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Resilience in Pandemic Sensemaking: Thinking Through a Community of Practice

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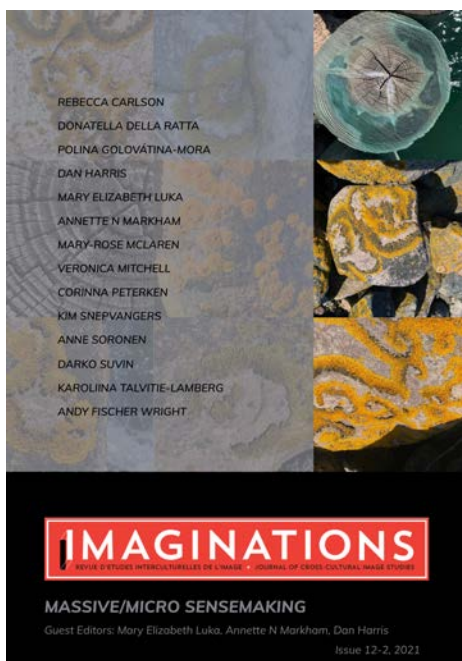
Résumé de l'article

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MASSIVE/MICRO SENSEMAKING
Guest Editors: Mary Elizabeth Luka, Annette N Markham, Dan Harris

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**Massive/Micro Sensemaking:
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Image credit: Annette N Markham

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RESILIENCE IN PANDEMIC SENSEMAKING: THINKING THROUGH A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

MARY ELIZABETH LUKA

In the fall of 2020, a series of videos created for the exploratory shared experience called Massive Micro Sensemaking were presented at the Virtual International Arts (VIA) Festival for Social Change in New York. In this article, Luka considers these works as caring, reflective and expressive practices of resilience during a global crisis, while questioning who benefits from promoting ideas about social resilience in such circumstances.

À l'automne 2020, une série de vidéos créées pour une expérience partagée exploratoire, appelée Massive Micro Sensemaking, a été présentée au Virtual International Arts (VIA) Festival for Social Change à New York. Dans cet article, Luka considère ces vidéos comme des pratiques de résilience bienveillantes, réflexives et expressives dans un contexte de crise mondiale, tout en se demandant à qui profite la promotion d'idées sur la résilience sociale dans de telles circonstances.

INTRODUCTION

On October 27, 2020, 40 people from around the English-speaking world met on the COVID-19 pandemic's ubiquitous gathering platform, Zoom, to screen and discuss a collection of 14 videos. It was the first night of a three-day international salon-gathering-slash-virtual-performance-festival, the Virtual International Arts (VIA) Festival for Social Change, hosted by the Mark De Garmo Dance Company. The latter is a non-profit organization that supports interdisciplinary programming in New York City, targeted to under-served school-age students (https://markdegar-

modance.org/). De Garmo choreographs and performs dance-theatre as well as hosting performance art and time-based media salons, such as the VIA festival where the MMS videos were exhibited. The nominal revenues generated by donations to the organization help cover the costs of exhibitions, discussion forums, dance-theatre performances, and educational programs.

The first night of the October 2020 VIA Festival featured videos generated by a 21-day autoethnographic prompts initiative, Massive Micro Sensemaking, (Markham and Harris 2020) that had ended just four months earlier, on June 7. Curated into batches of five to eight minutes of viewing (four batches of three videos; one of two videos), the presentation honoured the messy production values required by the rapid response and multiple file transfers used in these short-term time-based responses. Interspersed with five-minute discussion interludes with the three curators and several of the makers, the hour-long event created a bubble of visceral, intense reminders about what it had been like in the first weeks of the lockdowns, within which to watch, revisit, react, feel, and reflect on COVID-19 times, so far. Months later, it is evident (as with other articles in this special issue) that the layers of observation, reaction, and early analysis generated within these early "bubbles" (see Peterken, this issue) by MMS participants allowed the scholars, artists, and activists a way to feel connected to others through startling shifts in awareness of unfolding life experiences, to actively pause their own research agendas, and to explore a shared autoethnographic experience. More than this, however, in this article, I explore how sometimes seemingly superficial notions of resilience embedded in the video productions are deeply, if tentatively, felt, and can be unpacked as expressions not just of the tantalizing promise of MMS (making sense of the world collectively through 'sensemaking'), but also how it might connect to long-standing considerations of cultural trauma developed by Indigenous scholars and artists such as Thomas King and Cheryl L'Hirondelle. As the world (at the macro level) and the participants (at the micro level) emerge from that first year of extreme flux due to COVID-19, to what extent will shifts in research and creative practice and the kind of collegiality engendered by MMS with its 165 par-

ticipants take hold in the longer term, and why does this matter? I examine the curatorial threads drawn through the VIA Festival programming sequence and peer through the lenses of the videos of that evening—and a few other artworks—to better understand what the process offered beyond immediate catharsis and preliminary sensemaking about the situation evolving—or sometimes unraveling—before us.

