

Ways of Being, Knowing, & Relating: What Do We Do Now?

A summary of conversations at Musagetes' Retreat, January 8-10, 2018

For a list of participants, see page 10.

This report from Musagetes' Retreat (January 2018) begins with a summary of the key points discussed during our two-day conversation. It concludes with some thoughts to guide the analysis we'll conduct in 2018, marking our first decade of program development. The preparatory materials for the retreat summarized some thoughts on ways of being, knowing, and relating from many knowledge keepers, artists, philosophers, writers, and other practitioners.

The social worlds we inhabit, after all, as so many thinkers have reminded us, are not inevitable; they were not always bound to turn out this way, and what's more, in the process of producing this reality, many other realities, fields of knowledge, and ways of being have been discarded.

—Jack Halberstam

Musagetes' work has always been concerned with how we make sense of our world — what values are behind our critique of how things are and what is at play when we use our imaginations to consider how things could be.

Our Manifesto begins by acknowledging “the deep and perplexing problems that beset contemporary life”—problems that can only be resolved if we recognize that what makes most sense to each of us is likely a singular, reductive way of being in the world, of claiming to know things, and of relating to others, a state that will only result in the status quo. Through the lens of artistic inquiry, in combination with other modes and methodologies, we can take steps toward new, multiple and hybrid ways of making sense of the world—ones that avoid both appropriation and suppression of cultural and personal expression.

This year's retreat began with an exploration of what we mean by multiple ways of knowing, being and relating, and over the next 12 months we will use this framework to explore and evaluate our programs of the past 10 years, enabling us to do a close analysis of lessons learned on the role that artistic inquiry plays in transforming the

world. Our thinking draws extensively on the ideas, thoughts, and writing of many artists, theorists, activists, and practitioners, both contemporary and historical.

Musagetes' Manifesto (2007) and our annual retreat updates (2008-2018) reflect on the fault lines of modernity that originate from a too-great emphasis on instrumental reasoning, on the economy and finance as the measure of meaning, on a diminished sense of community and a neglect of the imagination and the spirit. Our programs experiment collectively with alternatives to these, by asking variations of these questions:

- Can artistic inquiry co-exist more fully with instrumental reasoning to shape a more just world?
- Can we establish economic forms that emphasize dignity and rights for all beings?
- Can our sense of community be grounded in a variety of ways that define family, collectivity, the nation-state, education, and the environment?
- Are we willing to expand our networks to include people who don't think as we do, who don't share our life experiences? Can we still find common interests?

Rarely do our projects address only a single dimension of ways of being, knowing, and doing; rather, they pursue the intersections among them. It's in the liminal or marginal spaces between categories, issues, or fields that we often find the most salient possibilities for transformation. *Queer City*, for example, began as an inquiry on urban environments through performativity by those who are queer or gender-fluid. It evolved into a broader inquiry into the economic injustices of the contemporary city and the strategies employed by many to resist and transform it (e.g. through community organizing and housing occupations). What remains constant is the centrality of the arts as the mode by which the inquiry is made (the questions we ask) and the methodologies applied (the actions we take).

Artistic inquiry is the heart and soul of Musagetes' work. But it's vital that we continue to ask ourselves, to what end? The deep and perplexing problems mentioned in the Manifesto are our impetus, and we believe that the result of artistic inquiry provides glimpses of new ways of knowing, being, and relating that promise to make the world a

better place. The good news is that many of these possibilities already exist in one form or another, with some examples listed here:

- Indigenous ways of knowing and being;
- queer families of logic rather than biology as ways of relating;¹
- ecological thinking as a way of being;
- economic dignity as a way of being;
- land-based learning as a way of knowing;
- slowness as a way of relating;
- improvisation as a way of knowing and relating;
- performativity and embodiment as a way of knowing and relating; and
- artistic creativity, broadly, as a way of relating.

“Ways of being”—also called “ontologies”—encompasses our understandings of what *being* is; what it means to persist in being—to live; and what it means to change. Our way of being influences our notions of life and death, the spirit, imagination, hope, possibility, and our ethics.

“Ways of knowing”—also called “epistemologies”—encompasses our understanding of what it means to know something; what meaning is; and what certainty is. Our way of knowing influences our approach to education, language, perception, sensorial, and the erotic.

“Ways of relating”—our identities—encompasses our understanding of how our relationships with others and our environment affect our knowledge of who we are and how we know things. Our way of relating influences politics, civil society, communication, and the arts. In this document, artistic performativity (dance, movement) and embodied knowledge are referred to as ways of relating.

