

**PERFORMANCE IS A PORTAL:
The Political and Relational Potential of Live Performance
Amidst Societal Collapse**

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of live performance as composed of three structural elements: gathering people for a shared experience, the centrality of imagination, and the performance's creation in real time, which, when prioritized, enable a kind of art capable of facilitating relational and political change. Analyzing each of these three components through the lens of worsening material conditions and institutional fallout in the US, I propose that it is these innate qualities of performance which have and continue to enable its survival as an essential human art form and make it uniquely suitable to collectively addressing the needs of the present.

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"Performance: The whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that takes place in both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of the performance...to the time the last spectator leaves."—Richard Schechner¹

"We need each other so badly right now. We must learn how to come together in love and resistance in this fucked up world."—Dean Spade, *Love in a Fucked Up World*²

Live performance is a relational form. Constituted through meeting for the purpose of experience, its ephemeral state is the mutual creation of performers and audience. Differentiated from film and visual art in part by the real-time energy and communication exchanged between these two groups, live performance, regardless of style, exists in the here and now. In a present contoured by increasingly siloed realities, where isolation and delusion are fomented technologically and politically, live performance demands collective attunement. Beyond any individual moment, show, or venue, live performance is an artform in which realities "not yet here," (to appropriate José Esteban Muñoz) can be constructed and embodied, however briefly. The implications of this embodiment reach beyond performance itself, providing a critical incubator for imagination in an age of scarcity and perpetual labor. The components of live art: gathering, imagination, and the real time creation of the performance, endow it with a unique and powerful capacity to inculcate societal change and foster solidarity at a moment of splintering realities and disintegrating material conditions throughout the west.

¹ Schechner, Richard. "Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance." *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1973, pp. 5–36. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144841>. Accessed 9 Apr. 2025.

² Spade, Dean. *Love in a F*cked-up World: How to Build Relationships, Hook up, and Raise Hell Together*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, an Imprint of Little, Brown and Company, a Division of Hachette Book Groups, Inc, 2025. pp. 14

Getting together is becoming more difficult. In the U.S., where expanding inequality³ has facilitated the control of ever more land and property by the capitalist class, space for the rest of us to gather, while always precarious, is increasingly threatened. Amidst a country-wide housing crisis⁴, public property in the US continues to dwindle, and what little is left and accessible, parks and public squares, tend to be heavily surveilled. Since 2020, we have seen the acute police state crackdown on public existence and dissent from Gaza solidarity encampments, erected in common space both on and off college campuses, to the relentless sweeps of unhoused citizens, most recently and odiously in New Orleans ahead of Super Bowl LIX.⁵ Illustrating the threat gathering poses to the ruling class, writer and tenant advocate Tracy Rosenthal, speaking on the *Death Panel* podcast, remarks "...every place where people get together in public space, they build community, however fragile that is, and they figure out ways to defend themselves, however small they are."⁶

Performance spaces may or may not be public. They are often structurally or materially inaccessible, or otherwise hostile to various individuals and groups. And yet, as gathering of any kind becomes increasingly criminalized, that it is an integral component of live performance remains consequential. Regardless of any implicit code of conduct stipulated by a space itself, performers and audience are almost always in direct spatial relationship with each other.

Information, however trivial or defanged, is transmitted and received in real time. Everyone

³ Kemeny, Tom. "Soaring Wealth Inequality Has Redrawn the Map of American Prosperity." *Atlanta Tribune*, 10 Feb. 2025, atlantatribune.com/2025/02/10/soaring-wealth-inequality-has-redrawn-the-map-of-american-prosperity/.

⁴ Anthony F. Pipa, Junjie Ren, et al. "America's Housing Affordability Crisis and the Decline of Housing Supply." *Brookings*, 28 Mar. 2025, www.brookings.edu/articles/americas-housing-affordability-crisis-and-the-decline-of-housing-supply/.

⁵ Brook, Jack, and Sara Cline. "Governor Forces out Homeless People by New Orleans Superdome before Super Bowl." *AP News*, AP News, 16 Jan. 2025, apnews.com/article/homeless-gov-new-orleans-super-bowl-f9071ac16b40116c6cace996ccacb5e.

