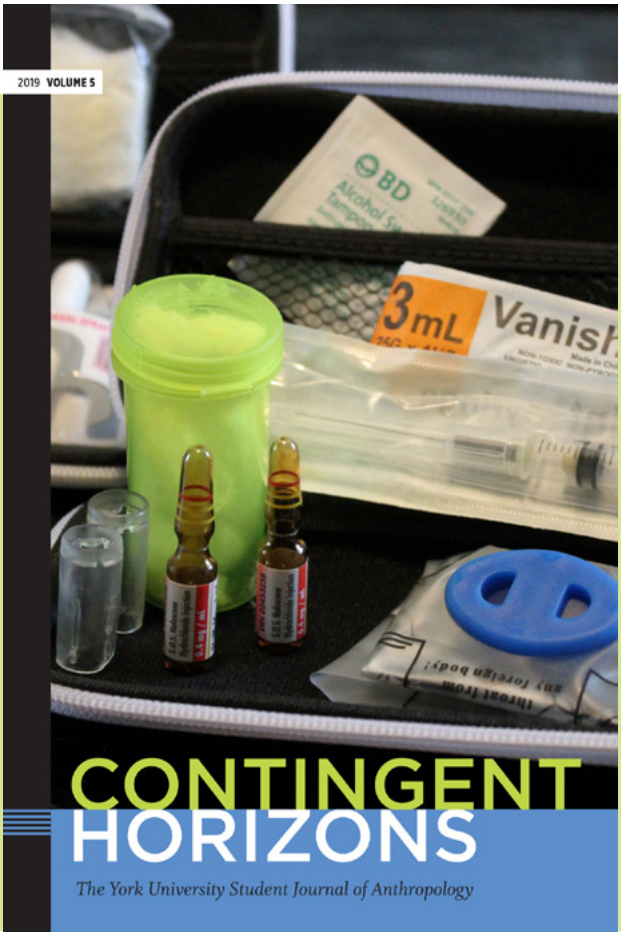


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# *Rotten Spring*
## An Auto-Ethnography of Power Dynamics in a Performance Art Collective

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From an auto-ethnographic perspective, this article describes the power dynamics that played out in a process-focused collaboration between five artists. Working with an attempted non-hierarchical model of collaboration, various strategies for negotiation emerged in the absence of a focused leader, and this article focuses on three instances of acutely potent power dynamics as they emerged within the negotiation processes. Contributing to the discourse surrounding performance ethnography—which at once frames group dynamics as a performance to support fieldwork analysis, as well as examines performance creation as a method of fieldwork (among other methods and frameworks)–this paper presents a non-hierarchical collaborative process as a performance ethnography in which all participants were ethnographers, as the emphasis of the process and the attention of the collaborators was placed on the group dynamics rather than the creation of the final performance. This article frames the aesthetic of the social as emergent through instances of shifting power in the group.

**KEY WORDS** Performance ethnography, social aesthetics, non-hierarchical collaboration

> In early February, the five of us came together feeling urgent about creating models for intimate and/or rigorous collaboration. *Rotten Spring* is an experiment in horizontal leadership. We attempt to enact a shared political and social paradigm among five artists holding different understandings of what constitutes work in a creative process. We hold that the well being of the group is predicated on the care of each individual, even when this means taking an indirect path toward our goal. Our line of questioning addresses citizenship, utopian ideals, dystopian wisdom, meaningful presence, potent absence, and cycles of fertility and rot. For This Is Not Normal Festival, we offer the evidence of our processes of negotiation. We present our own dynamics as a mirror for the culture in which we participate. – *Rotten Spring* Press Release (Alena et al. 2017)[1]

*Rotten Spring*—the name connoting the performance, the collaborative group, and the rehearsal process—was a process-oriented performance-creation collective I called together in the winter of 2017 to create a collaborative performance for the "This Is Not Normal" Festival in July 2017 at the Brick Theater in Brooklyn, NY. The

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***Rotten Spring* collaborative performance collective.** PHOTO: JANE FELDMAN

festival was a performance and theatre festival for works that addressed the political climate. I applied to the festival with a proposal to explore ethics in the process of collaboration. Though we (the collaborators) weren't sure what would emerge going into rehearsal, the final performance of *Rotten Spring* eventually looked something like an experimental dance-theatre piece. The emphasis on process within our collaboration subverted a traditional performance-focused orientation on creation and challenged the primacy of performance as the desired object in a process. That said, despite our luxurious six-month creation period, the urgency of deadlines eventually loomed, and the impending performance made demands on our process as channeled by each artist's unique personal stakes in performing. In this article, I examine how power—in terms of leadership, cultural capital, race and gender—was negotiated in relation to *Rotten Spring*'s extensive contract writing process, which aimed to define our terms of engagement for the project. In a sense, the contract was the object that defined our process. I am ultimately invested in the relationship between building contracts and the processes the agreements facilitate more broadly beyond *Rotten Spring*; however, the scope of this article will focus on my revelations through the lens of this collaboration. To give context, I will delineate the process of bringing the group together and the early ethics surrounding invitations and participation. I will describe the contract writing itself, delineating how we came to build the document. Finally, I will examine an instance of conflict that breached elements of our contract while we were exploring an exercise that staged the inherent relationship dynamics amongst us, thus reflecting on what the writing of the contract facilitated and limited.

