

How We Gather Now: A Finding Aid

By Seika Boye, Sasha Kovacs, Rohan Kulkarni,
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How we gather now is exemplified by the candid screenshot of a conversation between the four co-authors, with Zoom's interface shaping many of our encounters during the last year. The now omnipresent Zoom windows are also representative of the spaces of conversation and exchange that cut between and across intimacy and isolation, which we have been studying as we collaborate on a virtual exhibition currently titled *How We Gather Now: A Finding Aid*. Our goal is to develop a virtual space that facilitates ongoing access to a curated selection of recorded conversations about performance in Canada generated since March 2020. The collection of conversations that we are currently considering for inclusion in the exhibition have emerged, in turn, from our collaboration with other researchers involved in the

Gatherings: Archival and Oral Histories of Performance SSHRC Partnership Development Grant project, which serves the preservation and study of performance histories in Canada (gatheringspartnership.com).

In this article, we apply the structure of the Zoom frame to offer *CTR* readers a view, through isolated windows, into the exhibition's development process. In what follows, co-curators Sasha Kovacs and Seika Boye describe how the exhibition's central concerns and questions have shifted over its two years of development. Graduate research assistants Rohan Kulkarni and Atefeh Zargarzadeh detail the emergent methodologies employed in the current collection and transcription of potential exhibition materials. These reflections represent a research creation process



Four contributors from two sides of the country meet to discuss a virtual exhibition about performance in Canada: Rohan (bottom left) and Seika (top left) in Toronto, ON; Atefeh (bottom right) and Sasha (top right) in Victoria, BC.

Photo by Sasha Kovacs. Screenshot of a Zoom Conversation 9 February 2021. 11:36:23 a.m. PST

still in progress, working to develop a methodology to historicize new and urgent forms of performance-related gatherings.

Notes from Co-curator Sasha Kovacs

It seems almost impossible to think that just over a year has passed since 11 March 2020, when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Six days after that announcement, Simon Brault, the Director and CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts, recognized “the devastating impact that measures of isolation and social distancing will have on the arts and culture sector, which are directly dependent on audience attendance and domestic and international travel for their creative, production and dissemination activities.” Theatre auditoriums have sat empty for much of the past year—illuminated by countless ghost lights—while the global artistic community tirelessly pivots to reach audiences outside of theatre walls. Concomitantly, the 25 May 2020 murder of George Floyd resulted in a (re)reckoning with the impact of anti-Black and systemic racism on performing arts communities. In the wake of these events, artists and audiences have come together to reimagine performance’s relationship to social justice, health, well-being, and safety across multiple digital platforms. Conversations that in the ‘before times’ would have taken place in person in a lobby or bar post-show are now broadly accessible to the public via Twitter threads, online conversations in Zoom, and virtual artist talks. These waves of virtual theorizing are still surging and raise questions of what will be left in their wake:

- How are these conversations being preserved for posterity?
- What is unique about the online gatherings that theatre professionals and audiences have attended since March 2020?
- What discursive frameworks are resonating across these meetings?
- How can these conversations be mobilized as a tool in future practice, teaching, and research?

It is with these questions in mind that *How We Gather Now: A Finding Aid* was conceived. While the exhibition’s purposes intersect with other COVID-19-related archival initiatives,¹ what distinguishes our project is our aim to move beyond the collection of artifacts documenting how the pandemic led to various forms of performance pivoting and towards a focus on curating an approach to finding and interpreting the theoretical and reflective conversations about performance that have taken place (primarily, but not only) in Zoom meeting rooms. These conversations happening in little boxes represent unique archival objects; through our project we are looking to develop a methodology to engage with this new and now ubiquitous format of performance research material. In some ways, the exhibition’s present focus reflects a value that has always been at the forefront of our team’s planning for this virtual exhibition: we are committed to approaching this work as service to artists and other performance researchers. Yet the exhibition’s current strategy also represents an emergent direction.

