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Public Intimacies: Water Work in Play

An essay hosted by Petra Kuppers, with VK Preston, Pam Block, and Kirsty Johnston

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Abstract

This essay emerges out of water. It follows the thoughts of four disability culture scholars and artists who went swimming together and reflected on artful methods of public somatic presence. The writing developed from Petra Kuppers' initial queercrip aqua-fitness research, and from a series of communal post-swim free-writes in which the group meditated on boundaries and contiguity, on contagious laughter and demonstrative peace. The team conceptualized their self-care in a range of different ways: as political, as queered women's labour, as deeply personal, and as forcefully communal. Through shared swimming, conversation, and writing, they became conscious of the flows and undertows of somatic practice.

Keywords

somatics; disability dance; community performance; water-based movement, queer aesthetics, political self-care

Background

The day of water work chronicled in this essay emerges from my (Petra’s) exploration of water-based movement training, using a women’s studies and performance studies lens to look at women’s experiences in aquafitness.¹ For many years, my work has been at the intersection of movement and writing, feminist somatics and politicized bodies. As part of a sabbatical adventure in fall 2016, I began training in water-based movement.² I set out to write about my experiences as a middle-aged white disabled woman of size, complexly identifying as queercrip, a life-long dancer, and wheelchair user engaging in self-care and community health. My plan was to chart my way through a training session with an attention to the lived experiences of disability, race, class, body comfort, and age, and to write a creative non-fiction essay. Some of the questions I hoped to engage in my explorations included:

- Who will be my co-workshop participants?
- How do people experience their bodies? How do they move?
- What kind of bodies surround me in the pool?
- How will issues of body shame, body policing, and sensuality emerge in these sessions?
- Can I experience spaces of gender fluidity and desire formation in aquatic body-work?
- How can I engage disability studies and trans studies fields in my witnessing?

¹ Fitness and exercise and their effects and engagements of body image and those fit or not deemed fit have long been researched by feminist performance artists, including Angela Ellsworth (about whose work in the context of cancer and community action I wrote in Kuppers, 2007). Amber Hawk Swanson’s queer and incorrect fitness performances which engage with land art (shoveling a hole in the ground) (see Getsy, 2013), and Xandra Ibarra’s insect doublings in the pool, a swimmer next to a giant cockroach, in *Ecdysis: The Molting of a Cucarachica* (2015). Themes of drag, futurity and non-reproductive actions, racialization, othering, community creation, and performance swirl in the mix of this strand of performance art.

² The University of Michigan’s The Sport, Health and Activity Research and Policy Center (SHARP) and the Institute for Research on Women and Gender awarded me the first annual Joan Schafer Research Faculty Award in Sport, Fitness, and Disability, for my project originally entitled “Water-Based Movement Training: A Disabled Woman’s Journey.” I have come to call this grant my ‘sporty spice’ award.

Writing in community

During a week of Watsu training, in six daily hours in the water, I could not write, my nervous system literally too floaty and too tired to put fingers to the keyboard. I had experienced a form of ungrounded voicelessness in intense swimming, in my inability to write after hours in the pool. The pool is incompatible with my usual quick dash to the notebook, something I do in landed dance work to capture images and thoughts. It took a familiar and much loved mechanism to get me going again: the freewrite, in company, a staple of the creative modalities of the international artist collective I lead, the *Olimpias*.³ In these pages of freewriting, the questions above found answers -- often meandered, wafted, diluted, and concentrated as medium meets bodymind.

³ The *Olimpias* has a long history of art practice with disabled people in water. Like many other disability activists, we have found the efficacy of self-care, playfulness, and visual appeal of underwater photography a great draw in our art activism. For more information of one of these projects, the Salamander Project, see Kuppers (2015 and 2018) and Karp and Block (2017). See also Kafer about *Olimpias* minor outdoor actions in nature (2013: 143/44)



Image No. 1: Petra holding a participant while giving Watsu. Photograph: Stephanie Heit

Image Description: Petra during her formal Watsu training, in a pool in Florida, in her exam session. She is holding another white woman in her arms, one hand under head, one under knees, moving the spine, attentive. One of the core poses of Watsu work. (photo taken by Stephanie Heit)