MASSIVE MICRO SENSEMAKING

The MMS project came calling in April 2020, just a couple of weeks after the initial national lockdown in Canada in response to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. Annette Markham, one of the organizers (then based in Denmark), asked if I would be interested in collaborating on an autoethnographic creative/critical research response to the pandemic. Like so many others, I was intent on making sense of what was happening, as well as alternately resisting and accepting the changes to daily life that it was obvious had arrived. So, I said yes. On the work front, my preparation for summer research involving visits to creative hubs across the country had come to a screeching halt. I had flipped my winter courses to online delivery over the weekend. We officially transitioned from winter to spring and had delivered the last three weeks of the course in a shockingly different way than anticipated. And I was preparing to teach an intensive, multi-disciplinary methods course for 20 graduate students online at the largest university in the country. The students I work with come from different disciplines and degrees as well as diverse scholarly and professional backgrounds and exhibit various levels of comfort with being online for coursework. While some were registered in digital design programs, most were in education, management, or arts-based courses. As for me, the multi-disciplinary course was the seventh new-to-me course in a row. I was exhausted and felt unmoored in life and work, coming into the lockdown. The unfolding MMS preparation and processes helped to ground me.

While there have been several early outpourings of scholarly, professional, pragmatic, and creative reflections on the impact of the pandemic, this paper takes a step back to examine the way in which COVID-inflected productions set the stage to help shape acceptance of disruption and emergent visual culture presentation practices online. One of the outcomes of MMS was a series of videos programmed for viewing at the Mark De Garmo Virtual International Arts (VIA) Festival for Social Change on October 27, 2020, an event that provided the non-profit educational and performance company, Mark De Garmo Dance, with an engaging online event management experience. The first video presented that night was "Run Bunny Run" (Bastick et al., 2020, 0:51 mins).

Figure 1: Still from "Run Bunny Run" (Bastick et al., 2020, 0:51 mins).

"Run Bunny Run" (Bastick et al., 2020, 0:51 mins)

Stills of the gold-foil-wrapped chocolate 'bunny' in the 'outside world,' coupled with the threatening, pounding music in the soundtrack video pathetically and hilariously represent the vulnerability that many people felt in the early days of the pandemic lockdowns and the urge to somehow escape the situation, even if that meant self-injury or destruction. Its gentle but decisively fatal optimism results in the dissolution of itself as an object—every location it visits results in further melting, in

just 51 seconds—even while suggesting that there is a way ahead, which is fully unknown and yet to be shaped.

In the heart-pounding early days of shelter-in-place/stay-at-home orders, in late April and early May, I worked behind the scenes with Markham and her co-lead in the MMS project, Dan Harris, to prepare a series of 21 prompts for use between May 18 and June 7 (Markham and Harris). These exercises were designed to activate classic critical autoethnography as method by: *"(1) disrupting norms of research practice and representation; (2) working from insider knowledge; (3) maneuvering through pain, confusion, anger and uncertainty and making life better; (4) breaking silence/(re) claiming voice and writing to right; and (5) making work accessible"* (Holman Jones et al., 32, emphasis in original). These qualities make critical autoethnography a uniquely suitable method for exploring complex understandings of resilience and survivance. As I explore below, "resilience" (McRobbie) was one of the terms that was frequently used in reference to the changing social conditions exacerbated or caused by the unfurling of the COVID-19 global pandemic, though the way in which it was deployed has more in common with how creative workers in the arts develop professional capacity in precarious work conditions compared to how the related term, "survivance" (Vizenor), is used by Indigenous scholars and artists in regard to traumatic social changes or conditions.

In Markham and Harris's initial call for papers for a potential special issue on the autoethnographic experiences of COVID-19 to a variety of Listservs, more than 150 people responded with abstracts (including the 20 graduate students I was teaching). The 21 days of autoethnographic prompts was a way to build a community of connection and conduct research about sudden mandatory forms of social isolation at a time when the sensation of isolation was more unfamiliar and thereby intense (Markham, Harris, and Luka 2020). One recurrent theme that has since become a trope of the times, "being together, alone," was promoted by governments globally as a way to behave for the foreseeable and unknown future. In contrast, the initial challenge posed in the MMS call began with questions to observe what impacts such exhortations were having on people (as individu-

als or in a social context): "How is the experience of COVID-19 trans-forming everyday life? How are we making sense of this moment on both a global and granular scale?" Later, every single daily prompt would begin with this directive:

> "You have 24 hours to complete this task. The goal, as we will repeat daily like a mantra, is to build our embodied sensibili-ties toward the material we study, practice autoethnograph-ic forms of analysis, and transform our personal experiences through this COVID-19 moment into critical understanding of scale, sensemaking, and relationality of humans, nonhumans, and the planet."(Markham and Harris, 2020)

One of the prompts that I was deeply invested in was Prompt 3, which was a variation on another COVID-19 research-creation pro-ject, EXC-19 (https://exc-19.com/, Luka 2020). This preceding cre-ative project had invited artists, students, researchers, and other in-terested people to work together in a team of four to produce an "ex-quisite corpse" video, without knowing who the other three people were. Midi Onodera, the creator and producer of the project, noted:

> "[EXC-19 was] based on the Surrealist drawing game, 'The Exquisite Corpse', modified for the moving image. Each video would begin with a written piece of 19 words [be-cause...COVID-19]. This text was then randomly and anony-mously given to someone else to shoot video, photos or source found footage that somehow spoke to the written word. The footage would then be forwarded to another person for edit-ing and finally a fourth person would create the soundtrack. The 'collaborators' for each video would only be revealed once the video had been completed." (EXC-19 website)

I used the EXC-19 experience as inspiration for the MMS version of a media-based Exquisite Corpse game. A sign-up sheet in the shared Google folder allowed for up to four people to come together for MMS-EXC. People who did not yet know each other could commit to undertaking this process together, acting as an ice-breaker to get to know one another as well as a creative exercise and prompt re-

sponse. Many managed to complete their own step of the exercise within 24-48 hours (as directed by the prompt and notwithstanding multiple time zones), which resulted in several videos being completed within a week.

