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Placemaking through Parkour and Art du Déplacement (ADD) as a Singaporean Applied Performance Practitioner in London

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At this time of writing in early 2020, COVID-19 has prompted violent expressions of racism towards people who look Chinese in the UK. Amanda Rogers’ articulate critique of Royal Shakespeare Company’s *The Orphan of Zhao* (2014) and Bryony Lavery’s *More Light* (2009) notes that the use of yellowface in theatrical representations of Asians ‘support[s] the idea that all Asians look alike’ (2014, p. 457). As a Singaporean Peranakan, I am reminded that the celebration of diversity will not vaccinate against the tendency to use cultural differences against East Asians in the UK. Perhaps, in telling themselves that COVID-19 is a virus associated with the unhygienic or exotic food practices of the Chinese, people convince themselves that they can reduce the risk of being infected by alienating those who appear ethnically Chinese. The exoticisation of cultural difference will inevitably fall short of intercultural understanding. On 9 February 2020, a Thai tax consultant, Pawat Silawattakun, was called a ‘coronavirus’ whilst being filmed by two teenagers (Silawattakun, 2020). He was then robbed and punched in the nose (ibid.). It was late afternoon in West London, and there were bystanders, but no one tried to intervene (ibid.). On 24 February, Jonathan Mok, a Singaporean student studying in the UK was assaulted by five teenagers on Oxford Street (Lau, 2020). One said ‘I don’t want your coronavirus in my country’ during the attack which left Mok with fractures on his face that now require surgery (ibid.). These recent incidents have prompted me to reflect on placemaking through parkour and *Art du Déplacement*-inspired (ADD-inspired) applied performances, without feeling settled, in London, despite having lived here for seven years. In this chapter, I will extend Sara Ahmed’s ideas of the ‘melancholic migrant’ (2010, p. 142), suggesting that the lively nomad might use placemaking as a way of resisting assimilation and being transformed into a zombie migrant. Drawing from Roisin O’ Gorman and Margaret Werry’s (2012) observations on failure, I will reflect on placemaking that prompts reconsideration of the failure encouraged in creative learning environments. Finally, I reflect on Nishitani Keiji’s (1982) understanding of death as an
invitation to contemplate an understanding of living that recognises our interconnectedness to the more-than-human in place.

**Troubling the narratives of place**

The parkour- and ADD-inspired place practices that I have developed extend Sally Mackey’s place practices, which ‘can trouble the meanings of place, destabilising suppositions of locality, dwelling, inhabitation, territory, indigeneity, community, residence, belonging, connection and ownership’ (2016, p. 107). It is this troubling of existing meanings of, and relationships with, place that opens up the possibility of initiating alternative relationships with people in place and, therefore, a counternarrative of place. In thinking about place, I have been inspired by geographer Doreen Massey’s definition of space and place where ‘space is rather a simultaneity of stories-so-far’ and ‘places are collections of those stories’ (2005, p. 130). These stories describe a relationship with a physical site, as well as relationships between the human and the more-than-human in this site. My methodological approach draws inspiration from theatre educator Belarie Zatzman’s use of narrative inquiry as a form of ‘countermemory’ that creates ‘anti-redemptory, self-conscious memorial spaces constructed specifically to challenge and resist the certainty of monumental forms’ (2006, p. 117). In resisting an approach to history that prioritises one narrative at the expense of others, Zatzman uses narrative as a way of adding complexity to history through personal memories that enrich one’s understanding of a time that is past.

As a visiting applied performance lecturer based in London, I often use parkour- and *Art du Déplacement*-inspired place practices as part of a class I teach about place and placemaking. *Art du Déplacement* (the art of displacement, hereafter referred to as ADD) closely resembles parkour. Both parkour and ADD are ways of moving over, on, through, or around obstacles (walls, fences, railings, buildings) and surfaces in the city based on movements developed from an obstacle training course (Chow, 2010, p. 148). Parkour and ADD have slightly different movement philosophies although they have shared origins. Parkour might place more emphasis on moving across the city in a straight line, using the most efficient route possible (Angel, 2011, p. 222; Lisetz, 2014). ADD might explore how playful exploration of a familiar place can transform an overlooked urban feature, like a park bench, into a place of beauty (Piemontesi and Najjar, 2012).