Water work is not work in utopia. As much as it feels like that at times, we are not all equal in the water – unfettered, free, floaty. Instead, water can be a site of conscious and unconscious political articulation.⁴ The freeflow of water has often hindered clear sight of the cruelty of division. Every woman/gender-queer person I know has stories of bullying and teasing by the pool side, getting inculcated into the regimes of self-governance, diet culture, and body policing. I know many men hold these stories, too, but they do not so quickly share them with me, gender scripts being what they are. At the same time, many disabled women and women of

⁴ For one intriguing example of these conscious and unconscious political engagements around water access and women’s space, see Iverson on the Coogee Women’s Bath in Australia (2003).

size use water aerobics and aquafitness as accessible paths to self-care.⁵ In a recent issue of *Narrative Bioethics*, a woman of size reports on her experience with shortness of breath and on medical attempts to diagnose her, clouded by medical anti-fat bias. Her story centres on water exercise, on comparing her lymphedema-swollen legs to other swimmers, and to the potential effects of chlorine and heat, not taken into account by medical personnel who try to only find fault with her form of embodiment (Bramlette, 2013, p. 85-88). These stories rarely find their way into the scholarly literature, but they dominate in the pool itself.

The swimming pool has a long history of racial segregation and marking differences. Even now, many African-American communities are hesitant in their embrace of pools tainted by the memory and contemporary shapes of Jim Crow.⁶ In my home community of Ann Arbor, near some of the largest Muslim communities in the US, seeing women swim in hijabs is commonplace and unremarkable. For a few much commented-on days in summer 2017, France tried to police hijabs in swimming culture. Police in Nice forced a woman to remove her “burkini,” a garment whose invention is credited to Aheda Zanetti, a Lebanese-Australian woman who designs Muslim-friendly sportswear.

While visiting with my family in Germany in 2016, I read of a swimming pool near my old university town of Cologne trying to contend with a new problem (to them), in the throws of the refugee crisis: young Muslim men from a nearby asylum shelter misinterpreted Western-European-style women’s bathing suits as “invitations”, leading to unwanted chat-ups. Different bath cultures meet, and the German lifeguards were scratching their heads about how to make

⁵ In a recent issue of *Narrative Bioethics*, a woman of size reports on her experience with shortness of breath, and on medical attempts to diagnose her, clouded by medical anti-fat bias. Her story centres on water exercise, on comparing her lymphedema-swollen legs to other swimmers, and to the potential effects of chlorine and heat, not taken into account by medical personnel who try to only find fault with her form of embodiment. These stories rarely find their way into the scholarly literature, but they dominate in the pool itself. (Bramlette: 2013: 85-88).

⁶ One spark point for memories of segregation and its contemporary effects was the win of an Olympic gold medal by black swimmer Simone Manuel in the 2016 Olympics (for a blog post on the matter, see Blay, 2016).

peace and ensure everybody's enjoyment and bodily freedom in the pool. Eventually, the young men were banned.

Bath cultures enact bodily scripts and mainstream behaviors outside the pool. After a recent bath visit to my Ann Arbor pool, I was moved to write an email missive, pointing out the deeper structures that shape codes of conduct. A lifeguard had approached my partner and me in the pool and had asked us to refrain from personal displays of affection, to contain ourselves more. We had been engaging in a relaxing form of body work in the therapy pool, floating each other on the surface of the water. The lineage of this kind of bodywork is named 'Watsu' – a bodywork modality that will come more into focus as this assemblage essay shapes itself into a whole.

In my email to the swimming pool management, I pointed to the (probably unconscious) bias and homophobia of the lifeguard, and I politely asked the management to examine their processes to ensure equal treatment. I did not receive an answer. But my partner and I were also not harassed again, so I assume that some staff training and consciousness work had been done.

The experience has shaped our gender performance in the pool and shapes how my partner and I now engage each other in public swimming environments. We police ourselves more deeply, not wishing to lose access to one of the few therapy pools around, a necessity for my painful limbs.

Violence in the pool can transmit and amplify violence without and how to be queer, trans, or otherwise non-gender-conforming in public is part of the question that governs many people's engagement with semi-nude public space.

