



## The Sky and The Storm

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### ABSTRACT

The article is the result of a joint reflection by two artist-researchers on practices of compassion and poetics of care in academia. Through two socially engaged art projects carried out in two different universities - at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO) and at Queensborough Community College at the City University of New York (CUNY-QCC) - the article proposes a reflection on art as a collective practice of well-being and peaceful resistance. Through meditation, and somatic and artistic alternatives, the article invites us to contemplate the blue sky beyond the dense clouds it carries -- that is, it invites us into the imagination of other possible worlds.

### Introduction

This article was born from conversations between two artist-researchers about the potential for social practice. The collaboration was facilitated by Dr. Daniel Plá (UFSM) for the Second Seminar on Performing Arts and Contemplative Practices: *Contemplation, Performing Arts, and Coexistence* (2021) and later unfolded in meetings held over zoom, through informal and formal exchange about research, teaching

practice, and artistic creation at two colleges separated by an immense sky: the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO) and Queensborough Community College at City University of New York (CUNY-QCC). We offer two collectively imagined ecosystems, which engage somatic, meditative, and artistic practices to promote health and compassion in our campus communities. The WHO defines health 'as a state of

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complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO). At UNIRIO,<sup>1</sup> Tania witnessed students experiencing depression and suicidal ideation. She began the Clinica Somático-Performativa (CSP) to promote mental well-being. At CUNY-QCC,<sup>2</sup> Heather witnessed students struggling to communicate with authenticity as they encountered obstacles. She initiated the Social Presencing Theater<sup>3</sup> project with students and alumni (SPT-QCC)<sup>4</sup> to promote personal and social well-being. This article shares our journeys co-creating these practice communities.

Our writing also speaks of our common attempt to invent little pieces of sky amidst the storms. When we use the word 'sky', we are referring to the space or

spaciousness of mind experienced through meditation. 'A traditional metaphor for this experience is that the mind is the sky (a nonconceptual background) in which different mental contents, like clouds, arise and subside' (Varela *et al.* 2016, p. 26). We understand sky here not as a metaphor prescribed by a Christian heaven, but as a place of infinite time-space and silence within us. This sky is accessible through our relationships with nature, animals, ourselves, and others. We use the word 'storm' to describe deficit-thinking and scarcity mindsets. We aspire to resist these storms, or patterns of oppression generated by dominant cultures in our systems, such as ableism, patriarchy, neoliberalism, and white supremacy. We also recognize that oppression is pervasive. It fragments our

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<sup>1</sup> UNIRIO: Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro, Brasil.

<sup>2</sup> CUNY-QCC: Queensborough Community College at City University of New York.

<sup>3</sup> Social Presencing Theater (SPT) was co-created by Arawana Hayashi and colleagues at the Presencing Institute.

<sup>4</sup> SPT-QCC: Social Presencing Theater practice group which formed at Queensborough Community College at City University of New York, facilitated by Huggins.

relationships with ourselves, each other, and nature, influencing our relationships and systems. As co-authors of this article, we acknowledge that we are shaped by our positionalities as white women who were raised in Western contexts.

As we exchanged ideas and readings, we discovered a shared longing for our article to be a flightpath, or - better yet - to be the sky itself: a blue sky in the midst of the storms we live in. Could this sky connect our South and North American horizons as we journey together, offering social practice to cultivate health and compassion in higher education? What if we ourselves grow up to be birds? Could we imagine a runway where the reader could find a space for '*crescer pra passarinho*' ('growing up to be a bird'), as the poet Manoel de Barros writes? We seek, despite the dense clouds, to keep our gaze directed toward the sky.

## The Storm

### *Heather's Perspective on The Storm*

In school we have focused on language as a noun, not on what or who is named, or on who is doing the naming... In school we do not emphasize the real function of language in our lives: how it operates in courts, in hospitals, in schools, in the media, how it operates to perpetuate a society, maintain a social order, to reflect biases, to transmit basic values.

Toni Cade Bambara  
*Black English*  
1972

As an activist pedagogue, Bambara gave students the tools to see language as a verb, and to call out those who wield language as a discriminatory weapon. She challenged students to carefully investigate all the spaces they occupy (from the classroom to their homes), endowing her students with the courage and camaraderie to explore their own upbringings, ideologies, and prejudices, instead of ignoring, dismissing, suppressing or transmitting them.

Lavan & Reed (Eds)  
*'Realizing the Dream of a Black University'  
& Other Writings by Toni Cade Bambara*  
(2017)

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I was introduced to *'Realizing the Dream of a Black University' & Other Writings by Toni Cade Bambara* (Lavan and Reed, 2017) while I was reflecting on the SPT-QCC project. This two-volume publication, part of *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative*, gathers Bambara's previously unpublished writings, including artefacts from creative projects, journals about creative practice and social change, and aspirations for transforming education. She candidly describes storms within her and around her while also sharing ways to cultivate sky, contributing to this Special Issue's themes of contemplation, performing arts, and coexistence.

Bambara was, and is, a leader and elder of the Black Arts Movement, an award-winning writer and documentary filmmaker. She was born in NYC and grew up amidst the richly diverse neighbourhood of Harlem, frequenting community

gathering spaces like Speakers' Corner. She earned degrees from City University of New York (CUNY) and helped to develop City College's SEEK program which continues to offer access to historically excluded communities. She also earned a tenured professorship at Rutgers University before journeying beyond the academy.

What might be less apparent about Toni Cade Bambara is the breadth and depth of her creative and embodied practice, which included studying theatre arts, collaborating on theatre productions as a costume designer, enjoying dance, and travelling to Paris to practise mime. As for social practice, Bambara described herself as a Cultural Worker. Throughout her life, she engaged in creative works to promote transformation. Everywhere she lived, she dedicated herself to uplifting the wisdom of her local communities (Georgia Writers Hall of Fame n.d.). When colleagues reflect back

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on her impact, they share that she could 'be found with the people' (Salaam, 2010, 2:47).