The two videos that I was involved in met the criteria of Prompt 3. The Group 6 video, "Land Here" (Gallaway-Mitchell et al., 2020, 1:11 mins), used progressively stark still images from a research site in the north, each featuring local birds and wildlife, except for one collage of four images of heavy-duty equipment in the middle of the sequence. While the first image of a bird showed it flying in a wide open sky, the next images of birds were shown moving around harbour waters and the rest moved through stages of death and decomposition. The soundtrack was composed from wind, bird sounds and machine sounds, waves floating in and out of hearing. The group that had created this video loved it, though it was not shared with the rest of the MMS project because the images came from a research site and were not meant to be revealed, a condition shared after the video had been completed. Nonetheless, the objectives of the exercise were achieved, as all the participants came to know each other's work a bit better and to feel more involved as part of the larger group. The other Prompt 3 video I was involved in, "Zoom Haiku," (Holford, Markham, Luka, and Harris, 2020, 1:15 mins) incorporated a cacophony of images typical of the early days of the lockdowns (social media screen grabs from 'doomscrolling,' lonely though often contemplative walks by the shore, puzzles, marks on a paper from unfinished or only briefly glimpsed drawings, headlines from politicians falsely claiming to have contained the virus, and, increasingly, screen captures of glitches) with glitzy, tacky titles revealing the 19-word 'haiku', overlaid with a beautifully calming piano soundtrack combined with the sound of waves and wind. Many of the videos featured at the October 27 VIA Festival event took a close look at the experience of suddenly enforced isolation, with several using similarly jarring juxtapositions of sound, image, and text, including the second and third ones screened at the VIA Festival, "Braiding Dislocated Lives" (Frølunde, Peterken, Phillips, and Chemi, 2020, 2:25 mins) and "The Threshold of Sound" (Carlson, Markham, Stirling, and Zheng, 2020, 1:50 mins).

This mask has been bothering me for days.....weeks.....months.....yea

Figure 2: Still from "Braiding Dislocated Lives" (Frølunde et al; 2020, 2:25 mins).

"Braiding Dislocated Lives" (Frølunde et al; 2020, 2:25 mins)

In the first half, a delicate soundtrack of rain is overlaid on stills of the sky, a vaguely figurative (blue) painting and a short video of a snail moving along the ground. The text exhorts viewers to "watch slowness/ feel slowness/be slowness." In the second half, stills from protests over Indigenous lands and a white person wearing a white mask are paired with a video clip of the destruction of white masking materials, while the text critiques "white privilege." The only sound in the second half is ambient sound from the mask material destruction. The title suggests that the videomakers are attempting to "braid" together different life experiences to jar viewers out of complacency, using the "dislocate[ion]" of the pandemic experience to compel us towards a call to action to ameliorate embedded inequities. All this, while working closely and fast with strangers-becoming-colleagues, at a time when the Black Lives Matter movement was regaining strength.

What was evident at the screening of these videos was the degree to which they could evoke the sensations of the first few months of lockdown, when so much change seemed both impossible (lockdown behaviours) and impossibly hopeful (social change). Less than a year after the earliest lockdowns in Australia, Asia, and then Europe and

North America, the hush that fell while watching these raw reactions to the circumstances of the moment illustrated how those chaotic, determined, sometimes frantic reactions were still with us. As I write this, more than a year after those first lockdowns, the research documenting longer term mental health, social and cultural effects is just starting to emerge.

"The Threshold of Sound" (Carlson et al., 2020, 1:50 mins)

A mix of sounds drawn from protests, birdsong, piano music, and mechanical computer-generated or modulated audio, (e.g. "Hello, my name is Karen," "do you take care of yourself?, I want you to," "hashtag what I learned today," "link/image/analysis," "June 3, 2020," "even the sharp punctures of bird calls in the early morning future...I'm sure it's just a phase" were among the decipherable phrases) were combined with black and purple screens featuring countdowns. This form of sampling was clearly 'ripped from the headlines' of social events, particularly those presented and re-presented thousands and tens of thousands of times on social media, such as the growth of #BLM, or COVID precautions.

The "Braiding" video deliberately set the micro/macro views side by side (first half compared to second half), while the "Threshold of Sound" video aimed to integrate these lenses. The latter may be because "Threshold" was generated out of Prompt 21, the second deliberately collaborative prompt, meant to take up to a week or more to complete after the rest of the prompts were done. As a final critical autoethnographic (Holman Jones et al., 2014) exercise, this one aimed to compel some more enriched reflection and analysis but in a small group. Again, participants were encouraged to reach out to each other, on shared Google docs, the group Facebook page, or the Listserv, to build teams, but this time after having learned something about each other from the sharing of responses to previous prompts, including visual and time-based media. Prompt 21 asked:

> "Find at least two other people in the group to address the question: "What is going on here?" This is a classic ethnographic question. It is a question that seems simple but relies on immersion and "thick" understanding of the cultural situ-

ation to answer. It is a question that asks the researcher to move past simply describing what's presently happening, to consider what these particularities of the situation mean, at a more abstract, cultural level. In this activity, you should make a final performance with your group, in whatever way you choose. Post for the whole group on the mailing list. Please use the mailing list for sharing your team's product(ion), since this is the only place where all the participants have access." (Markham and Harris, 2020, p.13)

While some of the videos featured in the VIA Festival were drawn from the Prompt 3 videos, a substantial number were drawn from Prompt 21, 18 days later. Between Prompt 3 and Prompt 21, much had happened in the broader world, including the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police action, and a surge of protests in support of the anti-black-racism social movement Black Lives Matter around the world. Not surprisingly, the responses to Prompt 21 tended to oscillate between the micro (e.g. close observations of one person's experience) and the macro (e.g. world events, stance in the world, etc.), much more than the primarily micro-focused responses to earlier prompts (including Prompt 3) had done. But the Prompt 3 responses generated more raw, exploratory, or interestingly unresolved pieces. I have been thinking a lot about why this was the case, and turn to a recently published manifesto on research-creation grounded in psychoanalysis to think this through analytically and in more affective and visceral ways.