⁶ Rosenthal, Tracy. "Carewashing and the Right to Public Space w/ Tracy Rosenthal." *Death Panel*, 5 September 2024, <https://www.deathpanel.net/transcripts/carewashing?rq=privatization>.

present has assembled themselves with the expectation of undergoing a shared experience and both performers and audience require the presence of the other for the performance to occur. In this interdependent, permeable state of energetic reception, I believe that it is possible to collaboratively shift our collective reality.

Live performance asks us to get close, to focus and feel together. It is a different attentional experience from being on the subway, which forces us to get close, but dissuades and internalizes our focus. To be present for long on the subway is potentially to witness any number of horrors from the extreme (murder) to the mundane (people asking for help and being ignored, extreme poverty, general antagonism). In order to navigate this environment, we often choose to withdraw from each other: eyes down, headphones on. Live performance, by contrast, is only made possible through collective presence, and while this presence is often invoked solely in pursuit of entertainment, it is also exactly what we need to organize together for better material conditions. Listening and receiving, moving and being moved as a collective body: this is what live performance can do, resensitizing us to our world and each other

While live performance can and does happen anywhere (even the subway), when a space is created specifically with coalition-building in mind, the impact of collective presence can be amplified and sharpened, and the space between art and political action reduced. An organization committed to holding physical space for this kind of gathering and exchange, JACK is, "an award-winning performance meets civic space," located in Brooklyn, NY. Created by Alec Duffy, Mimi Lien, Steven Leffue, Godfrey L. Simmons, Jr., Nikaury Rodriguez, Prentice Onayemi, Ike Ufomadu, Amy Laird Webb, Jennifer Kidwell and Andreea Mincic, "JACK was founded to create a space for performance that serves as a connection point for multiple communities — a space where individuals from different backgrounds come together, create art,

and speak their truth." JACK hosts an annual season of over 60 performances and events, buttressed by community conversations, an artist residency program, and Reparations 365: "JACK's ongoing series of performances, workshops and discussions around the topic of distributive justice for Black Americans."⁷ The work at JACK, whether by artists from New York or abroad, is presented in the context of the space itself, one that professes to value the input and presence of its community as an essential component of its work. "...we center voices systematically excluded from experimental performing art spaces in New York City, particularly BIPOC artists, providing them space and resources to make art on their own terms. From our internal decision-making to artist/neighbor partnerships, we strive to create a space where all voices contribute." By centering collective liberation, and prioritizing work that "...is not designed for comfort, but rather to challenge our community with work that is intentional, urgent, and adventurous," JACK has staked its mission on the here and now of collective sociality, a porous container through which art and life can be experienced simultaneously.

Once the container is set, art is created not only through the presence of audiences and performers, but, critically, through their collective imagination. As anyone who has ever made theatre can attest, imagination is central to the entire undertaking, from narrative and character creation, to the suspension of disbelief required by an audience to emotionally engage with a play. In the context of performance art, audiences are asked to attune their attention and belief to the interests and aesthetics of the artist, to fabricate new logic based in the world of the performance. Regardless of the specific content of an individual piece, performance is a space made possible and kept by imagination, and it is imagination which the audience knows they will be called upon to extend. Performance engages our ability to imagine new ways of being (even if

⁷ "About Us-Jack." *Jackny*, www.jackny.org/about-us. Accessed 16 Feb. 2025.

only to temporarily facilitate the belief in, for instance, witches and munchkins) and thus enables a potent rejuvenation of the imaginative strength necessary to conceive of a world beyond poverty, police, and incarceration.

"From our current vantage point, living in a world with the most militarized borders, the most expansive surveillance technologies, the most severe concentration of wealth, the most imprisonment in human history, the most military bases and high-tech weapons, and the most advanced mechanisms of propaganda, it can be hard to imagine other ways of living."⁸ As Dean Spade details in his book *Mutual Aid*, we are living in a time of dire entropy of the collective imagination, but just as scarcity blots out our ability to imagine another way of organizing society, imagination remains the essential building material for all social and physical structures. In her book on abolitionist organizing, *We Do This 'Till We Free Us*, writer and activist Mariame Kaba explains that even extractive structures had to first be imagined. "...somebody had to actually first imagine prisons and the police themselves in order to create them. Everything you see in the world— somebody thought of it first. Once things are actualized into the world and exist, you can't imagine how the world functioned before it. It's like we develop amnesia. You just assume things have always been as they are."⁹ Live performance disrupts this calcified perspective by engaging the imagination. While watching a Broadway musical may not indicate a person's political ideology, having a shared somatic experience of a world and characters apart from our own can help us to understand our own agency as worldbuilders, and can introduce the idea that other ways of being are possible. Performance can be an incubator for political and

