

6-28-2019

Upstream Downtown: Theatre Creation Through a Feminist and Multispecies Lens

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Johnson, Morgan, and Alexandra Simpson. "Upstream Downtown: Theatre Creation Through a Feminist and Multispecies Lens." *The Goose*, vol. 17, no. 2, article 4, 2019, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss2/4>.

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MORGAN JOHNSON
AND
ALEXANDRA SIMPSON

*Upstream Downtown: Theatre
Creation through a Feminist and
Multispecies Lens*

Conception

In the historically masculine Western sciences we are told we can fully *know* a being by dissecting, labelling, testing, observing, and documenting. This is particularly true if that being is a nonhuman. Through the scientific process of fragmentation humans recede further away from appreciating what Jakob von Uexkull calls the *umwelt*, or unique worldview, of another being (321). In this article, we suggest an alternative: we explore feminist multispecies performance (with an emphasis on devised and clown/bouffon performance) as a means to challenge rationalist categorizations that define and therefore limit the physical, etymological, and ontological parameters of another being as well as our relationship to that being. How else might we come to know a species that is not our own? How may we do so in a way that allows for sentient human-nonhuman relationships and embraces the messy material entanglements that come hand in hand with being alive?

In 2018 we created and performed *Upstream Downtown*, a research-based, physical theatre play about salmon and humans finding home in Toronto, which will provide a platform for our investigations on feminist multispecies performance. In *Upstream Downtown*, the world is experienced through the bodies of two salmon-human amalgamates, Sojo and Beagle, who try to perform their very best human in order to survive in an andro/anthropocentric world. The play was produced in 2018 at the Toronto Festival of Clowns, the Toronto Fringe Festival, Riverdale Park East with Evergreen Brick Works, and the Scarborough Salmon Festival with Toronto and Region Conservation Authority; it was directed by Martha Ross with music composed by Anders Azzopardi and Stefan Hegerat.

Our focus for this article will be on the embodied explorations and conceptual frameworks used in the creation of *Upstream Downtown*, and how the salmon-human assemblage inspired the theme of homemaking and its relationship to gender, settler colonialism, the salmon body, human-nonhuman relationships, and environmental degradation. In the spirit of form and

content being co-constitutive, we have structured this article around salmon life cycles including conception, birth, maturation, death, and birth again. Though our focus is on salmon in North America, we hope our explorations can be useful for getting to know and developing sentient relationships with other species as well.

Birth

The creation process for *Upstream Downtown* was inspired by Elizabeth Povinelli's theory of geontopower, which she describes as "a set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife" (4). In resistance to the strict categorizations and hierarchies between salmon and humans imposed by geontopower, we developed the conceptual and methodological process of *boundless bodies* for performance—bodies that extend past their physical limitations, contributing to other forms of life and nonlife. More importantly, boundless bodies reflect the salmon life cycle and how birth and death are not conceptual opposites, but rather materially and ontologically connected. After the arduous journey of swimming upstream to return to their native spawning grounds, mature salmon give birth to a new generation, then die shortly after. Their decaying bodies, however, help fertilize and support the entire riparian ecosystem that future generations of salmon and many other species rely on. The adult salmon are thus present throughout the lifespan of their offspring, but no longer in the physical form of a fish.

In *Upstream Downtown* we wanted to explore how our characters, Sojo and Beagle, could also be built of multiple interlocking existences, including us as performers, the audiences we perform for, their memories of the performance, the spaces we perform in, the stories we are telling, the beings who have inspired those stories, and the cultural perspectives we are subjected to as female human bodies "being fish" on stage (more on that later). Our performance was an immersive experience that was equally reliant upon the contributions of the audience and the space as it was upon the artists who perform.