THE END OF THE WORLD OR JUST ANOTHER SHIFT?

During the first few months of the pandemic in North America, through my involvement in EXC-19 and then with MMS, I revisited research-creation commitments and practices that had been important in earlier work (e.g. Luka 2020, 2018), building on my own practice as a video artist and then as a digital media producer and policy-maker. Through video and audio editing, I observed that I could achieve a level of defamiliarization with what I was examining, including at the affective level. Defamiliarization

was preferable to seeking distance, which was patently impossible in the dramatically developing changes of the times, even while simultaneously creating something watchable or listenable. Similarly, in Natalie Loveless's recent book on research-creation as a mode of scholarly production and analysis, *How to make art at the end of the world* (2019), she discusses the metaphor and story-telling implications of Donna Haraway's examination of her relationships with her dogs in Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003). This consideration of the affective work required to examine inter-species relations as a kind of defamiliarizing storytelling process is a model not just for understanding how to investigate a complex problematic, but particularly to examine a circumstance within which the person doing the investigation is deeply implicated. In Loveless's discussion of Haraway's book, as undertaken by a group of students, the figure of the dog playfully comes into its metaphorical use as shorthand. Students became accustomed to asking each other "So what is your dog?" (p.25), which is to say, what are you examining that you need to separate out from yourself, even as you recognize how closely entwined you are with what you are looking at? In the context of my experience of EXC-19 and of the critical autoethnographic experience at MMS, identifying the dog is similar to asking how to denaturalize the situation, the conditions, the people and other-than-people that are intersecting at the specific moment of the global pandemic, and how this was being experienced locally, or at micro levels. Questions that can support the kind of curiosity Loveless aims to engender through research-creation include autoethnographic ones posed at MMS, such as "why is this important?," "who cares?," "why?" and "what next?"

Such questions also prompt crucial ways of generating observation at different registers (visceral, analytical, narrative, descriptive, etc.), often explicitly grounded in visual or oral culture practices. For example, in the manifesto, Loveless pairs this kind of curiosity with Thomas King's (2003) commitment to retelling various iterations of "stories of creation" as the articulation of emergent ethics and values situated in time and place (Loveless, 19-21, 23, 24-25). Consequently, stories (the ability to put together a narrative line, or the desire

to string together images, words, and sounds in a time-based project) become flexible methods to reflect on what can be understood as steadfast forms of resilience in a social context. As I suggest below, the MMS videos demonstrate efforts towards the latter; a looser and less resolved form of trying to understand shifts in social behaviour and interpretations of the world-as-it-is-now as these are recounted in King's teachings about creation stories, and enjoined in Loveless's "provocation...[that] *the crafting of a research question is the crafting of a story that is also the crafting of an ethics*" (pp. 24-25, emphasis in the original). The sincere and attentive reworking of such stories, between the time of MMS Prompts 3 and 21, and as research-creation communities of practice in evolving environments, enabled the scholars/artists involved to become more practiced observers and analysts of those situations, however raw and incomplete (i.e. without conclusion) those experiences may have been.

Making use of the idea of emergent knowledge in this context insists it is not possible or even desirable to pre-know what is under observation or being experienced. While some parameters can be set out around "the dog" in question, these need to allow for new information to come through. Autoethnographic practices, deepened through the sometimes visually awkward or unresolved MMS videos, simply aim to build steps towards illustrating one or more person's relationship to the world in a constantly shifting space, time, and set of registers. By assembling these videos into one hour of shared experience, the VIA Festival event began to point towards broader discomforting and more unresolved social issues. As the months passed following the Festival and early days of the pandemic, the discomfort would only grow, as if the global pause enacted by the situation compelled privileged and marginalized groups alike to look around and see how devastating the impacts of colonialism and systemic inequities were being felt in the circumstances. Efforts to connect seemingly disconnected experiences, such as in the second set of videos curated for the VIA Festival, reflected shifts from frantic or chaotic reactions to more measured—through still emergent—sensorial responses and social commitments. So, for example, "Marsh Wings Faded" (Dunlop, Wolf, Hutchinson, and DeGarmo,