Her first publication *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) 'acted as a new kind of Black, Puerto Rican, and Third World feminist studies open curriculum' (Lavan and Reed, 2017, p. 9). She invited her students, coworkers, and other colleagues to contribute. Together, they generated one of the foundational texts of the Black Arts Movement and disrupted the myth of a single and standard English. This is just one example of Toni Cade Bambara's practice of Authenticating Audience which recognizes the artist's responsibility to the community. The skillfulness of the work is evaluated by the audience it was created for, and even with (Massiah in Lavan and Reed, 2017). This social practice of sharing authority invites the community to 'call you out if you've got it wrong or applaud you

because they know you're right' (Austin 2014).

Bambara modelled that we cannot cultivate the sky without recognizing the storms. She observed that language can be 'wielded as a discriminatory weapon,' excluding ways of being, knowing, and doing. She reflected: 'What or who is named... Who is doing the naming?' (Lavan and Reed, 2017, p. 9). She situated the creation of language as emerging from the conditions in which it is constructed.

There are modes of intelligence and ways of being for which there is no precisioned vocabulary or available structures in English, since the languages of the West were being put together as the West was engaged in ransacking and destroying the ancient cultures (Lavan and Reed, 2017, pp. 46-47).

In doing so, she demonstrates how we might sense the past reverberating in the present. The *Lost & Found* editors continue this practice, inviting contemporary readers

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to bear witness to Bambara's wisdom across time and space.

Nearly fifty years after *The Black Woman* was published, I was working at one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse campuses in the United States: CUNY-Queensborough. While teaching voice and movement, I witnessed a storm as students struggled against the myth of a singular and standard American speech. In 2018, I initiated a research community with students and alumni to explore if Social Presencing Theater (SPT-QCC) might support personal and social well-being and transformation.

As the project unfolded, I found the process for building consensus in higher education long and winding. Whose knowledge counts? Are our words sufficient? Do we recognize when they are artefacts of dominant culture? I discovered that the word 'presencing' provokes. Some

lean forward with curiosity; others cross their arms, sneer, or turn away. Bambara reminds us that we are all creating knowledge, and it is no accident that we sound like loons when we discuss awareness or spiritual states (Lavan and Reed, 2017, p. 47). The artist may also be viewed as 'a freak and not to be taken seriously' (Lavan and Reed, 2017, p. 30). When viewed in relationship to each other, these dismissals of contemplative and creative practice demonstrate a pattern of exclusion in the system. Toni Cade Bambara dreamt of a language that 'will hasten the removal of all those artificially erected barriers so that we may become available to all the forces afoot in the universe.' (Lavan and Reed, 2017, p. 49). In turn, I wonder, which languages - ways of being, knowing, and doing - support personal and social well-being? How might

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we include the fullness of ourselves, across our spaces?

I discovered that innovation may generate assumption and miscommunication. When people hear or see the word 'theater', some assume that 'Social Presencing Theater' is a form of play-making; while SPT may support the creation of performance, that is just one of SPT's potentials. Within the theatre community, ways of being, knowing, and doing are evaluated and ranked. Creative contributions to commerce and entertainment receive greater resources and visibility than practices which support social justice, performance art, or applied theatre. The discipline of performance studies, which includes contributions that social practice makes to everyday human life and behaviour, is often stowed away in a crevice of the academy. Social practices for facilitating dialogue, including deep

listening, consensus building, and conflict resolution, are not widely accessible to students or community members. Rather this curricula is reserved for graduate students - those who have already demonstrated an ability to navigate the barriers in the system. And yet, social practice implicitly informs our ways of being, knowing, and doing in society.

Bambara questioned both the separation of knowledge and the build-up of disciplines in the academy. She observed that distance and 'clutter' generate confusion by perpetuating misinformation and assumption (Lavan and Reed, 2017, p. 17). Now in 2023, local and state governments across the United States have proposed - and in some cases passed - legislation to remove social and emotional learning from public education. This movement to abandon integrative learning follows efforts to remove diversity, equity,

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and inclusion initiatives. Toni Cade Bambara's question resonates across time: 'What or who is named... Who is doing the naming?' When will we rise to her call?

In the foreword to *The Black Woman* (1970), Bambara demonstrates how deficit-thinking creates and maintains hierarchies that presume rigour and encourage rigid thinking. She challenges readers to consider who is afforded the title of 'expert', rebuking the western academy for its historical exclusion of BIPOC communities, women, and non native English speakers. These patterns of exclusion - limiting whose knowledge counts - continue today. It is not enough to illuminate barriers or even remove them. Authentic inclusion welcomes diverse participation. Who has the power to ask the questions and direct the space?

Bambara also shared practices for illuminating the sky within us and around us.

She encouraged readers to turn their attention away from *reacting* to the storms (focusing on the 'myths that encourage ourselves to fashion ourselves rashly from without') and towards *creating* the skies (turning our attention 'to within') (Bambara p. 7). Her journals reveal an embodied, improvisational, and reflexive writing practice. She described writing as a 'powerful way of journeying toward what the shaping impulse can do' (Lavan and Reed, 2017, p. 17). Through practice and reflection, we 'confront the self, discover the self, share the self' (Lavan and Reed, 2017, p. 17). Somatic movement educators Karen Studd and Laura Cox remind us that,

language evolves from movement. We move before we speak and speaking itself is an action. Conscious awareness of how movement is embedded in our language helps us to understand how movement of the body is the basis of being' (2020, p. 24).



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Bambara's writing practice was also deeply relational. While she offered incisive critiques of society and its systems, she did not view herself as separate or superior. She recognized that deficit-thinking fragments personal and social well-being, priming each of us to be vulnerable to 'compliance, group denial, and amnesia.' She reexamined her previous writings to notice how language was functioning in her life. She engaged in active and social reflection about 'upbringings, ideologies, and prejudices, instead of ignoring, dismissing, suppressing, or transmitting them' (Lavan and Reed, 2017, pp. 9, 17-18). She engaged creative and social practices to cultivate compassionate and accountable relationships, recognizing that 'the truth is in the people' (Lavan and Reed, 2017, p. 34).

### ***Tania's Perspective on The Storm***

*July 2022.*

The crisis is environmental.

The crisis is social.

The crisis is political.

The crisis is economic.

The crisis is aesthetic.

