Talking With Our Mouths Full: Performance and Feasting as Intercultural Dialogue

by

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Talking with our mouths full

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Abstract

In May 2015, Vancouver Moving Theatre produced *The Big House*, a theatrical feast in which culturally significant food, art, and narratives were shared. The intent was to create a space for “coming together”. The feast was for members of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, a neighbourhood with a diversity of cultures, social problems, and strengths. The company partnered with other cultural and social justice organizations working in the area. The Ukrainian Hall hosted the feast. This ethnographic case study explores the creation and performance of *The Big House*, utilizing participant-observation, and in-depth and semi-structured interviews. The study frames *The Big House* as a means of building intercultural dialogue and understanding through hospitality rituals and performance. I come from a Western tradition, and have used mostly Western scholarship in my research. Although I respect and honour other perspectives, I can only authentically speak from, and for, my own.

**Keywords:** complexity, relationality, ecology of practices, métissage, storytelling, arts-based ritual, performance, feasting, hospitality, conflict transformation, community.
Talking with our mouths full

Table of Contents

Needing Nourishment: Introduction ................................................................. 6
  Purpose of Study and Research Question .................................................. 8
  Significance of Research ............................................................................ 10

Scouring the Market: Literature Review ......................................................... 11
  Community-based Theatre and Relationality .............................................. 11
  Artistic Practice and Conflict Transformation .......................................... 16
  Feasting and Hospitality ............................................................................. 18
  Ritual and Performance .............................................................................. 20

Polishing the Silver: Method ........................................................................... 23
  Framework ................................................................................................... 23
  Sample ......................................................................................................... 23
  Data Collection Procedure .......................................................................... 25
  Data Analysis Procedure ............................................................................ 27

Picking the Bones: Data Analysis ................................................................. 29
  The Event ..................................................................................................... 29
    Ecology of practices .................................................................................. 31
    Community-based theatre as event art ...................................................... 34
    Event art and hard work .......................................................................... 35
  Métissage and Intercultural Weaving ......................................................... 35
    Artistic practice and métissage ................................................................. 35
    Intercultural métissage .......................................................................... 37
    Strands of food and storytelling .............................................................. 39
  Politics and Relational Art Practices ........................................................ 41
  Hospitality, Relationality, and Affect ......................................................... 44
    Hospitality, vulnerability and respect ......................................................... 45
    Hospitality, relationality and leadership .................................................. 47
    Hospitality and limits of practice ............................................................ 48
    Hospitality and emergence ..................................................................... 50
    Ritual and communitas ............................................................................ 51

Digesting It All: Conclusion ......................................................................... 54
  Addendum ..................................................................................................... 56

References ....................................................................................................... 57

Appendix .......................................................................................................... 66
Talking With Our Mouths Full: Performance and Feasting as Intercultural Dialogue

Needing Nourishment: Introduction

In May 2015, Vancouver Moving Theatre (VMT) produced an intercultural feast for and with their neighbourhood, Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. This is a diverse but troubled area that displays the underbelly of colonialism. According to the City of Vancouver Planning Department (2015), “The Downtown Eastside has struggled with many complex challenges including drug use, crime, homelessness, housing issues, unemployment, and loss of businesses in the community.” The neighbourhood is also the site of inventive effective hard work, and political organizing. An injection site provides drug users with safety and education; groups seek action regarding missing women; Aboriginal associations provide support negotiating through legal structures; and many groups coalesce around housing initiatives (City of Vancouver Planning Department, 2015). Some community programs are arts-based, such as weekly art-making and information-sharing circles for people who self-identify as women (Community Arts Council of Vancouver, 2015). While many residents, proud of their resilience and individuality, find acceptance and a sense of home within the area, slum conditions remain and systemic racism, poverty, violence, and gentrification continue to destabilize the lives of community members (Masuda and Crabtree, 2010). The neighbourhood is part of the unceded traditional lands of the Squamish, Tsleil-waututh, and Musqueam nations. There is steady migration between the neighbourhood and territories of these and other Coast Salish Nations such as the Fraser River Stó:lō, a nation with long established cultural learning programs (Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, 2015).