The performance styles we used (clown and bouffon) are particularly useful forms to explore boundless bodies. Both performance styles fully come to life with an audience present. Jacques Lecoq, a physical theatre practitioner and teacher who is well known for his work in clown and bouffon, describes the clown in his book *The Moving Body*:

The clown, who is ultra-sensitive to others, reacts to everything that happens to him and varies between a sympathetic smile and an expression of sadness . . . the contact the clown has with his public is immediate, he comes to life by playing with the people who are looking at him. It is not possible to be a clown *for* an audience; you play *with* your audience. (146-147)

One of Lecoq's training techniques, "Identification with Nature," requires students to study nature and the four elements (earth, wind, fire, and water) and develop a discourse of physical and emotional movements. "Identification with Nature" "involves hard work over a long period,

going on to colours, lights, words, rhythms, spaces into what we call the *universal poetic sense*” (44). The universal poetic sense articulates “all humans share the sense of an abstract dimension . . . which can be found in all of us” (168). “Identification with Nature” towards a universal poetic sense was used to explore the bodies of salmon. This process involved attending a salmon run at the Humber River, watching YouTube videos of salmon spawning and swimming, and spending hours in front of the mirror flapping our hands like fins, gaping our mouths, and trying to recreate the powerful fin swish when a salmon moves upstream. While we did not achieve “total identification,” the arduous process of physically resembling a fish helped us find universal communicators that both we and our audience understood. What we were able to achieve through the embodied practice of *Identification with Nature* are the *dynamics* of salmon.

Identification requires patience and acute ears. Perhaps most importantly, Identification will always be incomplete. It is in this way that Sojo and Beagle are able to resist species categorization. Our audience’s suspension of disbelief allowed our human bodies to be read as salmon; yet at the same time, when deemed necessary for their survival, Sojo and Beagle might strategically choose to perform human.

The process of embodying a species other than our own is a humbling experience. As the performers attempting to embody salmon, we will never fully “master” that which we seek to represent. Neither of us will ever fully swim like salmon. We will never breathe underwater like salmon. We will never fully grasp the world through the same perspective as salmon. As such, we will never fully know salmon as the Western sciences tell us we might. It is through this incompleteness of knowledge that we open ourselves up to the possible subversion or confusion of preconceived hierarchies. We see *Identification with Nature* as important to developing sentient human-nonhuman relationships vis-à-vis performance. Failure to achieve full *Identification*—or full knowing, for that matter—with a nonhuman keeps the longing for connectivity, for exploration, and for a deeper understanding of the complex assemblages that implicate us all in each other’s well-being.

The “birth” (in all its salmon-y complexity) of humans’ relationship with salmon on this land goes back thousands of years. Indigenous people from many different nations across Turtle Island have had and continue to have deep connections to salmon. A colossal shift occurred in the past two to three hundred years, marked by the mass arrival of settlers to what is now called Canada. As a result, overfishing, water pollution, and obstruction of the salmon’s native streams devastated fish populations across Turtle Island and almost entirely wiped out the salmon niches in the Greater Toronto Area. Currently, there are several different species of salmon living in the many tributary rivers of Lake Ontario: the introduced species that were brought here from the Pacific Ocean (such as spring/Chinook or Coho salmon) and the Atlantic salmon, which are native to Lake Ontario (although the natural stocks died out in the 1800s and are only recently being restocked).

As the researchers and creators of *Upstream Downtown*, we wanted to critically examine our own relationships to salmon and our position as settler-Canadians finding home on stolen

Indigenous land in Tkaronto. Our clown characters, Sojo and Beagle, are the introduced species of spring salmon, and were made to parallel and satirize the actions of early (or present day) settlers in Canada. In the play, Sojo and Beagle have to navigate towards their home in a space that is unfamiliar to them. Their directional compass (the one located in their DNA that leads them back to their native spawning grounds) is not responding to their new surroundings. As a result of this disconnection to their past, Sojo and Beagle try to overcompensate by monopolizing the environment around them and claiming everything as their property in a desperate attempt to find home in unfamiliar land. These satirical land claims are meant to compel the audience to consider their own assumptions around private property and entitlement to land. How might (settler) humans be overlooking salmon as part of the human assemblage based on anthropocentric constructed hierarchies of the animate and the inanimate? How might multispecies performance subvert this hierarchy? Just as Sojo and Beagle are “settling in” to their new home, they receive an eviction notice from their landlord, demonstrating, as *Alt. Theatre* reviewer Kate Croome puts it, “the exploit one must abide simply to reside on land that is not really the landlord’s possession in the first place.”