In this moment of widespread global crisis, neoliberal politics are spreading disease. In his doctoral thesis entitled 'Artist-Educator: Neoliberal Somatopolitics and the Crisis of Sensibility of the Western(ized) Body', Brazilian artist-researcher Danilo Patzdorf details how the different phases of capitalism have directly affected our bodies, whether through colonization (which dealt with race and disenchantment), industrialization (which enabled the monitoring of gender expectations and enforcement), financialization (which dealt with desire and breakdown), or digitalization (which dealt with expression and disconnection).

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Through an in-depth and detailed description, he demonstrates in his research how contemporary suffering is part of a project of political domination that goes through the establishment of a 'neoliberal somatic-politics', which takes energy and vitality from us, producing exhausted bodies, throwing the responsibility for 'failure' on the individual and not on the society that produces it.

Within the University, one of the important processes of devitalization of artist-researchers occurs, in my perspective, through the reduction of teaching to a bureaucratic state for political purposes. This growing bureaucracy takes artist-researchers out of the classroom and rehearsal room and throws them in front of spreadsheets and reports, spreading disease through guilt, sadness, disappointment, anger, and frustration. Faced with the growing demand for filling out

reports, the race to obtain funding, and the assumption of evermore mechanistic, repetitive, and controlling tasks, the alternative given to artist-researchers seems to be to give up their own desires and dreams, the impulses of their bodies, and even their own identities and health. The consequence of this process is the establishment of an ideology of self-denial and self-sacrifice for the sake of the public 'good'. In this act of giving up on oneself, the institution and the powers it represents manage to perpetuate inequalities and maintain the structural status quo and its racist, sexist, ableist, and speciesist origins. Because the growing bureaucratization is constituted as a demand, it provides an incentive to those who agree with it - even as it destroys them - by manufacturing an excuse to ignore the pulse of life within themselves.

Over the years, I have observed multiple teachers of artistic disciplines renounce their childhood dreams to accept the demands of the bureaucracy as an excuse for not fulfilling their deepest callings. This denial of self, induced by a politics of harm, develops into resentment; as they succumb to the bureaucratic pressure, they shift their efforts to pruning, reducing, diminishing, inferiorizing, limiting, embarrassing, depressing, and demotivating the students. I believe that our work can counteract this process: it can be an attempt to witness and accompany a lift-off, to help other artist-researchers fly in the blue sky of possibilities. We urgently need to stand up against the neoliberal idea that existence is grounded in the process of pain and suffering. We need to be attentive and listen to the vibration and song of life. As Saci Wèrè sings in *Cabeça sem Tampa*, 'criar é uma palavra que deriva da criança'

(*Head without Cover*, 'to create is a word that comes from the child'). We need to walk towards the 'childhood of the words' ('criançamento das palavras', Manoel de Barros), to cross the world to invent the new, to imagine other worlds, to see the sky and open our colourful parachutes. For Ailton Krenak, an important ambientalist, we are falling down, but as artists and activists, we can invent ways to fall with poetry, delicacy, and company.

We have already fallen on many different scales and in different places in the world. But we are very afraid of what will happen when we fall. We feel insecurity, a paranoia of falling, because the new possibilities that are opening up require us to demolish this house that we inherited, that we comfortably carry in great style, although we spend the whole time afraid of falling. So maybe what we have to do is to discover a parachute. Not eliminate the fall, but invent and manufacture thousands of colourful, fun, even pleasurable parachutes (Krenak, 2019, p. 31).

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Even as we collapse or fall, we can create colourful parachutes which offer new ways to expand and glide. Our response does not have to be painful: we can listen, care, and manifest compassion. In the book called *Nos cabanes (Our huts)*, the researcher Marielle Macé uses a similar metaphor to Krenak. For her, metaphorically, building huts is 'imagining ways to live in a broken world and find out where landing is possible' (2019: 27). Parachutes and huts: our way to invent new ways to live together in these challenging times.

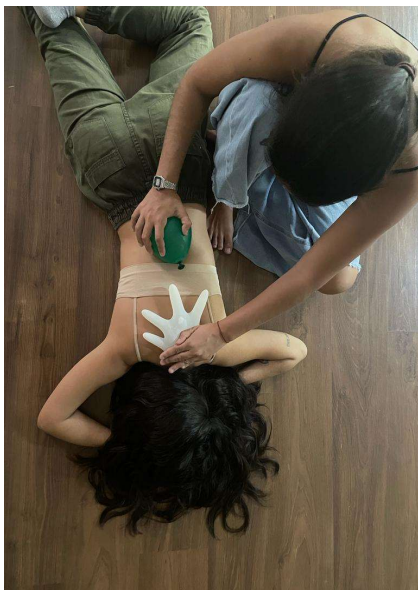
## **The Sky**

### ***Tania's Perspective on The Sky***

We have developed several research projects within the international and cross-institutional research group I coordinate with Dr. Gilson Motta, entitled *Con-temporary Performative Practices* (UNIRIO/UFRJ/CNPq). With each project, we try to go a little deeper into the art

practice that poses itself as a path for wellness and healing. The first project, *Arte Socialmente Engajada (Socially Engaged Art)* (2016 - 2020), was dedicated to enhancing participatory art projects in areas and times of crisis, in order to understand how art can be participative. The second project, *Performers sem Fronteiras: Arte em Tempos de Crise (Performers without Borders: Art in Times of Crisis)* (2016-2020), integrated acting, performance, and somatic practices in trauma zones, exploring ways to invite this type of participation in traumatic situations, like earthquakes and violent attacks. The current project, *Poéticas do Cuidado: Arte em Tempos de Crise (Poetics of Care: Ar in Times of Crisis)*, started in 2020, seeks to research practices of creativity and compassion in the complex pandemic and post-pandemic context we live in. It investigates how art can support long-term

practice. It would not be possible to detail all the results of the projects here, they have been published in papers and books. Here we will focus on one of the projects, the Clínica Somático-Performativa (Somatic-Performative Clinic), or CSP.<sup>5</sup> It was developed in the context of the last research project, because the CSP aspires to generate paths of health and art within the institution, about which I will elaborate here.