As a participant and collaborator, I am implicated and included in the power dynamics that emerged in *Rotten Spring*, a reality marked by the tensions, love, obsessions, heartbreak, and gratitude I continue to hold for the project. This project is in me, alive in me still; writing about it is writing about myself. I hope that by speaking from a personal voice I can highlight my implication in the group and my perspective, rather than pose as an objective authority (which I am not). Further, by sharing my perspective on the happenings of *Rotten Spring*, I hope to invite the reader into dialogue with the broader social contexts and implications that the process reflects. Anthropologist Ruth Behar defends vulnerable ethnographic writing by stating that, "a personal voice, if creatively used, can

lead the reader not into miniature bubbles of navel-gazing, but into the enormous sea of serious social issues" (1996, 14). I am deeply interested in how "serious social issues" show up in the personal and intimate moments of life and I believe that unpacking personal experience can contribute meaningfully to the project of understanding mechanisms of oppression and socialization. The process of *Rotten Spring* continues to be a part of my lens on the world, and I hope to share the questions and curiosities it has left me with.

Performance ethnographic theory will frame my analysis, as a way of inviting my performance skills to inform my approach to framing power within the group. As exemplified in the above epigraph from the *Rotten Spring* press release, at the culmination of our work together we saw the performance as an expression of the dynamics amongst us and a reflection of the larger cultural contexts in which we all participate. In other words, participating in *Rotten Spring* constituted ethnographic fieldwork, with our culminating performance replacing a formal ethnographic report.

Performance ethnography brings together the growing field of performance theory—which Dwight Conquergood (2013) praises as a "rallying point for scholars who want to privilege action, agency, and transformation" (47)—with ethnographic analysis. Conquergood argues that performance theory is extremely important for the field of anthropology as it moves away from logo-centrism and thus the elite and imperial methods of knowledge production within anthropology's legacy (2013, 48). He suggests that: "Performance-sensitive ways of knowing hold forth the promise of contributing to an epistemological pluralism that will unsettle valorized paradigms and thereby extend understanding of multiple dimensions and a wider range of meaningful action" (Conquergood 2013, 48). Simply put, we communicate through action, emotion, silence, tension in the body, relationships, behavior—and what is spoken or written is not the only way we produce knowledge. It is from this standpoint that I will examine the *Rotten Spring* rehearsal process.

Performance ethnographer Johannes Fabian argues that the creation process of any work of performance holds a dynamic negotiation of power among the people involved. "Fascination with the communicative, esthetically creative, inspiring, and entertaining qualities of cultural performances all too easily make us overlook that the people who perform relate to each other and their society at large in terms of power" (Fabian 1990, 17). Fabian's work in performance ethnography frames fieldwork itself as performance, bringing into relief the ways in which all participants including the ethnographer are equal contributors to the cultural and power dynamics that emerge (1990, 12). He argues that the specific presence of the ethnographer affects the events during their fieldwork, and the ethnographer's perspective is always only one lens as shaped by their positionality. Subsequently, Fabian (1990) suggests that the ethnographer becomes "a provider of occasions, a catalyst in the weakest sense, and a producer (in analogy to a theatrical producer) in the strongest" (7). For Fabian, the dynamics within the performance of fieldwork are a metonym for the larger cultural contexts from which they emerge. In other words, the power dynamics that played out in *Rotten Spring* at once reflected and were shaped by larger social frameworks; the performance was a metonym for the process, and the process was a metonym for the larger cultural dynamics in which we were participating.

To further contextualize the choice to see the collaboration as fieldwork, the work of performance ethnographer and anthropologist Magda Kazubowski-Houston is useful. She

advocates for performance creation as an ethnographic methodology, claiming that, "it has enormous potential as a means of studying the complex relations of power that unwittingly bind ethnographers to their research participants in the field" (Kazubowski-Houston 2010, 192). I extend "ethnographers" and "their research participants" to collaborators in a devised process, and find myself aligned with Kazubowski-Houston, eager to include the complicated relations of power in an analysis of what took place within the group, and a consideration of how these events reflect broader social structures.

Additionally, I will draw on Avery Gordon's (2011) work to explore how violent histories of oppression are present absences in modern contexts of cultural production. I will also reference Shannon Jackson (2011) to understand the social implications of collaborative groups, and Diana Taylor (2013) to frame the politics of body-based versus text-based knowledge production. Finally, I will draw on Maria Lind (2009), who writes about artistic agency in collaborations and how this agency enables or hinders the success of collaborative groups to respond and resist the wider social situations from which they emerge.

*Rotten Spring* was not intended initially as performance ethnography; it is only in retrospect that I find performance ethnography a useful lens that gives language for how the process and group dynamics reflect the broader culture. *Rotten Spring* was a kind of collective performance ethnography; all of the collaborators were performing fieldwork within the group, doing personal research about the group from their unique perspective. I am defining research in this case as the act of scrutinizing the creative process in order to make as informed decisions as possible about how to move forward collaboratively with personal integrity. We were each researching what it was to be in personal integrity (acting according to our values) while collaborating within the group. This meant that the creation process was guided by an inherent reflexivity in order to assess what to do next and to glean what was happening in any given moment. In the beginning, we knew very little about what we would make—only the performance venue, the timeline, who the collaborators were, and otherwise very little about theme or content—and so we were making up what we would create through a process of exploration. Just as an ethnographer enters fieldwork with only hypotheses of what they will find, each member of *Rotten Spring* entered the open-ended process with only guesswork of what the process would entail (Fabian 1990, 12). I called together a group of people I felt shared my passion for group process and pedagogy, and so all of us were interested in the group's emergent dynamics as fodder for what we would create and how we would organize ourselves, even as we intersected with this interest differently. We eventually came to think of the final performance as a reflection of our process, less because it reflected critically on the process explicitly, and more because it was the exact evidence of our negotiations—what we performed was what we could agree on. The open-endedness of the project thrust us into the task of grappling with our interpersonal dynamics in order to accomplish composition and decisions.