2020), moved from hectic 1950s black and white commercial footage of white people consuming media to contemplative colour video clips of a lush green forest. Similarly, "Out, Empty, Away" (Seddighi, Murray, Dorsey, and Sarwatay, 2020) pulled on a narrative thread that led from close-up images of micro spaces inside the home to a subtle exhortation to become involved in protests to support Black Lives Matter, and to a critique of white supremacy in the details of the stereotypical, seemingly safe middle-class home. The final short video in this sequence, "Ice melting on artwork" (Cooper, 2020), acted as an interstice between these two videos and the next set of videos, comprised of a moment-in-time-lapse without sound, and completely without resolution.
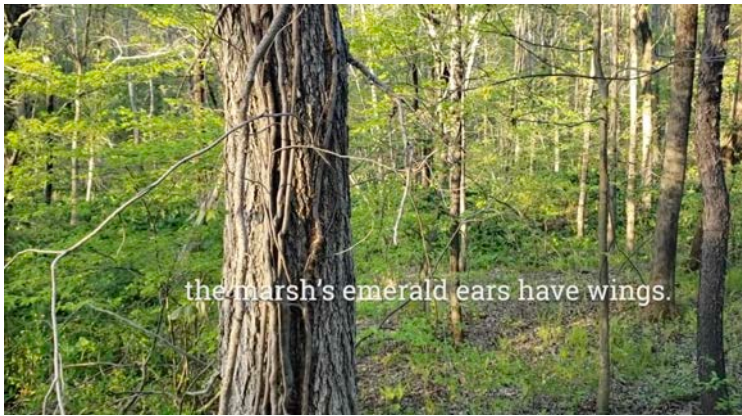

Figure 3: Still from "Marsh Wings Faded" (Dunlop, Wolf, Hutchinson, and DeGarmo, 2020, 1:07 mins).

"Marsh Wings Faded" (Dunlop, Wolf, Hutchinson, and DeGarmo, 2020, 1:07 mins)

Starts with found black and white footage and noisy promotional verbiage about the launch of televisions in homes in the 1950s, as well as a scene outside a commuter train space. In the last half of the video, the footage is intercut with the 19-word text and video images of a de-

liciously lush green forest, accompanied by a quiet piano sonata, "On a Summer's Day".

Figure 4: Still from "Out, Empty, Away" (Seddighi, Murray, Dorsey, and Sarwatay, 2020, 3:29 mins).

"Out, Empty, Away" (Seddighi, Murray, Dorsey, and Sarwatay, 2020, 3:29 mins)

Several low-resolution stills are cut together, with images ranging from beige indoor spaces to colourful flowers and cups, keys on the counter, artwork, an open dog collar, research books, a laundry hamper, i.e., everyday indoor micro scenes. One central image features an exhortation to be (an) activist alongside an art poster with a similar theme. The 19-word text is typed as if they were file folder labels stuck on top of images, with the penultimate words: breath, breathless, BREATHE, followed by kitchen-based images (a bleach called "White King", salt [to rub in the wounds of racism?], vitamin pill box, timer, etc.). The sound is a simple, synthesized, quiet, contemplative refrain.

"Ice melting on artwork" (Cooper, 2020, 0:23 mins, no sound)

This rough time-elapse sketch was a response to the potent nature of Prompt 7, which asked participants to hold an ice cube in their hands until it melted, and curated into the VIA collection as an indicator of some of the raw responses to the prompts. For many, Prompt 7 was among the most powerfully evocative prompts, and marked a turning point in depth of observation and analysis during MMS. For an expanded response to this prompt, see Wei Li's poetic-dance-photographic essay (Li 2020).

What I appreciated most about the collaboration between MMS and Mark De Garmo Dance was the opportunity for both professional and aspiring artists and scholarly or creative autoethnographers to productively reflect on their exploration of research-creation as a mode and method for engaging in the everyday world in front of them/us: both those who were involved in the process, and those who witnessed these outcomes. To be able to share the stage with new peers and to flex muscles as they were being acquired was a gift that a burgeoning practitioner could only hope for in the heart of the pandemic. Viewers were rewarded with some gems of expression that captured aspirations, emotions, and analyses but were also almost entirely unresolved, much like the situation within which they found themselves. So what? Why does this matter? For one thing, the two VIA Festival events and several monthly Salon events (over the last three years) experiment with how performance and visual arts can be experientially presented in context and in discussion. In

COVID-19 times, the VIA Festival and monthly Salon events were part of a much broader social experiment in the arts that tackled the challenges of conveying visceral creative and social engagements online. For example, subsequent VIA Festival and Salon presentations featured more live dance performance streaming than the first VIA Festival, as well as the ability to watch these after the fact for a modest pay-what-you-will fee. This emergent practice is an exemplar of how quickly and effectively some arts organizations (particularly those with an educational as well as aesthetic mandate) adapted to the new world (dis)order. As the United States continues its move back into 'real world' performances, the VIA Festival producers are able to continue to program internationally for online presentation while simultaneously considering the future of live in-person events in New York.

SEEING SOMETHING ANEW, AGAIN

The legibility or opaqueness of the MMS videos after the fact of their production tells us something about the intensely specific nature of the time in which these videos were produced. In Thomas King's terms, each of these videos aspired to present a micro-element of the pandemic story, the creation of new (or the doubling-down on not-so-new) social conditions, and various stances that humans involved took in relation to social justice, health, and culture in May and June 2020. Of course, the other activities that were generated by the 21-day MMS project also puzzled over this question, but were not shared in a public forum with the intent to digest and analyse how various conditions had changed (if they had), or what the reverberations of the early experience of the pandemic would or could be. By presenting and reflecting on the videos in an exhibition and discussion setting, the participants began to turn to questions that had arisen or been acted upon since their initial autoethnographic responses, such as how to incorporate and move beyond the experience of the pandemic in a healthy generative way, in professional or personal or social lives. These included whether there were lessons to be learned about what was useful or desirable about pandemic conditions (minimal travel, a decrease in

consumerism, time to write, etc.), or recovery strategies to be developed to ameliorate damage that was done during this time, or to what degree participation in social justice protests and efforts to change nation-state regulations, legislation, and budget processes could affect policing practices, policy development, and funding.