⁸ Spade, Dean. *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next)*. Verso, 2020. pp. 20

⁹ Kaba, Mariame, et al. *We Do This 'til We Free Us Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* Mariame Kaba ; Foreword by Naomi Murakawa ; Edited by Tamara K. Nopper. Haymarket Books, 2021. pp. 94

social imagination, opening temporary portals of possibility as the first step toward structural change.

Engaging the imagination not only through art, but through collaborative organizing, Public Assistants is "an enclave of interdisciplinary creators--a brave space for QTBIPOC to develop our collective understanding as a means of self-sustenance. A space for us and by us to skill-share, create, and cultivate joy."¹⁰ Originally created by interdisciplinary artist DonChristian Jones as a mutual aid hub for queer and trans people of color, "what started as a vacant lot for folks to build protest signs has blossomed into a public art space...offering after-school programmes, a community fridge, a bike-repair workshop and much more."¹¹ As a concept, Public Assistants encapsulates a wide variety of programming, initiatives and happenings, from performances and readings to artists residencies and an internet radio station. While they were unceremoniously evicted from their original space in Crown Heights in 2021, were itinerant for a time, and now work out of a storefront in Bed-Stuy, the immediate community has always been integral to the work of PA.

Shanekia McIntosh, in her 2023 essay on PA quotes Jones: "There was this sense of urgency for us to stay alive in our community, and we believed that staying alive meant creating things together. We stayed alive through dancing, eating, and protesting."¹² Because the frame of Public Assistants foregrounds the community and their day to day interactions as people come and go through the space, any performance presented there exists inside a network of people in ongoing relationship to each other. "Gradually, Public Assistants became a space for collective

¹⁰ "About - Pa." *ABOUT - PA*, publicassistants.org/ABOUT. Accessed 16 Feb. 2025.

¹¹ Trouillot, Terence. "'Aesthetics of Urgency': Public Assistants on the Artistic Practice of Mutual Aid Work." *Frieze*, 10 Mar. 2021, www.frieze.com/article/aesthetics-urgency-public-assistants-artistic-practice-mutual-aid-work.

¹² McIntosh, Shanekia. "How Mutual Aid Network 'public Assistants' Are Challenging the Politics of Respectability." *ELEPHANT*, 4 July 2023, elephant.art/artist-donchristian-jones-nonprofit-public-assistants-challenges-the-politics-of-respectability-through-mutual-aid/.

action and provided an outlet for many individuals to contribute meaningfully whilst allowing artists within the collective to develop their practices." This emergent approach to art and community constitutes a container of relationship in which co-creation, not just of individual artworks but of the project as a whole, is the essential generative force. Everyone who works inside Public Assistants, whether rehearsing a piece, making a protest sign, or cleaning the space, is helping to actualize and define what the collective is and what its capabilities are. While exactly what the physical space contains or where it is located may shift, Public Assistants was first formed by the unexpected combination of whoever showed up, and made possible through an ongoing commitment to center emergent community needs.

Responding to social and political issues in real time requires us to "feel what's really happening," to quote singer and icon ANOHNI. As the title of her latest tour, this phrase perfectly illustrates what live performance can offer its participants: a collective experience of our shared world in real time. The permeability of liveness is critical to its power and relevance. Even the most tightly scripted piece of theatre is ultimately created in the moment it is performed, and undeniably impacted by the desires, energies, and moods of everyone present. This permeability has implications, not only on the atmosphere of an individual performance, but on the content of the performance itself, and the function of performance as a tool for political and social organizing. Because it occurs in real time, live performance is capable of responding and directing our attention to the present moment. It can interrupt our malaise about the state of the world and direct us, together, towards alternatives. And while many material and social structures of the theatre or other performance spaces may dissuade their attendees from speaking or engaging with their bodies, audience members remain as alive and agentic as the performers they observe. Live performance is defined by this meeting of people, intention, and permeability,

wherein all groups manifest an experience only accessible through collectivity and real time. Certainly, not all art is concerned with political struggle, but as a medium, live performance is uniquely suited to engage topics of material and political consequence in part because its liveness necessitates that it be, even minimally, responsive to the world around it.