**Fig. 1.**  
**Clinic Session: Lygia Clark's Relational Objects.**  
**Photos: personal archive.**

The CSP began in 2018 as an action to prevent suicide and depression; it was developed in partnership with the Dean of Student Affairs (PRAE) of the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), where I work. It was initially held on a weekly basis at the University, in partnership with schizo-analyst Bruno Cuiabano and artist-researcher Diogo Rezende. CSP was created to propose new ways of being together, to generate a healing space through a loving connection, and to develop creativity collectively. Since its inception, CSP has been a space for welcoming and building new ways of being, as well as for experimenting with different ways of working with the issues that affect the students; CSP supports participants in transforming from victimhood to empowerment and accountability through

<sup>5</sup> CSP: Clínica Somático-Performativa at Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro, Brasil (UNIRIO).

artistic practice. One of the creative insights which emerged within the context of the Clinic came from a performative experience of my own, revealing the close connection between teaching practice, artistic practice, and community practice. About the birth of the project: in 2013, I went through a very difficult time and I decided to try to cheer myself up by putting a poster on the streets and social networks, saying: 'Invite me to do with you what you like to do most. Tell me the day, time, and what I need to bring'. I was counting on the fact that gathering people, to do what they liked to do most, would help cheer me up as well – a perspective that I considered a bit selfish at the time. But I quickly realised that activating people's solidarity was a very interesting process: in order to help me, they would ask themselves what they most liked to do, and reclaim their own practices (sometimes forgotten for years). I

understood that arriving at a place of being able to help others, whether you arrive through serendipity or intention, offers a great perspective for empowerment. After filming about forty shared activities (watching the clouds rise on Ipanema beach, eating an orange in the sun, taking a road with no destination...), I decided to give back and offer what I like to do most: laugh. I sat on a chair, offering laughter with whomever wanted it; simultaneously, a video of all the activities played on a big screen. The final performance entitled *Ulysses – a Caminho de Casa (Ulysses - on the Way Home)* happened three times in 2014: at the Helsinki International Performance Art Festival in Finland; at Grace Exhibition Space in New York; and at the Zsenne ArtLab in Brussels. It was crucial to realise that creating performative processes which activate the solidarity of others has a profound healing effect; this

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became one of the cornerstones of the Clinic's practice.

Initially, CSP was open to anyone (students, teachers, administrative staff) who wanted to participate. However, in 2019, CSP began to work with a specific group of students and teachers: those who wanted to participate in the experiences in order to become CSP facilitators in their respective workplaces (schools, communities, neighbourhoods). The Clinic worked as a space of intersection between therapy and art. The activities of CSP emerged organically from participant experiences, beginning with the use of diverse therapeutic modalities (Somatic Experiencing, Mindfulness, Schizoanalysis, Jodorowsky's Psychomagic, Lygia Clark's Relational Objects, Soul Motion, Yoga, conscious movement, etc.) and the language of performance in its various forms (autobiographical performance,

photo and video performance, relational performance, social performance, urban performance, and ritual, among others). In this way, the Clinic proposed different kinds of bridges for personal transformation: from a 'body-archive' of traumas to a 'body-archive' of new possibilities. These regenerative paths awaken the potency of life and produce a revolution of affections to support engaging with the current social and political moment.

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Clinic focused on specific projects of poetic care. First, collaborating to create a group for *Escuta Poética (Poetic Listening)* with Professors Marcus Fritsch, Ricardo Kosovski, Leticia Carvalho, Juliana Manhães, and Nara Keiserman to offer listening to whoever wished and also to ourselves. This experience unfolded into a listening project entitled *Roda de Mulheres (Women's Circle)*, which, in partnership with

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the UNIRIO Workers Health Care Sector, we offered in an online modality to all interested female employees and to a working group of UNIRIO professors. Another development was the creation of the show *Crescer pra Passarinho - uma Experiência de Cuidados Poéticos Online*, (*Growing up to be a Bird - an Experiment in Poetic Care Online*) performed with *Performers without Borders*, within the Research Group 'Contemporary Performative Practices'. The show, presented online ninety times during the pandemic, initially sought to care for health professionals who were on the frontlines of the pandemic; then it expanded to raise funds for the Association of Theater Producers of Rio de Janeiro (ATPR) by helping to buy food baskets for artists who were hungry. Another action at the intersection of art and health was a project inspired by Memorial Inumeráveis

(Innumerable Memorial), in which I directed a performance, *Cada Número é o Amor de Alguém* (*Each Number Is Someone's Love*). In this performance, we paid homage to each of the Brazilian victims of COVID-19 by sharing their life stories in alphabetical order. It was presented as the opening performance at the conference for the Brazilian Association of Research and Post-Graduation in Performing Arts (ABRACE) in 2021.

Finally, there was another unfolding of the CSP actions, which became a new project entitled *Petformances – Poéticas do Cuidado para, com e por Animais* (*Petformances - Poetics of Care for, with, and by Animals*), in partnership with the student, instructor, and veterinarian Manuella Mellão, which unfolded in courses offered at the undergraduate and graduate levels and workshops at MIT/São Paulo and by the SESC EM CASA program. We



focused the clinic's action on generating or deepening an anti-speciesist mindset and fostering inter-species solidarity, which are vital for disrupting the current ecological crisis. (For further reading on *Pet-formances*, see the article published in *Urdimento - Revista de Estudos em Artes Cênicas* in September 2021.) In March 2022, when activities finally resumed face-to-face, the Clinic became a welcoming space yet again, this time as part of a course called *Prática de Cena (Practices of the Stage)*. In this course, offered in partnership with Caio Picarelli, artist-researcher, graduate student, and collaborator of the Clinic, we developed performative and somatic practices inspired by the students' desires for learning.

As we all returned to the face-to-face world, following two years of the pandemic and virtual teaching and learning, we asked the students: 'What would you like to learn

that you never had the opportunity to do before?' A wish list was developed. Students longed to roller skate, to hula hoop, to dance ballet, to write a graduate school proposal, to use a pressure cooker, and to be invited to a slumber party, among others.