Drawing on philosophical understandings of these abstract concepts (ontology, epistemology, identity), the terms “ways of being, knowing, and relating” have a utility for Musagetes’ self-analysis in both a macro and micro way. Indigenous ways of knowing and being are macro forms in that they encompass multiple worldviews—

¹ A reference to Amistead Maupin’s concept of the logical family rather than the biological.

with much debate about which aspects may be universally Indigenous (pan-Indigenous), such as the sacredness of the land and all its beings. Improvised music, on the other hand, is a way of relating that offers us possibilities, not for an immediate wholesale transformation of our social system, but of methodologies for greater social justice within the system (a micro form). It is important to distinguish between the macro and micro ways of being and knowing to avoid repeating the marginalization of the more elevated macro forms — for example, the attempted genocide in Canada of Indigenous peoples and their forms of knowledge.

While improvisation itself is not a macro form or a worldview, per sé, one form of improvised music originates in the worldviews and historical specificities of Black people in America—from the early rhythms of life in Africa, through slave ships and plantations, to the jazz clubs and hip-hop bars of Harlem. Adding further nuance, House music—crafted out of obsolete electronic equipment at the closed factories in Queens—has connected with drag performers to form the House | Ball community, a safe haven for LGBTQ+ people rejected by the Black Church, which upholds Christian principles forced upon them through slavery and now perpetuated by the social systems in which they exist.² Musagetes' Manifesto mentions organized religion as the “emptying out of mystery.” So the registers, or degrees, to which ways of knowing, being, and relating resound differ extensively and we must be mindful of this as we reflect on our work and the language we use.

For an organization such as Musagetes, which is still comprised predominantly of white people—even as we work to change this—we must acknowledge the limitations of our non-Indigenous interpretations or understandings of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Cash Ahenakew, a Blackfoot scholar at UBC, refers to this as ‘grafting’: “...when Indigenous epistemologies are interpreted through non-Indigenous ontologies in research settings....The concept of grafting [refers] to the act of transplanting ways of knowing and being from a context where they emerge naturally to a context where they

² For a detailed history and analysis of the House | Ball community, read Michael Roberson's text on ArtsEverywhere.ca.

are artificially implanted.”³ He illustrates this with an example of the trouble Indigenous researchers face in academia where research processes are based on the “violent historical foundations of modernity” and where the notions of inclusion and integration serve only to re-legitimize dominant ways of thinking. It is important that we discuss Indigenous ways of knowing and being in ways that acknowledge the limitations of representation (our language and identity) and make use of forms and modes such as rhythm and embodiment that gesture toward the imagination and the life of the spirit.

The inspiration for Musagetes’ recent thinking about ecology and the environment comes, in part, from reading the work of Mohawk scholar, Dan Longboat, and from listening to a presentation by Nora Bateson, one of our guests at the January 2018 retreat. Using vastly different starting points, both express a fundamental dimension of Indigenous and ecological thinking: the interconnectedness of all things.

Longboat describes an Indigenous concept of imagination in his essay, *The Haudenosaunee Imagination and the Ecology of the Sacred*:

*Spiritual and intellectual integrity is achieved on Turtle Island by the interplay of human and more-than-human consciousness. The experience of imagination is minding all things. Minding all things performs the spiritual conservation of all things. All things comprise the Indigenous mind and Indigenous minds are composed of all things.*⁴

Bateson, drawing on her father Gregory’s well-known book, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, and on the work of his father, William, a professor of biology at Cambridge who coined the term genetics in 1906, asserts that “as it stands, our ‘knowledge’ often prevents us seeing the interdependencies of our complex world, therefore we disrupt them—to the detriment of our well-being and that of the biosphere we live within.”⁵ Our survival is based on our ability to interact with complex living systems and the unnameable spiritual dimensions of consciousness and being at home in the world. The Batesons’

³ Cash Ahenakew, “Grafting Indigenous Ways of Knowing Onto Non-Indigenous Ways of Being: The (Underestimated) Challenges of a Decolonial Imagination” in *International Review of Qualitative Research*, Vol. 9 No. 3, Fall 2016; (pp. 323-340) DOI: 10.1525/irqr.2016.9.3.323

⁴ <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1206331206292503>

⁵ Nora Bateson, *Small Arcs of Larger Circles*, Triarchy Press, 2016, 190.

work has contributed much to understanding the role of rational and spiritual ways of knowing and their transformative impact on the ways we think ecologically.