My approach to applied performance practice is inspired by Mackey’s ‘place practices’ (2014) where the creation of ‘subversions’ and ‘re-experiences’ offer opportunities for the formation of new ‘narratives’ of, and relationships within, a familiar place (Mackey, 2017, p. 11). Extending Mackey’s place practices, the parkour- and ADD-inspired applied performance practices I use create counternarratives of place that open up more nuanced understandings of the world, encouraging the development of more meaningful relationships that challenge existing narratives of place. As an applied performance practitioner who works mostly with young people from low-income families in Singapore, my participants often articulate their concerns in ways that teach me about the inequalities of place (Singapore). The conversations we have about place (Singapore) often extend beyond the performance and workshops. For 15 youths, these conversations have continued for almost 10–12 years now. Two of the youths have become my mentors, helping me understand the future that young people are fighting for in Singapore. Their personal hopes are inextricably linked to the future of place (Singapore.)

This practice of learning from my participants is something that I have carried into my pedagogic practice in London. There are resonances here with Courage’s ‘social practice placemaking’ in terms of how ‘urban co-creators’ work together in ‘a horizontal collaborative process with a deeper level of engagement’ (2015, p. 2). We learn from each other, together. In facilitating parkour- and ADD-inspired place practices as part of the session on place and placemaking,
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I have taken inspiration from Majid Rahnema’s approach to participation (2010). In critiquing the manipulative way in which participation is used to legitimate foreign control over populations in developing societies, Rahnema suggests that instead of ‘empowerment’, this encounter between activists and participants of development programmes might be approached as an opportunity ‘to live and to relate differently’ (2010, pp. 135, 140). The notion of empowerment positions the recipient as powerless and misleadingly suggests that the activist’s power is superior (p. 135). Instead of empowerment, Rahnema persuasively argues for the co-creation of new knowledge through a process of listening without ideological bias (p. 141). This means attending to needs and negotiating between the values of the people and the values that activists hold, even when these values conflict with what activists believe they need. The process of mutual learning must also be a process of respectful ideological negotiation. A rigorous debate does not need to be resolved with consensus.

The placemaking session that I facilitate usually begins with an invitation to explore moving over and under a chair using basic parkour or ADD moves. I demonstrated a vault over the chair and a quadrupedal crawl under the chair. I demonstrated an adapted lazy vault where I sat on the edge of the chair and swung my legs over. The quadrupedal crawl involved moving on all fours, where hands and feet keep to an imaginary line. I invited participants to be creative with what ‘over’ and ‘under’ mean. Holding the chair up with my legs, I suggested that this too, can be considered as movement ‘under’ the chair. After the participants explored moving over and under a chair, I invited them to use the chairs in the room to create a sculpture that represents their fear. In a recent session, I demonstrated this by putting two chairs next to one another, one upright and the other lying on its back with legs facing the participants, as if it had fallen backwards. I sat on the edge of the seat of the fallen chair and looked towards the upright chair with my head bowed. In these sessions, I have chosen to explain what my fear sculpture means in order to disrupt preconceived notions of the teacher as one who knows all and has no fear. I told the participants that they do not need to articulate what their fear sculpture means. I am only articulating my fears so that they might undertake a similar thought process in the creation of their own fear sculptures. The abstract chair sculpture is intended as a means of creating an ambiguity that enables participants to express their fears without feeling too exposed. The chair sculptures are abstract representations of fears that are specific to place. Then, participants were invited to position themselves in relation to the chair sculpture: first avoiding the fear, and then becoming acquainted with the fear.

The lively nomad

On 5 February 2020, before the COVID-19 lockdown was enforced in the UK, I facilitated a session with first-year applied theatre students in a university. One student (P1) kept adding chairs to her fear sculpture. P1 called this a ‘new-age’ sculpture that would never be finished. This constant movement seemed to suggest a state of perpetual unsettledness, but it is not unsettledness that P1 fears. In a follow-up interview, P1 explained that her fear is ‘this constant flow of taking, taking, taking and producing a pile of the same experiences or rhythms’ (P1, 2020). For P1, this rhythm is associated with an unthinking, repetitive mode of living in the city. She explains:

I am not in control… I feel the city is quite mechanic [sic] and I can’t really experience being connected to life itself. It becomes habitual and I can see that I have no power upon [sic] my habits or the rhythms I follow. But I start to identify with the rhythms. And I start to experience myself as the rhythms of the city.
P1 is aware of how she has started to take on some of these habitual rhythms of London, and how these habits have shaped her experience of London. P1 distinguishes ‘being connected to life’ from these ‘rhythms of the city’. For P1, these habits hinder a more dynamic responsiveness to living. With each chair (or habit) that P1 added to the stack, her physical mobility became more regulated, more ‘mechanical’ in its predictability. P1’s fear is related to how all the habits she is forming (and will form) in London solidifies a way of being that is not living. There are echoes of Lefebvre’s ‘arhythmia’ here, where a disruption of associated rhythms in the body manifests as illness (2004 [1992], p. 68). P1 suggests that within the city, the body is disciplined to work and move at a heightened pace that she finds inimical to being alive. This mechanical busy-ness resonates with ideas of zombie capitalism where working, despite burnout, is socially validated as self-actualisation through work.

In present work conditions where ‘psychological (and psychosocial) identification with the workplace and with the work’ is required, Kelina Gotman notes that workers are compelled to achieve self-actualisation through the process of becoming ‘resilient to degrading work conditions’ (2019, pp. 123–24). Workers are expected to be grateful to employers for this opportunity to realise one’s purpose in life through work, even as work conditions become evermore precarious, exploitative, and demanding of time beyond designated work hours. In reflecting on 1930s dance marathons where exhausted dancers kept moving (barely shuffling) to stay in the competition, Gotman notes that ‘dance marathons theatricalise an economy that has become anaesthetic… [workers] hover in the zombie state that capital would begin more and more systematically to deploy: grinding us down, so that we believe that we like it – almost (2019, p. 127, p. 145). Workers are not coerced to continue working beyond exhaustion, yet, like the dancers in the dance marathon, we do. To stop would constitute some sort of moral failure where one chooses not to realise some inherent potential identified by one’s employer. In recognising that the city compels not only a certain rhythm of movement but also, a certain way of thinking and creating art, P1 fears becoming a zombie.

Extending Sara Ahmed’s ideas of the ‘melancholic migrant’ (2010, p. 142), I suggest that P1 recognises how migrants are expected to assimilate and resists her own transformation into a zombie migrant. For Ahmed, the melancholic migrant is one who refuses to forget the suffering associated with experiences of racism in the UK (ibid.). This migrant resists integration (ibid.). When I told P1 that her constant movement made me think about unsettledness, P1’s face lit up as she said, ‘Yes, I decided to become unsettled for this period of my life, so I came to the UK.’ P1 moved to London, from Hungary, about two months ago. P1 recognises that being in London unsettles her in a way that provides creative stimulation, yet P1 has no intention to apply for settled status in the UK even though she is an EU citizen who could qualify for pre-settlement status. P1 has decided to pursue undergraduate qualifications in London, with an expressed intention of leaving at the end of her studies. She has chosen geographical mobility, believing that this mobility will invite challenging experiences that will be more conducive to learning. Unlike many EU citizens living in the UK, P1’s fear is not unsettledness. In defiance of narratives that assume all migrants want settled status in the UK and narratives that associate happiness with settledness, P1 recognises how this narrative perpetuates a form of cruel optimism. She resists becoming a zombie migrant in favour of becoming, I suggest, a lively nomad. P1’s decision to unsettle herself resonates with Maurya Wickstrom’s description of nomadism as ‘a multivalent strategic reference to a collective of practices… that defy the absorption of Travellers as neoliberal subjects’ (2012, p. 136). These practices include a resistance to land and property ownership that restricts mobility, an appraisal of formal education as optional while emphasising alternative modes of knowing and the prioritisation of commitments to the extended family over work commitments (p. 139). Wickstrom argues that ‘the capacity for indifference to private
property and all that it means’ implies that nomadism can offer ‘a new politics that is based on rethinking everything’ (p. 140). Extending Wickstrom’s nomadism, P1 demonstrates an indifference to obtaining settled status in the UK and this, I suggest, opens up new ways of thinking about the politics of mobility.

