

## **We Came Singing**

### **The Braided Voices of Jill Carter, Virginie Magnat, and Mariel Belanger**

Honoring Cultural Diversity through Collective Vocal Practice is a SSHRC-funded project developed in close consultation with an Indigenous Advisory Committee composed of seven Indigenous artist-scholars and Elders / Traditional Knowledge Keepers, as well as two Indigenous and two non-Indigenous graduate students and a non-Indigenous artist-scholar. Together<sup>1</sup> we have been exploring resonance as a practice of ritual engagement activated by the Indigenous ethical principles of relationality, reciprocity, respect, and responsibility. In 2016–17, we co-facilitated three gatherings / singing circles hosted in two Okanagan traditional winter homes and at the University of British Columbia First Nations Longhouse in Vancouver; two open workshops at Simon Fraser University and UBC's Okanagan Campus; two performative presentations for the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and for the Canadian Association for Theatre Research / L'Association canadienne de la recherche théâtrale conference held in Toronto; as well as a three-day retreat/closed meeting in the Okanagan.

#### **About Singing**

*Jill Carter:* Singing for me is an elusive, frustrating, and at times incomprehensible art. As a young woman, I pursued vocal training, and for several years, my body would go into revolt the moment I hit B-natural during warm up. First, it checked out, and I would lose consciousness. Then, it would *threaten* to check out while I grasped the side of a table or chair, shaking and rocking and finally dissolving into sobs. Then, I turned cold. Then, I turned hot. Still, I sang on, locked in a love-hate relationship with my voice, my breath, my vibrating body . . .

I don't remember the songs of my people after I have left a circle, and I have finally accepted without (or *with less*) guilt, shame, and apology the idea that perhaps this is because this is not my task in life: I am not a singer. Or am I? What is it really—to “sing?”

When I tell a story with my heart pounding in my throat, as my being resonates, stretching the strands of my DNA to their limits—reaching to a listener, feeling desperately for

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<sup>1</sup> The members of the Indigenous Advisory Committee are Syilx Elder Delphine Derickson, Cree Elder Winston Wuttunee, and Nêhiyo Itâpsinowin Knowledge Keeper Joseph Naytowhow, three distinguished singers, musicians, storytellers, and educators; Indigenous Music Therapy specialist Dr. Carolyn Kenny (Antioch University); Arts-based Indigenous Education scholar and musician Dr. Vicki Kelly (Simon Fraser University); scholar-practitioner of Indigenous Epistemologies and Indigenous Education Dr. Manulani Aluli-Meyer (University of Hawaii); Indigenous Performance Studies artist-scholar Dr. Jill Carter (University of Toronto); Syilx interdisciplinary artists and MFA students Corinne Derickson and Mariel Belanger (UBC); Ethnomusicology and Theatre Studies PhD students Julia Ulehla and Claire Fogal (UBC); and Performance Studies scholar-practitioner Dr. Virginie Magnat (UBC), who directs this SSHRC-funded project.

an answering vibration—is that singing? When I sing out a greeting or hear my blood singing in my ears, am I not singing then?

I have learned through the years that singing, while certainly confessional, is as much response as it is call. It requires an opening of self—a signal of invitation, a promise to accept what is received.

*Virginie Magnat:* As a European performance practitioner and educator, I have been (re-)learning traditional songs in Occitan, the critically endangered language of my Mediterranean cultural legacy. According to Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, when a competent performer actively and attentively embodies a traditional song, it can become a vehicle that reconnects them to those who first sang the song. What keeps a traditional song alive is the particular vibratory quality linked to the precision of the song's structure, a form of acoustic energy channelled by repetitions and subtle variations, enabling this song to reach us across hundreds of years. If ancestral embodied knowledge is encoded in traditional songs, and if the power of these songs hinges upon the embodied experience of singing them, then trusting that the body can remember how to sing, as if traces of this ancient knowledge had been preserved in the body memory, can become a way of recovering that knowledge and reclaiming cultural continuity (Magnat 2014).

If vocal music traditions—whose resilience crucially depends on oral transmission—epitomize the value of intangible cultural heritage (as defined by UNESCO), can sharing songs from different traditions contribute to the “survival” of oral cultures? Can collective cultural practice support expressions of cultural sovereignty and self-determination while promoting inclusivity, diversity, and solidarity as the core values of a healthy multicultural society? Can engaging in non-colonial forms of collective vocal practice help Indigenous, Settler, and Immigrant communities to develop mutually beneficial relationships based on a shared respect for the natural environment and a shared commitment to collective health and well-being, intercultural understanding, and social justice? Can collective experiences of the value of cultural diversity lead to positive change in Canada in the post-TRC era? Can the contested term reconciliation be envisioned as a call to active participation in anti-/de-/non-colonial forms of cultural practice, a form of collective testimony or utopian performative with a potential for transformation?