Notes from Co-curator Seika Boye

If you search the term ‘gathering’ today, one year and counting into the COVID-19 pandemic, you will find a number of dictionary definitions of ‘an assembly or meeting,’ followed by guidelines for gathering *safely*: colour coded, zone specific, sternly stated, and difficult to discern guidelines for how to be together while staying safely apart. In many ways the guidelines are about navigating and discerning *proximity*—nearness in space, time, or relationship. To my mind, *Gatherings: Archival and Oral Histories of Performance* has always been about proximity and how to create or facilitate it where it has not otherwise been. The emphasis on nearness as opposed to apartness or distance is a through line in a project that may seem from the outside to have shifted dramatically—especially in relation to the virtual exhibition.

The ongoing dialogues between Sasha and me have focused on exhibiting ephemera discovered in the research and research relationships of our colleagues on the *Gatherings* project. It was intended to be virtual prior to COVID-19 lockdowns. In January and February 2020, we began to plan an online exhibition focused on the collection of objects from communities and practices that have been historically and systemically excluded based on institutionalized racism and white supremacy. When COVID-19 lockdowns were announced in March 2020, our concern shifted to how the project would be impacted by lack of access to institutions, community spaces, or homes where objects are stored and our inabilities to travel or have objects professionally photographed. A redistribution of travel funds would be considered in terms of resources, if the need arose.

On 25 May 2020 the need, a need that was already at the heart of *Gatherings*, was catapulted to the forefront of our COVID-19 concerns. Anti-Black violence was once again documented and the inequities that are always simmering, in closer proximity for some than for others, were placed at the centre of our questioning about what is needed. Any objects to be included in the exhibition would reveal something about people and their relationships to one another, their communities, nation states, institutions, cultures, and locations. What objects would help us to direct focus to where it is *needed*? What would guide the curation of the exhibition? When the Dance Studies Association distributed a call for the redistribution of funds to Black, Indigenous, and other racialized artists disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns, the *Gatherings* Executive quickly responded to the call. At the same time, I began to observe the sudden proliferation of online discussions for, by, with, and about Black artists, cultural leaders, and scholars, linked by the purpose of clearly stating and challenging the systemic racism that continues to be rife within cultural institutions. The time required to attend each talk quickly became untenable because of Zoom fatigue, homeschooling my two children, and exhaustion from the hyper-focus on racism in news and social media. I began to ask the following questions:

- Will I ever catch up on missed conversations?
- How will we return to this moment to review the record?
- Will the conversations be available to us when we are ready for them?

- Is anyone tracking these conversations? Contextualizing them? Time-coding them or transcribing them for ease and to turn discussion into resources for research and tools for action?

In response, as part of my personal research with *Gatherings* (outside of the co-curatorial work on the virtual exhibition), I decided to ask two artists and community organizers, Kevin Ormsby and Aria Evans, if they would be willing to share recordings of upcoming conversations they had organized about anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism in dance in Canada and allow for a detailed transcription by a BIPOC research assistant. Aria's discussion was for racialized artists only, and it was important to respect this boundary in the transcription process as well. They both agreed, and I also invited them to participate in interviews reflecting on the conversations, with a fee being paid to reflect this labour. I asked Rohan Kulkarni, *Gatherings*' research assistant, to document and transcribe these conversations. His reflections on the process and developing methodologies have become an invaluable point of reference for *How We Gather Now*.

It quickly became apparent that a new object was emerging from the simultaneous and intersecting truths of a global pandemic and protest against anti-Black racism: recorded online conversations between people who were not usually, easily, in a room together. These conversations became the new focus of the *Gatherings Virtual Exhibition*.

Notes from Documentarian Rohan Kulkarni

The process of documenting “Konversations on Colour”—an online gathering of over a dozen Black artists and leaders from Canada's dance community—was marked by surprise and discovery: surprise that the format of virtual gatherings was more challenging to document than I had expected and discovery that documenting such conversations is an act of responsibility and care.