What connections become possible when we open ourselves up to giving and receiving so intentionally in shared time and space? What happens to people when they undergo a shared experience enacted in the present but striving to conjure what does not yet exist? Can performance help us to feel what's really happening in a time of pervasive disembodiment, delusion, and danger? Can it help us to survive?

"Everything worthwhile is done with other people," Mariame Kaba tells us.¹³ Live performance is ultimately constituted by what is shared among people, gathered together in time and space, exchanging attention and embodiment. This sharing has been more or less difficult throughout history, and today, as we stare down the imminent dismantling of arts funding structures in the US, it behooves us to consider where our priorities lie. Relatively new kinds of performance now considered canonical, Broadway most notably, are only made possible because of the money and access to technology enabled by oppressive and inequitable funding structures. Biennale-scale performance work is made primarily by big name artists with sustained access to money through inheritance, grants, or patrons. In a time of constant visual spectacle facilitated by social media, this manner of outsized production has become synonymous with the artform itself, but as the means of its creation quickly dissolve, a space is opening for the reassertion of live performance as an accessible, bountiful, and communal practice, working in tandem with organizing, mutual aid, and resistance. As long as the theatre has existed, there has been a

¹³ Kaba, Mariame, et al. *We Do This 'til We Free Us Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* Mariame Kaba ; Foreword by Naomi Murakawa ; Edited by Tamara K. Nopper. Haymarket Books, 2021. pp.153

constant flutter of anxiety about its assumed demise. Perhaps we are living in the moment where theatre and performance as we have known them in the west for the past hundred years will undergo irreversible change. Yet, live performance, from its origins in communal ritual to its current articulations in front of a paying audience, remains an essential component of human sociality.

Live performance requires us to gather together in shared time and space: a social container that enables not only the performance itself but a temporary coalition capable of problem solving and caretaking for and with each other. Live performance requires us to engage our imaginations, to create and suspend new worlds, logic, and solutions; a mental process which rebuts the flattening of culture, and incites us to consider how our society can be changed. Finally, live performance is a permeable state, created in real time, and impacted by what is actually happening in our lives, bodies, and world. Live performance endures because it is responsive to our needs. We need to gather, we need to communicate, we need to imagine, and as our material conditions continue to erode, it is through meeting these needs that we may discover and build a path through the fallout.

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A Conversation with Nicole Garneau

Nicole Garneau is an interdisciplinary artist making site-specific performance and project art that is directly political, critically conscious, and community building. We met on zoom to discuss their work and the relationship between performance and revolution. The interview has been edited for clarity and length

Frank Barret: So you're in Kentucky right now.

Nicole Garneau: I am. I'm in Kentucky, here in Disputanta, in Rockcastle County. That's where I'm at, at home.

FB: I would love to begin with your perspective on where you are with your art now. How do you experience the trajectory of your artmaking?

NG: Here's what I know. The state of my current artmaking and performance work is related to, cannot be separated from the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. I didn't really have any place to live that wasn't my parents basement in Central Illinois, so I decided to move to Kentucky in the middle of Covid, and now I've been living in rural Kentucky for almost 4 years, which is amazing in many ways. Moving to Kentucky also enabled me to participate in some Kentucky-based theatre projects that I was already involved in that were like outdoor theatres so we could actually kind of do them during Covid. Performers have to figure out how to survive and make art in a time when no one's going to the theatre, and one way to do that is to make outdoor work. That was definitely part of my trajectory. And I did two or three

other shows in the last few years that were also outdoor works like an outdoor spectacle at Double Edge theatre that I performed in, and an outdoor performance of a play called *This Place is a Message* that was produced by Faultline theatre on the Yale campus.