While lounging in the pool, a fellow aqua-fitnesser told me that nearby here in Fort Pierce, Florida, where I am assembling this essay, vandals had set the local mosque on fire. It

had been the place of worship of the mass shooter who killed 49 mostly queer Latinx people dancing in their sanctuary at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando.



Image 2: Aquafitness in an outdoor pool in Florida. Photograph: Stephanie Heit

Image Description: Petra with sunglasses and grin, among a group of white and Latina women in a pool in Florida, during a morning Aquafitness session. (photo taken by Stephanie Heit)

It is impossible to talk about social justice and water in 2017 without also witnessing the countless images of drowning people, crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Syria, trying to enter European countries, through watery boundaries. Their struggles for life and death intersect directly with the burkini and bath culture issues with which I opened this section of the essay –

some bodies, with some histories marked in habitus and clothing, are designated to precarity.⁷

The same mechanism, choices about lives not worth living, discardable lives, has hung over disabled people in Nazi times and eugenic regimes, and hangs over queer people placed in concentration camps in Chechnya in 2017. It reaches deep into many Jewish Community Centers, such as the elder homes where I have worked as a community dance artist, where elders remember German guards tattooing numbers on their skin (personal communication). It marks the racialized production of disability in sites like Flint, Michigan, or the Canadian reservations struggling with the availability of potable water.⁸ Precarity, disability, race, devaluation, water: the connections abound.

Peace seems out of reach. Hate, exclusion, being out, wearing a veil, shifting identity, and choosing a bathing suit style: all these moments mix when I think about identity and safety in the pool. And I think about this most mornings, during my aqua-fitness class, while swinging my leg as a pendulum, rolling my shoulders, and twisting my waist. These thoughts contaminate the water when I consider whether to offer a Watsu session to my lover, who I can touch in public.

These issues of access, intimacy, and violence follow me as I call on my colleagues and friends to go swimming together, during a visit in Toronto where I gave a talk about *Olimpias* methods of public political gestures to the York University theatre department. All swimmers had histories with me, and they did not know each other before going swimming together. VK

⁷ English Professor Christina Sharpe attends to echoes of the slave ship's wake, trailing the ship and rippling ever onward in contemporary race relations, a physical/metaphorical movement: "In the wake, the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and the refugee, to the regulation of Black people in North American streets and neighborhoods, to those ongoing crossings of and drownings in the Mediterranean Sea, to the brutal colonial reimaginings of the slave ship and the ark; to the reappearances of the slave ship in everyday life in the form of the prison, the camp, and the school." (21) To attend to wake work is to stay present to slavery's grammar and its continued unfolding.

⁸ See, for instance, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/why-is-canada-denying-its-indigenous-peoples-clean-water/article31599791/> and <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/water-treatment-plants-fail-on-reserves-across-canada-globe-reviewfinds/article34094364/>, see also Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's memoir *Dirty River: A Queer Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home*.

Preston has participated in a previous *Olimpias* workshop, and was part of the writing team of another montaged essay on working at Royal Bethlem Hospital, i.e., Bedlam, near London, UK (see Kuppers 2016). Pam Block has collaborated with me in the creation of a water-based training workshop for occupational therapy (OT) students. We adapted the *Olimpias/Salamander* form, disabled people going swimming together, into a format that allows OT students to understand power, presence, and grace in new ways, in the boundary-questioning medium of water. She and a colleague have written about the effects of this art-based work in OT settings (Karp and Block, 2017). Kirsty Johnston is a theatre professor from Vancouver, where she specializes in Canadian theatre, and a long-standing comrade in disability culture discussions. We had just given lectures at York’s Department of Theatre in call and response to one another.

Method

The method we chose for this essay approximates devising, a theatrical form, with its emphasis on multi-vocality. Theatre scholars Mermikides and Smart (2010) focus on this multi-vocality when they name the challenge that devised and collaborative performance offers to “the authority of text [but also that] of the individual creative artist—and, by implication, any suggestion of a singular ‘truth’” (p. 6). Water undercuts certainty and opens us up; our method responds to this experience. In water, otherspace can make us imagine manatees and otters, fantasies of non-realist embodiment give us gills, and knit new sensations into our skins. Experimental communication is the core method: spinning creatively onward from what we are working on, in the moment, in the group that assembles, and responsive to shifting environments. This lineage encompasses performance scholar Dwight Conquergood (2002), who argues that performance can be understood “as a lens that illuminates the constructed creative, contingent,

collaborative dimensions of human communication; knowledge that comes from contemplation and comparison; concentrated attention and contextualization as a way of knowing” (p. 152).