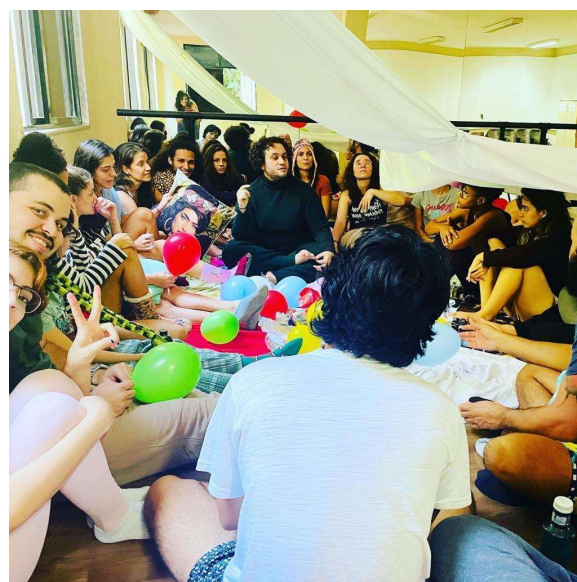


**Fig. 2.**  
**Somatic-Meditative Practices. Urca beach.**  
**Photo: personal archive.**

The collective intention was to amplify sensitivity while also offering space for individual healing processes; for this reason, we created a somatic space that

promoted the harmonisation of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual bodies; at the same time, the space was also performative, supporting these ways of being through cycles of exploration and integration. The CSP meetings were composed of two interwoven parts. The first part of the meeting included somatic and meditative practices which aimed at preparing the bodies for the exploration of new ways of being. The second part of the meeting was dedicated to the wish list. The inquiry and activities were defined and shaped by those who voiced the desire, while also welcoming input of the group. A flexible schedule accommodated impulses and changes. There was no obligation for the rest of the group to fully understand each desire, or to participate in every activity; instead, the group agreed to offer solidarity to each other through listening and presence. By starting these meetings

with the meditative and somatic practices, a space was created for learning; this also introduced and encouraged performativity throughout the whole process by inviting the participants to surrender to a new experience at every meeting.



**Fig. 3.**  
**The slumber party.**  
**A childhood wish of Thais Aquino.**  
**Photo: personal archive.**

As the weeks went by, Caio Picarelli and I observed that the students began to have greater self-confidence while sharing their own vulnerabilities. They expressed this through speech (learning 'how to deal

with homesickness' and 'how to overcome a betrayal'); through the exchange of touch (learning 'how to do and receive massage', or understanding 'how to engage with relational objects in Lygia Clark's work'); and through deepening their relationships with their bodies (learning 'to dance ballet' and 'to use a hula hoop' and 'to ride a skateboard'). In this respect, CSP emerges as a field not only of arts research, but also of artistic practice as research; through art, we find ways not only to activate what is necessary for emotional, physical, and psychological health, but also to encourage the culture of hope and enchantment for life.



**Fig. 4 and Fig. 5.**  
**Buddha's participation in somatic practices.**  
**Photo: personal archive.**

It is worth noting that the wish list activities were not enacted in a literal way. Thus, to learn how to use a pressure cooker, performative videos were made in which everything that pressured the participants in life was symbolically formed into little balls and thrown into a pressure cooker. This activity was then developed into a relational performance by the student Thais Aquino. In June of 2022, a student posted a video online threatening to shoot students and faculty at the Center for Arts

and Letters at UNIRIO. In response to this threat of attack, we engaged with our fears and demystified the atmosphere of terror by performing choreography set to the music of *The Phantom of the Opera* while wearing ghost costumes. To deal with homesickness of one student, the group shared a meditative walk in the middle of the forest and exchanged experiences of homesickness. Homesickness was then transformed into little paper boats which were released into the sea by Zé Caetano, who initiated the inquiry.



**Fig. 6.**  
**Learning 'How to deal with homesickness'**  
**by Zé Caetano.**  
**Photo: personal archive**

At first, we didn't know which kind of archive the whole process would take (performative actions, a catalogue of actions, records through photos, videos, etc.). The original dream was to create a space that would expand beyond any single project by establishing an art-clinic-space which integrates somatic and meditative practices along with performative actions which engage the senses. This was only possible by fostering trust between participants, by giving ourselves over to the proposals, and by allowing the process to unfold with full confidence. As the process went on, we decided to structure a session of sharing with the public, in which each student could invite two people. Held on July 20, 2022, the session was attended by my dog-therapist Buddha and presented itself as a great space for coexistence, exchange, and health for all the people involved.



**Fig. 7.**  
**Invitation to the public sharing event.**  
**personal archive.**

The project continues its course, unfolding in somatic-performative meetings held by the creative team, to research more deeply how the process is contributing to the participants' well-being. We are especially interested in supporting participants in creating their own resources for well-being, by improvising beyond habitual choices. Participants are discovering that their ability to invent new possibilities within the CSP carries over into

daily life. At this point, it is possible to share some guiding principles that have emerged during the course of the project. These principles include: developing concise speech and deep listening; creating a space of physical, emotional, and affectionate certainty so that flight can take place; creating a space of trust in the group, since the mutuality of the connection provokes the well-being and tranquillity needed to dive into vulnerabilities; balancing the three missions of taking care (of the tasks to be done, of well-being, and of relationships); and accompanying and validating the experience of the other without judgement or interference.

We are flying.

### ***Heather's Perspective on The Sky***

I initiated a Social Presencing Theater (SPT) practice community at Queensborough Community College

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(CUNY-QCC). I'll refer to our practice community as SPT-QCC. SPT was co-created by Arawana Hayashi and colleagues at the Presencing Institute. It is a body-based approach for observing the dynamic relationship between our awareness and our behaviour. SPT engages practice and reflection as an action research process, integrating 'physical and spatial intelligence with emotional and cognitive intelligence' (Hayashi, 2021, p. 20).

Each word in the name Social Presencing Theater is significant. 'Social' refers to the community aspects of the practice. We practise in community, illuminating our relationships, and the quality of these relational spaces, or 'social fields'. 'Presencing' was coined by C. Otto Scharmer, who describes it as 'the state we experience when we have opened our minds, our hearts, and our wills'. This

integrative approach offers an opportunity to perceive 'from the source. It allows us to connect and move with emerging new realities and rapid change that cannot be addressed by reflecting on past experiences' (Scharmer, 2009, p. 62). I conceptualise this as a kaleidoscope harmonising across our internal and external spaces. SPT uses an early definition of 'theater', referring to 'a place where something of significance happens'; in this context, theater is simply making something visible. SPT cultivates relational awareness across our bodies: our personal bodies, our social bodies, our systems bodies, and the Earth. This offers a unique opportunity to experience our humanity. Our bodies are visible, and they also contain tacit knowledge. SPT reveals well-being and wisdom; when we practise in community, we recognize our capacity for 'collective awareness, or "social pres-

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encing” (Hayashi, 2020, p. 5).