I'm definitely a theatre maker: I love making theatre and performing in theatre. Part of my work, as I see it right now, is being an active creator in the art and performance and theatre ecology that I want to be a part of in rural Kentucky. It's never going to be New York. It's never going to be Chicago. It's not that place. It's a different place, and we have other things to offer.

I have, for several years, been working on a performance that I'm currently calling *Prophet*, about a feminist prophet character that I perform. I'm in a deep place of exploration of that character, and a lot of the exploration is: who is this for? Who am I talking to?

Who do I want to be in conversation with, and what are the things that I want or need to say at this particular political moment. Currently a lot of the content of *Prophet* is about rage: rage about how we kill women and other people who can reproduce through our medical policies, how we deal with reproducing bodies in medical settings. It's based on a narrative of my own, about how a Catholic hospital almost let me die before they gave me the hysterectomy that saved my life. I think one of the things going on in reproductive health right now in the United States and around abortion and around what happens when abortion is made illegal, is that we see that there's all these other repercussions. What happens to reproductive organs that are not working? Catholic hospitals are prevented from doing any procedures that will interfere with reproduction, and if you are unfortunate enough to find yourself in a Catholic hospital needing a hysterectomy to save your life, they will wait until the last fucking moment; until, as one of my doctors literally said "the condition –I had lost so much blood that–the condition of my body was incompatible with life."

FB: That's shocking. Shocking but, as with so many things today, not surprising.

NG: Right? It's my story, but it's more than just reciting this narrative. It's really trying to make a way to help people understand all of these ramifications, and how they actually play out...but in the role of like a feminist prophet.

It's wild out there. I keep thinking: am I starting a cult?

(Laughter)

FB: That's the question we must all ask ourselves as theatre makers! I want to return to the topic of Kentucky, doing performance outdoors specifically during Covid, and bring it to a question of audience. As an artist who's made performance all over the world, how do you think about your audience? What kind of audience are you playing for in rural Kentucky, and what kind of impact does that have on your work? Do you have aspirations for your performance impacting the material conditions of your community?

NG: I think a lot about audience, and I think we have a responsibility as performing artists to give a lot of consideration to our audiences, without whom none of this would exist. Truly. My basic approach to inviting people to a thing is that I really believe in the thing. I truly believe that when I invite someone to my performance, or another performance, or a performance I'm in, I truly believe that I am inviting them to an experience that they will enjoy/will make their day

better/will add value to their life, because I believe in theatre and performance, because I go see a lot of it. That's the other thing. Back me up Frank, don't you know people who do theatre and performance, who hardly ever see anything?

FB: But of course.

NG: ...hate being an audience member.

FB: Right.

NG: I do not hate being an audience member! I'm a good audience member. I will watch the most boring thing for the longest time. I feel like I have so much patience for theatre. Maybe even if I have to doze off, that's fine. I regard theatre and performance as an audience member as inherently adding something good to my life. So I feel with complete confidence that when I invite someone to something it's going to enhance their life as well. I did this project called *Uprising*, which was a five-year performance project that I did a lot in Chicago and in other places. There were these sixty, mostly outdoor volunteer performances that I called "public demonstrations of revolutionary practices." I think a lot of my understanding of audience comes from there because I thought a lot about the ethics of performing in public, and what I was subjecting people to who did not sign up for coming to a performance. I really thought a lot about how gentle we would be, giving people space to escape, never making anyone feel trapped. That's a really important part. All of the things I learned by doing outdoor performance work extend into my current performance work. Sometimes I tell people at the beginning, "you're not

trapped." If you don't like it, you can leave. It's okay, you won't even hurt my feelings. I care more about you taking care of yourself and being a human in the space. Also, I believe that theatre is good for people. You can come to a show if you like me, but if you don't come to my show, I don't think that it's because you don't love me enough.

In *Prophet*, there's kind of like some ceremonial—there's some participatory things that go on like a collection that I take from the audience. Then there's an offering that I give out. I'm asking people to do a thing, but really giving them an out and being extremely explicit about the out: "Here's what I'm asking for, and if you don't want to do it, it's fine. No one's gonna be mad at you." I think those ethics around participation are really important, helping people understand what they're getting into. If what they're getting into is just watching a thing, great. But if there's other things that are going to be asked of them, I think it's really important to let people know. It has been my experience from doing participatory things that, regardless of whether someone has done it or witnessed it, sometimes people say to me: I needed that. They say things like: that impacted me, that allowed me to express a thing that I needed to express. I didn't know that I had that inside until I opened my mouth, and all of a sudden it was coming out. So I do view the creation of a container for certain kinds of processing as part of the performance experience that I have worked on over the years.