Anne Bogart (2004), another theatre artist, uses montage in stage creation – and, in this essay, our method draws from the same well: “Montage is a way of putting images together that incorporates juxtaposition, contrast, rhythm, and story. It creates a through line by assembling, overlaying and overlapping different materials collected from different sources” (p. 141).

Montages become waves of meaning and experience—mixing, contagious, continuous.

A day at the pool

It is the week after the 2016 US elections, and all of us, US-based or Canada-based, are feeling down, brought lower by the rising incidents of hate crime: anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, and anti-queer actions in our respective hometowns. We all knew that we needed to strengthen ourselves, our bases, for our kids (those of us who were mothers) and for our communities, and to go to an aquafitness class together felt like both self-care and a political act. We all organized ourselves, to get to talks, to get to each other, to take nourishment from one another, and we delighted in the moments of contact.

Pam Block:

I got on the wrong bus, then missed the stop, then got off on the wrong stop, and it turned out that I was using the wrong address the whole time. I asked for directions, walked about a half mile, asked for more directions, and eventually arrived. I heard the end of Petra's talk and all of Kirsty's. I was so wound up that it was hard to concentrate. I eventually settled myself and began to engage; I listened to the stories, and during the Q&A Petra noticed I was there. She stopped

mid-sentence, her whole face lit up and she said, "Hello Pam! I hadn't noticed you arrived!"

During lunch, we plotted a meeting at a pool for the following morning.

That night I took my boys to swim lessons at the local Boys and Girls Club – a comforting space of many types of bodies, skin tones, and ethnicities. I recounted to horrified Canadian parents what was happening with the children in my NY community – that some are chanting on busses “Trump for the Whitehouse, Hilary for the Grey House.” Others are marching through the halls of their schools chanting, “Build A Wall.” And still others have parents who are suddenly taken from them at school bus-stops and deported. I tell of the harassment intersecting disability, gender, race, and (desired) sexual violence premeditated by a group of 8th grade white male students targeting three Asian children adopted by my white friend. As I talk of anti-racist activism, one woman says with tears in her eyes – “But it shouldn’t be necessary. It shouldn’t be there in the first place – not in schools and not in government.”

The next morning at the Jewish Community Centre (JCC), I did not want to go into the pool to exercise because I had a cold, but I loved seeing the peaceful scene of Petra cradling VK. It reminded me of Petra similarly cradling me just after my dad had died.



Image 3: Pam and Petra, part of an Olimpias' Salamander workshop in Stony Brook, NY. Photograph: unnamed workshop participant.

Image Descriptions: Two white women in pool water, drifting together. Pamela Block is held by Petra Kuppers, head resting on shoulder. Eyes are closed, meditative poses, bowed head. (photo taken by communal camera during a Salamander session with the Occupational Therapy students at Stony Brook University, US)

I took off my clothes and went into the warm waters with the 3 other women and a disabled girl. I wondered, was it a mikvah⁹? It was not, officially, but it felt like one that day.

Petra:

This morning, as we enter the JCC, we encounter one of our theatre department colleagues dropping off her kids at school. She tells us how concerned she is: this morning, anti-Jewish

⁹ A pool used for the purpose of ritual immersion in Jewish religious practices.

leaflets and graffiti appeared in Toronto. [These violations are ongoing].¹⁰ Hard times, indeed.

We all manage to make it to the JCC, though, and we check in with ID and signatures, and are released into the warmth of the pool area, coffee cups tagging along. Then there's the aquafitness class followed by some Watsu moves, with two of us moving a third gently in the water; followed by a trek to the nearby café and a number of free-writes, artfully placing computers and hand-writing paraphernalia around lunches. A day out.