A central question discussed at the retreat related to the reverberations of Musagetes' thinking and experimentation in the broader world. Alessandra Pomarico, one of our long-time partners in Lecce, Italy, as the curator of the Free Home University, was a guest at the retreat. Of Musagetes' 10-year history of experimental projects, she said:

Lecce was one of the early projects that Musagetes' embraced. Because of this, I experienced the organization's trajectory of concepts, ideas, embodiments, attempts, and experiments. I got the chance to be informed by and to inform the process. I, and participants in the Lecce work, also underwent a shift as a result of this work together. As a result of that shift both those of us in Lecce and Musagetes expanded the space of mutual listening, mutual respect for practice, theories, and embodied knowledge production that can resonate and reverberate from local to global.

Initiatives such as Free Home University and the ArtsEverywhere Festival are examples of how something done locally can resonate globally. A key characteristic of Musagetes' presence locally is its link back to broader global challenges via the inquiries and communities we engage (e.g. understanding migration with people who have migrated) and through the channels that ArtsEverywhere opens to communities in which we're not directly involved. The ArtsEverywhere Festival takes place locally in Guelph, Ontario, but as its programming becomes better known and is increasingly anchored in initiatives globally, it has the potential to become well-known internationally.

The notion of reverberation inspired comments from another of our retreat guests, Karyn Recollet. She describes herself as an urban Cree visitor to Tkaronto (meaning "where the trees stand in the water"—also known as Toronto).

How do we design for emergence? I think it has something to do with how sound reverberates off of urban Indigenous territories. For a lot of us that is our experience. Often people tend to associate Indigeneity with folks who live off the land⁶, and who live on the reserve, or who live in rural spaces. But the reality is that the emergence has to come from

⁶ Editor's note: "To live off the land" is a way of saying "to subsist on what the land provides, perhaps through hunting and gathering."

the reverb off of tall buildings, off of the underground waterways, off of the concrete that oftentimes contains the bones of actual Indigenous kin from the Mississaugas. We have to think about the fleshiness of ourselves. What is the reverb of death? If we really want to talk about our relationship to lands and our relationship to territory of belonging, then we also have to consider the significance of the fact that some bodies are more valued than others. The round dance might attend to this practice or process. It might be a matter through which we find the frequencies and the movement practices that come from our territory. Because in the round dance we actually invite deceased ancestors and kin to come and dance with us.

As the conversation shifted toward methods of bridge-building across ways of being and knowing, especially Indigenous and non-Indigenous, Karyn offered another way to think about this:

How do we create consensual relationalities⁷ that surge beyond the languages of reconciliation? Bridge-building certainly is a language that has been helpful in terms of thinking through modes of governance. However, building bridges sometimes looks for similarities rather than through the rupture that is in this house. We design for emergence through rupture, sometimes thinking through how rupturous that bridge is, and know that the very mortar that the bridge is built upon is the bones of Indigenous folks. Sometimes it's the fractals. So if you look at concrete, for example, the ways that the sun reflects off the rocks, sometimes these are the only things that we have to work with. So fractal thinking can be a way of thinking about relationality rather than the building bridges model.

Karyn elaborated on this, using her concept of the *kinstillatory*, which she defines as “the relationalities that exist between our bodies, and our lives, and constellations, and star knowledge, and star mapping. Looking at lands' overflow is looking at how land also gestures downwards past the surface and into the underground waterways that exist, and then beyond into the subaqueous spaces. And then also the tentacular reach of land. So how does land reach outward? And how does land overflow into the celestial?” She referenced Swampy Cree scientist Wilfred Buck who travels around with a 5-metre inflatable planetarium, teaching Indigenous students what their people know about

⁷ *Relationality* in Indigenous thought is a complex set of ideas that might be summarized as the whole set of embedded relationships between beings, not as separate from one another but as enmeshed in all of nature, in the spiritual and corporeal, and the terrestrial and celestial worlds.

stars—and that it wasn't just the Romans and Greeks who studied them. Buck also talks about the sky and stars and constellations as land spaces.

Further defining *kinstillatory* forms of relationality, Karyn explained:

I call it kinstillatory, because of my relationship to kinships, but also as somebody who was taken from my original family as part of the Sixties Scoop and adopted into a non-Indigenous family. Kinship and kinship making have different meaning for me. There has to be some kind of genealogy to talk about our home lands. For me it's about my relationship to the stars, and for a lot of us I think it's that belonging in that home, that place making. That got me thinking about love, and rupture, and decolonial love, and how sometimes we need to fall in love with the idea that this isn't permanent. Or, I'm gonna fall in love with all of the fleshiness of you, and all of your scars, and all of your rupture, and you're gonna fall in love with the fleshiness of me, and all of my scars, and all of my rupture, too. What is the shape of our collectives, and what is the shape through which we gather? I think it's rooted in this idea of what decolonial love is. Projects of love and liberation have to have some semblance of hope and futurity. But I don't think that we need to get rid of the rupture in order to get there.