Does that help people materially? I don't know, but, for example, in *Prophet*, I ask people to say things that they're angry about, and then in the performance, I have a way that I deal with, or catalyze, all of those things. So the *Prophet* is a channel for catalyzing all of this rage. Does it work? I don't know, but I at least say that's what I'm trying to do. I'm actively trying to be in a relationship with people where we figure out how to have a productive thing to do with our rage.

FB: Totally. I think that can make a material difference on how people are in their own bodies. Invitation is crucial. Invitation and consent are crucial, because if you're coerced into being there, you are not going to be able to commune, or, you know, step into the attunement. And if people leave, people leave. I want you to be here because you want to be here, and we're going to try to do something. You can have any kind of feeling about that, and you can decide not to do that at any time. But if you decide to do it, follow me. Let's go. Perhaps something is possible together that is not possible alone.

NG: Yes, and I think it's powerful for people to be able to exercise agency and not do the thing. That invitation is also powerful because there's a lot of times in our lives when we have not been allowed that agency. So even the act of saying, "No, I'm not going to do that," could be someone stepping into their power.

FB: Yeah, exactly. I've been thinking about the role of technique, training and virtuosity in performances that are highly conversational or where the performers directly address the audience. In the context of my own work, I'm increasingly interested in having it very sort of open. What happens when we, as performers, are very dependent on whatever is happening in the room? Hearing you talk about how the Prophet is sort of transmuting or processing the rage is an example of how I think we, as performers, can use the skills that we've trained very hard in, not to show someone how good we are, but to hold the real interaction we're having with the audience.

NG: Yes, absolutely! One example: the last time I performed *Prophet*, someone fainted in the front row in the middle of the performance. I think they fainted because there was something on stage that reminded them of blood, and you know how people are about blood. I had lights in my face so I couldn't really see what was going on, but there was a disturbance, and, thank goodness, they were people who were actually producing (the performance), and I saw one of them kind of swoop across the front row to deal with this person. People are looking like "what's going on," and the people around them are kind of worried, and it was just this moment when I had to take a breath and be like, "okay, this needs to be held." I'm not stopping. Because this performance is still going on. But this moment needs to be held. It needs to be something other than what I thought it was going to be like. I need to not be just going with my lines and barreling through, especially because: would a feminist *Prophet* just barrel on through if someone was having a medical emergency? No, I don't think so. The person actually ended up being fine. They got revived, and then watched the rest of the performance. But at that moment, I was like, okay, I know how to do this. I know how to hold space. I could feel my training. I was like, all right. Let's just take some breaths. Let's all just take some breaths right now. That's what we're doing at this moment in the performance. I can't remember what else happened, but it was sort of like just holding it for a little while, until everyone kind of came back and stopped being distracted, and then they could come back to the moment. But that to me also is that moment of where your training comes in.

FB: Talking about how one of the things that training can do is equip us to hold the moment makes me curious what you think about the task of performance makers right now, in this country, in this year.

NG: Even before Trump got re-elected, here in Appalachia, Tennessee, Kentucky, we were seeing things like anti-drag legislation. First of all, although I do not want that to happen, you know that live performance is extremely political and relevant when you have to legislate against certain kinds of performances or certain kinds of presentations of identities. Now we know that, actually, performance is politically relevant. Great news.

FB: Great news.

NG: Wonderful news. When I think of what drag is doing, and when I look at what drag is doing here in Kentucky...drag is one of the ways we explore different identities, that we present possibilities for identities, identities that maybe don't even exist yet. I view it like imaginative, futuristic work that we are all doing to liberate ourselves from the rigid confines of who we're supposed to be based on how we look or our genitals. And that's what I think drag is doing.