As the SPT-QCC journey unfolded, we discovered ways to cultivate personal and social well-being in our campus community. Over our three-year research cycle, the students and alumni generated shifts in the performance of their everyday lives, and initiated new roles in their communities; they enacted change within and beyond our campus community by co-creating performances, research presentations, and public programming.

This collaboration uncovered liberatory paths for participation in daily life by transforming concepts into practice, and by illuminating connections between the deeply personal and the deeply systemic.

Hayashi shares that,

we are all tangled in webs of forces that contribute to our personal and societal stuck situations. By embodying those forces, by deeply sensing into them, I begin to know how the whole system needs to shift in order for me, as an individual, to

be free to move (37).

Our applied research revealed that when we listen and sense the tacit knowledge of our relational bodies - personal, social, system, Earth - we generate tiny pieces of sky. This supports us in cultivating a personal and collective capacity for working directly with the storms in our lives. We can learn to relate to societal challenges that are often viewed through a deficit mindset. Instead of collapsing or turning away from these challenges, we can learn to approach ‘difficult’ conversations or ‘wicked’ problems as workable situations. (Communication and social design use these keywords to describe deficit-thinking that arises from complex circumstances.)

One particularly vivid collaboration emerged through our partnership with one of CUNY-QCC’s campus cultural centres: the Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Center (KHC). The seeds for this

project appeared in April 2018 when I offered an introductory SPT workshop at CUNY-QCC. Two of the participants, then student Joseph Distl IV (Joseph) and CUNY-QCC alumnus Yineng Ye (Ye), shared that SPT transformed their understanding of empathy. As they practised SPT, they recalled their experience in a campus leadership program offered in partnership with the KHC and Global Citizenship Alliance (GCA): Ye in 2016 and Joseph in 2017.<sup>6</sup> As GCA participants, they had ‘explore[d] issues of global concern from different perspectives’; they attended interactive sessions on listening, empathy, and collaboration as they prepared for an international weeklong trip, which included a visit to Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site.<sup>7</sup>

They discovered a co-emerging

insight: SPT transforms empathy from cognitive understanding into embodied knowing. They wondered if this discovery might have value for others in our community and for higher education. Joseph reflected about his time in Austria: ‘while I understood what empathy meant, it was a really difficult space for me to access because it made me feel very vulnerable and uncomfortable having these conversations’. As Joseph practiced SPT, empathy became more accessible in daily life. In *Radical Friendship* (2021), Kate Johnson shares that ‘the practice of being in direct contact with the suffering in our world is called *bearing witness*’ (196). She also offers a candid insight: she initially perceived the practice as ‘distant and remote... like the stereotype of the detached, navel-gazing meditator’; what

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<sup>6</sup> GCA: Global Citizenship Alliance at Queensborough Community College.

<sup>7</sup> KHC: The Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Center, Queensborough Community College at City University of New York.



she came to understand, and so generously shares with her readers is that 'this process of bearing witness in a sustained and conscious way is the exact activity that makes it possible to take wise action' (197). The participants identified that SPT cultivated their capacity to bear witness. They began to perceive action and nonaction -- movement and stillness -- and their subtleties. Ye shared:

There's something I learned that was rarely found in a traditional classroom. The difference between sympathy and empathy is action. Not only that -- empathy calls for action; empathy is an action' (CUNY Queensborough).

Their experiences align with Hayashi's writings on SPT: the practices -

invite deep reflection and brave action. They engage the whole person -- body, mind, and heart. They work quickly -- they get to the point. They engage people's natural creativity and deep care for one another (2020, p. 21).

We began a listening journey in Fall 2019 to explore these insights (Scharmer, 2009, pp. 380-384). Joseph and I met with Marisa Hollywood, Assistant Director of the KHC, to share our initial findings. She encouraged us to envision possibilities for an interactive workshop. We learned about an upcoming exhibition: *Survivance and Sovereignty on Turtle Island: Engaging with Contemporary Native American Art*. We met with Dr Laura Cohen, Executive Director of the KHC, and Kat Griefen, one of the co-curators of the exhibit. The exhibition would be of national and local significance. The KHC would uplift the histories of the indigenous people on the continent, and acknowledge the KHC stands on the traditional land of the Matinecock people, near the Lenape and Shinnecock people. It would be the first time a Holocaust museum in the United States would explore the genocide of first people in dialogue with the

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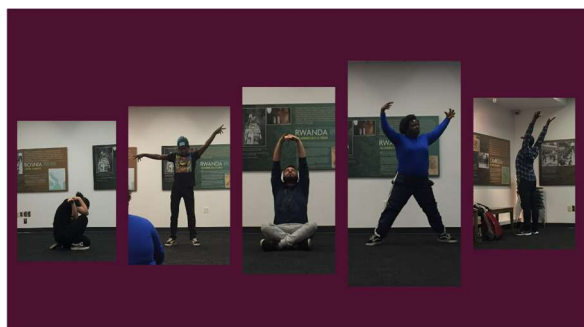
Holocaust. Many in our campus community, including members of SPT-QCC, would witness their ancestries included at the KHC for the first time; others in our community would learn one or both of these histories for the first time. The exhibition was being co-created through shared authority. Co-curator Danyelle Means, Oglala Lakota, shares, there is 'not one group who holds all of the knowledge'; rather, everyone is welcome to visit and 'build a bridge' (KHC). We recognized the potential and risk in this act of inclusion, which strengthened our resolve to participate. As the exhibition opened, we attended public programming to participate in this exchange between indigenous artists and our community.

At our meeting in Fall 2019, Marisa encouraged us to reach out to Lampeto (Bette) Efthymiou, the Director of the GCA leadership program. Bette was excited to learn that Joseph and Ye continued to

reflect on their GCA experiences. She offered her support and asked how she might practise SPT. This inspired us to build on Marisa's suggestion and create an interactive workshop as a prototype for our SPT-QCC community.