Figure 5: Still from "The Warrior" (Torres, Peterken, Jones, and Chen, 2020, 0:51 mins).

"The Warrior" (Torres, Peterken, Jones, and Chen, 2020, 0:51 mins)

This response to Prompt 3 was typical of the early group videos, it is particularly contemplative and hopeful. The Ken Burns effect (a slight push in to a tighter version of the image) was applied to several still images, most of them featuring blue skies or the colour blue. Only one image disrupted that even slightly: a blue sign with the word "Emergency" on it. A light, calm, melodic line repeated throughout, and the 19-word equally calming text appeared at the end briefly.

"Paces" (Shelton, Cooke, and Wong, 2020, 2:28 mins)

This response to Prompt 21 was typical of the later—more directive and narratively smoothed-out—group videos. As contemplative as the one that preceded it in the lineup, "Paces" used a calming soundtrack of someone walking on concrete (a sidewalk? a road?), a slight breeze and

birdsong vaguely in the air as a through-line. But this time, the sound was combined with a series of 26 still images, mostly screen captures of headlines and photographs published in news outlets in May and June 2020 about protests against growing political oppression and racism in Australia, Hong Kong, and the USA, as well as reports of the increasing levels of infection and death tolls from the virus. None of these images remained still, with a combination of pushes, pans, and tilts over the two to five seconds each image was onscreen. Along with the sounds of walking, this created a sense of movement and solidarity but also a sense of the intransigent and increasingly visible nature of the problems being highlighted. The stills were interspersed with a screen capture of a video of typing out the lines from "a Chinese ancient poem/Written while taking seven paces/By: Cao Zhi." The poem reinforced the anger, grief and confusion arising from the pandemic, bemoaning the cooking of peas in a pot ("why boil us so hot?"), using the very husks that had nurtured the peas to stoke the fire, while connecting the present-day situation to much older oppressions and resistances. This was the only video in the exhibition that used a language other than English.

"Team 2 EXC" (Shelton, Shields, Cooke, and Wong, 2020; 1:26 mins)

This Prompt 3 video (from May) used a drawing of a typical Zoom meeting of the time, with faculty at a university as the visual foundation, and several textual quotations in English superimposed on the images, rolled across, spun or tumbled into view. These included "you're on mute," "can you mute yourself? I hear a blender in the background", phone calls interrupting the meeting, and then questions about the dangers of returning to work in person or the precarity of jobs that may have been asked in the chat or out loud, and a final commitment by the meeting lead to send a poll around "for next week's meeting" when they "might have some answers." The camera was always moving; it 'pushed in' to various people depending on the text presented on screen, or 'pulled back' when the question became more general. Martial, rhythmic music (heavy on bass and drum) played in the background. A single two-line headline was repeated at the beginning and end of the video: "BREAKING NEWS: 'Trampling our rights'/Terrorists pretending to be protestors, screaming spittle about shelter-in-place 'trampling our

rights.'" The violence of the language in the headline, the anonymizing of the specific meeting(s), the relentlessness of the interruptions and the background music, the inability to read emotion or make connection to anyone on the screen, and the constantly moving text across the screen replicated the sense of agitation and anxiety that many of the responses to the prompts shared in the MMS21 group documented about early shelter-at-home lockdowns. There was nothing resolved about the situation, even while there were evident efforts to communicate and support the participants.

As the devastating nature of the ways in which the pandemic exacerbated inequitable social conditions became clearer (between Prompts 3 and 21, and then between the end of the 21-day experience and the October event), the videos began to present images and text that expressed conflicting notions of resilience and collective action. What makes someone "resilient" in circumstances such as pandemics, or during broad-based protests about collective versus individual rights across social groups or about anti-racism? What is meant by "resilience"? Why do some governments attempt to ameliorate a severe economic crash as part of a resilience strategy and others do not? The question of who benefits is key.

Resilience is one of the terms often used to describe the ability to move past/put behind us/cover over past traumas, big and small. Under extreme conditions, surviving severe social trauma experienced across whole cultures for generations, such as by Indigenous peoples in North America and elsewhere, has previously been described as "survivance" (Vizenor, 2008). Here, I turn to the work of Cheryl L'Hirondelle to illustrate survivance as a form of resilience. Drawing on the idea of "speaking the world," performance artist Cheryl L'Hirondelle talks about Cree "sounding[s] of the worldview" (L'Hirondelle, Alvarez, and Zointz, 290) as deeply connected to language. Similarly, Thomas King's (2003) variations in the telling of creation stories are a way of accommodating and speaking the world out loud, complementing the concept of survivance as a positive attribute emerging from traumatic experiences, often mobilized in research about the survival and evolutions of Indigenous cultures. These are not just ways to defamiliarize and challenge the seeming implacability

of the surrounding conditions, but also to activate the importance and strength of language in the maintenance and adaptability (survivance) of cultures, particularly Indigenous cultures.

Similarly, S. Rose O'Leary (2020) applies the lens of survivance to focus on diasporic impacts on identity through creative storytelling and image-making. O'Leary's account tackles the macro implications of survivance as both strategy and inexorable condition from the perspective of large ethno-cultural groups of people compelled to migrate globally and thereby to make radical cultural, emotional, and intellectual changes or commitments because of inequitable, shifting social conditions. This bears a resemblance to Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Thomas King's work, but also to the micro-level work of MMS over its 21 days of prompts.