Tim Cresswell notes that ‘mobility is a resource that is differentially accessed’ and argues that it is not so much the degree of mobility that is differentiated, but the experience of geographical mobility. The degree to which people are able to control the speed, route, comfort, and representation of their own mobility, and the mobility of others, is differentiated by gender, race, and financial resources (2010, pp. 162–66). Cresswell’s *Towards a Politics of Mobility* (2010) observed that ‘the globetrotter sits in plush velvet seats and chooses from extensive wine lists, while the hobo travels close to death on a wooden plank precariously balanced on the same carriage’s axels’ (ibid.). While the experience of mobility remains life-threatening for refugees and victims of human trafficking, the experience of comfortable mobility has become more accessible with budget travel options. Cresswell’s nuanced appreciation of mobility challenges Terry Eagleton’s assertion that ‘the rich have mobility while the poor have locality’ (2004, p. 22). It may be true that the rich will find it easier to settle in post-Brexit UK, but this may not matter to the lively nomad as settling in the UK is, arguably, not mobility.

In the creation of her fear sculpture, P1 was constantly mobile. I suggest that it is this mobility which materialises a counternarrative of place (London). In the UK, high population turnovers in neighbourhoods have been linked to the erosion of a sense of place attachment for people living in these neighbourhoods (Livingston et al., 2008, p. 56). Implicitly, Mark Livingston, Nick Bailey, and Ade Kearns suggest that people who choose geographical mobility do so at the expense of others’ sense of place attachment as they disrupt familiar social networks and limit opportunities for people to establish trust within a place (p. 57). However, Harry Ferguson’s account of how going for a drive can facilitate deeper communication between social worker and child suggests that in building a relationship through (auto)mobility, the car can become a significant place (2009, pp. 279, 282). I suggest that these are placemaking conversations that encourage a different relationship to the car. The car is no longer just a vehicle that facilitates commuting between places. It has become a mobile place and attachment to this place grows with each (auto)mobile conversation. Ole Jensen has positioned place as ‘a mobility-defined spatio-temporal event that relates to the way we configure narratives of self and other’ (2009, p. 147). Place, for Jensen, is not necessarily determined by the length of one’s residence in a particular location. The mobility of the lively nomad need not be conceived as an obstacle to placemaking, therefore.

P1’s constant mobility materialises a counternarrative of place where the mechanical rhythms of the city (London) temporarily unsettle P1’s nomadic approach to living. Each chair that P1 acquires manifests a representation of sedentarism that anchors P1 to a fixed point in the room. Wickstrom defines sedentarism as ‘a deeply formative attachment to place, to staying in one place, and to a… belief that being itself can only begin, cohere and persist through being in place’ (2012, p. 134). Extending Wickstrom’s sedentarism, P1’s fear might therefore be interpreted as a fear of gradually conforming to the mechanical rhythms of living, learning, and working that perpetuate settledness in the UK. P1’s decision to unsettle herself has prompted me to think more critically about narratives of settledness in the UK. Even though settledness temptingly promises a sense of belonging in place, the racism revealed by COVID-19 reminds me that I will not find belonging through assimilation here. Instead, I have chosen a placemaking mobility. Jenson has asserted that ‘none of the poles within the sedentary-nomad polarisation can claim to understand the contemporary mobility phenomenon’ (2009, p. 142). Extending Jenson’s call to think beyond dualities in order to think critically about contemporary
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mobility, nomadism should not be understood as the opposite of sedentarism. In mobility, there is both nomadism and sedentarism. In mobility, one can still form deep attachments to places that have prompted reconsideration of the way one lives. Though not physically in place, these places become a part of who we are, manifest in how we relate to others. These places are carried within us, and the practices formed in these places are shared with others in the places that we travel to. This conversation about fear and the contemplation of unsettledness that emerged from a parkour-inspired applied performance practice will stay with me as I travel to other places. It is a placemaking conversation that is located in London, but I wonder, is London the place that remains with me? Or is there a trace of P1’s Hungary?

Facing the consequences of failure

During this session, another participant (P2) decided to hang a chair from the metal frame of a stack of bleachers which could be rolled out for lectures. He then stood directly beneath the suspended chair. When I asked him about his fear sculpture, he explained that in addition to creating a sculpture of his own fear, he ‘also wanted people to experience some bit of that fear… that’s why [he] decided to hang a chair on a height… it’s very reasonable that it might fall’. I told P2 that I was indeed worried that the chair might fall on him. I was relieved when he moved to the left of the chair and stared at it when prompted to acquaint himself with his fear.