In late November 2019, we gathered in the KHC classroom and practised together. It was a new space for us, and not a neutral one; a distinctive feature of the space is a wall display of infographics about genocide across history and around the globe. We began this workshop as we often do, with somatic practices for listening to ourselves and to each other. We moved freely for a few minutes. Then we practised mindfulness, followed by two SPT practices: 20-minute dance and duets. Next, Kat guided us through the exhibition. We returned to the classroom on our own to reflect in silence; then we slowly began to explore the felt-sense of our experience,

allowing movement and stillness to emerge in response to the exhibition. As we improvised solo performance sketches in silence, the energy in the room began to shift. I myself experienced my body being drawn into the open space, as if the space was offering itself as a reflection pool. Eventually we shared these performances with each other.



**Fig 8.**

**SPT-QCC community members share improvised performances in dialogue with *Survivance and Sovereignty*, Nov 22 2019. L to R: Ksenia Volynkina, Justin Allen, Joseph Distl IV, Phylisha Louis & Kristopher Harris. Photos: personal archive.**

The body-based practices of breath, mindfulness, and movement supported us in paying attention: we were able to suspend the habit of collapsing or turning

away from the violence and atrocity; instead, we chose to stay with the discomfort we were experiencing. As we offered our presence, we generated ‘tiny bits of sky’ within ourselves. Amidst this suspension, we felt the presence of our collective fabric. The group was not only offering space, it was offering time.

Scharmer describes that

[in] these moments, when time slow(s) down and space seem(s) to open up around us, we (feel) the power of subtle presence shining through our words, gestures, and thoughts -- as if the presence of a future were watching and attending to us (Scharmer, 2009, p. 178).

Our relational space was collectively ‘hanging the sky’ (Kopenawa, 2013, quoted in Krenak, 2020, p. 37). We were capable of holding both themes of the exhibition: *Survivance* and *Sovereignty*; with deep resonance in our bodies, we were bearing witness to atrocity alongside resilience. Our collective embodied experience supported

us in 'letting go of (our) old "sel(ves)" and letting come the new "Sel(ves)"' as we travelled together across time, arriving in a different position altogether (Scharmer, 2009, p. 43).

### *Exchanging Tiny Pieces of Sky*

Joseph and Ye's early insight initiated a new space of convergence, and generated ripples which continue to unfold. Bette from GCA offered a rare gift when she joined us in practice that November. She discovered her own insights about the value of SPT in life and pedagogy. She later recalled that 'the mindfulness of body, the ground, the space...' invited her to reconnect her mind and body. She sensed more deeply than she had in some time, and experienced profound sadness for a loved one who was suffering (Efthymiou, 2021). Arawana reminds us that sadness can be a 'code word for compassion... sadness is powerfully human'. Further, 'it

can get us moving out of our comfort zone... into the completely messy business of helping our world' (Hayashi, 2020, p. 88).

Bette recognized SPT's potential for teaching and learning. She shared that the practices support sensing someone else's differences while also recognizing your own. When she experienced generative listening in this full-bodied way, she realised - this is what it is all about: 'You can't keep what you learn all to yourself. If you aren't doing anything with (what you hear), then what's the point?' (Efthymiou, 2021).

Bette invited us to co-facilitate a workshop for GCA in February 2020, creating a new flightpath! This time, Joseph and Ye each facilitated practices; we also adapted the duet practice to create movement dialogues with the artworks in the exhibit. Joseph shared that facilitating a workshop for students who were participating in a program that he once

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attended 'was a very full circle, surreal moment for me'. He found himself standing in the middle of the room during the closing activity, leading a group of people he'd just met: 'I realised that without SPT and GCA, I would have never been able to put myself in the centre of that circle' (CUNY Queensborough).

We also discovered that well-being emerges in serendipitous ways. Bette invited a colleague to join us for the GCA workshop. She later shared that he called a week later and thanked her for saving his life. When he did the practices, he discovered he was in deep pain. He went to the doctor that day and learned that he needed immediate treatment.

### *Audacity of Peace*

When Bette travelled across campus to practise with our community in November 2019, she engaged with the change emerging around her. We all have this

capacity to relate with the social fields in our communities and systems. One of my wanderings led me to participate in the KHC's professional development series in 2020-21. One of the sessions, *Arts, Education, and Empathy: Towards a Pedagogy of Peace*, featured a peacebuilding project created by Daniel Fernández Fuentes. Participants engaged in performance practices to sense the past reverberating in the present. This experience supported me in communicating more effectively with the KHC's Executive Director Dr Laura Cohen by positioning SPT as an integrative approach that links body, mind, and heart. This dialogue inspired a collaboration between the KHC and members of the SPT-QCC community in Spring 2021. We co-created virtual programming to share about SPT, our community, and the SPT-GCA participants' 'Empathy to Action' project

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through a two-part series: *Peacebuilding through Awareness and Improvisation*. As this new landing pad emerged, other SPT-QCC community members joined the collaboration: Celeste Abramowitz, Justin Allen, Geovanny Guzman (Geo), Kristopher Harris (Kris), Jessica Kreisler (Jess), and Phylisha Louis (Louis). Colleague Aviva Geismar from QCC's Dance Program offered assistance, and with the support of CUNY's *Transformative Learning in the Humanities* initiative (CUNY TLH), we invited guests: Arawana Hayashi facilitated practice for the CUNY community, and international SPT practitioners Uri Noy-Meir and Manish Srivastava guided reflection with the SPT-QCC community and audience. We discovered the challenges of the pandemic were also creating opportunities. Our local grassroots community did not have the resources to host these global leaders in person, or the

means for the group to travel to them. This virtual programming --and the resources offered by the KHC and supported by CUNY TLH-- provided a gathering place to exchange 'tiny bits of sky'.

Two years earlier, in April 2019, I was seeking a fresh perspective about our project and I asked Manish Srivastava if we might have a coaching session. As I shared about the emerging roots and branches of our SPT practice community, he shared an image with me. He sensed that our group was making a kind of emergent street art together; he encouraged me to care for its essence as we crossed the threshold from the 'streets' of our community into the 'museums' of our institution. As we designed these offerings in Spring 2021, I experienced the transition he foretold. On campus, some colleagues expressed concern about the SPT-GCA participants' description of 'empathy to action'; complex

conversations about the nuances of empathy and compassionate action unfolded. Off campus, some colleagues voiced discomfort about describing SPT as a practice for peacebuilding. Who are we to teach about peace? And who are we to come to a community cultural centre devoted to 'using the lessons of the Holocaust to educate current and future generations about the ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping' to do so? (KHC). What did we have to offer this community, which includes survivors of the Holocaust and other mass atrocities? We continued to work directly with these questions as we prepared for the event.

