Esther Neff

Theatrical Agencies and Performance Principles:

MARSH (Materializing & Activating Radical Social Habitus)

MARSH worker-owner meeting, 2021. Photo courtesy of MARSH.

Making and performing theatre may be seen as highly "agentic" behaviour: a small group of individuals develops intentions or "visions" involving some sort of idea, score, or script and works to situate, embody, or realise these. "Agency" may be defined as any capacity to correlate intentions with consequences through action. "Agents" design and undertake actions for reasons, often intending to do or effect something in particular. For social groups, abilities to principle, plan, and strategise actionable performances in advance, and

to correlate intentions with outcomes, remain key features of "political agency" (Bratman 2000, 40-43). Both within and beyond ritualised and institutionalised processes of theatre and politics, a vast array of privileges, legitimisations, laws, norms, and other conditions delimit and enable different individual and social agencies. This article focuses on a social agent called MARSH (Materializing & Activating Radical Social Habitus).

MARSH was initiated—much like a theatre collective—in 2017 by two individuals, my mother and myself. We intended to stage a "biocultural laboratory" to test and practice agencies, particularly through cooperative labour organising, prefiguration of grassroots food-land-body relations, and deliberative, communicative democratic processes ("democratic" here as it emerges from socialist theory of communicative self-management, not specific representational and electoral processes within nation-states). Our agentic capacities to situate this project involve our practical, individual "locations" within and in relationship with performance paradigms and our theories about the kinds and consequences of potential agencies themselves.

"Agency" may not have been a familiar term to all attending the first public organising meeting for MARSH in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2019. Those gathered included cooks, bakers, social justice activists, and performance makers, all invited to a public meeting through fliers in the neighbourhood, word-of-mouth, and social media. In the meeting, we do not all share vocabulary, and we also disagree, for example, about the ethics of serving Coca-Cola in the diner. To a certain extent, we are conditioned differently in terms of cultural "habitus" (Bourdieu 1984, 170) even while arguably disciplined within the same truth-power paradigms or "regimes of truth" (Foucault 1980, 132) and trapped within a shared "colonial/modern matrix," (Mignolo 2011) which may be seen assigning our role-plays and differently restricting our potentials for action within racial capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialities. Terms like "agency," "theatricality," "principles," and "strategy" are first brought to bear as whiffs of hope that it may be *theoretically* possible for a small group (a "social agent") to intentionally design and determine our own lives, on purpose, for reasons, creatively, in orientation around "some other" principles than those coordinating immiserati*ng* paradigms.

Soon after this first public meeting, St. Louis city failed to put up the overcharge gates meant to handle the swell of the Mississippi River, and many businesses and homes were flooded with sewage, as was MARSH. Then, in March 2020, COVID-19 hit. The initial plan to open the diner, develop an Artist Guild, and hold an interdisciplinary performance conference called *Bioculturalities*, were thwarted by compound civic failures and ecological crises. In navigating these conditions, a very small group (including my mother, myself, Kaia Gilje, and my sibling Daniel)[1] began to operate MARSH as a food co-op. The co-op collaborated with local mutual aid efforts during quarantine, hoping to prevent the starvation of homebound neighbours and those relying on food pantries. The questions "what *should* we do?" and "what *can* we do?" largely drove MARSH's early days of activity, bringing individual and small group agencies into a relationship with material emergency. Conditions also exposed *principles*: reasons for acting in some ways and not others, based on ethics, beliefs, and values.

In discussions of the political agency of theatre and performance, scholars often ask questions such as "what is this production or play doing?" We then often ask what its productive agents (both individual and social) intended to do and then judge whether or

not the production has done these things. A "production principle" is centralised by such inquiries, joining forces with principles such as optimisation, utility, and efficacy, those principles which coordinate and (de)value means and measures of action within capitalism. As Jon McKenzie describes in *Perform or Else*, performative agencies—capacities to make or do something through speech and other action—are made synonymous with *power* (or lack thereof) to *make change* (Butler 1996, 13, McKenzie 2001, 159, 177-178), and any agentic actions are judged, managed, dramatised, arranged, and transformed by what he calls "the performance paradigm." The performance paradigm reduces "agency" to productive, optimised (etc.) performance, defining agency solely as the ability to *perform,* usually *productively*, though other modes, such as those that "challenge" power, may also be recuperated (McKenzie 2001, 171). "Performance," thus principled and wholly recuperative, is no salvatory grace of resistance (McKenzie 2001, 267), and neither is "agency." While theorists such as Janelle Reinelt note that theories of performativity are "part of an ongoing poststructuralist critique of agency, subjectivity, language, and law. […]," a sense that "The political stakes in this work have to do with the recovery of possibilities for agency" (Reinelt 2002, 203) continues to conflate "agency" with what might better be called ownership of labour power, or capacity for production, even if these powers and capacities are driven towards some "more ideal" (otherwise-optimized) means and conditions.

McKenzie, however, avoids productive/nonproductive distinctions, as well as the assumption that *increasing* the agencies of "all," or those of a specific political contingent, towards more efficient, productive, resistant, or self-determining performances against or in control of a/the machine is an ultimate good akin to seizing means of production. Instead, he extends an invitation to consider how agentic capacities are designed through *ways of seeing and situating* (theorising, theatricalising) "performance" and "performativity" as *principlings* which themselves "do things." Although the question as to how and *if* some belief or faith in "agentic performance" may, can, or should be maintained literally trails off within the physical object of his 2001 book, a desire—erotic, in Marcuse's sense—to imagine ourselves agents of the ethically otherwise rather than as self-optimising agentic producers, enables us to ask what can we mean by "agency" and how we might suspend disbelief in some agentic capacities decoupled from power and productivity. In short, McKenzie stages an ability to inquire: are there any agencies to change what kinds of "agencies" there are?