Then, the participants were invited to create a movement path through the room, using the parkour- and ADD-inspired movements they had explored to respond to the fear sculptures created by others before returning to their own sculpture. They were invited to make one change to their fear sculpture before positioning themselves to create an image that represents a first step towards working through their fears. The movement paths were intended to encourage an exploration of how we might negotiate the fears of others in this shared place, even as we are working through our own. I joined the participants in navigating the sculptures of fear they had created. I placed my cheek on a cool, metal leg of one of P1’s chairs. I vaulted over an arrangement that looked like an empty casket. Using quadrupedal crawling movements, I stood next to P2’s chair and placed my ear onto the metal scaffold that was holding it up, listening. After moving through the fear sculptures of others using some quadrupedal crawling movements, P2 returned to his fear sculpture, took the chair down, and held on to it as if he was embracing it. Later, when I asked P2 to reflect on his response to the prompts, he said:

No matter what you do, you’re always negotiating with your fear. Sometimes you’re winning over it, sometimes it’s winning over you. It’s always there, always on top of you. Sometimes you face it, and sometimes you ignore it. And it’s always hanging there.

When I asked what his fear was, P2 said his fear, on that particular day, was ‘not being aware of his fear’. When I invited elaboration, he said:

It’s so boring not to have any fear. I’m not talking about that one traumatic fear… but just day to day, not having a fear to prove your fear wrong. That gives you a different kind of confidence and boost, that I can prove my fear wrong. Fear is a tricky thing. You’re not afraid of fear, you’re afraid of the presumption [sic] of fear. And in that sense you are not afraid of falling. Actually, you like falling, but you’re afraid of what comes after that.
This fear of not having a fear seems to suggest that P2 uses his fears as a prompt for learning. P2 believes that learning can only happen when one attempts something daunting which could have painful consequences. P2 recognises that even though one may say that one fears the task, the fear is really of the consequences of failing, not the task itself. This appreciation of the consequences of failing resonates with current observations within schools where a fear of failure impedes learning (Lahey, 2015).

Róisín O’Gorman and Margaret Werry note that ‘we live in the depressive ruins of the university, an entity dedicated to the rabid pursuit of illusory success when any substantive mission that might give that success substance has long since been mortgaged to market values’ (2012, p. 3). Students know that failure is a necessary part of learning. They want to learn by failure, but they have also learned that academic failure has a significant impact on their employability. While the student might be persuaded against building a narrative of self-worth based on their present academic performance, the consequences of academic failure on graduate employability have become prohibitive. In this environment, O’Gorman and Werry observe that even the ‘strategic, emancipatory or experimental use of failure – however much it is still necessary – is freighted with risk, danger and difficulty’ (ibid.). In this context, P2’s placemaking practice offers a counter-narrative of place that demands the reconsideration of the romanticisation of failure in creative learning environments. Is the encouragement of failure in creative learning arguably made from a place of privilege which is insensitive to the precarity of graduates?

Then, I invited the participants to write down one thing they had learned, about themselves or their fears on a small slip of paper without signing off. These reflections were then collected and shuffled before being redistributed to all the participants. This process seems to encourage openness as the writer’s identity remains anonymous. The responses read out by the participants ranged from ‘seeing others interact with your fear and not being scared makes me feel less scared of it’ to ‘when I face my fears, I don’t defeat them, I join them.’ One participant noted that ‘there was a feeling of coexisting and letting it fall away like a leaf (decoupling).’ Another wrote, ‘My fear is inevitable so I don’t know why it still scares me.’ I asked P2 what he had written when invited to reflect on what he had learned about his fears. P2 said he had drawn a face and wrote, underneath it, ‘FACE.’