## The Beginning

> *Paul, Kendra, and Jade had arrived at my house and we sat in my kitchen and snacked. Aisha was coming from her house in Washington Heights—in other words*

> *the trek to Brooklyn was the farthest for her. I clocked this, realizing that we would have to change up the location of our meetings so that she would not always be the one traveling the farthest. We gathered in the living room once everyone was present. I shared that I hoped we would all take equal ownership over this project but that I was aware that as the social glue I would facilitate this first rehearsal to get the ball rolling. I asked if they had any questions for me. Paul asked, "Why us? Why did you bring us together?" I responded, "Well I have a crush on all of you." We laughed in delight of this admiration, and the others eyed one another with curiosity.*[2]
> (Author's field notes, January 2017)

From the very start we were thrust into the negotiation of power, particularly in terms of social capital, accessibility, and privileged identities. I had pre-existing intimate relationships with some of the collaborators and not others; some of us had more established or active creative careers which informed our initial approach and comfort level; our geographic proximity informed the ease with which we were able to attend rehearsal; and I intentionally brought together a mixed-race, gender-diverse group; however the ways in which this was handled in some cases was neglectful, or risked tokenization. I'll give some context for how the project came together to elaborate. I will explore the crevices of desire, aversion, apprehension, and attraction that often accompany beginnings, as they did in *Rotten Spring*.

I was interested in working non-hierarchically after a year of studying with a theatre company, SITI Company, in New York City and creating performance compositions non-hierarchically with assigned collaborators, rather than chosen. In December of 2016, I saw the call for submissions for the "This Is Not Normal Festival" at The Brick Theater in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. I had a relationship with the theater already: I had put up two shows in the space the year prior, and I co-taught a children's theater class with one of the co-op theater's organizers. "This is Not Normal Festival" seemed like an appropriate platform for an experimental, process-oriented performance piece, since the festival was interested in curating pieces that investigated radical structural change after the 2016 American election. In the theater world, devising alternative power and leadership structures is an emerging trend. Born from post-modernism and the blurring lines of dance, visual art, and performance art, collaborative processes are sites for enacting alternative power-structures. According to Shannon Jackson:

> Performance's historic place as a cross-disciplinary, time-based, group-art form also means that it requires a degree of systemic coordination, a brand of stage management that must think deliberately but also speculatively about what it means to sustain human contact spatially and temporally. When a political art discourse too often celebrates social disruption at the expense of social coordination, we lose a more complex sense of how art practices contribute to inter-dependent social imaginings. (Jackson 2011, 14)

Jackson argues that the politics of performance creation are not sequestered to overt political messaging; she offers a framework in which social coordination within a group is a political and progressive act, if the coordination is arranged in ways counter to dominant

organizational structures. This lens affirms the political intent of the process-orientation in *Rotten Spring*. Even though *Rotten Spring* was not structurally designed to intervene in a political context, the methods of social coordination within our group were meant to coax social imaginings through enacting a non-hierarchical power structure, counter to the efficient and individualist values of dominant capitalist and neo-liberal methods of production and organization. However, as Maria Lind (2009) writes, "collaborations often constitute a response to a specific, sometimes local situation, and they run a constant risk of becoming incorporated into the system they are reacting against" (53). Though collaborating created the opportunity to enact alternative social realities within a productive framework, white, cis, class, and male privilege inevitably informed how our collaboration played out, even though the desire for a "non-hierarchical" collaboration was originally intended to subvert some of these oppressive power structures.

I was nervous while writing the email proposal to reach out to collaborators, afraid that people wouldn't want to work with me, insecurity creeping in that this wasn't a meaningful enough project for these artists whose work I so admired. Paul is a University of Chicago graduate, and had a deeply thoughtful collaborative performance practice with his then partner, Sam. I had worked with Paul and Sam earlier in 2016 on two performance projects they directed, and I loved working with them, really appreciating how they thought about the interplay of collaborative dynamics and production, as well as the politics of the work they were making. I chose to reach out to Paul and not Sam since by the time I was sending invitations, Sam and Paul were going through a break up, and Paul had a more extensive background as a performer. I spoke with Sam about this and we expressed a desire to collaborate more in the future but agreed that both of them coming onto this project was too much. For identity politics clarity, Paul is a white, cis-man of European descent. Since their breakup, Sam has changed his name and come out as trans-masculine.

Kendra is an extremely powerful performer and experimental dance choreographer without traditional dance training. I met Kendra in person when we ran into each other at an art event after we had already had an email exchange. Mutual friends introduced us and when we met, we clicked immediately: her eccentric style and edgy, goofy intimacy along with a sharp sense of humor enchanted me. When we met for coffee and saw a performance a few weeks later, we found we had a lot of shared fascinations, deeply interested in the intersections of spirituality, philosophy, collaboration, intimacy, and performance. Mutual friends later shared that they wanted to connect us in part because we reminded them of one another. Beyond us both being tall, white, blonde, middle-class, cis-female identifying people of Anglo-European settler-descent, we share a similar aesthetic and sense of humor.

I had met Jade in the spring of 2016 in a class I had taught at the Abrons Art Center in New York that harnessed performance practices, Jungian depth psychology theory, and somatic practices to explore the unconscious. In the class, Jade's reflections about the group dynamics, pedagogical practices, and leadership styles struck me as remarkably insightful. I found her understandings of attention, the enactment of built agreements, and accountability profound. Jade had a background in dance and radical politics and was training to be a Feldenkrais[3] practitioner at the time. She was offering free Feldenkrais sessions to fulfill the requirements of her training, and I took sessions with her, which we would couch in conversation about performance, love, sex, leadership, cults, and groups.

The insights always shepherded profoundly new perspectives for me. Jade is a queer, poly-amorous, mixed person of colour (POC) with Black and white heritage, and reports that her Eurocentric features play a big role in her social interactions.