As I reflect upon these tensions now, I sense that our minds were showing up to direct our bodies when our bodies already knew the way. This is a common reaction to working with open space. It's so common, in fact, that when we practise SPT, we

recognize it. We practise cultivating capacity so we can work directly with tension, rather than bloat or collapse. Practice reveals that when we return to our senses, we discover a middle way; the energy of conflict can transform into compassion. The authors of *The Embodied Mind* (2016) offer that 'when the reasoning mind [is] no longer cling[ing] and grasp[ing]... [then] compassionate energy arises without pretence'. Further, that 'it is the anxiety about feedback - the response of the other - that causes us tension and inhibition in our action'. When we let go of this tension, we experience relaxation and discover 'supreme (or transcendental) generosity' (p. 247). We were fortunate that many people took a risk to explore the possibility that SPT offers contributions to peacebuilding. As we continued to prepare for the program, our collaborators on and off campus responded to 'inner voices of

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resistance' like judgement, cynicism, and fear by opening their minds, hearts, and wills (Scharmer, 2009, pp. 42-43).

When we eventually offered our workshop on *Peacebuilding through Awareness and Improvisation* in March 2021, we were greeted by many willing participants who arrived with curiosity to share in practice and reflection. During the program, Joseph, Kris, Louis, and Geo demonstrated accessible approaches for practising 'empathy to action' during lockdown at home, and shared poetry generated during their action research process at the KHC. During the event, Uri Noy-Meir reflected that the creative practice uncovered new potentials within and beyond theatre, by engaging 'art as a gateway into deep research of social, political, and spiritual significance.' Arawana Hayashi shared that SPT-QCC's emerging art form:

links the deeply personal with the systemic, with the bigger view of the global and the spiritual world that we all live in. These moments, the gestures, the words of these poems... they open from the most minute moment of the heart... into a real sense of global humanity, and beyond.

Serendipity also arrived through other attendees. CUNY-QCC's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning Director recognized the engagement of high-impact practices (American Association of Colleges and Universities). She encouraged the eligible participants to present at CUNY-QCC's Spring Student Symposium. We were also joined by a member of CUNY-QCC's counselling staff, who invited me to facilitate a workshop during a Healthy Living Fair in May 2021; this helped our community enact a long-held aspiration for campus-wide access to SPT. This, and other experiences, inspired KHC leadership to feature compassion in their 2021-22 professional development



series; KHC Executive Director Dr Laura Cohen shared:

So much of the work we do at the Kupferberg Holocaust Center is about the past... today reminds me... that our programming is about life, making these connections between the past even more resonant in the future, and talking about what it means to not only live with these memories, but to put them into conversation and to really harness the power of peacebuilding and relationships.

Each of these actions offered opportunities for our community to bear witness, which brings me back to April 2018. During that first workshop, several of the participants shared that SPT was a practice for promoting world peace. At the time, it sounded audacious to me. And yet, as a global citizen, and as a child and sister of U.S. military veterans, I would do anything to eradicate war. In the words of Ben Ferencz, prosecutor at Nuremberg:

*If it is naive to want peace instead of war, let them make sure they say I am naive. Because I want peace instead of*

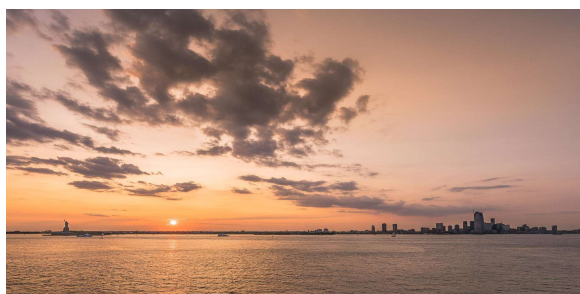
*war. If they tell me they want war instead of peace, I don't say they're naive, I say they're stupid. Stupid to an incredible degree, to send young people out to kill other young people they don't even know, who never did anybody any harm, never harmed them. That is the current system. / am naive? That's insane (2021).*

Listening to his words, I feel my own heart swell. When the students and alumni shared their wisdom with me in 2018, I was unable to receive it, yet their 'naive' clarity transformed my conditioned cynicism. Kate Johnson reminds us that,

*[the] moment of clear sight is the end of denial. We must use it as a springboard for compassionate action: action that interrupts cycles of harm, either by addressing the needs that the harm created, or by preventing the harm from happening in the first place (197).*

How had I convinced myself to cede one of humanity's greatest problems to the appointed experts? We can't leave peacebuilding to anyone else. The responsibility lies with each of us. We can

disrupt the 'widespread restlessness which threatens world peace, and even the existence of life on this planet' (Hayashi, 2021, p. 113) by transforming our own behaviour.



**Fig 9.**  
**The sky over New York City.**  
**Photo: Geovanny Guzman (SPT-QCC)**

## Conclusion

Writing, we realise that the sky can be our guide, but only if we welcome the changes with our full selves. Since the sky is all around us, space can be generated within each one of us. We can facilitate intentional encounters where self-expression and brave action are possible: spaces where we can welcome everyone who understands that peace with oneself,

with the other, with society, and with the environment are collective priorities right now. In the case of SPT, we walked a somatic path where empathy became compassionate action. We uplifted the young people's radical vision for our community. In the case of CSP, we recycle sad affections into compassion and joy. We transform our vulnerabilities into strengths and we fight for what makes us alive. In both cases, we seek compassionate practices and walk the meditative path to be able to see it. We travel to each other by exchanging tiny bits of sky, co-creating flightpaths for ourselves and others we have yet to meet. We welcome serendipity. We are the system, we are the University. Therefore, at any given moment, we can transform our behaviour; we can choose to offer our attention to another focus, to foster a vision of peace, and to build an artistic and sustainable future. Even in the midst of the

most intense storm, we can reduce the distance between our dreams and the reality we create through our actions; we can walk together toward the sky.

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