**Liveliness is a conversation about death**

There were quite a few chair sculptures that suggested a fear of death. One participant had arranged the chairs around her such that they evoked a casket. She was lying down in the middle of the chairs with her hands folded over her chest. I had initially wondered if the sculpture P2 created also represented a fear of death. When I shared this with P2, he said: ‘there was a period in my life where I was very aware of death, but you cannot fear it. That’s what I learned in a very shocking way which very disturbed me, but that’s part of life, to die.’ I invited P2 to elaborate on his present perspective on death. He spoke of the loss of a close friend in India to suicide. He said:

> When I was looking at my friend, lifeless… I just remembered that yesterday night at 3 am we were laughing and talking about all the best movies. I just [clicks his fingers] “This could happen to me.” Which then, for a very long time, made me very suicidal and depressed… I was so much afraid of dying that I stopped living… nothing in life is certain but dying. And that changed the way I look at death. I think, “Okay, I’m going to die. Doesn’t matter when, but we are not going to live 500 years. So until I am done, I have to promise myself that I live. And that will make my time worthwhile” [sic]. Otherwise I am already dead.
P2’s acceptance of death as a certainty of life, and subsequent acceptance of life as impermanent, resonates with Graham Parkes’ ideas on living with conscious awareness of the impermanence of life (1999, p. 97.) In accepting that life is brief and that it is impossible to avoid death, one begins to live differently (ibid.). For Parkes, this involves ‘renouncing the immortality of the soul and also the substantiality of the ego by seeing through the illusion of duration’ (ibid.). When one accepts that there is no soul that endures, then one begins to re-evaluate the desire to leave legacies to remind future generations of our achievements. For P2, this appreciation of life as impermanent has renewed his commitment to living. He notes that:

The beauty of death is that when it is going to happen, you will be not there. I won’t be there... And being sad, being depressed, being fearful is a certificate that you are living, which is a good thing.

This acceptance of one’s mortality seems to prompt a different relationship to fear. P2 seems to understand fear without being controlled by fear. In a sense that echoes Parkes when he noted that ‘it is all over... but somehow – so far, at least – it is all back, too’ (1999, p. 97). Fear has become part of P2’s renewed commitment to living. I resonate with P2’s reflections on death. Accepting my own mortality has enabled me to let go of the desire to establish legacies. In contemplating my own death, I have become more attuned to the impermanence of all living things. Nishitani Keiji observed that death should not be understood as an anticipated event that removes one from the world of the living (1982, p. 3). Rather, death is a part of life, and both death and life are coexistent in all living things (p. 93). Death is ‘something that we bring into the world with us at the moment we are born’ (p. 3). Extending Nishitani’s understanding of death and life as coexistent in all living things, I suggest that this understanding of living as death-in-life can be understood as another dimension of mobility. This brief passing through life is enriched by these conversations about death. Although these connections are momentary encounters that can never be repeated, even when we meet again, they are placemaking conversations that deepen our connection in the present. This contributes to the liveliness of living.

At the end of the workshop, I invited the participants to create chalk graffiti haikus reflecting on their hopes for the year ahead. A few participants wrote poems that expressed their concern about the ongoing climate crisis. One participant wrote:

A red tree dying
The ridges on your back rise
Rain rustles the leaves

Another wrote:

Black chairs stacked up high
Heart hopes for a saved planet
Rain in wild torrent

Considered in the light of these haikus, P2’s reflections on death have led me to a slightly different contemplation of impermanence. While the realisation of our own mortality has offered humans the privilege of considering how we might realise the full potential of our limited life on Earth, the realisation of these ambitions often deprives the more-than-human of living out their limited life on Earth. Perhaps, contemplating the impermanence of all living things is the beginning of compassion. Jason Luger notes that ‘when gentrification or
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failed urban redevelopment projects tear neighbourhoods and human souls apart, it is often art that remains to tell the story – representations of memories, of dreams, of hope’ (2017, p. 230). These chalk graffiti haikus have been washed away by the rain, but the counternarratives of place that have emerged from our placemaking will remain. These chalk graffiti haikus capture the impermanence of all life. This is a contemplation of impermanence that has prompted further understanding of how humans hasten the death of the more-than-human as we live. To what extent does this human renewed commitment to living hasten the demise of the more-than-human? This understanding of death emphasises a more-than-human understanding of interconnectedness.

On the evening of 23 March 2020, a COVID-19 lockdown across the UK was announced. Many international students have returned to their home countries, but I have chosen to stay in London. I know this will not be recognised as solidarity. This fear of people who look Chinese will linger, long after the lockdown is lifted. This parkour- and ADD-inspired placemaking practice has troubled narratives of settledness and assimilation. This conversation about death has prompted me to explore how the contemplation of impermanence in all living beings might encourage a more compassionate placemaking. A placemaking that enables liveliness of all living beings.

References


Further reading in this volume

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Jonathan Jae-an Crisman
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