When I reached out, Drea had recently left a performance troop they were a part of for years, a company that performed alternative spirituality through holiday farces. Drea shared that some of the dynamics that had emerged in the company were really troubling for them, and upon leaving they were feeling drained and disenchanted with the power dynamics of the theater and performance world. I had reached out to Drea—who is white, of European settler descent, and identifies as gender-nonconforming—to be a collaborator on *Rotten Spring*, and we spoke of this history on the phone. I shared with them that our process was intended to be non-hierarchical and could take any shape, and that they should also not feel any pressure to come to all the rehearsals if they weren't up for it. I had the sense that absences would be an important presence within the group; that the inclusion of an absent person signaled the invitation for everyone to participate at the pace of their desire and capacity. With the political climate as it is/was, radical care of oneself and one another within community was part of the politic that I wished to enact and hold in the process. Further, care politics within creative ensembles are an extremely important aspect of what can and cannot happen within a group. Jackson (2011) reminds us that: "Whether cast in aesthetic or social terms, freedom and expression are not opposed to obligation and care, but in fact depend upon each other; this is the daily lesson of any theatrical ensemble" (14). Drea ultimately decided not to be a part of the process at all based on burn out from this previous project, however they remained a present absence for the first few weeks. The ethic of care that their absent presence introduced became a defining social principle amongst our group, which is reflected in the press release epigraph.

With our collaborative background, Paul and I were eager to put our heads together about what the project could be before the first meeting. On the phone, he asked about the other people I had invited to be involved. I told him I didn't think he knew any of them and listed everyone's name and what their practice was. He described that he had resistance to working on an open-ended project in a homogenous group of white, cis-gendered people, not wanting to reproduce the white supremacy of the art and performance worlds nor the trend among white artists to neglect to address white supremacy in their work. I had already considered the dynamics of diversity in the group, however his comment prompted me to think of someone I hadn't originally considered. "Yes, I totally hear you." I told Paul. "I might reach out to someone else, actually."

I hadn't originally thought of Aisha because I didn't know her as well as the others. Aisha is Black Trinidadian-American and works largely with arts and cultural organizations invested in equity and POC advocacy. We had met only once at a party in Brooklyn and she had spoken briefly about her writing practice. She described her writing as creative essays, which she sometimes performed live. She also had a sound art practice. After the party, we agreed to follow up over Facebook, and we'd had a bit of back and forth in which she'd sent some of her writing. I was enchanted by her and her work, and eager to have the chance to connect more.

When I reached out, Aisha responded with interest, curiosity, and an air of formality. She congratulated me for getting into the "This Is Not Normal" Festival, sent along some

work samples, and then we had a phone call to talk through the project. She shared that the invitation came at a poignant moment as she had been thinking about new outlets for her writing and performance after collaborating with some mentors and wanting to move away from the dynamics emerging in those relationships. I shared that I was hoping for the group to function non-hierarchically, or at least with fluid leadership, all of us taking ownership over the piece, and all having equal weight in decision making processes. With past experience organizing a Black advocacy group in her university with a non-hierarchical organizing structure, Aisha agreed to participate.

Avery Gordon argues that unaddressed social violences exist as "seething presences" that haunt modern contexts, which I will consider in an examination of how the invitations to participate in *Rotten Spring* were extended and received. Gordon (2011) states: "The (haunting) ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life" (8). Through Gordon's lens, cultural production, particularly within the Western world, is always haunted by the legacy of slavery, white supremacy, misogyny, and colonialism, and nothing produced within North America escapes this paradigm. When these histories remain unaddressed, they exist as social tensions, differences of understanding, and neglect to care for one another. Repeatedly, unpacking my white privilege means noticing the moments where I unconsciously center my own comfort as a white settler and cis-female presenting person without questioning the impact on those around me. Ultimately it was the proposal to intimately collaborate and the respect we had for one another's work that brought the group together; however, my white privilege informed my invitations to a majority of white, cis collaborators. And though I invited a minority of people of colour and gender non-conforming people to participate, I failed to explicitly check in on their comfort levels with the dominant white and cis demographic or ask how I might best support them in the process. Of course, everyone in the group likely clocked the demographics and still made the decision to take part (or not) on their own terms; however, my not second guessing this arrangement and not addressing it directly exemplified racialized and gendered power dynamics, which likely implicated the comfort level of group participants. The "seething" absent presence—as represented by my unchecked white privilege supported by white supremacy—of the violent history of enslavement and systemic oppression haunted the invitations to collaborate. In my case, this haunting eventually brought about enormous revelations about the possibilities for advocacy through building mutually constructed agreements. For *Rotten Spring*, this manifested in the writing of our contract.

## The Contract

> *I notice in myself some fear and nervousness mounting without any roadmap—and I feel I share this feeling with others based on what is being said and proposed in rehearsals. And at the same time, your words last night re-ignited the fascination with what's possible when the process and the not knowing are the score for making—as we started out. At the same time, I wish for further skills to trust this unknown.* (Author's email to Jade and other collaborators, May 2017)

To describe the context from which the contract emerged in more detail, I wish to rewind to track how politics were understood amongst us from the beginning of the project. The "This Is Not Normal Festival" applications included a loose call for critical political theater and performance. Like for many cultural organizations after Donald Trump was elected in the 2016 American presidential elections, the necessity to respond and offer platforms for political dialogue felt urgent. The festival call had somewhat vague language about responding to the "abnormal" circumstances we were in as marked by the political situation. In conversations with the *Rotten Spring* collaborators, Paul voiced that he felt it was unproductive to frame what was happening as abnormal. Forces of oppression were hyper-activated by Trump's explicit misogyny and racism, however Trump's campaign made explicit what was already alive. White supremacy and misogyny have been the fuel for production within North America since its founding (hooks 1992, 1-40). The country is rotten. This is in part where the name for the collective and the show later came from. "*Rotten Spring*" was at once a reference to revolution—Arab Spring, Prague Spring—and the rot of utopian dreams, for instance the "American Dream" and the way it keeps an invested public patriotic and aspirational even while living with endangered rights and resources. That said the name was a treasure chest of interpretations within our group throughout the process.

