

Luisa Greenfield et al. (eds.), *Artistic Research: Being There, Explorations into the Local* (Aarhus: NSU Press, 2017)

*To perceive what remains hidden in our lives, to identify what we take for granted, to find ways to look more critically at our surroundings and ourselves, and to grasp what distinguishes this place from every other place. Perhaps these are the resonances of art practices and research that are grounded in the idea of the local. ("Introduction" 7)*

The opening lines of *Artistic Research: Being There, Explorations into the Local* establishes a tension that persists through the volume: being somewhere—experiencing the local—and being involved in the creative process embodies the possible, the perchance, and the process. There are, however, other aspects to the contingency outlined above, those of displacement, itineracy, and loss. The editors acknowledge this tension by defining the local as an idea that “focuses on the strategies that allow one to become rooted in each place even when in the throes of transition” (9). And for almost all of the artists whose work constitutes what is, in effect, a larger and collective creative project, the idea of transition, of change, and of movement, is connected to experiences of mourning and yearning.

Place, locality, the local: each iteration is an intimate discursive space for communication and communion with times, people, things, and ideas that are either now elsewhere or still in the process of becoming. By foregrounding “being there,” the artists and researchers of the Nordic Summer University (NSU) unavoidably ask the reciprocal question: what does it mean to not be somewhere else? As for an answer, taken together, the collection’s essays and creative projects seem to offer the following: everything is relational. There is no local without the global, no citizen without a stranger, no present without the past, no art without resistance, no I without thou. In the Preface “Being T/here,” Robert Mock gestures to this point when he describes the essays in the collection as “utopian performances” that offer “fleeting glimpses of the ‘potential of elsewhere’” (24; Dolan 5 quoted in Mock 24). The idea of “elsewhere,” then, can only exist if there is a here, a locality from which to look out from and imagine a collective whole. Being in a state of “receptive relation to an *other* space” drives the production of the creative works within *Being There* and unifies them, at the same time (Greenfield 27).

The interconnected sense of mourning and yearning that permeates the writing and haunts the performances may stem from the collaborative nature of the NSU; each artist is always aware of their larger role in a bigger project and, consequently, always aware of both the presence and absence of their fellow artists and friends. This dual awareness appears over and over again in the writing and serves as a unifying core to the work, perhaps nowhere more obvious than in “Windows. A Correspondence Between Elina Saloranta and Myna Trustram,” which is a standout piece in the collection. While each woman is undergoing their own process of mourning—one, a marriage and the other, a death—both are yearning for each other’s letters, for the relational interaction that helps form and give meaning to

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their artistic production and their individual experiences of the local as a moveable place for healing and comfort. There is a real intimacy in the exchange of letters across space and time, albeit mostly in email form, that transposes the sense of the local from a place of potential isolation (meaning, if you are there, and I am here, we are apart) to a movable and shared experience: “So, in the correspondence the two women move between the immediate (the green chair) and the distant (the geographical distance between them, their different responses to loss and so on). Where do they locate their losses?” (111). For Saloranta and Trustram their losses are indeed located, they reside both within and in places.

The titles of the collection’s three sections, “Itinerant Locals,” “Placing the In-between,” and “Encountering a Singular Place,” help narrow the ambitious scope of the work. In “Itinerant Locals,” for example, both Per Roar’s “Docudancing the Local,” and Ami Skånberg Dahlstedt’s “Suriashi,” link the local with the dancing and choreographic body and, in similar ways, conscientiously query the nature and effects of the translation of culture from a local-historic-specific context to someplace else. Additionally, because of the deeply personal stories from which their projects arise, the moving body becomes a vessel for remembrance, an iteration of the local that resonates throughout the collection. The related ideas of “slipping” in “Micropracticing the Local” and “spontaneity” in “Fun Palaces,” each speak to the generative value of repetition with difference, another subtext to the collection as a whole that is introduced early in these more theoretical essays and which resonates especially well with Maggie Jackson’s rumination on possession and migrancy in “On the Road Again.”

Jackson’s essay, like the other middle essays of the collection, is most overtly concerned with what I mention at the outset as the shadow side of the “being t/here” binary—migrancy, refugeeism, displacement, or, to use Eduardo Abrantes’ own words, the “contrast between the idealized wanderer who departs to gain the world she has not yet seen but dreamt of, and the refugee whose utopic dream is born of the violent eradication from the world she knew” (91). Balancing this contrast is perhaps the collection’s greatest challenge and feat, which is successful only because of its constant state of self-awareness and self-correction. The images of the compass and the semi-observed billboard that reads “Have No Home...Keep Driving,” in Larissa Lily’s “Meanwhile in Another Town,” make the shadow side of the local unmistakable. The break from first person to third person narrative in Luisa Greenfield’s “Milena” also speaks to this hard truth: sometimes, the weight of history causes a rupture, driving us from ourselves and from the places, the localities, where one cannot separate what has happened from what is happening—“this could be anywhere” (131). For the woman in “Milena,” walking into the water, forcing herself into a present and place that *feels* different, even though it may be the literal embodiment of what

she is attempting to escape, is what allows her to remain, to endure.

The collection's final section focuses on these particular places, both within and outside the context of the familiar. "I am writing in this place where I am," writes Alexandra Litaker in "We All Have Such Islands." To focus on being in the immediate experience of place is to perceive how Seamus Heaney's "cold floor" or Wordsworth's oars touching, breaking, entering, and leaving the dark waters of Ullswater Lake can produce a type of knowing otherwise obscured. Cecilia Lagerström's "Spies of Everyday" and Eduardo Abrantes' "Local Sound Families and a Choir in Estonia" both return to the idea of relationality and the artist's de-centered position as one who "patiently responds to events in the surroundings (Lavery 45, quoted in Lagerström 154). Attentive walking and performance writing are mutually generative artistic processes for Lagerström and develop what she identifies as the creative tools of "both closeness (recognition) and estrangement (distance)" (157). These "observant moments" (cold floor, oars on the water, "greet the beggar") waver between closeness and distance, recognition and estrangement, here and there (156). "Near and far," Eduardo Abrantes writes, "at different pitches, the animal voices, simultaneously glorious and eerie, entered into an uncanny and undecipherable dialogue with the Northern Lights" (178). Abrantes' exploration of "local sound families" examines the uniqueness of particular soundscapes, meaning groupings of sounds dependent on and emergent from a particular place (170). Yet, his powerful penultimate essay is equally about recognizing the "radical interdependence" of any given locality, regarding both its constituent parts and its alterity. His extension of the soundscape family to the animal world speaks to this recognition:

*The soundscape of that situated place at that moment, the local sounds experienced ...and their interrelationships, fully expressed their radical interdependence that, if interfered with, can make whole species extinct, or conversely, can awaken a strong sense of immersive co-habitation, of full and engaged ecological interconnection in its widest implications. (178-179)*

Dialogue, interrelationships, interdependence, a surmise that humanity seems to need reminding of again and again—we are all connected and interdependent even when we are apart. Perhaps, a more fitting title for the collection would have been *Being T/here*, the back slash a visual representation of our mourning, of our yearning.

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