### **About Song as Invitation**

*Jill Carter:* The late and greatly mourned Dr. Carolyn Kenny (Choctaw) tells a story she learned from her adoptive (Haida Gwaii) family. In this story, as the creation is beginning to unfold, fear has seized human beings, and so they have devised a stunted life lived in stasis and darkness. Their bodies seized by fear are tiny, refusing to grow into the creatures we were created to be. Isolating themselves from the outside world, they live together crammed inside a giant clamshell until Raven sings them out into the world and into their humanity (see Kenny et al. 1).

I do not know what it is to live in a world without fear. But I am learning what it is to come singing despite (and, perhaps, *to spite*) my own terror. I am learning what it is to stretch my being to its utmost to reach through the darkness of my interior “clamshell” toward another who may be standing in the light. I am learning, too, what it is to open myself to the songs outside myself, to be shifted by the currents of resonance sent by another’s intentional breath (see Meyer, in Kenny et al. 23), to await invitation, to accept welcome, and to be transformed by the possibilities contained within these offerings.

In circle, I re-member myself. But to enter the circle, I remember, Indigenous protocols globally have required us to pause in a liminal space, never touching that place where water kisses land, never venturing into the clearing beyond the dense forest, never stepping off the tarmac until we have sent out the call announcing our presence and intentions and until we have received a response—an invitation to step into the territory of another. Across Turtle Island, we came to each other singing. Across Turtle Island, we received each other in song. Today, our nations’ circles and the circles within those circles continue to receive, to grow, to radiate outwards.

*Virginie Magnat:* Our collaboration hinges upon the conviction that cultural practice is a vital way of being and knowing. Through the collective practice of tuning to the voices of the ancestors, our ritual engagement with resonance connects the living past and the living present to create an acoustic ecology for the healing of community, place, and land. We are exploring the possible affective impacts of weaving our voices together when employing the arts-based inquiry form of literary *métissage* in relationship to the traditions of Indigenous knowledge and song, so that braiding voices can become a way of honouring Indigenous research methodologies.

### **About our CATR Conference Performative Experiment**

*Jill Carter:* The membership of the Canadian Association for Theatre Research / *L’Association canadienne de la recherche théâtrale* gathered in Tkaronto/Gichi Kiiwenging in the spring of 2017, lending us the opportunity to invite visitors to, stewards of, and settler-denizens within the traditional territories of the Erie, Petun, Neutral, Wendat, Seneca and Michi Saagig Anishinaabeg into our work.

The work to which we have committed ourselves with the singing circles, facilitated by Dr. Virginie Magnat, concerns itself with the shared duty of all two-leggeds on these lands to listen, to learn, to remember and to reciprocate—*con* verse. It concerns itself with the re-imagination of right relationships and the invitation to articulate newly acquired understandings and commitments. It envisions a way forward, which begins with a Speech Act—a declaration of desire to enter into an ongoing relationship with each other and the biotas that sustain us all and that renders the articulation of desire into an ongoing practice in quotidian life. Without such a practice, treaty (nation-to-nation and human-to-nonhuman-world) violations will continue to escalate, as humanness erodes and the natural world revolts, refusing to sustain the monsters into

which we risk making ourselves and each other (see TRC 121-26; see also Crowshoe, in TRC, 123).

*Virginie Magnat:* Indigenous scholar Dr. Dwayne Donald defines literary *métissage* as “an ethical praxis of relationality” and states that the key challenge currently facing Indigenous peoples is “the assertion of difference in response to the homogenizing power of coloniality, neoliberalism, and globalization” since such a focus on difference “seems in direct contradiction to Indigenous philosophical emphasis on wholism and ecological relationality.” This compels him to ask, “How can we be simultaneously different and related?” (xvi-xvii). This challenge is particularly relevant to research striving to contribute to on-going reconciliation processes in Canadian society.

*Jill Carter:* And so, we came singing. We rejected the urge to arrange bodies in a circle—to obligate our witnesses to enter (however willingly) this circle without ceremony, without protocol, without invitation. Instead, we applied the first fruits of our research, utilizing ancestral mechanisms to inscribe a healing circle with the resonance produced by our own instruments. Within this vocally inscribed circle, we intended to re-place our guests in mindful relationship to the biota we share; to each other; and to the difficult work with which we are all charged in this historical moment. As we (five representative members of an ever-expanding circle of song) sought to curate a space of invitation into relationship with that larger circle and with the work accomplished by our colleagues within that space, I found myself returning to a poem that Mariel Belanger had shared.