Nonetheless, we had all expressed a desire for the show to be politically contextualized, partly in response to the festival call, and partly because of each individual holding this value in our own art making practices in different ways. How this political agenda would play out in our process and performance was hard to clarify in the early stages because the project's content was still so open ended.

By the second or third rehearsal, Jade, Paul and Aisha voiced a need to have a frank conversation about our politics. I was unclear what this meant or what this would look like—were we hoping to come to a political consensus or simply decide on the political content to inform the project? Further I was nervous to speak about my politics, afraid that I would not be able to articulate them in clear and concise terms in a go-around-the-table kind of way. I deeply value anti-oppression and hold socialist-informed ideals—infrastructural care of the individual by the state—but I did not have the jargon available to say what this meant to me, or how this value might be informed by my positionality. Ultimately, we did all name something of our political leanings during the "politics" conversation but struggled to clarify how this naming might implicate our time together. We weren't sure how to demand clarity of the uncertainty that was our process. How were these politics going to play out amongst us? Jade, seeing the risk of leaving this indeterminate, proposed that we write a contract.

In the classic article "The Tyranny of Structurelessness", Jo Freeman (1972) reflects on the power structures within groups in the women's liberation movement in the 1960s, asserting that the prevailing concept of "structurelessness" as a radical group organizational model was in fact a "smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others" (152). She calls for establishing explicit governing structures and offers techniques for democratic group organization (Freeman 1972, 163). Freeman's work provides an important framework on the necessity of building agreements to work against hegemonic power structures entering a group process. Explicit agreements on governing structures were what Jade was after.

The contract-writing process went beyond governance or operational aspects and focused on our terms of engagement. Prior to writing the document, we had already agreed on a method of splitting administrative tasks amongst us and aiming to work with non-hierarchical leadership, which to us meant taking turns "captaining" and aiming for consensus decision-making. The contract, as I see it now, aimed to clarify the mechanisms of intimacy amongst us; the necessary intimacy that is required for collaboration and performing with one another. We defined what aspects of our body we were open to having touched in improvisation, we made a hard line that none of us would be pushed into performing our identity onstage without explicit and agreed upon reasoning for it, and we built protocol for conflict, absence and the possibility of deciding to leaving the group. The contract aimed to clarify our work together by naming the bounds of what we were willing to do, make explicit the power dynamics amongst us, and limit certain actions between us.

We ended up taking a number of meetings to draft the document. Jade provided a rubric, drawing on agreements she had built for a business collaboration. After the second or third rehearsal we had devoted to writing the contract, Kendra was restless and expressed the desire to get on our feet and be negotiating our dynamics through doing embodied work together rather than sitting and talking. We were doing a very thorough job, writing collectively through verbal negotiation and, as the process played out, we were all daunted by how long the contract was taking. Jade maintained, however, that creating this contract was extremely important to her—in fact her participation in the project hinged on it. I asked her about it one day on the subway on the way home from a rehearsal at Aisha's. I said something along the lines of, "I completely trust you and that this process is a necessity for you. I also am not completely clear why it is a necessity – could you say more about that?" She thought for a moment. "I am always moving through contexts in the world that don't have my best interests at heart. I have to work to build contexts for myself, so that I can trust my circumstances."

This struck home. This I understood. Jade was a queer, polyamorous person of colour. Every aspect of her identity risked being ostracized, overlooked, misunderstood, oppressed, or penalized by mainstream culture. Creating agreements with the people around her, even if tedious, was an effective way to protect herself in unknown contexts. This was kink politics. This was the way to have polyamorous relationships. When normative structures don't serve the kinds of relationships you want to have, you need to build new ones. When echoes of systemic oppression inevitably show up in a mixed raced, mixed gender group, agreements need to be in place to protect the more vulnerable. The necessity to build common agreements and be patient with this process was a way of collectively protecting and being an ally to those of colour and gender non-conformity in the group. We were creating a rubric for being together that we could all trust—and thus we were building trust with one another.

The culture of our group took shape while composing the contract, at once because we were writing about our terms of engagement as well as working through the textures of our negotiations. The scale of the project of writing the document deepened our commitment to one another and to the process. This commitment was reflected in an ethics written into the contract; a commitment to sticking with challenging aspects of the process, even if that meant taking time to cool off and returning when we were ready, as well as methods for asking for the kinds of support or intervention any of us might need.

Though we all felt our bonds and rapport deepened through writing the contract, there were some arguments against it as a method of entering collaboration. A year after the final performance of *Rotten Spring*, while at an unrelated artist residency with Aisha and reflecting on the project with her, we both were commenting on how useful we found the contract-writing process to be; how it promoted self-protection within the group, allowed for greater freedom within the bounds of the contract once set, and developed wholehearted consent amongst individuals collaborating. She also shared that she had brought the practice of contract building to a musical collaboration she was taking part in after *Rotten Spring*, and her collaborator was extremely resistant to the prospect, particularly the word "contract." Her collaborator saw contracts as a mechanism through which Black musicians in a moneyed, white-dominated music industry had been consistently exploited. As an artist very interested in how group process supports or hinders creative production, I so valued the contract writing as a tool to collectively construct terms that we could all agree on, protecting the most vulnerable parts of ourselves within the unknowable process. However, violent legacies of exploitation trouble the binding practice of contract building.