My instruction at the outset was to offer a summary of the two-hour recorded conversation as best as I could, without worrying about capturing every detail or idea that came up. Positioning myself as if I were a notetaker during the live occurrence of this meeting, I documented each speaker's contributions, trying to pay special attention to their body language, intonation, and points of emphasis. All the while, I was grappling with the gravity of the topic being discussed, namely, systemic anti-Black racism in the performing arts. My first two attempts at documenting this conversation felt like a failure. There were simply too many voices, too many important ideas, and too much at stake to be satisfied with a general summary as the only living archive of such a meaningful community gathering.

I decided to do this conversation greater justice through a verbatim transcript. Knowing how labour intensive this task would be, I wanted to make use of the plethora of AI (Artificial Intelligence) transcription services available online. I uploaded the video to a service called Otter.ai and watched it work, only to realize quickly that it was not suited to this task. The diversity of the group having this conversation was too overwhelming for an AI service to contend with—it could not make sense of the variety of accents and dialects representing everywhere from Montreal to the Caribbean and various generations of African diaspora. I found myself correcting, on average, every fifth word of a sentence: not

only was this frustrating, it was also very inefficient. My assumption of AI as an objective, accessible resource quickly dissolved in the face of the reality that AI transcription could only be productively accessed by those working with conversations spoken in standard, white-coded North American accents and cadence. Right on cue, I received emails and pop-ups from Otter and other AI websites encouraging me to make use of their (expensive) manual transcription services, which were guaranteed to work very well for conversations with multiple speakers and a variety of accents. Rejecting these aggressively marketed services, I worked over several weeks to produce a complete verbatim transcript of “Konversations.”

As detailed as the transcript was, I realized it could not be the only documentation of this event. It would be very difficult for anyone to sift through numerous pages and overlapping ideas to find useful quotations and action items. The verbatim transcript needed a companion, which I am calling an *interpretive* transcript. By doing a simple keyword search within the verbatim transcript, such as ‘funding’ or ‘Canada Council’ or ‘diaspora,’ I was able to create a comprehensive list of overarching themes based on how frequently a word was spoken. After identifying these key threads within the discussion, I extracted and time-stamped quotes that felt most useful based on the possible future significance of ‘Konversations,’ including for political action and community building.

I propose the dual transcription method is an effective and responsible approach to documenting virtual gatherings that centre marginalized communities and discuss sensitive topics, of which there have been many in the past year.

Notes from Gatherer Atefeh Zargarzadeh

As the exhibition team's research assistant, I was assigned to gather and categorize a wide range of materials reflecting the exhibition's shift towards recorded conversations. I selected these materials from an initial list of sources contributed by the *Gatherings* research project's co-investigators and collaborators. With no limits on potential formats, these materials range from podcasts, video conferences, seminars, performances, exhibitions, workshops, symposia, and research projects. Whether initially created for public or private forums, and whether first presented as recordings or live, these materials are now available through a range of online platforms such as Zoom, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Spotify. They include conversations and events held across—and spanning the borders of—Canada because of the global nature of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the social justice protests in response to the murder of George Floyd. Those who led these gatherings represent a diverse range of occupations and fields of artistic practice. I categorize some of the key concepts discussed in these talks and events as:

- Individual/collective responsibility
- Centralizing marginalized voices
- Cultural and creative isolation
- Racial capitalism and over-policing in Canada
- The impact of COVID-19 on the arts sector and arts administration
- Black identity and systemic racism in the arts

- Indigeneity/inclusion/equity/resilience
- Art community support and the value of art in society during the pandemic
- Asian-Canadian responses to COVID-19
- Mental/physical health and the performing arts

The ephemeral nature of these gatherings poses a challenge: audio or video recordings are either disappearing or not currently available for different reasons. This is more prevalent when conversations are specifically between under-represented individuals and communities. The inefficiency of certain search engines in identifying these recordings is another issue. Many of the contributed items could not be found through a Google search, and I was only able to identify them by following a chain of related links across platforms.

Acknowledging these challenges, we are currently sorting through sources and planning to illustrate each material in a way that its format, time frame, key concepts, poster/image/screenshot, description, date, participants, and the link to the event/talk can be easily identified, as in the image below.

