

Dramaturgy of Virtual Gatherings OR *Towards a Poetics of Zoom* **by Laurel Green (she/her)**

I live as an uninvited guest committed to mutual respect and care on the unceded Coast Salish territory of the Lekwungen-speaking Nations, now known as the Songees & Esquimalt Nations (Victoria, BC).

Draft 1, October 31, 2020

As a dramaturg, director, and producer with a focus on new performance work, my evolving practice includes curating and leading events; how to craft invitations to participate, build brave rooms, create meaningful exchange, and facilitate with care. I admire a strong moderator, and appreciate experiences that are thoughtfully planned, abundantly generative, and effectively ephemeral. Over what is by now probably 100's of audience talkbacks, pre-show events, artist panels, community convenings, participatory performances, creation workshops, wild parties, play rehearsals, and staff meetings; I've grown my instincts for how to 'read a room' by noticing the voices, energies, experiences, interests, power balances, and non-verbal cues, in a group.

In March, when the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine began, and my in-person contracts were cancelled, I set up a Zoom account to meet with my collaborators. I joined my friends for movie night. I read a bedtime story to my niece. I sat in a community town hall. From our distanced squares, we turned our cameras on and held each other's gaze in muted silence, facing a profound moment of change; shock, loss. And then, slowly, we began to engage, connect, and work together.

Over the past eight months, from Zoom on my MacBook, I've now Hosted team meetings, play readings, university tutorials, grassroots advocacy groups, panel discussions, script writing, murder mysteries, wine tastings, ideation sessions, games nights, creation workshops, change interviews, video commentaries, birthday parties, rock concerts, family reunions, fitness classes, and a peer-led Leadership Camp. Relying upon, and exponentially expanding my 'dramaturgical tool-kit', I'm learning how to effectively facilitate and collaborate online, how to design flexible and responsive programming, establish trust, encourage participation, and hold space for difficult conversations. I'm following my curiosity and working alongside artists and companies across time zones, with friends who share resources, software, and strategies. We help each other conceptualize and test prototypes, troubleshoot technically, often sending a Zoom room link with the message: *have you got a minute to help me try something out?!*

I've made some missteps, like 'rapturing' 40 people out of their breakout rooms mid-sentence, or misjudging the amount of material a large group can cover over the course of an hour, and how long we need for introductions. I've combated technical difficulties, vulnerability hang overs, awkward silences, time zone mix ups, and moments of stage fright. Moving from necessity to creative invention in these virtual spaces, I've become interested in the unique considerations and possibilities here, what innovations have been revealed, and what requires further thought and experimentation. I'm trying to find

moments to reflect and take notes. To remain conscious of the privileges that allow me access to digital tools that are not available to everyone. To make good use of this time.

As I write this, I'm currently planning an upcoming digital conference that will bring together a remote regional network of theatre presenters over three weeks (who have never met before), event-scripting an eight hour spin-cycle-around-the-world fundraiser and working with an arts council towards an online action with City Hall. With sweating palms, I'm using [OBS](#) to run a live immersive performance for audiences on the other side of the country. My work in peer support and programming with [Wellspring](#)'s cancer community has taught me much about how to show up for each other on Zoom in a trauma-informed space. Moving programs online within three days of the Centres' closing, we're maintaining connections, improving access, and navigating grief in community.

Voraciously gathering online facilitation practices, I'm interested in how we can empower ourselves, model new ways of working, and practice the future in our virtual spaces. Especially outside of institutional contexts and as independent community groups, we can share leadership, disrupt hierarchies, and activate networks of lateral mentorship. I believe that we as dramaturgs are uniquely primed to innovate and push the boundaries of this format by tapping into those skills we relied upon in the theatre lobby, office, classroom, or rehearsal hall. We can use our strengths as connectors, process-designers, deep-listeners, change-makers, question-askers, room-runners, community-builders – to name only a few of our superpowers.