Kirsty:

It is an early rise and an easy amble to the pool with Petra, followed by a chance encounter and political commiseration in the lobby with a colleague and her two kids en route to school and the JCC pool later this afternoon. Our colleague shares news of swastikas painted onto elementary schools this morning in Toronto. In sharp counterpoint to the shock and sadness of the news, we are all welcomed cheerfully by the JCC staff. They provide us clear guidance about the most accessible route to the pool and offer extra towels for free. My first aquafit class is eased by friendly faces and saltwater buoyancy. Our instructor is a cheeky motivator and each retro song brings back happy memories. The stretching exercises at the end are remarkable for the tiny muscles they find. After the pool clears, there is quiet and space for the Watsu, and Petra and VK let me witness this profoundly intimate care. I am immediately reminded of cradling and the uninhibited plasticity, open breathing, and wholehearted trust of babies. Simply to witness this is relaxing. Petra invites me to help at a key moment, and I fear that I will drop VK, but the water keeps us all up. . .

¹⁰ These violations are ongoing. The initial incident was this one: <https://www.thestar.com/news/crime/2016/11/24/swastikas-anti-semitic-messages-seen-around-toronto.html>. For ongoing crimes of this nature in Canada, see, for instance, <http://www.torontosun.com/2017/06/30/cops-investigate-anti-semitic-graffiti-at-school>

Petra:

Easel, our aquafitness instructor for the day, is a young Asian-Canadian woman with tattoos and a lot of sarcasm. This is the self-identification she offered to me when I asked her. We swayed and hopped in the water while she sweated outside, her muscle shirt over her multicolored lycra pants. The songs were an 80s/90s mix, not a favorite of the main crew in this JCC, she told me, but she really delighted in us, three in a disability performance gang, bopping to 'Karma-karma-karma-karma-karma chameleon.'

Around us pushed other bodies: a few men, some lean and athletic, some more hesitant, all elder. Women of color and Jewish women shifted their weight back and forth in the water, some leaning on multi-colored noodles. We three seemed to be the only ones singing along to the song's 'you're my lover, not my rival.' But the smiles across the waves were genuine and welcoming. Even when we begin to crowd each other a bit, as we as newcomers are clearly a bit of sand in the gears of the pool machine. Stepping back and forth, hopping, striding, twisting: if you stand still, you will be run over by an elder intent on their strides. But it worked out, collision avoided, and we graciously check our extension privilege in the unbordered saltwater.

There are different levels of challenge to the exercises: level one keeps both legs on the floor while the upper body twists; level two means that one leg floats out to the back, stomach muscles under attack. In level three, you float freely, legs all out, on your belly, a noodle supporting your shoulders as you pull your non-existing six-pack through its paces and draw your knees to your core. We stopped singing, at times, as we had to focus to keep up. As the exercises shift there is space for eye contact, for checking out costumes, or looking at the

lifeguard, with hipster straw-hat, slouching past Easel, and bumping her shoulder all friendly-like.

Then we all stretch. Yoga poses: warrior, hands out; balance: tree, foot to the calf, do not tip, a hand straight up to the roof, the moment I break eye contact with the instructor and my fellow crew. We chill in the stretch, across my shoulder, down my back, observing the elegant curve of my hand. My current bodymind meets my fantasies, I dream in non-realist embodiment states that lengthen me, drift me, support me.

VK:

Clutching pool noodles, we sing aloud to Boy George: joy-leavened. In the change room, among beautifully ageing elders, I recalled a trans* friend's first, anxious appearance in boys' bathers at the Y. We were relieved, first with access to a family change-room. The neighbours, so absorbed in acts of bodily care, were unreactive, amiably attending to themselves. Today, the mixed, Orthodox, secular, inter-racial and convivial pool at Wednesday morning aquafit is a balm as, absorbed in movement, we best approximate the instructor's gestures, our limbs unfamiliar in the flux of salt water.

Kirsty:

Tree and warrior poses, with arms instructed to hover above water, are startlingly powerful. When was the last time I gazed with others in such a focused way? Looking skyward past our outstretched fingertips as a class was profoundly moving today. I think of the many supports in this instance that I take for granted all too often: community, pools, lifeguards, water, modern luxuries, friends, and collective strength. While we are adrift in fear and insecurity in this rabid

political moment, I must take inventory more regularly of these safeguards, lifeguards, healing waters, play-spaces, kind hearts, hard-won systems, and sites of community.