This simple yet compact organization not only facilitates a more easily decodable metadata for identifying and categorizing each source at a glance, but also provides the exhibition's curatorial team with better insight into what materials we have and what is currently missing.

Notes from a Year Later

A year into this work we are still in motion and entering the phase of curatorial decision-making. In conclusion, we offer our reflections and observations as we move forward with this work, informed by so many simultaneous experiences.

Sasha: This contribution offers four windows into the histories of and preliminary approaches to *How We Gather Now: A Finding Aid*. The format we have used to structure this reflection illustrates the impact that Zoom is having (consciously or not) on our ways of working and being together. It might seem that our exhibition's shift towards focussing on the online conversation marks a new direction but in fact it has returned this project to its original purpose, which has always been to approach the study of performance history as a service to a broader network of artists, educators, and researchers. The conversations we have collected and are now analyzing through our ongoing curatorial process serve to underscore the urgent need for this approach as they emphasize that the dramaturgies of our work—the structures we enact within—are deeply implicated in the politics of our artistic and research practices.

Seika: With a year behind us, we now have a scope for comparison. We have been witnesses to, and participants in, a profound change in our ways of communicating in day-to-day life and in how we share our artistic practices. If we look back, we see the shifts that happen without detection: as in rehearsal, the edges smooth out, transitions are made with ease, and another entity emerges from what we are doing together. This shared familiarity means that our way of analyzing recorded conversations is also more adept and nuanced. We have experience from within recorded conversations, and participation enables us to analyze conversations with increased understanding of these platforms. *How We Gather Now* is working to have this material ready to access for research now and in the future.

Rohan: A year later, online gatherings have become a part of our everyday reality. They have opened up a space of potential for larger conversations about equity and anti-racism in the arts,



A visual rendering developed by Atefeh Zargarzadeh that exemplifies the exhibition team's current approach to organizing collected research materials in an at-a-glance format.
 Photo by Atefeh Zargarzadeh

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allowing artists to find meaningful solidarity across the country (and internationally). The methodology of documentation goes hand in hand with online gatherings, co-constructing the narrative around this unique historical moment and developing new techniques that will do justice to the goals of these conversations.

Atefeh: A year later, I look back at the ever-growing scope of materials gathered in the exhibition thanks to greater access to online spaces for artists to convene. Every day I am engaging with new features released in platforms that aim to bring people together: YouTube Live, Discord, Facebook Live, IGTV, Clubhouse, Gather. Online gathering is now the new norm, and it amplifies a Fear of Missing Out. As such, more than ever I feel the exigency of my role in this project.

To follow developments of *How We Gather Now* go to gathering-partnership.com.

Note

- 1 For example, the Harry Ransom Centre's Theatre 2020 project (at the University of Texas at Austin), the University of Toronto Quarantine Performance Project (quarantineperformance.weebly.com), and the Interuniversity Research Centre on Québec Literature and Culture's (CRILCQ) database, which tracks adaptation strategies implemented by Québécois artists and organizations unable to travel.

Work Cited

Brault, Simon. "COVID 19: Putting People First." *Canada Council for the Arts*, 17 Mar. 2020, canadacouncil.ca/spotlight/2020/03/covid-19.

About the Authors

Seika Boye is a scholar, writer, educator, and artist whose practices and research revolve around dance and movement. She is an assistant professor, Teaching Stream/Director of the Institute for Dance Studies at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, University of the Toronto. Seika curated the archival exhibition *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900–1970 and Now*.

Sasha Kovacs is an assistant professor of theatre history in the Department of Theatre at the University of Victoria (Canada). Her research focuses on Canadian theatre historiography, with a special interest in non-traditional performance-related archival materials.

Rohan Kulkarni is a second-year PhD student at University of Toronto's Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. His doctoral research explores the rise of South Asian diaspora theatre in Canada over the last three decades, with a focus on examining its aesthetics, themes, and politics.

Atefeh Zargarzadeh is a third-year PhD student in theatre studies at the University of Victoria. Her doctoral research identifies paradigms of cultural appropriation in the politics of theatre production that propagate and commodify images of Middle Eastern identity within North American intercultural theatre spaces.