Through McKenzie, MARSH may be seen as a social agent that investigates how intentionalised action, affective relations, description of paradigms, and dramaturgical designs for action, become faithful yet impermanent principling, rehearsing, and modelling performativities that reconfigure potentials for agencies. I am collectively terming and theorising these modes of performativity *theatrical agencies*. I could just as easily call them *theoretical agencies*, as the etymological purview of both "theatre" and "theory" involve active, social, situated visions or *ways of seeing that radically materialise that which is seen*. Further, MARSH is ongoing and adaptive in its operations, and this text is a part of what McKenzie calls a "lecture machine" that, among other machinations, "binds together words and acts" (McKenzie 2001, 20-22). I will here both enact and theorise *theatrical agencies* as thinking-doings which: 1) describe and theorise, prescribe, and prefigure using dramaturgically designed, intentionally developed, and theatrically staged prefigurative *principlings*, 2) *rehearse* worldings through the embodiment of such other principlings, and 3) *model* actions, affective relations, and procedures as principlings speculatively

reorienting dominant definitions of performance, productivity, and agentic power. These three theatrical agencies are posited throughout the writing-performing of this text, invented, entangled, and installed as the theoretical imaginary of the active, practical and conceptual ongoing activities of a gesture, hope, eros, or will towards biotic flourishing and liberation, which may or may not be thereby performatively, agentically, potentiated.

Principling

Score prompt cards as part of *Muscular Bonding* (2018), building renovation/devising processes/performance. Photo by Nina Isabelle.

MARSH is first a physical site, nestled in the "broken heart of America" (Johnson, 2020). In 2018, my mother used a lump sum of money from the sale of her small organic farm to outright purchase a vacant and dilapidated double-storefront building in the middle of the United States of America (central Turtle Island), on the south side of St. Louis (Cahokia), very near the Mississippi river. The building contains a 1950s-style dinette with the classic American chrome counter and stools, a large open room, a woodshop, and three apartments upstairs. A thick layer of dust covered everything in the diner, which closed in the mid-1990s with salt and pepper shakers still on the tables. In one of the upstairs apartments, a yellowed newspaper celebrated the 5th anniversary of NATO (1954). Behind the building, an extra half-lot of grassy ruins had to be transformed into the arable ground.[2] My mother, Beth Neff, is a food and land activist, farmer, and writer (among other things) with many years of experience in alternative agri-food systems and cooperative organising. I am a performance maker, theorist, and founder of PPL, a performance collective and organisational entity (among other things). We are both Midwestern USA-born white Jewish queer cis women. She was born in St. Louis, where her family emigrated from Odessa in the 1890s. Our ability to sell and purchase property is a part of material histories that involve white supremacy and settler colonialism, patriarchy and family law. These material histories configure epistemic and conceptual constructs (such as individualism) and very

real inequitable economic distribution. While intersectional privileges and oppressions are perhaps the most obvious and easiest to see conditioning agencies, colonial property-owning practices also interface with "agencies" in even more metaphysical ways, for example authorising individual humans to determine the use (and often abuse) of "land," cordoned off in squarish chunks and made autonomous from both ecological relations such as watersheds and from human commons.

Property-owning "agencies" (whether of land or intellectual property) and definitions of agency emphasising individual power position agents "outside" or "in control" of "the world." Such agencies are not only "allowed" but required by performance paradigms, part of what McKenzie describes as an "over-powering performance" that he ties to "the cocky American spirit" (McKenzie 2001, 257). McKenzie debates Nietzsche's conception that the ability "to calculate, to promise, to anticipate the future in plans" can also require a sacrifice of self-determination towards becoming "stones in a great edifice" (257). Of course, for Nietzsche, the superman is an exceptional case of the liberated agent who can, from his perch above and withal the world's mere stones-in-the-wall, see and reveal the structures and mechanics of nature and society. In the USA (and elsewhere), it is often difficult to distinguish between Nietzschean wills to power—which are easily adopted and skewed by Social Darwinists and fascists—and bids for "generalised agency," through which persons seek rights and safeties to act with interest and eros against systemic violences and exploitations. The term "agency" also frequently leans neoliberal, overused as a keyword within projects seeking adherence to and expansion of constitutional promises to *individual* life, liberty, and pursuits of happiness. Within dominant liberal-imperial USA worldviews, conceptions of agency are synonymous with the empowerment of individuals and individuated social groups with(in) *central systems*. That is, "agencies" are like shares in a company, or indeed, ownership of some parcel of property, whether of body, land, intellect, or reality. Thus, general senses of what agency is and does are connected ideologically to manifest destiny and other colonial representations of individual agents enacting and enforcing their wills.

Many of MARSH's initial performance processes investigated "sweat equity" and "muscular bonding" in the face of individual property ownership and senses of agency as "willpower." In the winter of 2017, my mother and I gutted 3 tons of broken lathe, rotten wood, and horsehair plaster from the upstairs of the building. Much of this material was pulled down from the high ceilings with crowbars duct-taped to broom handles. Noxious clouds of coal dust, built up since 1850, coated our skin, hair, and nasal passages, despite construction masks. Trash, horsehair, concrete chunks, and the dried bodies of pigeons rained down on us. We shovelled up the rubble into 5-gallon buckets, lowered each bucket off the edge of the back roof, and then carried them across the frozen yard, climbing a ladder to empty them into a dumpster. Temperatures inside and outside the building were well below 0°C (32°F). Later that year, I formed an ensemble of (almost all white and queer) female and non-binary performance-makers to collaborate on a project called *Muscular Bonding*. Lorene Bouboushian, Adriana Disman, Kaia Gilje, Nina Isabelle, Beth Neff, Edward G. Sharp, and I installed new insulation, drywall, and framed out bathrooms, paying choreographic attention to our labour processes, ways of communicating, and bodily capacities for skilled physical work. Through renovation and repair of the MARSH building, we also devised interactive scores for a collective installation that we then transferred to the Living Arts Festival in Tulsa, Oklahoma. We framed this project as a challenge to distinctions between "social construction" and "natural" behaviour, actively attempting to perform what McKenzie calls "perfumative destratification," which he sees exemplified in the "two-sided, double-headed becoming"(McKenzie 2001, 218-19) of Linda Mary

Montano's work with (and as) chickens. Indeed, Linda has been a powerful influence on many of us performing this project. "Muscular bonding" refers to human and non-human persons moving in herds, flocks, schools, and other social formations. Influenced by Montano, we feel that intentional development and enaction of muscular bonds reveals the territorial boundaries of individual and social embodiments and exposes "the simultaneous encoding of these bodies into articulable subjects and objects" (219). The theoretical proposal here is that such exposure of and movement across territorial boundaries may engender "deterritorialisation" and "reterritorialisation" of contexts, identifications, and systems towards the "creation of a mutant creativity, an iterative invention of alterity" (218). *Muscular Bonding* was also an attempt to connect these more metaphysical Deleuzian ideas with political *praxis,* to simultaneously practice the sensual and affective qualities of working as an (unalienated) social body, and to contribute practical unpaid (reparative[3]) hard labour towards socially-distributable surplus.