Further, some members were frustrated with how much time was allocated to sitting and talking rather than moving and developing content for our performance. This was true particularly for Kendra, whose extensive collaborative and performing background has trained her with incredible skills for negotiating through doing and performing rather than writing. There are ample arguments in performance theory to support embodied negotiation rather than written or spoken negotiation. Performance theorist Diana Taylor's work is critical for unpacking the different politics of writing and documenting as compared to embodiment and enactment. Taylor states:

> By taking performance seriously as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, performance studies allows us to expand what we understand by "knowledge." This move, for starters, might prepare us to challenge the preponderance of writing in Western epistemologies. As I suggest in this study, writing has paradoxically come to stand in for and against embodiment. When the friars arrived in the New World in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries… they claimed that the indigenous peoples' past—and the "lives they lived"—had disappeared because they had no writing. (Taylor 2013, 16)

Taylor delineates the "repertoire" as a set of behaved and enacted systems of memory and knowledge passed on through relational and cultural contact as compared to the archive as a system of historicizing and objectifying cultures, scripted into Western knowledge systems as already extinct (2013, 22). Towards the point of contracts being used along racial lines to exploit Black people in North America, Conquergood's embodiment argument touches on the ways in which oppression is constructed through written legal binding agreements, and the radical act of undermining text-centeredness through embodied acts of resistance. He claims that: "(T)he slaves' performances described by [Frederick] Douglass were not authorized by any originary text […] they were collective upsurgings of pain and protest. […] These performances contested and subverted the soul-numbing oppression that was authorized by an entire apparatus of legal-juridical and commercial texts" (Conquergood 2013, 52). I delineate this snippet of text-versus-body discourse to

complicate the phenomenon of the contract in our process, the legacy of exploitation within legal binding processes, and illuminate the value of un-worded negotiation.

In the context of *Rotten Spring*, however, the contract writing process became a tool for intercepting oppression. None of us are illiterate within our group so collectively writing did not exclude anyone from the agreement-building process. Though seated and sedentary, the dynamic embodied experience of our collective during the contract writing process is aligned with anti-textuality. We were delineating what our bodies could do with one another, and so imagining and projecting our bodies into possible futures and aiming to take care of one another in those possible futures. Further, our writing process did not replace embodied negotiations—we engaged in performative negotiations before and after writing the contract.

The tension in negotiation styles, however, created subtle social divides within the group, along the lines of which conflict later emerged. Through a close analysis of power dynamics, I explore how the intensity of a particular conflict during the rehearsal process was in relation to the terms of our contract. It is possible that we broke aspects of the contract and conversely that we did not create terms within our contract to cover the territory we were in when the conflict emerged. Further, the trust we built through the careful planning for possible painful futures led us into deeper and riskier territory in our rehearsals.

## The Conflict

> *"Do we trust each other with the task of performing and the material we wish to put forward?" "I have trust in the material, not the others." "I trust them enough to fuck me up (because they will be accountable)." "I don't trust the material; I trust collaborators as people in the rotten spring community." "I trust myself enough to make "poor" decisions and recover from the consequences."*
> *New Lebanon Rehearsal Notes* (Alena et al. 2017)

We attended an artist's residency as a collective in June, shortly before our performances in July. We had been afforded the weeklong stay through friends of Kendra's who organized the residency program, which took place in New Lebanon, New York. We had studio space for the week, and we invested our hopes in finalizing the project at the residency. We divided up our studio time by giving each member a chance to captain a rehearsal. This meant that each of us had a number of hours in the day to direct the activities of the group, in the interests of producing material and supporting one another's creative vision. During his captaining time, Paul was interested in building exercises to tease out the inherent dynamics between us. I was really interested in this impulse of Paul's as were others in the group; since so much of our energy during the process had been devoted to examining our dynamics in the contract writing and collective decision-making, it was exciting to imagine we could channel this work into our performance. For Paul, with a background of collaborating with his partner where lines of life and art were blurred, mining our relationships as a part of a creative process was a natural site of interest. In order to explore our dynamics, he designed a series of improvisations between two people at a

time. Aisha was not yet at the residency (she would arrive for the last three days due to her work schedule), so the exercises were between Kendra, Jade and myself. The first session was between Kendra and Jade. Jade and I left the room while Paul prepared Kendra for the exercise. He talked with her about the dynamics alive already between she and Jade, offering his observations as well as asking about her own, and they concluded by allocating a few central motivations that characterized the dynamic. Paul then called Jade in to prepare her similarly. As I sat in the hall while this preparation was happening, I moved from feeling excitement about the line of questioning Paul was engaging, to feeling extremely uncomfortable with the set-up of the improvisation. When Kendra came out, she shared that she thought the exercise was risky, that what he was asking was pretty personal, but she was also willing to give it a try. In a creative process, dealing with very personal material is not foreign, however I couldn't help but see the position of power Paul was in by coaching us one at a time. Though he likely saw this simply as an efficient way to prepare the exercise, I couldn't help but read the situation as the only cis-gendered man in the group drawing on the lived experience of his collaborators, putting himself in a position of power and eliminating opportunities for accountability by talking to us one at a time. I also wanted to give Paul the benefit of the doubt, as I had experienced him as sensitive and conscientious in past projects. The discomfort was real, however, but like Kendra, I was willing to try the exercise at least for this first round. Our anxieties about building something in time for our performance were high, and so we had to measure bringing up concerns against the time it would take.

Our contract covered the process of rehearsal, but we had not laid out specific terms for drawing on the dynamics of our real relationships as creative material. This territory is tricky because the container of the "improvisation" invites one to play and take risks beyond what might be contained in social codes outside of an improvisation, however drawing explicitly on one's personal relationships for an improvisation means that actions within the exercise may affect your real relationship. Further, our contract did not address what we would prioritize as anxieties heightened as the performance date drew nearer: would we continue to emphasize process and easeful negotiations, keeping loose our expectations for any particular quality for the performance, or would we eventually allow ourselves to let our desires about the performance's quality determine the quality of our process? We did not anticipate this juncture during the contract writing, and so we ended up resting somewhere in between, which sometimes meant taking risks inspired by flares of anxiety about performance quality and our limited time.