Petra:

Expert knowledge in the pool: is this a treatment, or is this a ritual? What is the nature of the engagement that is central to Watsu? Today, at one point, I invited Kirsty to come up under VK's body, to place the nook of her elbow beneath the occiput (the back of the skull), high up, and to take (some of) the weight as we held her together, gently rocking. To give Watsu is as powerful to me as receiving it, often more powerful: the beauty of a face in repose; the warm water floating in edge space near mouth and nose; trust, safe word attention, something akin to BDSM rules¹¹ shifting over my brain as we engage each other in otherspace. This is all about trust and boundaries.

Kirsty can feel the deliciousness of caring for someone who is a virtual stranger, in the lovingkindness of distanced care. I can see her own breath slowing, shifting, the three breaths of VK, Kirsty, and my own approximating, finding a pulsing rhythm together, eyes open, eyes closed, ears open, ears closed, public intimacies.

The lifeguard asks us kindly to move to the non-swimming lane, and we comply, an easy engagement, no stress. Two other women speak loudly, too loudly, their volume assaulting my ears as I am on the edge of otherspace. Public intimacy means navigating other people's trauma and joy leaking into one's own space. Earlier, in the coffee shop, a young woman was talking about her exam worries with a mentor. She nearly screamed, each word etching its way past my

¹¹ BDSM refers to bondage and discipline (B&D), dominance and submission (D&S), and sadism & masochism (S&M). None of these particular forms of sensual play are at work in our pool play here, but yet, Petra and VK feel they are close at hand, as we give ourselves to each other, in edge spaces. The term came up naturally between us, in the water, and we enjoyed hanging out in its space. Durational practices in performance art are also often linked to BDSM communities, and the links between our gentle Watsu care and the different trust-based care of BDSM made sense to VK and Petra.

coffee vapors, and I witnessed her distress. May the cushioning of the aural wave in the water echolocate back to her, give her peace. In the water, our influence spheres are altered: some people drift with us, and I can see the slow smile spreading over features. Others are untouched, and some even seem a bit hostile to this stranger intimacy in their midst, in a world where all intimacy intimates sexuality. Sexuality is not absent here, in our wafting, but it is not foregrounded, not the story, only the reservoir of possibility that allows us to imagine self-care in future-oriented utopias.

Let us have faculty meetings in this fluid space; let us have mentoring meetings where your lack of spelling ability meets the liquidity of a space where the sentence might float off into its other, where poetic rules might drip into the English certainty. What does it take to offer succor to one another, to tune into another's heartbeat? What names do we have for warping the communal field?

VK:

Echoes play over the tile room, and four hands hold me up in the gentle waves. My spine drifts at the water's surface, and I feel fish-hipped and supple. The steps of my breath ascend and descend like comfort. Gently held in warm water during Watsu, I emerge with a slight but genial daze, chatting quietly, finding easy companionship and steam welcome antidotes to isolation in writing. We make room, stirred into laughter. A joker enters the steam room, crying 'bring in the cappuccino' as she nakedly hangs towels against the glass door.

Pam:

Was it a mikvah? Probably not, but it reminded me of mikvahs and their relation to the Olimpias' Salamander; it reminded me that this is sacred space, that the interaction of bodies and water, especially women's bodies, was sacred.

Tomorrow my boys go to JCC day camp and will be cavorting in the water just as Petra, Kirsty, VK, and I did, though to a different and internal soundtrack. It is a new pool, just renovated. Months ago, during summer camp, my boys had to walk in the heat all the way to the university pool. The refreshing swim negated as they sweated their way back to the camp.

I do not know what it looked like before, but now, renovated, the pool is bright, clean coloured, with a long, gradual, and graceful ramp for entry. It is inviting, beaming happy, peaceful, with joyous energy. It seems so happy to be open again, so proud of its new colors and welcoming ramp. 'Come in' it says to those of us in the gallery, the ramp extending like a beckoning and encircling arm. 'Come in and enjoy.'

Pam:

We are four women in our forties. Petra and I are both 48. I quite like that age; it is so easily divisible by so many numbers but also so uniquely solid. One of us starts a sentence with "I'll be 50 then..." I am quite looking forward to turning 50 as well, rock solid and built to last, enduring but also resplendent and flashy.