Framing MARSH as a "theatre project" similarly attempts to stage an array of de- and re-territoralisations between economic (re)production and social construction as a "biocultural" naturity. That is, to intentionally rehearse autopoietic conflicts (McKenzie 2001, 218) between "productive" labour with the "nonproductive" conceptual and representational labour of performance-as-art. McKenzie describes how "liminautic" processes—transfer of theatre's frameworks and forms across spheres—serve to install "performance" as a mandate across different economic, technologic, ecological, social, and political systems (McKenzie 2001, 129-131). "Theatre-as-X" and "X-as-Theatre" can resist *and* reproduce mandates for efficiency, productivity, and metanarrative calculations of inputs and outputs. Ultimately, McKenzie sees "theatre-as-X" co-constructing three "performance paradigms," namely Performance Studies, Performance Management, and Techno-Performance, through both challenges to them and articulations of them. Together, he sees these three paradigms as a "global performative matrix" (2001, 130-135) that has translated disciplinary apparati (as theorised by Foucault) into performance principles, drawing on Marcuse's definition of the performance principle as that which "standardises society" and "optimises systems" (2001, 162-163). However, McKenzie also writes that "liminal-norms," that is, the operative translation between systems enabling the emergence of paradigmatic matrices enforcing "standardising" and "optimising" principles, are being "broken down" through internationalised and embodied performativities. These performativities may use the liminal, transferrent, suspended time-space of performance-*cum*-"perfumance," as a "cutting across multiple structures" (McKenzie 2001, 241) via "minor" and "joyful" tests (229, 236) that dislodge or work against what Judith Butler describes as the "cementing" of "sedimentary" performativities (166-167). Here, it seems that McKenzie (and Butler) give agents two options: reproduce the performance paradigm or challenge it (often thereby reproducing it) through haphazard experiments. Are there agencies that involve intentional, theatrical construction of some "other" principles and paradigms?

Theories of performativity across fields see possibilities for agency differently but are entangled with theories of *social construction,* which largely position agencies as discursive capacities, that is, abilities to describe something, make representations of it, and critique it as if from around the outside of it, creating it as a play staged in the centre of an arena. Ways of seeing (theories) involving "social construction" are often motivated, writes Ian Hacking, by the need to criticise, change, or dismantle some "X," which is seen as a construct, matrix, or "paradigm" established by normative performances (re)producing truth-power. Points of attack along the theoretical plotline thus open with "*X* is not inevitable, *X* was brought into existence or shaped by social events, forces, epistemes, history, all of which could have been different" (Hacking 1999, 6-7). In other words, "X" has been *per-formed* into its current configuration and thus can be *re-formed*. Here,

theories of performative agency in conflux with those of social construction may require a theatrical suspension of disbelief, in that *if (and perhaps only "if")* we choose to see certain systems and elements of the world as contingent on our agentic performances, it will then *seem* (and thus perhaps become) more likely that these systems and elements can be changed. "Agencies," within such conceptual frameworks, are thus defined as the (sometimes *imaginary*) abilities of both individuals and collectives to design and successfully perform rehabilitation or amelioration of *X* by accurately correlating intentions, aims, and principles with their consequences, performing procedurally to realise designs, thus building "better" operating systems-*cum*-worlds. For agents to engage in (re)construction of worlds, visions for "better worlds," diagnostic pictures of the way the "bad world" works now, and some sort of faith in agencies are all required. The former may involve prescribing alternative values, principles, models, and scores for good and right action. Diagnostic descriptions of how a "bad X" works may focus on plasticities and porosities to motivate beliefs that agentic access, intervention, and reform may be possible. Because such descriptions, depictions, and diagrams serve to prefigure (and delimit) agencies, "theory" often focuses on "negative" descriptions of the world as it stands now, dramatising embattlements between man and the machine, between the marginalised and the mainstream, and between the righteous Oppressed and the morally corrupt Empowered. These dramatic descriptions are themselves forms of affective and historically material encodings which (dis)(e)nable persons to see, feel, and act within our "real" lives and (as if) within dramatic conflicts.

During breaks from renovation labour, the *Muscular Bonding* ensemble smoked hand-rolled cigarettes and discussed very powerful "bad Xes," including the one named "white supremacy." We spoke about how we wanted to prefigure an alternative to this "X." We spent time describing how paradigms of inheritance, property, race, gender, domination, ecocide, reproduction, and labour value connect ideologies with material realities. We tried to theorise what principles might allow social construction to "perform" symbioses, abolition, mutualist subsistence, and other eudaimonic (flourishing and desire-oriented) pluritopic (plurally utopic) formations that might be "more habitable." Much of our ameliorative thinking, terminology, and reasoning had been situated by academic theory, including that of decolonial scholar Fernando Coronil, who deliberates "Occidentalist Representational Modalities." Coronil sees these modalities (re)producing Western hegemony and its Hegelian modes of overview, conquest, and rationalisation (Coronil 1996, 57-60). Through theoretical views like Coronil's, principles like productivity, efficiency, objectivity, functionality, standardisation, homogenisation, subjection, optimisation, and control[4] can be seen using representational modalities, sensibilities, and judgements to materialise both objectives *and* "objective" paradigms. What, for example, is an alternative principle to "systems optimisation"? How can we propose a "better" system without "optimisation"? Should there be any "systems" at all? Such inquiries—as creative endeavours—require focus on *principling* as the dramaturgical and theoretical processes describing, rehearsing, and modelling the theatrical stagings of particular agencies.