I think all of us performers can be up to that. All of us performers can be up to the imaginative work of creating the representation of worlds that we can believe in, the creation of worlds that don't yet exist. Storytelling is incredibly important. Telling our stories, telling the stories of other people, especially in light of the blatant erasure of so many historical records. There's a group of people outside of Berea, Kentucky, that are up to the work of telling stories about historical Black communities that existed here before Berea College, before Berea was a town, before all of that. There are people that are doing Affrilachian¹⁴ performance, literally just creating a counter narrative to the idea that Appalachia is white. Appalachia is not white.

¹⁴ Walker, Frank X. *Affrilachia: Poems by Frank X. Walker*. First ed., Old Cove Press, 2000.

Appalachia is a lot of different people, and Appalachia is also Black, and has always been Black, and Black Appalachians have done a lot of things.,

FB: What you were saying about the importance of storytelling, is making me think about just how much is and has been lost and suppressed, how much oral storytelling and communication is a part of the sinew of humans, and just how radical it is for people to be doing that work when those stories are not reflected or preserved in any other way. Which brings us more specifically to the subject of resistance. What do you think about the relationship between performance and revolution?

NG: One of the approaches that I took in the *Uprising Project* while I was doing the performances, and to a certain extent when I was writing about it afterwards was the notion of revolutionary skills; and the red notion that we have to practice if we're gonna be ready for revolution, if we're going to know what to do when it comes. You can't just like, wake up one day and be ready for a revolution. You gotta work towards it, and you gotta do a lot of really boring stuff that is about person to person organizing and all of that kind of stuff. But I do think that artists have some skills that can be put to work in the revolution. Southern artists and Southern Black artists, especially at the Highlander Center, have done a lot of theorizing around cultural organizing, and that literally means: we organize the people towards revolution, through art and culture. Art and culture is a strategy for organizing the people towards revolution, not an add on. It's a literal tactic. So I think when we lean into that as an organizing tactic, it can be very powerful. All revolutions have songs, all revolutions have visuals. The revolution needs to

mean...was it Toni Cade Bambara who said something like, "we have to make the revolution seem irresistible, or look irresistible..."

FB: Yeah! "The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible."

NG: That's what I mean. I really believe in that! We have to make our shit look so fun and sexy that why wouldn't you want to be a part of it? Which is like the complete opposite of all of this, like judgy, cranky leftist you're not saying the right word kind of stuff, which I definitely am guilty of myself. So, I call myself out on this.

FB: Sure, absolutely. It's the white, neoliberal socialization in which we've come up, and I think what it often looks like is people being afraid of each other because the fear of doing something wrong or saying something wrong has precluded connection. In the idea of revolution there are all of these theoretical trappings about what to say and what not to say, and what to do, and what not to do. But then there's what we know to be true, which is: bodies want to be together, and they want to be dancing, and they want to be singing. Why would we want to do anything that doesn't include that? Why would we want to undergo a process to bring forth a world that doesn't have that?

NG: Yes, absolutely. And I think that many of the same skills that some of us use to make theatre in particular, are the skills that we can use for revolution. For example, I had worked with Higher Ground in Harlan (KY), which is a 20 year old community theatre project that exists within the Southeast Kentucky community and technical college system. They do a lot of oral history and

story based work, and at every step of the process of making theatre, I see how radicalizing it is. First of all, asking people to tell their stories and actually listening to them, turning those stories into a thing that positions those stories in a broader context and makes it not just about me, but about a world that makes my story legible within a broader context of society is really important.

Singing together is a revolutionary act. Dancing together is a revolutionary act. I just watched this documentary film called *Standing Above the Clouds*, about native Hawaiians defending Mauna Kea, which is the highest mountain in the world. And shocker: somebody wants to come build a telescope at the highest point of the mountain, a mountain so high, they say when it rains the first drop of water falls on Mauna Kea. It's a sacred place to these people, and they have been defending it for generations, and one of the most powerful things I saw is the ways in which the Hawaiians used their songs and chants and bodies to create a literal wall of resistance. I mean the commitment, doing it all together. Their only weapons are the voice and body, and just energy across a road and they held back the police. They held everybody back. With songs and chants and dances. Done with fucking full commitment. Not like a half assed: Hey! Hey! Ho! Ho! We're talking full commitment. Performers can help people get to that. We can help people get to full commitment of the body and the voice. Yes, we can.