*Virginie Magnat:* We first experimented with *métissage* when Indigenous artist-scholars Dr. Vicki Kelly and Dr. Jill Carter, Indigenous graduate students Corinne Derickson and Mariel Belanger, and myself braided our voices, sounds, songs, and words through a performative presentation at the 2017 CATR conference in Toronto. We nonverbally invited everyone in the audience to stand up with us to honour the seven directions announced through songs accompanied by drumming and flute playing. This collaborative experiment was informed by Dr. Carter’s investigation of dramaturgical structure devised as an insurgent research encounter that pushes back against settler-hunger/passive consumption and gently transforms the comfortable voyeur into active witness. The acoustic ecology we created for this experiment also benefitted from the guidance of Dr. Kelly, who has used *métissage* extensively in her own research. This includes collaborating with the authors of *Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for Our Times* (2009), who acknowledge her as a mentor.

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### Seven Directions Strand for “Singing Circles”

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**Seven Directions Piece** (Vicki and Corinne nonverbally invite audience to rise)

<b>Mariel</b>	<b>Call (poem / stanza by stanza)</b>
<b>Vicki</b>	<b>Flute</b>
<b>Jill</b>	<b>Response—directional teaching (always ending with “listen”)</b>
<b>Corinne</b>	<b>Four Directions<sup>2</sup> traditional song in nsyilxcən (Syilx/Okanagan)</b>
<b>Virginie</b>	<b>Traditional songs in Occitan (southern France)</b>

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## I

*Mariel Belanger:*

I am in a box  
That surrounds me  
And makes me stumble  
When I walk

*Jill Carter: Waabinong:* The East is the place of new beginnings: the journey of life begins in the eastern quadrant of the circle; the sun rises before us, and we face its light, seeking vision and giving thanks for this gift of life—the return of the birds, the warming earth, the flowering trees. It is springtime—*Ziigwaan*. And everything is quickening inside and around us. *Asema*—tobacco—is the medicine of the east—offered in gratitude for These things.

LISTEN...

## II

*Mariel Belanger:*

Tripping on my history  
While trying to keep pace  
With present mystery

*Jill Carter: Zhawaanong:* Here in the south, we are in *Niibin*—the summer of our lives. The world is bursting with the sweetness of life. We are taught that it is here and now that we must

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<sup>2</sup> Corinne Derickson's “Four Directions” song includes South, East, North and West, as well as three additional directions to honour all above and all below and the centre inside us.

take care of the spirit the growing body houses. We must cultivate that spirit, so the harvest will be rich and sweet as youth fades, and the hot blood cools. Grandmother Cedar is the medicine of this wild, wandering season. She cleanses and protects.

LISTEN...

### III

*Mariel Belanger:*

In a fit of anxiety  
I throw the box  
To the land  
Oh Creator, Oh god, . . . oh someone  
Help me understand

*Jill Carter: Epangishmok:* Facing westwind, we are in *Takwaakin*—the autumn of our lives. A time of preparation; a time to ready ourselves for the conclusion of our journey in this life. Sage is the medicine associated with this season; its sweet smoke cleanses us, soothes heated thoughts, calms fears, and ensures that we continue to travel on with clear sight and good thoughts.

LISTEN...

### IV

*Mariel Belanger:*

Where do I belong?  
The white indian holding  
Her granny's song

*Jill Carter: Kiiwedionong:* The North is the place of wisdom. As the earth rests under her snow blanket, so we rest in the winter of our lives. This is the time of story. The time of ceremony. The time of spirits. The sweetness of the sweetgrass braid carries us momentarily back to the summer of our lives, reminding us that life continues; all times are one. . . *Biidaaban:* Dawn is breaking. The future rushes in. Rest. Remember.

LISTEN...

V

*Mariel Belanger:*

Oh God, Oh Creator  
Why rip me in half?  
Why do I suffer  
While other's laugh?

*Jill Carter:* They told me, Look up to the sky! You will never lose your way. And you will always know when to plant or to pray; when to feast or to fast; when to hunt or to tell story. Follow the path of souls. Feel the big-bellied grandmother pulling on your womb! Look up, they told me. “We are such things as stars are made of . . .”

LISTEN...

VI

*Mariel Belanger:*

The song in me implores  
Protect your mother earth  
She needs your care  
But my soul yearns for more  
And begs to explore

*Jill Carter:* Look down, they told me. You are the youngest child of Aki—the earth. When your mother is sick, take care of her.

LISTEN...

VII

*Mariel Belanger:*

The future  
Wings spread  
Waiting to soar

*Jill Carter*: You stand at the centre of the circle. Wherever you find yourself—that is the centre. Look ever outwards from this place where your spirit begins its journey. And know this: Like a stone cast upon the waters, your every impulse affects change in the world.

For good or for ill?

That is your responsibility—the burden you must carry.

LISTEN...

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