The economic, legal, and organisational structure of a "worker-owned cooperative" is especially interesting when *principles* are drawn into focus. Both my mother and I have been organisers as part of cooperatives (labour, housing, food, and performance-as-art) throughout our lives. There are seven structural principles laid out by the International Cooperative Alliance Statement on the Cooperative Identity, and these prescribe certain ethics, objectives, deliberative processes, and social relations. They structure the

"operating system" of worker-owned cooperatives and serve to regulate the performances of social agents within a "global performance matrix" that largely defines "agency" as a more equitable distribution of "shares in a company." As a social agent, MARSH's participates in these structures and systems; for example, MARSH banks as part of another cooperative, the St. Louis Community Credit Union, which itself is a participant in global markets and imperial banking structures and is involved in reproduction and use of the symbolic system of currency. Does it make sense to distinguish such "structural" principles in any way from more "embodied" principles? Does every "daily" behaviour, many driven by needs, such as those for food in the immediate and long term future (thus designing performances of canning, freezing, cooking, baking), the desire to maintain affective affiliations amongst a social group (thus making time and space for joking, gossiping, arguing), and personal aesthetic sensibilities, informing, for example, how an individual arranges root vegetables across the counters in the grocery store, or how a lattice is laid across the face of a pie, interface with, reproduce, and reinforce "the performance paradigm"?

McKenzie's paradigmatic thinking folds in organisational performance and management (2001, 55-94), through which principling may be seen as procedures installing micropolitical structures. These structures both restrict and allow. On the one hand, principles such as "the 7 cooperative principles" stage an autonomous structure that "rules" behaviours and restricts or negates processes. On the other hand, intentions, aesthetics, and preferences of specific subjective agents also inform principles, which positively stage embodied actions and support the emergence of structural elements. Both of these stagings can be aligned with power and its global matrices, installing certain defaults for *forms* of social agencies. For example, cooperative ownership may *challenge* (McKenzie 2001, 142, 151-153) individual ownership of a piece of property, but it is not an anecdote to the paradigmatic problem of property ownership. Likewise, a majority Black, Indigenous, and POC membership in a cooperative may challenge the power-holding of other cooperatives involving a majority of white people. Still, it retains the autonomous structure of the "banking cooperative" as a social agent participant in racial capitalism through global monetary systems. It is perhaps the way that principles are seen through Performance Studies (McKenzie 2001, 29-54) as "dramaturgical" elements that certain theological, ethical, and ritual performance processes and decision-making procedures may (re)orient around "other" values and beliefs, resulting in decisive yet para- and sub-paradigmatic action. MARSH has tended to seek subversively-oriented participant processes, for example, paying the BIPOC worker-owners and not the white ones and thereby attempting to practically counter hegemonics (a common and consistent arrangement across many of MARSH's labour systems and operations).

MARSH exterior, 2022. Photo courtesy of MARSH.

Four years after the building renovation, four current worker-owners gather in the diner after a long day in February to speak to me over zoom (I am in NYC in the winter, pursuing a PhD). We orient the discussion around MARSH's current principles and how they perform and fail to perform "worldings." MARSH has legal bylaws as a non-profit cooperative, but more ethics-based principles are dialogic and generated "from within" daily interaction. Towards the writing of this text, I ask worker-owners to describe principles they feel the social agent of MARSH embodies. Ishimaiah Moore identifies "consensus" (one of the seven Cooperative Principles), and we speak about what this means and how it operates in the design of actions. We can see the idea of "consensus" *principling*; that is, we can see how the processual discussion of principles amongst a group and embodied translation of agreed-upon principles into stagings of actions, decision-making procedures, and relationships become the hinge of movement between theory and practice. "Principling" as a verb can be seen as both a practical, daily activity and formal political strategy, part of a long history of Marxist conceptions of how practice and theory, thinking and doing, must be performed in perpetual conflux, as *praxis.*

While "performance principles" may be seen as centralising forces, principles for theatrical agency, on the other hand, might use the values, beliefs, hopes, and desires of assembled persons to self-recognise and design self-exciting ways of materialising and positing

"world(ing)s" (Kennedy 2016, 90-91, Haraway 2016, 50-52) through "emergent strategies."[5] It is here that principlings become (in theory) prefigurative, futurist, utopianist, process-based or "dialectical" theatre rather than solely reproductions of metamodels. Such (post) conceptualisations, in many ways echo and parallel theatre's shift between "old" and "new" dramaturgies, as have been described by Marianne Van Kerkoven and many others. The old "scientific Marxist" ways, as Van Kerkoven explains, tended to involve a director and his team interpreting a script and developing concepts in advance of rehearsal, then realising these interpretations and concepts through production. The "new" way (which is decades old by now and arguably not new at all outside of central European theatre) is process-based, communicative, and constitutive, developing concepts and interpretations through play, improvisation, iteration, reflection, and experiment (Van Kerkhoven 1994, 1). Both "old" and "new" dramaturgies are engaged in world-building, albeit through different strategic ways of—and through different processual forms for—correlating intentions with actions and their consequences. *When, how,* and *by whom* within a process are "principles" to orient that very process to be envisioned? If we are to overthrow or evade default paradigmatic principles such as "productivity" or "optimisation," *how* shall a social agent resist or replace these for themselves, and in relationship with which concerns, observations, affective responses, and values?

Rehearsing, Testing, Practicing

MARSH Co-op grocery store, 2021. Photo courtesy of MARSH.

MARSH worker-owner Renata Frank at the co-op grocery bulk station, 2022.
Photo courtesy of MARSH.

In 2020, MARSH received a grant from SARE, a state program for "sustainable" food projects. This grant enabled the opening and operation of a public storefront cooperative grocery, with sliding-scale and free organic, local food and guaranteed hourly wages for worker-owners. However, the grocery store project is not itself performing very well. It does not extract surplus labour, mark up costs to make a profit, or perform any kind of accumulation or exploitation. The grocery store will not succeed within capitalism. It is an autonomous worlding, a critical play upon conditions. Like a theatre project, the grocery store will only last until the grant runs out. Principles of fair labour, equitable access to food, consensus, and biotic generativity are centred within processes, pushing principles of optimisation and productivity out of the *mise en scene*. Further, failure to perform has very real consequences for the lives of performers, as being paid through the grant to operate the MARSH grocery store is the sole source of income for some. Social conflict also arises between those who are dedicating their lives to the MARSH project and those who see it as an opportunity to serve themselves; if the grocery store is going to "fail" anyway, why not simply pocket the grant money and do nothing at all? What reason(s) do any individual have to pursue eros, strategy-building, or creative interest if no capital value is produced?