While some forms of resilience acknowledge challenges to and survival of discrete forms of identity, cultural production, and social experiences, even as these are being transformed by deteriorating social or work conditions, the term is also used in the creative economy as a primarily laudatory and desired characteristic for workers in the sector, who experience precarity and often damaging work conditions. Meant to express less about trauma and more about adaptability, the notion of resilience in the culture sector is often mobilized to help explain the process or method of integrating emergent and competing forms of identity or social mores, including through cultural production and expression. Unpacking the elision of meanings in the term resilience through the fourth trio of videos programmed at the October 2020 VIA Festival event is helpful for understanding how the creators of these works were beginning to integrate and make sense of the pandemic, using visual metaphors. This set of videos was the quietest of the groupings, which produced a contemplative mood among the salon participants.

"Homesteading Across Time" (Bolander, Smith, and Stirling, 2020, 2:08 mins)

The first half of the video begins with two still images of networked threads or bacteria, with a round robin of the reading of a quote from Harold Rheingold's 1993 Virtual Community: Homesteading on the

Electronic Frontier repeated by the three participants, exhorting us (in part) to "think of cyberspace as a social petri dish...and virtual communities, in all their diversity, as the colonies of micro-organisms that grow in petri dishes," while the camera tilts up across the colour image of linked bacterial threads in purple and green and black and white. The second half of the video shows the camera continuing to tilt up through the "sky" of the threaded bacteria, with no other sound.
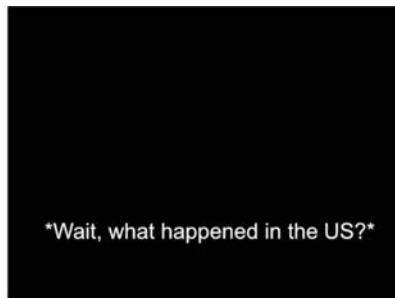
Figures 6 and 7: Stills from "Braided work visual art (Brode-Roger, Erdely, and Murray, 2020, 2:00 mins, no sound).

"Braided work visual art" (Brode-Roger, Erdely, and Murray, 2020, 2:00 mins, no sound)

The video is a visual essay that incorporates many still images, including drawings and photographs, with a series of fragments of dense quotations and excerpted comments in text in English from May and June 2020 threaded among the stills. The text (more than the images) raise questions about the relationship of human to more-than-human, about the (macro) threats posed by the virus, by protests, by contested politics, and the (micro) comforts from a privileged position of researcher.

Figure 8: Still from "Birdsong" (Snepvangers, Murray, Pronzato, and Waysdorf, 2020, 2:30 mins)

"Birdsong" (Snepvangers, Murray, Pronzato, and Waysdorf, 2020, 2:30 mins)

The video is a series of stills, starting with 30 seconds of several quotations typed in or photographed that address obscenity, art, and social unrest. The next ten seconds feature four screen captures from phones viewing news items from around the world, and then a video clip with a slow 40-second pan from the balcony of a six-story building in Europe across an empty-seeming neighbourhood, followed by additional text and image stills that repeat the earlier themes, and ending with a still of

flowers and a 50-second video clip of walking through trees. Recordings of birdsong throughout are perhaps a reference to the early days of the pandemic when people took note of quiet streets, nature sounds, and the idiosyncratic appearances of animals and other creatures in city streets.

STILL FEELING OUR WAY: MOVING TOWARD SOME CONCLUSIONS

The details offered in the latter group of videos speak to a desire to express resilience: to integrate emergent micro experience with drastically changing macro conditions. Earlier, I talked about Natalie Loveless's manifesto for research-creation (2019). In that text, the idea of resilience also surfaced, this time as the affective work required to rethink the world in emergent, culturally expressive ways on an ongoing basis. Why? Loveless notes: "An approach to research-creation modeled on emergence insists on the complexity of lived histories and worlds, and on the difficulty of accounting for and responding to such complexity" (26). Jeannette Winterson also talks about resilience in complexly affective terms: as a mode of surviving and moving past traumatic life events related to family violence and sexuality (2012). But, as in Vizenor's and O'Leary's notions of survivance, Winterson does not reject those events outright, given how formative they were. Instead, Winterson thinks carefully about what had happened and what is still happening (emotionally, intellectually, in language; to herself and to others around her), using an elastic form of resilience (like King) as a lever to "change the story" (Winterson 2001, 5) in the present and for the future or to change the social pressures that aim to have people conform in ways that are oppressive.

Three of L'Hirondelle's artworks illustrate this approach well. "Nikamon ohci askiy: songs because of the land (Vancouver songlines)" (2008) features L'Hirondelle exploring, learning about, and singing her way through the unfamiliar territory of Vancouver, Canada, as a mode of acknowledging the traditional territory and the people who steward it, as well as to learn about the city (see also Jacobson-Konefall, Chew and Warren, for example). People were welcome to accom-

pany her, although not necessary for her purposes. "The NDN Storytelling Bus" (2011-2014 in Regina, Canada) was a periodic, ongoing (often understood as anarchist or disruptive) exploration of territory as well, but, as L'Hirondelle notes, "our trickster who goes wandering out of curiosity and to visit relatives" (L'Hirondelle, Alvarez, and Zointz, 296), notwithstanding that the colonial and settler structures and social strictures have (in turn) previously (attempted to) disrupt(ed) or destroy(ed) the languages and cultures from which the figure of the trickster emerges. In this time and space, Western space and time gets thrown out the window of the bus. Finally, "Why the Caged Bird Sings" (2008-2020, various locations) presents low resolution videos of incarcerated Indigenous women singing over prison landlines, trying to connect with other people through the details of their relayed experience even when no one is on the other end of the line. The poignant performances gathered together in L'Hirondelle's presentation of these works point to how Indigenous women are disproportionately incarcerated, and also recall the strength gained from gathering virtually and spiritually while being unable to physically gather, retelling and recontextualizing stories through song and image, words, laughter, and tears. Here, the promise of future connection enables the women to feel their way into future gatherings. The final set of videos presented during the VIA Festival reflected similar ambitions in the COVID-19 context for this group of artists, activists and scholars.