What Karyn proposes as a way of thinking beyond bridge-building toward an expansive, celestial relationality is a great example of what Nora Bateson, also a guest at the retreat, defines as *synmathesis*, which she uses to mean “learning together”.

Synmathesis is the idea that an entity is formed by contextual mutual learning in interaction as a noun. I'm a synmathesis, you're a synmathesis, a field is a synmathesis, and that all living processes, all living things exist in a perpetual state of mutual learning in their contexts. They are always responding, always in interaction, always changing just a little bit. And as they do, we have this thing called evolution that happens. Boundaries are interfaces of learning. For example, if we keep trying to solve the immigration problem as something separate from the wealth gap problem, as something separate from the ecological problem, as something separate from the way that exploitation is taking place in all parts of the world, we're not going to get it. We're just going to keep chopping off the heads of hydras.

The kind of information that is generated about relational interdependency, I call it warm data. It's warm because it's in relationship. It's in its contexts. It's not isolated and alone. Warm data can be defined as trans-contextual information about the inter-relationships that integrate a complex system.

Finally, a comment made by Alessandra Pomarico received many nods of agreement around our retreat table: “Art is a space for healing. It stirs the wounds, it makes the pain more visible, bringing it to the surface, making us less numb.” These are words to live by as we reflect on our work and how it addresses “the deep and perplexing problems that beset contemporary life.”

Setting the Tone for a Program Analysis

The deep thinking offered by our guests at the retreat can be summarized in the following questions to guide our program analysis in 2018:

- Relationship-building has been a central aspect of many of our programs—putting into relation people who come from different contexts, experiences, and world views. How can forms of relationality such as the ones offered through *kinstillatory* thinking and *warm data*, move us beyond mere reproduction of the status quo?
- What ruptures do we directly and indirectly cause through our programs, gatherings, and conversations? How do we conduct ourselves individually and organizationally through these ruptures to shape a path toward decolonial love, as Recollet suggests? Is this the healing work of art?
- At which boundaries do we work? How do our inquiries rub up against each other and intersect to prompt new learning? Do we find *symnathesis* (mutual learning) at these boundaries and edges in ways that shift perception, cause ruptures, or enable us to unlearn colonial thinking?
- An understanding of the imagination in Indigenous thought can be the foundation of Musagetes’ commitment to embodying multiple ways of knowing, being, and relating in our organizational form, programs, and relationships. How do we respect and enact in our own understanding what Dan Longboat wrote?—*The experience of imagination is minding all things. Minding all things performs the*

spiritual conservation of all things. All things comprise the Indigenous mind and Indigenous minds are composed of all things.

Reflections on Musagetes' work by the International Advisors (Tim Brodhead, Frances Westley, Simon Brault) offered several direct questions about our programs for us to consider:

- Is it the ultimate goal of Musagetes to generate more conversations that lead to other conversations and so on? Or, is it to translate conversations into actionable ideas and scalable positions? Are we building a transnational dialogue through our project experiments and discourse?
- We have seen major paradigm shifts in the world since the founding of Musagetes. Given the state of the world today, how do we get our work to the "outer register" more quickly?
- If the richness of our programs on a small scale has become quite intense and is reflected in the frameworks of our thought, how do we connect that to social movements in order to stimulate a broader enactment of our mandate?
- Musagetes describes itself as a learning organization, but what processes of *unlearning* are necessary to decolonize our organizations and ourselves?
- How can Musagetes become more public, more visible, more open and transparent in broader circles of discourse about Musagetes' methodology, its own struggles, its own failures and successes especially in relation to its own process of decolonization?
- If we think of Musagetes as a sensibility rather than as an approach, a methodology, a program, or a set of projects, then the way we form and sustain relationships must be creative, open, responsive, and collaborative.
- Is ArtsEverywhere amplifying the influence that Musagetes might have? How can we test our assumption that if more people read about what Musagetes and others are doing and learning, then we'll influence other peoples' ideas of what's possible? Could a stronger element of journalism build greater readership engagement, currency, and urgency, especially as we weave together art and social justice?
- Does our work offer multiple entry points for people who want to interact with our model? A single tone, language, link, or format is not enough. We need to have multiple ways and pay attention to maintaining those ways of engaging.

These questions, and others, will provoke further thinking and writing through 2018 as Musagetes looks forward to the second decade of its existence. How will the world change in the next year, two years, and beyond? What do we do now?

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