Understanding MARSH as a theatre project subverts success-failure binaries enforced by capitalism while testing ethical, social, and aesthetic principles in a risky yet temporary and flexible "creative" space. Testing or rehearsing principles ideally generates theatrical agencies that may be seen as methodological rather than productive. Generation of methods, strategies, and practices through theatrical agencies involves situation of "sites

for sight" that accept their own "imaginary" or "artificial" status, breaking with reality through intentional re-orientation. MARSH's grocery store fails at capitalism to allow involved agents to *design and practice* post-capitalist food systems, affective relations, and exchange paradigms. This site of "transcendence" or "fabulation" may itself be imaginary (or "merely theoretical"), but suspension of disbelief in the possibility of evasion or alternaity, both values marginalised epistemologies and ethos, and promises new potentials that might fulfil the hopes and desires of those intentionally preserving sites for cooperation outside of totalising performance paradigms. This area of strategic practice can be theorised as a convergence between Black and decolonial political strategy and avant-garde theatre traditions.

In terms of the latter, and in attempts to contextualise MARSH within more familiar theatre history in anglophone imperial academic contexts in the USA, I sometimes refer to how, for example, Martin Puchner discusses Richard Foreman's *manifesto* practices as intervening ruptures or "cuts in the historical process, which manifest new timelines" (Puchner 2000, 451). Here, a strategic staging of a radically rebellious "zero point" estrangement becomes, as Puchner puts it, "the beginning of a new future." These trajectories of the militant "avant-garde" have perhaps, at their best, synthesised dogmatic, authoritative strategies and generative, affect-oriented prefigurative strategies, forging modes of "theatrical agency" which deploy their ideation in hopes of dismantling seemingly unshakable and inevitable paradigms and default linear "progressions" and "productions" from "within them."

Public meal in the diner at MARSH, 2020. Photo courtesy of MARSH.

In addition to the daily "rehearsal" of both principles and predictable conflicts between individuals, MARSH can be seen theatrically creating or "producing" what Lefebvrians call "space" —sets of relations and forms that are both a *field of action* and a *basis of action* (Lefebvre 1991, 1). Following Lefebvre, Christian Fuchs describes how a "third type" of Marxian-inspired social theory, framing "dialectically integrated structure and agency approaches", requires an emphasis on communication (Fuchs 2019, 135-136). Instead of either seeking the power to "produce space" as authorised social engineers or competing solely within ordinary representational spaces of exchange and use-value, "communicative" processes propose that "humans in society can intentionally produce signs to make objects [that] symbolise and take on specific meanings that are culturally created, stored, disseminated, and communicated" (Fuchs 2019, 136). While dominating and producing space on behalf of oneself is a "master's project" (Lefebvre 1991, 165), more subjective, specific, and abstract spaces, as mediums for and sites of intrapersonal exchange and daily inhabitation, are intentionally oriented around what Kenneth Burke calls "grammars of motives," that is, they are dramatically conflictual acts oriented around communication. Burke writes that while acts and agents require "scenes to contain them," scene-act and scene-agent ratios are positional; that is, scenes can either directly demand the actions that reproduce them, or they can provide potentiating motives for agents to devise and enact subsequent and interrelated scenes (Burke 1969, 3-20). What theories of "theatrical agencies," as interrelated yet distinct modes of performance here offer are ways of seeing "agency" in terms of both *communicative* and *motivated* performance. The former sense of *communicative* action involves the constitution of meaning, while the latter sense of *motivated* action requires meaning-oriented modes of creating, making, and rehearsing. Agents choose to see and perform in certain ways and not others for *reasons.* Through this lens, what MARSH is "doing" with the grocery store is not performing a grocery store, rather practising communication about how a grocery store might (or should) be meaningfully performed.

Rehearsal, among other agentic theatrical "capacities," is a sequence of opportunities to communicate about how and why a social agent may want to build paradigms, models, and other representations in certain ways, thus shaping certain worlds that, presumably, align with the beliefs, values, desires, needs and other heuristics held and carried by those affected. Such communications are extremely difficult. Very deep assumptions must be uprooted, and individual agents must commit to "bad feelings," such as confusion and failure. Principles like permanence—even "sustainability"—as well as consistency, stability, and "optimisation" often seem like "natural" objectives, evolutionary laws, and any other orientation may seem unreasonable. Any principlings dislodging default principles (like "optimisation") involves the correlation of "other" means with "imaginary" (or even unknown) ends. This, in turn, requires constant, collective self-reflection, which places immense pressure on deliberative performance or *communication* as that which stalls the default social reproduction of objective principles and principle objectives.

For MARSH, modes of "rehearsal" occur across scales and forms, from making different batches of vegan empacadas, tasting them, adjusting techniques and the recipe until those who will be eating the empacadas are satisfied, through the large-scale ways in which the social agent reforms and restructures itself. From the initial attempts to organise as a public diner and performance space, through the mutual aid activities during quarantine, into operation as a food co-op that then became a physical grocery store style food co-op, MARSH tests, rehearses and adapts itself around its shifting principles. MARSH's current

(2022) shift is from a grocery store into a food forest and CCSA, and a future shift to focus on the diner as a public restaurant is currently under communicative consideration. Through such shifts, the agentic power to effect change becomes the theatrical agency to collectively determine and test how to make changes. This agentic power is not theorised or performed as a development of mechanic abilities to control means so that they produce optimal ends. Rather, agencies evolve to circulate and test performative principles, tendering those that are *shown and experienced through communicative, rehearsive stagings* to constitute the conditions and contexts desired, needed, appreciated, or otherwise intentionally adopted by entangled individual and social agents.