In her book, *The Art of Gathering*, [Priya Parker's](#) describes hosting with *generous authority*. "Make peace with the necessity and virtue of using your power," she writes, to maintain the integrity of the gathering. Use 'generous authority' to *protect*, *equalize*, and *connect* your guests. This never rang truer than on Zoom, where Hosts can wield mute buttons and spotlight functions benevolently, encourage non-verbal cuing, 'passing' from person to person, ask questions, offer synthesis, model participation, bring energy, give breaks, encourage activity, start and end on time. Back in April, facilitator Misha Glouberman wrote [a great article about hosting a cocktail party on Zoom](#) where he made all of his friends Co-Hosts so they could move between breakout rooms with autonomy while communicating via Google Doc. I've borrowed this tactic to democratize spaces, and now the [latest update of Zoom](#) offers the chance to select a breakout room, though there's still no messaging between rooms. Google docs are my go-to for group note-taking and communication, also adding the agenda and an SOS page if anyone gets lost. I'm usually viewing in split-screen mode or on two displays. With larger projects, sharing a Google Drive as a 'Living Library' of recordings, resources, and archives to reference from week to week – capturing emergent thinking.

I'm thinking a lot about how material can be shared in presentations, and the structuring of sessions to maximize participation and get away from the conventions of a lengthy lecture delivered via screen share. I started curating 'micro-presentations' as 10 minute

snapshots, case studies, and sharings – sourced from group members, or specific artists I knew who were confronting a certain challenge or experimenting with something new. We'd talk about their topic in advance, and I'd ask them to end their presentation with a prompt or provocation for the room. Running three micro-presentations back to back, with a moment of Q&A between, and then moving into breakout rooms, we then have three talking points to start small group conversation. These presentations were recorded and saved as a playlist of emergent thinking.

Small touches like adding custom messages to the text in your waiting room, playing music as folks enter, and spotlighting Welcome visuals using the 'virtual background' function. ([Check out these Google Slides templates](#) from LeadingGroupsOnline.com) Like in a rehearsal hall, check ins and check outs give a great indication as to the mood and needs of the group. I'll use a short prompt that offers a chance for everyone to speak (i.e. in one word each, how is your head, heart, and body today?) and then the check-out is a 'punctum' or commitment coming out of our time together (i.e. What is something you'll take with you? What is a connection you will act upon?). Leading a recent University tutorial, I borrowed a check-in from facilitator [Sue Biely](#) prompting the class to *draw the shape they feel like*, and to give a word to accompany their shape. I faced a gallery of 'tired squares'. At the end of the tutorial – where I ran them through the concept, rehearsal, and performance of a scene – I asked them to return their image for check-out. One student said, "I've added a smiley face to my square because I feel alive again."

Establishing right relations, I've created Community Agreement docs that folks can edit, add to, and sign on to in advance, as well as sending out some practices for engagement in invitation emails, displaying them as visuals in the room, or speaking them through live – whatever is most authentic, integral, and reflects your collective values. As a settler on unceded territory and recognizing technology as a form of colonization with an impact on the land, there are many practice and protocols of virtual territory acknowledgements on Zoom; from a smudge, to group mapping, noting your location in the chat, and moments of sharing around the circle. Here is a link to a deeper conversation around practices in online convening that center unsettling, decolonization, indigenization and disability justice in process design – [amplifying the work of Unsettling Dramaturgy](#).

Gathering online with intension is a practical, technical, and artistic endeavor. We can make space for meaningful conversation, collaboration, and change, starting with the question, how do we want this space to *feel*? Who is in the room? What is our purpose? What is the *experience* of arriving, participating, and ending that meeting, for all? I'm wondering, as we spend more time in this realm, what do we notice is emerging? What are the newfound poetics of Zoom?¹

¹ Thank you to Adrienne Wong, my friend, and AD of [FOLDA & SpiderWebShow](#), for using this phrase 'poetics of Zoom' in a conversation with me.