In Spring 2014, after the Stony Brook *Salamander* in the pool, after free-write and during the sharing of reflections, I tell my students in New York about the first time I met Petra. We were both in a pool in a hotel in Arizona— both there for a 3-day board meeting of the Society for Disability Studies— both of us newly on the Board of Directors. Petra is a creature of the water. She was happily drifting through the water and said, "This is so lovely. We should have

our board meeting here! Why do we have to structure these events so oppressively?" What she meant did not quite click at that moment, but after we were confined to the long table for two full days of meetings (and me very sick for most of it), I understood full well. I told my students that I saw in that moment the seed for the *Olimpias*' Salamander Project. Petra interjects at that point. "I had forgotten that."

VK:

I sit in warm water in the midst of a hard week. Post-election US and many re-crossings of borders have made me somnolent and ferocious by turns. The news feels palpable, like shockwaves of misgiving scattering among everyone I know. Preoccupied, although at one time a devout swimmer, I have also forgotten that pools are sacred. I am reminded of this by the tears unreleased in another's voice. Days later, in the election's wake, strangers sang outside Leonard Cohen's Montreal home. The grain of his voice reached into and through our broken ones as news of his passing ushered in a proximal beyond. Day and night, candles and bouquets accumulated on the stairs and sidewalk. Still later, recordings bloomed on the radio, offering a farewell duet with Cantor Gideon Zelermyer. In the pool, it's not yet time to linger with "You Want It Darker" or "Hallelujah." The class launches into Culture Club's "Karma Chameleon." As a child, loving the chorus, I had no concept of its queer contradiction. "You come and go" was for me a poppy *Fort / Da* I would sing at the swing set. At the supermarket checkout, at a child's eye level, Boy George endured inkily despite tabloids' near-continuous shaming. In the pool, I hear the chorus anew, gaining perspective on grief as relation slips, losing footing. The song brings joy, still, as our tattooed instructor leads us in complex patterns. Traversing three sides of the pool, from the concrete edge, they lead us in a stumble-dance until we float on salty

waves our hearts beating louder than sounds ricocheting against the tiles. Watsu follows as Petra's watery touch tracks my bones. We grin, like tree frogs, as David Rakoff once wrote.

Petra:

After the aquafitness class, I flew to Florida, in a tin can, a sardine delivery mechanism. I watched the movie *Key Largo*, with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, a black and white grainy memory lane. This is the Florida I first remembered meeting, as a teenager in Germany, watching lots and lots of smoky Bogart pics and imagining America. In the film, Seminole Indigenous Floridians get killed by the stupidity of white settler Americans, who try to deal with the fallout of economic actions like Cuban embargoes and prohibition, actions that create criminal undergrounds and shadow empires. Right... sounds familiar.

And there is the sea, too, wild and roiled up into a hurricane. There is a swamp in which the sheriff finds the corpse of another agent. There is the struggle on the boat, suspended between jurisdictions, as Bogart establishes his moral articulation of the 'natural law' and kills everybody.

At the end, Bacall opens the hurricane shutters, and the light pours in, and she looks hopefully out over the sea – and the scene cuts to a shot of Bogart, grievously wounded, on the helm of the commandeered boat, leaning toward her. They may be okay, or they may not be, but the two Seminole men are definitely dead, and the trust between an elder Indigenous woman and an older white man is eroded, vanished, found lacking in the rigors of the hurricane and its watery assault.

It is all out in the open: death and precarity. The veneer of civilized separation is stripped off. In Toronto, and at home in Ann Arbor in this post-election week, hate crimes expose the deep rift between the people that characterizes our age.

In the old film, water does not erase these differences but puts pressure on them. What is important? Facing the elements, what survives? What is morality, when there's no air to breathe, no land to be on, when oil seeps out and poisons us?

My freewrite here has shifted me far from the pleasures of the pool, our tactics of stranger intimacies and public politics of touch and communal energy expenditure, of karaoke, and the nostalgia of play lists. But I bind myself back to these politics of an everyday encounter, as I put on the bathing suit again, as I get ready to go swimming, here in Florida, to engage in the desultory banter and chat that is part of the public pools I visit.