MODELLING

Movement artists Hannah Price and Jacob Henss working at MARSH in preparation for a performance on site, August 2019. Photo courtesy of MARSH.

As dramaturges, directors, designers, theorists, and playwrights can tell us, theatre often involves building temporary worlds. These worlds have boundaries. They are easily adapted or stopped and can be seen as tests, models, or maquettes. Theatre's micro-worlds can stage representations of imagined futures, but they can also be more directly "prefigurative," building a new world in the shell of the old (Dixon 2014, Gordon 2017, Kinna 2016) or installing an operational model of the future in the present.

What Jon McKenzie calls "the performance paradigm" is also a kind of model. A "paradigm" is a theoretical staging of "the way the world works" that, as Thomas Kuhn originally described in terms of the scientific community and epistemic depiction, serves to essentialise, specialise, and increase the efficiency of communications amongst "scientists" who believe themselves to be developing "factual" knowledge of the world (Kuhn 1962, 115-121). A paradigm coheres vision and experience, explaining empiric phenomenon and a *representational model* that builds a community of practitioners sharing a common vision.

"Theatrical agency" can be found in the rehearsive, prefigurative *modelling* of representational paradigms. Regarding such models in the sciences, Marx Wartofsky discusses "the active role which representation and the use of models plays in shaping our perception and cognition, and in serving as a heuristic guide to our theoretical or practical activity" (Wartofsky 1979, xxiii). Wartofsky writes that "our own perceptual and cognitive

understanding of the world is in large part shaped and changed by the representational artifacts we ourselves create. We are, in effect, the products of our own activity, in this way; we transform our own perceptual and cognitive modes, our ways of seeing and of understanding, by means of the representations we make" (Wartofsky 1979, xxii-XXiii). Thus, performativities at least partially materialise principles desired by performing agents.

For example, simple staging such as "pay what you can/pay it forward" may be seen at least *modelling* a transitional world that recognises and values interdependency. Such stagings operate "from within" and are distinct from those actions and moves which claim "agency" as the "overseeing" power to determine or change the entire structure or system. In other words, the social agent staging the "play" envisions the natural laws of a specific "worlds" built, from the inside out, based on their responses to and within that world. "Performance" is thus broken down into embodied processes of farming, cooking, talking, grant-writing, bartering, play-writing, and so on, not all of which are driven by objective(s) or performance principles. These processes may correlate with institutional and cultural performativities of "the social agent" as a non-profit organisation, a laboratory experimenting with labour forms, a worker-owned cooperative, a public diner, and grocery store, a theatre company, but not *all* processes are restricted to one-to-one relationships in terms of optimisation and productivity. Rather, a larger number of processes (insofar as it is even possible to distinguish a single "process" as a sort of performance object) are embodied for "other" reasons, such as pleasurability, ethical responsibility, and curiosity.

Such "direct" modelling embodiments can be as "challenging forth" performance modes that seek to frame, depict, or order the world "as an object of representational knowledge" (McKenzie 2001, 156-157). They may also be seen as prescriptive modes designed to configure or "prefigure" alternate or future worlds. Senses of the prefigurative are most often married with utopian socialism (Kinna 2016). However, senses of "rehearsing" and "modelling" drawn from theatre also complicate the temporal positioning of prefiguration (Gordon 2018) and how it may rupture "existing power structures" or "the paradigmatic" by diverging from reproductive cycles (Smucker 2014). Some agentic behaviours— precisely those seen as "theatrical" and "theoretical" do mimetically reproduce and repeat ethically and intentionally centralised principles, but they do not necessarily operate immediately as "real" world(ings)s. Rather, these rehearsive and reproductive performances are fabricated self-reflexively as tests or designs for something in the future, not as inevitable or accurate descriptions of essential or "real" worlds. When framed as "merely a model" or as "just a rehearsal" (relatedly, as "play" or "just art/theatre"), a micropolitics of radical difference between desired worlds and known worlds dislocates default epistemologies. This difference acknowledges desire and the imaginary, refusing to directly "challenge forth" general theories, metanarratives of modernity, or representations reproducing destined or "natural" worlds. This is not just about incorporating some "new social subjectivities into the established social compromise of the nation-state—which was organised along whiteness, heteronormativity, waged labour, and property—by engaging in changing the dominant conditions of representation" (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2006, no page numbers), there are also agentic processes which practice and model communicative theorisation and theatricalisation of "paradigms" themselves, as representations of worlds.