After Kendra and Jade's private coaching sessions, Paul invited me to take on a critical eye as an audience to assess what was working as I watched the first round. The exercise that took place was a staged conversation between the two of them with some bizarre, hyper-real behavior and trajectories, yet the two performers were also very much themselves. The improvisation was a bit like a scene from a play, and definitely interesting, though my nervousness about the method remained. Jade and I went next, and being coached by Paul helped give insight into the process he had gone through with the other two; however, I still found myself uncomfortable with the position of power he was putting himself in. In the final round between Kendra and myself, Jade sat in on the coaching sessions rather than out of the room, and this helped adjust the power dynamic slightly. Still, I found myself angry that night, and I wasn't alone; Jade and Kendra shared my

concerns. I spoke to Paul, saying something akin to, "I can't help but see this as you, the only male in the group, wielding power over the rest of us. This is vulnerable work and you are avoiding being put into a vulnerable position." Paul received the criticism graciously and was willing to adjust the exercise.

The next day in the studio, Paul did an improvisation with Jade, and Kendra and I coached them. It was fun and playful, and it helped adjust the power dynamic somewhat to have Paul out of the facilitator role, however we were still in risky territory. The irony is that good theater often centers around conflict so, in a certain respect, we were likely assessing the interpersonal dynamics to coax conflict, consciously or unconsciously, to build a scene. We had not all consented to this risk because we had not taken time to really imagine what it might mean to do this work.

The conflict emerged in the second round of the exercise on the following day. Aisha had arrived at the residency, and we had all returned to the house we were staying in for lunch. We were behind schedule, so I was to make lunch while Aisha got settled and Kendra and Jade did a second round of their exercise, with Paul coaching. I am not sure why we let the original structure of the exercise with Paul as the solo coach re-emerge. I think in part because we were crunched for time, we had aired out our concerns and so perhaps thought they might be abated. Further Paul had expressed this work was really important to him—that the inherent reflexivity was some of the more interesting content of the project for him. We were all captaining portions of the rehearsals and were attached to what we were creating—it was unfair to eliminate what Paul was most interested in working on while continuing with our own captaining. Wanting to honor this and sharing in his creative interest, we went ahead with the exercise in a bit of a rush. Based on observations from the previous round, Paul and Kendra decided her motivation was to seek connection and intimacy; Paul and Jade decided her motivation was to maintain boundaries that were true to her values and protect boundaries by deflecting what was coming at her. I paused lunch prep to watch the exercise. During their conversation, Kendra was opening herself in a vulnerable way in hopes of connecting with Jade—asking questions, relating personally to things Jade shared, and seeking physical contact. Jade was protective of herself (also vulnerable), not trusting that Kendra understood her value systems. Tensions began to build. Kendra was shut down a number of times. Jade's boundaries were tested repeatedly. At some point, it was obvious we needed to stop. Both people were hurt and hurting one another–not intentionally, but through the construct of the exercise that was so keyed into the inherent tensions between them. Once the exercise stopped, it took us all a minute to see that boundaries had been crossed. At first, Paul was enthusiastic about the content that had come up, and though I agreed the scene was certainly compelling, I felt the implications on the performers were problematic and harmful. As a film actor, I have performed in improvised films that draw on my personal character for the narrative of the film, and I have experienced when this phenomenon feels invasive: when a director asks me to dig into personal histories and trauma in order to support the story; or perhaps when something shared in a private, intimate conversation gets exploited to explicate an acting note that the director delivers while shooting on set. When a director exploits some part of a performer for the sake of their creative vision, they lose buy in from the performer—they lose consent. It was through the lens of background experience that I was watching the exercise, and thus red flags likely went up for me sooner than others.

I believe Paul was trying to tease out the tensions amongst us in order to serve the project of revealing how systemic issues were playing out between us, even in our intimate collaboration. However, because Jade and Kendra had not been sufficiently briefed on this vision—none of us had, as we had not articulated it for ourselves during our rehearsal experimentations—the performer's investment was lost and they felt exploited. The container of the contract did not hold terms or frameworks such that Jade and Kendra could properly consent to what was happening. We had not built terms for explicitly performing the ways in which hetero-normativity and white supremacy inform our relationships. We hadn't collectively thought through these possible painful futures and accounted for them in protocol. We didn't quite know what was happening and so we didn't know how to account for it in the contract or an amendment. We had exited the bounds of our agreements.

To return to Gordon's (2011) ghosts and the insistence that cultural production within the Western context cannot escape legacies of oppression—of slavery, white supremacy, sexism, misogyny, ableism, and colonialism—I see this conflict as haunted (8). It is because of these histories that the tensions that emerged felt so painful. It is in part because of Paul's masculine gender and the legacies of misogyny that made the exploitative nature of this conflict sting all the more. It is in part because Jade and Kendra hold different race, class, gender, and sexual identities—as well as understandings for how they like to connect with others safely—that made it hard for them to hold shared terms of intimacy in order to connect during the exercise.