Figure 1. When faced with eviction, Sojo and Beagle attempt to be the evictors and dress up as a power-hungry landlord and his reluctant landlady. *Upstream Downtown*, July 2018 at the Toronto Fringe Festival. Alexandra Simpson (Beagle) left, Morgan Johnson (Sojo) right. Photo credit: Nicholas Porteous.



Figure 2. Sojo and Beagle dress up as early colonial settlers and Beagle tries to convince Sojo that the water is theirs by writing their name on a flag. *Upstream Downtown*, July 2018 at the Toronto Fringe Festival. Alexandra Simpson (Beagle) right, Morgan Johnson (Sojo) left. Photo credit: Nicholas Porteous.

Maturation

Salmon narratives offered us a nuanced way to explore our own bodies as female human creators through concepts of homemaking, gender, and female maturation. Most of us associate a healthy, mature salmon ready for consumption with the colour red. Wild salmon get their red colour naturally from their diet via carotenoids, a pigment found in many plants. Farmed salmon, however—fish that biologist Mart Gross believes should be recognized and studied as its own evolutionary lineage, *Salmo domesticus* (132)—become red from a dye administered by the fish farm industry. The shades of dye used to colour salmon are presented

similarly to shades of lipstick.¹ In both cases, the colour red is used to make female humans and fish more desirable for consumption. Gross's title, *Salmo domesticus*, aptly reflects the process of female domestication (for both salmon and humans) that we explored in *Upstream Downtown*.

Red is not only the preferred colour of salmon meat and roe, but also has significance to female identity through menstruation and normative cultural associations including red as a signifier of desire, passion, emotion, and sex. Women and red get placed together through images of the devil, femme fatale, slut, and homewrecker and therefore draw connections between sexual maturity, desire, and sin.

In *Upstream Downtown*, we made the conscious decision to exploit the popular iconography of the colour red and its connection to female human and salmon bodies. The play featured a maturation scene in which Beagle jumps into the water, emerges as a mature salmon, and goes on to perform a hyper-sexualized mating dance. Meanwhile, Sojo sits on the edge of the stage combing her hair with a plastic fork to the song of Ariel's voice being taken by Ursula in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. Sojo in this moment is made to reflect the sexualization of fish (such as mermaids and sirens) and the loss of innocence in exchange for sin. Sojo eventually breaks from the nostalgia of *The Little Mermaid* and interrupts Beagle's mating ritual. Sojo then transforms herself into a scientist and attempts to dissect and sell Beagle's newly matured, red body to the audience (the performer was wearing a red bodysuit). Our intent was to warn audiences "of the dangers of misinterpretation/misreadings of . . . the female body" (Donida 69) as a site of consumption and to help audiences "detect those 'certain injuries' upon [Beagle's] body, so that we may retrace those recognizable cuts back onto ourselves" (70). Croome describes the scene:

Under Sojo's direction, Beagle is put under the magnifying glass, body segmented and highlighted for the audience's visual consumption. While comical, it is an intentionally discomfiting segment, one in which the audience is forced to consider the very real (and sadly, relevant) purported ownership claim by male politicians of women's bodies, particularly those of non-white women, a claim which reduces women to machines of reproduction.

Our aim during the maturation scene was to reflect how categorization can become an act of violence upon the female and nonhuman body, and to denormalize the act through satire.

¹ To view an image of the colour wheel of these dyes (DSM SalmoFan):
https://www.dsm.com/markets/anh/en_US/products/products-solutions/products_solutions_tools/Products_solutions_tools_salmon.html.



Figure 3. Sojo as a corporate scientist dissects Beagle for the audience. *Upstream Downtown*, July 2018 at the Toronto Fringe Festival. Alexandra Simpson (Beagle) right, Morgan Johnson (Sojo) left. Photo credit: Nicholas Porteous.



Figure 4. Sojo and Beagle dress up as hyper-masculine fishing buds and try to catch a fish. *Upstream Downtown*, July 2018 at the Toronto Fringe Festival. Alexandra Simpson (Beagle) left, Morgan Johnson (Sojo) right. Photo credit: Nicholas Porteous.