AGENCIES PRINCIPLE/PRINCIPLING AGENCIES
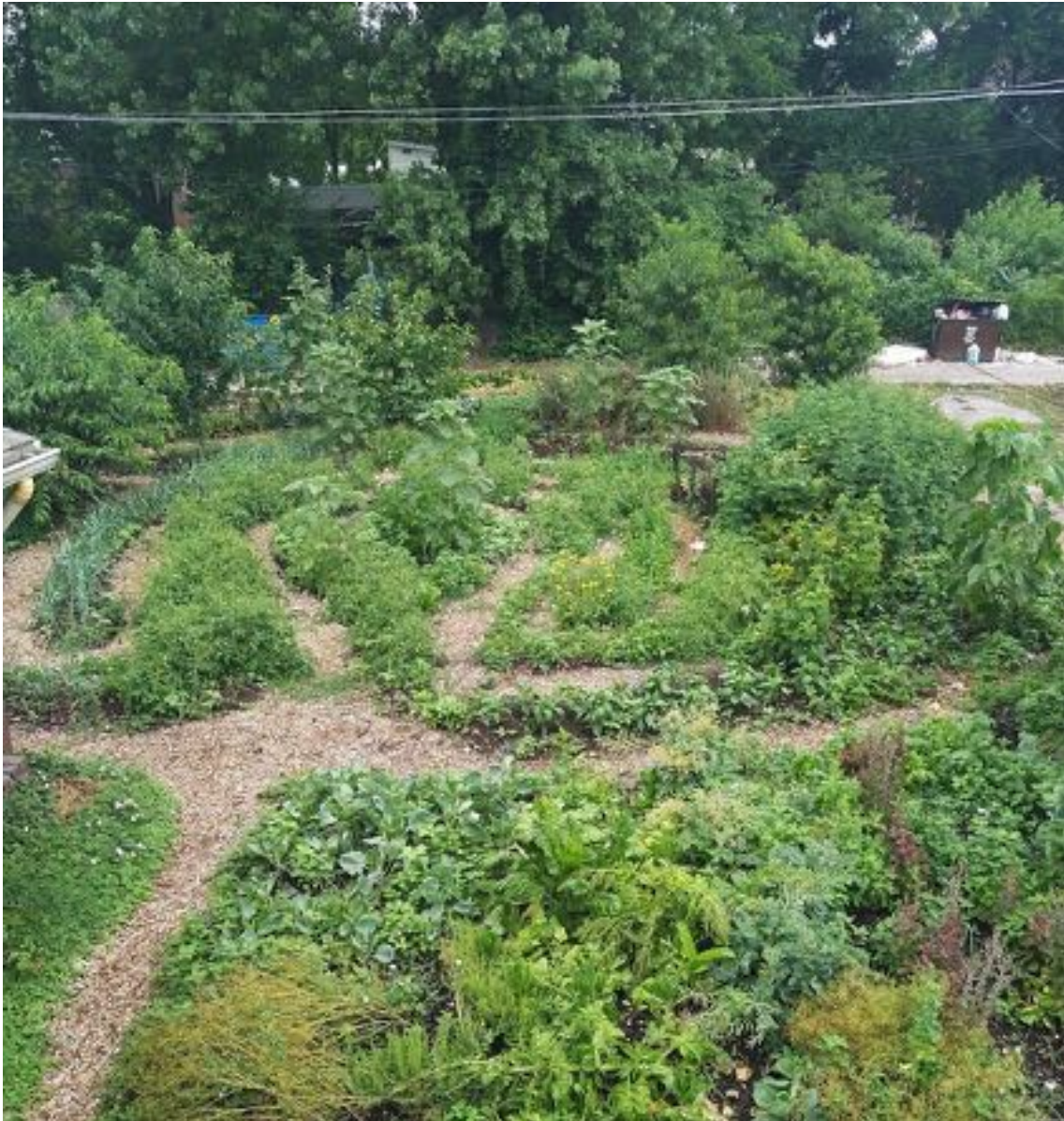
6917 Broadway site permaculture labyrinth garden, 2021. Photo courtesy of MARSH.

On a sunny Friday afternoon in May 2021, MARSH opened an outdoor market with sliding-scale groceries and produce. Due to COVID-19, the indoor spaces were closed, but the farm lots were flourishing, and there were greens, spring onions, strawberries, rhubarb and asparagus, and other items from local and organic farmers and producers available. In some senses, this market was the first "public performance" of the MARSH project, a turning-out and looping-in of many processes of planting and following recipes and mixing and baking into a pie to be shared outward. Members of the cooperative body also engaged in performances of communication, trying not only to explain what MARSH "is" but also to absorb the outpouring of other individuals wanting to get involved in how MARSH "performs," as well as floods of questions. What about MARSH is not just a business with a socialist brand and a liminautic framing as a "theatre project"? Who are the individual agents involved in the project, and how do the realities of race, gender, ability, class, and

sexuality play out within embodied social relations? How do different forms of "justice" in terms of access, biotic health, ability, and power relate with conceptions of "agency"?

Here in this text, I am using the term "theatrical agencies" in part to create a tension between that which is seen as "sub-optimal," "unproductive," and "non-standard" performativity in that it may "break down" (glitch, scatter, queer, etc.) systems and those intentional, procedural, and often collective actions (including social theorising processes) which may stage other paradigmatic principlings. McKenzie largely theorises "perfumance" in terms of an embodied romance between thought and action, play and discipline, eros and intention, "an emergent folding of the outside in" (2001, 261). Here, a disorientation of binaries between "resistance" and "reproduction" suggests this "third way" between a grand, meta-narrative order as an inherently "Bad X" and a chaotic lack or dada-esque thrashing as the last gasp of freedom. McKenzie iteratively describes "perfumance" through storytelling, poetic metaphor, and that which synthesises the mechanic and the organic. I am also attempting here to parse the practical "dramaturgies" of not *only* "following our noses" but also prefigurative ways of moving and thinking that see "technopoesis" not solely as capitulations of the feral to technologics but also as existential agentic creativity, that may "radicalise" the "roots" of performance, that is, mitigate the very soil of *principles* from which "paradigms" are grown. This is done on the ground, from states of emergency and specifically from the subjectivities of principles like care, that is, care as to whether or not human and non-human persons, watersheds, and planets live or die. Conceptualisations and theorisations of "agency" as affective and sensual response-abilities "from within" rather than as empowered productivities "above" systems may be difficult to describe, and they may feel uncomfortable and confusing to constitute. Principlings are shifting, never quite stabilising into "forms" "as per" substance.

Hopefully (and somewhat romantically, *idealistically*, even naïvely), the sense that (re)production of performance paradigms is not an inevitable and determined state of becoming excites its own experiments. What "else" can be performed agentically through theatrical methods, frames, and strategies? Senses of potential alternatives—"elsenesses" say—are materialised through, as McKenzie proposes, perpetual liminautic passage, de- and re- territorialisation, movement between performance studies and prefigurative cooperative organising, and use of already-interdisciplinary modes of theatrical theory and theatre practice. Through *theatrical* modes of "worlding" and "world-building," embodiments are conscientiously built into temporary micro-paradigms, materialising social agencies around "affective strategies, micro-arrangements of normativities, and mutations" (McKenzie 2001, 177). As MARSH worker-owners lean over the beets, tomatoes, and zucchini arranged on the folding table beneath the white tent snapping in the wind, such theoretical wor(l)dplay itself surely does not appear "functional," "efficient" or "optimal," it may appear dangerous, silly, uncool, idealistic, wrong, and so on. Yet perhaps it is due to the very disconnects between and within paradigms that the fearsome "or else" remains suspended and "theatrical agencies" emerge as rehearsals of intentions, principling relations, models of more inhabitable worlds not yet fully performable.