Yesterday, in Toronto, a young disabled girl was in the hot tub with us. Her caregiver sat behind us, reading a book while the child was dunking her brown limbs into the water. At one point, we all made eye contact. She came over and shook everybody's hand, a warm touch, full pressure. We all gave her our names. She would not speak at first, and just looked at us with big eyes, curious and open. Her caregiver encouraged her to say her name back to us, as she explained the rules of the social encounter. We heard the name (and I keep it secret here, a little moment of secrecy between disabled subjectivities in the public pool). Everyday encounters, little moments of courage and of reaching out. They are the micro-politics of everyday artful actions, curious and open in the water that binds us all, if we let it.

Kirsty:

So many conversations this week have been about managing the shock of the US election. We share grief, coping strategies, and plans. In sharp contrast, there is such a welcoming atmosphere at the JCC, and without a formal plan or notice, Petra and VK found hospitable space for Watsu. The other swimmers worked around us without incident. Michael Davidson begins his book *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* at the community pool, and he offers it as a metaphor for social inclusion, independent and communal living. The metaphor holds for us today as we both joined a class and struck out on our own, joked with others in the sauna, and had intense and private conversations. So much of the day has been beyond my routine and comfort zone. I am therefore particularly grateful for this space and the chance to have stretched in so many ways.

Conclusion

On one of the days during which I (Petra) am sitting with this essay montage, my daily news tells me that at Standing Rock, a young woman's arm got nearly severed by a water cannon. She might lose her arm. She is one of so many peaceful protesters standing up to guard our water, our earth, our living.

As part of my preparation for coming to Toronto and our day out, I had read up on whose land we were assembling: "This land is the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River" (Elders Circle [Council of Aboriginal Initiatives], 2014). I had found that in one version of the city's naming, Toronto, is said to derive from a Mohawk word, "tkaronto," which means "where there are trees

standing in the water.¹²” When engaged in water work, it is never easy to draw lines (or to write them). Things flow. If we are not careful, water creeps into lungs, into eyes, makes us sputter, and threatens our life. If we are careful and attentive, we feel supportive, buoyant, and relaxed and calmed enough to not hurt each other so easily.

In this one small action, one small, en-passant, ordinary morning’s adventure in Toronto, we used our bodyminds to be with and float questions of hate and love, of diversity and resilience, of pressure and the sacred. In that pool, we marked our presence. I told Easel, the instructor, about the fact that we are disability studies people, that some of us are queer and gender researchers, that we are understanding the aquafitness class as a site of encounter and difference. We engaged in our small subversions, pushing the edges of appropriate public conduct, contaminating the pool with political embodiment, contagious joy.

Our writings, collected on one day, small actions of assemblage, hold on to moments in the habitus of everyday life. We chart, experimentally, what it feels like to be in mixed company, to loosen one’s edges, to remember, and to combine old things with new things. This is performance knowledge and somatic knowledge in action together – and the horizon is not safety, calmness, smoothness, but the moment when the smoothness breaks toward an Other.

There are questions that we can take away from the surreal framework of these performances:

How can we make our meetings more human-shaped (in pools, cafes, board of director meetings, art galleries, or elsewhere)? How can we have more and different humans together, communicating? Who is not at our meeting, and why?

¹² In my internet search, I found this particular derivation attributed to John Steckley, a Canadian specialist on indigenous languages, adoptee into the Wyandot nation. The phrase is now used widely online, without specific attribution or citation, complicating other name derivation hypotheses like “meeting place.”

What are our supports, in precarious times? What kind of self-care do we engage in, as academics, as writers, as activists? How can we share these supports, make these resonant, open up new experiences for one another, as embodied mindbodyspirits?

What are the histories of our pools, our sacred spaces, our fitness forms, and how can we intervene in these histories?

Let us be public. Can we set up situations so we can get to chat to an aquafitness instructor about gender and disability studies?

Let us think about homeopathies of intimacy, small inclusions of new forms of closeness and tenderness, in public space, inoculating publics by exposing them, bit by bit, to new futures. Let us think about how to be relatively safe while doing that, too.

The desired horizon, for me as a performance artist, is the moment we become aware of who is not in the pool with us, of how ableist, racialized, and gendered differences shape our actions with one another, when the rules become visible and up for play. For a moment, in the pool, in these writings, we honour a smidgen more territory in the communal registers of "how beings stand together."

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