To continue creating the final performance, we needed to process what had happened. Our contract included a commitment to address any conflict that emerged within rehearsal, and though we took an explicit reconciliatory approach in other instances of conflict, this particular one was so deep and the anxiety levels about the final performance were so high that we ultimately decided not to go through a mediation or conflict resolution process. This was out of respect for the voiced needs and boundaries of those most affected. We talked extensively, however, about the ethics of finishing off the devising process together given the unresolved conflict and the decision-making stand still we found ourselves in (each of us was advocating for our aesthetic tastes as shaped by our public-facing identities as performer-creators, whilst also remaining accountable to our agreements to care for one another and the group; two drives that were repeatedly at odds). We ultimately decided that in order to continue our work together, the content from the performed scene between Jade and Kendra was omitted from the material we were working with (though other scenes borne from Paul's exercise were successfully included verbatim in the final performance), coming to a kind of truce in order to finish out the process.

In preparing to publish this article and seeking consent from my collaborators, however, they pushed me to say something more than just that we arrived at a truce. We talked in a softly lit attic room in New Lebanon, with an ant carving infinity signs in the white carpet marking the passing hours. Something happened in the attic room with the tireless ant ambassador that transformed us. Was it that in spite of adversity, we committed to one another? That even though we didn't address the conflict directly, we remained in the process and decided on terms for continuing? Perhaps it was that because of the non-hierarchical decision-making structure, none of us could realize our individual visions, and we had to coordinate collectively, which required a kind of intimacy with others that is rare. There is an intimacy to moving with adversity, and attuning to the collective voice,

to the points of intersection amongst us, rather than following any single lead. Perhaps we were actually in the same position as before the conflict, however the ways in which we were "haunted" were more explicit (Gordon 2011, 8). We were attuning more deeply to the spaces between us, to the absent presences in the room, and the painful conflict meant that we could no longer ignore them. The conflict was the symptom of the haunting and the portal for our heightened attunement; as Gordon suggests, "Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (Gordon 2011, 8). We were recognizing the power amongst us—at once the power we each held coming into the group, the power of the acute "seething" presence of histories of oppression (Gordon 2011, 8), as well as the power of our commitment to one another—and, being transformed, worked individually to move collectively from that place of recognition. To return to Jackson (2011), our social coordination bore our collective's politic (14).

## The End/Performance

By framing *Rotten Spring* through the lens of performance ethnography, I am able to look at the social forces at play within our collective as indicative of larger cultural phenomenon. Kendra's style of negotiating through action, Aisha's troubling the word "contract" while also appreciating the value of the process, Paul's desire to deeply engage our relationships as creative material, Jade's practice of building agreements to create safe containers for risk, and my naiveté around the style of process I wanted to instigate, all reflect diverse points of entry into our process that are shaped by the broader social structures in which we participate. Two years later, I am still unfolding the many encounters that emerged from our group of five focused so intently on an unknown goal. The moments of conflict and unchecked power relations I have described above mark the failure to produce a concise performance piece with ease, however it is this very failure that troubles the public-facing nature of producing a performance at all and emphasizes the dynamic relationships and negotiations that made up the process.

The aesthetic emphasis of the performance of *Rotten Spring* was the social and relational dynamics that served consensus—its aesthetic qualities were a result of the accomplishment of a chain of agreements rather than a specific design. From a critical lens, the performance was meandering, improvisational, and a bit arbitrary, yet the aesthetic choice to emphasize the social fabric that served to build the piece nestles the process as a point of pride and a glorious theatrical failure for me. For Jack Halberstam (2011), "Failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair; it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (3). Halberstam relates failure to transformation and proposes failure as impetuous for social change through un-successful experience. The successes and failures of *Rotten Spring* at base have strengthened for me an ethic of mutual care, patience for negotiation, and the rich terrain of relationships as worthy creative territory. The unresolved conflict towards the end of our process was a failure of our contract that illuminates how we might have written the contract better.

In writing about fieldwork and protest as performance, anthropologist D. Soyini Madison (2010) writes, "These performances not only reflect who we are but also shape and direct who we can become" (12). This article examines how *Rotten Spring* approached agreement building in part to think through how it might have instantiated differently. The relationship between contract building and what is possible in process has broad social implications and possibilities. Contract building brings to mind ethics reviews, briefings, and terms of engagement with interlocutors in fieldwork as a point of comparison. To harken back to the imperial legacies of anthropology and legal-binding agreements as related to logo-centrism, contracts and agreements at the beginning of fieldwork and other collaborative processes have also been a means of exploiting people and culture for Western consumption (Conquergood 2013, 50). That said, the ongoing attention on how to build agreements with interlocutors such that they can honestly consent to the process of fieldwork is a practice that performance can learn from. Certainly, it seems to be true that the style, tone, and ethics encoded into contracts as well as the written content shape the experiences that take place built on the agreements therein.

More poetically and less succinctly, I think of the contract in *Rotten Spring* as a collaboratively written document produced through verbal negotiation to explore and define the bounds of our engagement with one another, focusing on the most tender aspects of ourselves and most painful possible futures, building protocol for how to move through these situations and protect ourselves. I am interested in how the contract writing of *Rotten Spring* intervened in existing oppressive social structures, and more broadly, how it might have done so better. In our case, the process of writing collaboratively slowed our momentum, encouraged reflection, and deepened the nature of commitment, and through agreeing on protocol, built the possibility for greater risk taking. Even though our contract failed to protect us from the risks we ended up taking, I believe an adjusted contract would have accounted for these possibilities. This relationship between contract building and risk taking continues to excite me in relation to future projects.

## Notes

1 This article has been published with the permission and consent of the collaborators of *Rotten Spring*. Though I am the sole author of this article, arguments here in are deeply informed by the incredible privilege of working with the *Rotten Spring* collaborators. I am deeply indebted to our collaborative creation process, and their input during the final edit of this article.

2 The names of collaborators have been changed to protect privacy. The dialogue in this paper is not exact quotations and has no written or archival source.

3 Feldenkrais is a restorative somatic body healing methodology, developed by Israeli engineer and physicist, Moshé Pinchas Feldenkrais.

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