Notes

[1] In peer review of this article, social research protocols were identified as an important issue to address. Ethics procedures designed to protect and respect human subjects are slightly different in the USA and Australia, and in both places critical writing on "life art" projects (and on any artistic performance projects in which the author is directly, personally involved) are sticky. In the end, I have decided to treat MARSH as an artistic project and to *credit* other individuals as co-authors and co-creators. Those named are not my "research subjects," they are artistic collaborators. That being said, of course this written essay is a subjective composition and may not reflect the views, perspectives, narratives, and beliefs of these different project collaborators. Those named have agreed to appear in public discussion and criticism of their artistic work, including this essay as an element of the performance project *MARSH*.

[2] This text artificially and arbitrarily brackets the "human" activities of MARSH from its ecological and biotic entanglements, though the impossibility of doing this is much-discussed amongst MARSH cooperators.

[3] The question as to whether voluntary/unpaid labour can be used by white people as a form of "reparations" is somewhat particular to the USA and other nations built on and through racialised enslavement. This question re-presents itself within MARSH's operations and has demanded more focused attention in projects and performances I do not discuss in this particular text.

[4] This list is synthesized from the work of Cedric Robinson (1983/2020), Enrique Dussel (2013), Seyla Benhabib (1986) and deeper research into pragmatism, utilitarianism, and other epistemological and ethical-political traditions involved in materialising racial capitalism as part of "world systems."

[5] See Adrienne Maree Brown (2017).

Works Cited

Online sources cited in this article were checked shortly before this article was published in December 2022 and all links were current at that time.

Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London, Routledge.

Bratman, Michael E. 2000. "Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency." *The Philosophical Review* 1 (109): 35-61

Brown, Adrienne. 2017. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press.

Burke, Kenneth. 1969. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Butler, Judith. 1996. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. London: Routledge.

———. 2015. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1997. "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary." In *The Castoriadis Reader*, edited by D.A. Curtis, 321–337. Oxford: Blackwell.

Coronil, Fernando. 1996. "Beyond Occidentalism: Toward Nonimperial Geohistorical Categories." *Cultural Anthropology* 1 (11): 51-87.

Dixon, Chris. 2014. *Another Politics: Talking across Today's Transformative Movements*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Dussel, Enrique. 2013. *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*. Translated by Eduardo Mendieta, Camilo Pŭrez Bustillo, Yolanda Angulo, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Foucault, Michel and Colin Gordon. 1980. "Truth and Power: Interview conducted in 1977, published in L'Arc." *In Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, translated and edited by Colin Gordon, 109-133. New York: Pantheon Books.

Fuchs, Christian. 2019. "Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space and the Critical Theory of Communication." *Communication Theory* 29: 129-150.

Gordon, Uri. 2018. "Prefigurative Politics between Ethical Practice and Absent Promise." *Political Studies*, 66(2): 521–537.

Gould, Carol. 1993. "Feminism and Democratic Community Revisited." *Nomos* 35: 396-413.

Hacking, Ian. 1999. *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Jaffe, Aaron. 2020. *Social Reproduction Theory and the Socialist Horizon: Work, Power, and Political Strategy*. London: Pluto Press.

Johnson, Walter. 2020. *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States*. New York: Basic Books.

Kinna, Ruth. 2016. "Utopianism and Prefiguration." In *The Political Uses of Utopia: New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives*, edited by S.D. Shrostowska and James Ingram, 198-215. New York City: Columbia University Press.

Kuhn, Thomas. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lefebvre, Henri. 1991 [1974]. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson. Malden, MA: Blackwell Press.

Loffreda, Beth, Claudia Rankine, Max King Cap, editors. 2015. *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*. Albany, NY: Fence Books.

McKenzie, Jon. 2001. *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. London: Routledge.

Mignolo, Walter. 2011. *The Darker side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Papadopoulos, Dimitris and Vassilis Tsianos. 2006. "Precarity: A Savage Journey to the Heart of Embodied Capitalism." *Transversal*. https://transversal.at/transversal/1106/tsianos-papadopoulos/en.

Puchner, Martin. 2002. "Manifesto = Theatre." *Theatre Journal* 54 (3): 449–465.

Reinelt, Janelle. 2002. "The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality." *SubStance* 31 (2/3): 201-215.

Robinson, Cedric J. 2019. "Fascism and the Intersections of Capitalism, Racialism, and Historical Consciousness." In *Cedric J. Robinson: On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance,* edited by H.L.T. Quan, 87-109. New York, NY: Pluto Press, 2019

Schechner, Richard. 2014. *Performed Imaginaries*. London: Routledge.

Smucker, Jonathan. 2014. "Can Prefigurative Politics Replace Political Strategy?" *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 58: 74-82.

Stewart, Kathleen. 2012. "'Worlding Refrains [2010]." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by M. Gregg & G. Seigworth, 339-353. London: Duke University Press.

Van Kerkhoven, Marianne. 1994. "On Dramaturgy." *Theaterschrift*, 5-6. http://sarma.be/docs/3108.

Wartofsky, Marx. 1979. *Models: Representation and the Scientific Understanding*. Doldrecht: Reidel Publishing Company.

ESTHER NEFF *is a US-based practitioner and theorist focusing on organizational performativity and social epistemology. They are one of the founders of MARSH (2018) and the founder of PPL (2004), a thinktank and performance collective making operas of operations. A PPL compendium responding to PPL's 7-year stint as a public laboratory site*, Institution is a Verb, *is available through The Operating System. Neff's past projects and writings have appeared in the* Routledge Companion to Performance Philosophy *(co-written with Yelena Gluzman),* The Palgrave MacMillan Handbook of Queer and Trans Feminist Performance*,* (States of) Wake (*LADA*) and 7 Invitations *(Glasshouse), and been published in* PAJ, *the* Performance Philosophy *Journal,* Performance Is Alive*,* CAESURA, Cultbytes, culturebot*,* ICE HOLE*, and many other places online and in print. Neff's libretto and "operating manual"* Embarrassed of the W(h)ole *(Ugly Duckling Presse) are forthcoming March 2022. They are currently working towards a PhD at CUNY Graduate Center.*