"Feeling Our Way" (Fahey, Dunlop, and Whitney, 2020, 2:21 mins)

A filtered heartbeat sound starts with a still of a feminine shadow followed by stills of two abstract images. The sound changes to a song about abandonment and death sung by a solo female artist with guitar, combined with still images of an apartment courtyard and other urban settings, abstract paintings and drawings, and followed by a final statement: "to reconfirm that human thing/that matters most/we hold each other/in feeling ways/feeling our ways" combined with the sound of people gathering in an urban setting.

"A Moment" (Fitzpatrick, Sreberny, Clark, and Dilkes, 2020, 2:58 mins)

A group of four people, sometimes shown individually, sometimes shown in the four quadrants of the screen, one per person. A conversation about how to be safe in the waning days of MMS 21. The seeming 'passing along' of a mask from one quadrant to another, in a video where the territory (parts of the video/parts of the world) is represented by these quadrants. A toast. Curated to wrap up the presentation, the video simply featured the four participants coming together to learn something about each other and then connecting on zoom to share some of the lessons they'd learned in early Covid times.

Given the specifically feminine nature of many of the videos in the Festival, and to add a cautionary critical note to this final section, I take up the way in which Angela McRobbie converts the notion of resilience into a critical tool. Through the notion of "Perfect Imperfect Resilience (PIR)" (42-45), McRobbie thinks about feminine resilience as it is currently promoted and practiced in the Western world (e.g. McRobbie explores Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg's "lean-in" approach) and how this "protects the status quo" (46). PIR becomes a mechanism to control people (compared to survivance as an aspirational or redeeming social quality in the world as-it-is-today), particularly through cultural production (both the work required and the outputs). It is classically impossible for non-dominant figures (those other than white, cis-gender males) to attain 'perfection,' or to be fully successful, in this context. McRobbie discusses PIR as a way to analyse the "dispositif" (52) in action in the field of cultural production, as the condition or tendency towards the replication or creation of conditions that reinforce pre-existing ideological commitments (to capitalism, to specific forms of equity, to radicalism) that do not upset the status quo. McRobbie uses PIR to examine how magazine or craft production (for example) is practiced and circulated to replicate systemic inequities and the devaluing of female labour or perspectives. This becomes a way to examine the inequitable and imperfect ways in which the culture sector/creative industries are actually generated and supported. Why is this important? PIR draws our attention to the way in which artists, craftspeople, womxn, and

marginalized or outlier groups are compelled to practice or learn or demonstrate resilience in imperfect ways in order to be allowed to participate in cultural production. The MMS videos as a whole point to similar contradictions and exhortations that surfaced in more obvious ways in COVID-induced conditions.

Why did so many of the MMS video-makers (and curators, and participants) find that collaborative video-making might help signify a kind of hope to gather people together in ways that weren't physically gathering together? In the making of the videos, were people feeling more (or less) able to cope with the shocking changes experienced? Given the experiential nature of both the MMS prompts and the curated video programs, it is unclear whether this is even the right question. What is clear, however, is a palpable desire to make sense of the world outside the MMS space and time while situated within it, in a contingent way: to be resilient and to show resilience at specific sites of storytelling. Many of the MMS videos hint at or directly refer to devastating personal and social experiences during the first half-year of the COVID-19 pandemic. These representations do not compare in scale or depth to the systemic suppression of cultures and identities expressed by L'Hirondelle, King, O'Leary, or Winterson, and the resulting affirmation of survivance. Nor do they have the impact of social justice protests involving tens of thousands of people around the world, such as those supporting Black Lives Matter, during COVID-19. However, they do offer fleeting impressions of related efforts to become resilient allies and neighbours in healthy and affirming ways during the early days of the pandemic. Some aim to look even more deeply into ways to resist those deeper and more long-standing oppressions. Troubling elisions between specific applications of the terms resilience and survivance are thereby made usefully visible by the kind of situated research conducted during MMS. A decade or even a century from now, who will be looking at how the time available to researchers, artists, activists, and citizens was mobilized during our respective experience of COVID-19? What will researchers, artists, and policy-makers be reflecting on, and will it have import other than in tandem with social justice movements of the moment? Time may or may not tell.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Still from "Run Bunny Run." Bastick et al., 2020, 0:51 mins.

Figure 2: Still from "Braiding Dislocated Lives" (Frølunde et al; 2020, 2:25 mins).

Figure 3: Still from "Marsh Wings Faded." Dunlop, Wolf, Hutchinson, and DeGarmo, 2020, 1:07 mins.

Figure 4: Still from "Out, Empty, Away." Seddighi, Murray, Dorsey, and Sarwatay, 2020, 3:29 mins.

Figure 5: Still from "The Warrior." Torres, Peterken, Jones, and Chen, 2020, 0:51 mins.

Figures 6 and 7: Stills from "Braided work visual art." Brode-Roger, Erdely, and Murray, 2020, 2:00 mins.

Figure 8: Still from "Birdsong." Snepvangers, Murray, Pronzato, and Waysdorf, 2020, 2:30 mins.