Gender fluidity became a focus in *Upstream Downtown* after we learned of satellite males: smaller, less aggressive male salmon who pretend to be females in order to avoid aggression from alpha males during spawning. Through their effeminate disguise, the satellite males are able to trick the alpha males and swoop in to fertilize roe (Isabella 90). We were interested in the different levels of power we were able to achieve between Sojo and Beagle, and also among our audience, by switching and blurring genders.

The act of disguise allowed us to include multiple and complex perspectives into *Upstream Downtown* including scientist, fishermen, and landlord/lady, each sitting in a distinct gender category. Sojo and Beagle's ability to shapeshift reflects the bouffon performance style. Bouffons can become multiple characters in order to call upon the fallacy of that particular identity. Sojo and Beagle played multiple genders and roles in order to illuminate how female human and salmon bodies have been used as sites for the deployment of power in a highly masculine and industrial world. Through these jumps in logic and character, *Upstream Downtown* also diverted from the linear narratives and rational sciences of the Western world and, instead, highlighted the sites of potential solidarity across various kinds of oppressions.

Death

Over 130 species include salmon in their diets—including salmon themselves. Spawned-out carcasses sustain the next generation of salmon by fertilizing the water and promoting algal growth . . . Salmon are literally part of many other species, permeating the economy of nature.

—Peter Coates, *Salmon*

Death from a human perspective is often regarded as a loss of something or someone. During the creation of *Upstream Downtown*, particularly when it came to how to “end” the play, we wondered how we could detach death from human connotations of finality, and instead use it to reflect the salmon life cycle, particularly the economy of nature described above by Coates. At the end of the play, Sojo and Beagle prepare to die:

BEAGLE: We’ve had a good run, haven’t we Sojo?

SOJO: Yeah, we’ve had a good run. *Beat.* Well, here we go! . . . *Beat.* Are you dead yet?

BEAGLE: No. I’m not dead yet.

SOJO: Now?

BEAGLE: No, Sojo.

SOJO: I’m not dead yet either . . .



Figure 6. Sojo and Beagle prepare for death. Alexandra Simpson (Beagle) right, Morgan Johnson (Sojo) left. *Upstream Downtown*, July 2018 at the Toronto Fringe Festival. Photo credit: Nicholas Porteous.

This goes on for quite a while as lights slowly dim until the stage is left in blackout. As creators, we wanted to challenge the concept of death as the end of something—in this case, the end of *Upstream Downtown* and the end of Sojo's and Beagle's lives. The audience never sees Sojo and Beagle die. It is assumed that they might, but the slow fade to black and the continued conversation between Sojo and Beagle about dying has a feeling of ongoingness. If the lights were to come back on, we imagine Sojo and Beagle might reappear, but this time perhaps as algal growth to feed the next generation.

Birth again

To perceive death as the beginning and not the end of something connects to the ephemerality of theatre itself. Theatre has the unique ability to disappear and yet remain through the memories and lives of its audiences. Therefore, the end of our play might not be the end at all, as Sojo and Beagle would remain in the memories and future interactions of audience members, our artistic team, ourselves as the artists, and even in our next show, as clown characters are wholeheartedly connected to the actor who plays them. In the spirit of a cyclical salmon life, we hope to find comfort in the incomplete and humbling process of embodied learning. Can we leap into the unknown (whether it be body, story, or relationship) and embrace the fear that follows? Can we consider not knowing as part of a new worldmaking project that nurtures human-nonhuman relationships? Certainly we have fear in this endeavour for a variety of reasons: as inhabitants of a dying world, as humans with a history of making catastrophic mistakes, and as performers engaging in the act of *Identification* fully knowing we are destined, in a sense, to fail. In the spirit of the leaping fish, we suggest we jump into the unknown waters.

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Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to many people for their roles in the creation of this article: to Catriona Sandilands for her inspiration and support; to all the amazing folks who worked on *Upstream Downtown* with us in its many variations—especially to Martha Ross for her generous and creative energy in the rehearsal room; and, of course, to the salmon and all those who have cared for them.