Naxaxalhts’i, the Stó:lō cultural advisor/historian, explains the revitalization of First Salmon Ceremony as an example of reintegrating cultural practices (2007). Since post-contact
times, simply eating salmon had marked this ceremony. Two decades ago, the Stó:lō relearned that once, some of the community transformed into birds and went down to the ocean to see the salmon people. They captured a baby salmon and took it back to Yale, throwing away its diapers as they went. Wherever the diapers fell, salmon populated the rivers. At Yale, the fry leapt into the river pools and now salmon always return there. The need to return the salmon to water is central to First Salmon Ceremony; the salmon is now treated with more ritual, and the bones are sacrificially put back in the water. It is best that a lot of people share the salmon, even if they each take one bite. Since relearning the narrative, yearly First Salmon Ceremony has become an increasingly significant part of Stó:lō cultural celebration and an act of renewal.

Renewal and gathering strength were the themes of VMT’s *The Big House*, a celebratory event of “coming together”. The intention was to strengthen understanding and alliances between members of different cultures and support organizations within the neighbourhood. As with Stó:lō First Salmon Ceremony, *The Big House* highlighted culturally significant food, and ceremonies that honour resources and strengths. To the Coast Salish, the big house is a traditional building that houses people in multi-family groupings (Coupland, Park & Palmer, 2009; Lepofsky et al., 2009). Much of winter life, the season of ceremony, took place within them (Ames, 1996), and First Nations’ references to the big house focus on the life within them (Walling & Georgeson, personal communications, 2015). The big house is home, in contrast to the use of the phrase in American slang, in which “the big house” means prison (Morrison, personal communication, 2014). For
Talking with our mouths full

VMT, *The Big House* connected often-marginalized cultural groups, and re-imagined traditional feasting in which oral history, poetry, music, theatre, and dance are woven together with food. *The Big House*, while produced by VMT, was performed over three nights at the host Ukrainian Hall. Each of the three community performance events articulated expressions particular to the cultures represented by participants rather than presenting hybridized narratives.

**Purpose of Study and Research Question** Kearney (2002) opens his book *On Stories* by stating, “Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating” (p. 3). This claim nicely puts performance and eating together as universal and essential. Scholars suggest the feast universally combines eating and storytelling as elements of shared ritual, where conviviality and communitas (the sense of oneness) are intended outcomes (Dietler & Hayden, 2001; Schechner, 1985; Turner, 1974). The performance of culturally specific feasts is a means of reaffirming familial and cultural belonging (Dietler & Hayden, 2001; James, 1983). At the feast, meaningful food is served (Fischler, 2011), stories are told, sung, or otherwise performed (Brewer, 2007), and rituals are re-enacted and re-embodied (Gruenwald, 2003; Schechner, 1985; Turner, 1974). *The Big House* extended the concept of the feast as an expression of cultural connection to one of intercultural connection.

How can feasting, as an act of cultural affirmation, be a tool of intercultural dialogue? Sharing a meal as a means of building connection between unfamiliar parties is a time honoured practice, from dinner dates to diplomatic feasts. The acts of shared eating and storytelling are central motifs in Western and Indigenous hospitality protocols (Baker, 2010; McDonald, 1995; Reece, 1993; Rinon, 2007; Still, 2011), and the extension and perception of hospitality are keys to crossing cultural borderlines (Derrida, 2000; Kearney, 2003). Derrida (2006) frames immigration policies within hospitality protocols, and sees colonial and neo-liberal practices as
Talking with our mouths full hostile to the host/guest relationship. There is a nascent movement in international conflict transformation work that uses arts practices to discover imaginative ways to address hostilities (Cohen, Varea & Walker, 2011, Le Baron & Honeyman, 2006). These ways of framing conflict and hospitality are relevant to addressing problematic dynamics in the Downtown Eastside.

The purpose of my research is to explore the role of a community-based art practice amongst members of a diverse and troubled neighborhood. My research question is: how has VMT used performance and feasting to build intercultural dialogue and understanding through their community-based event art, The Big House? VMT identifies The Big House as a weaving together of feast and performance, with the purpose of sharing cultural practices to build community within a site of conflict. I draw from and contribute to a range of studies that focus on community-based theatre practice (Barndt, 2008; Jellico, 1987), and the field of arts practices in conflict transformation (Cohen, Varea & Walker, 2011; Le Baron & Honeyman, 2006). I investigate the rituals of public feasting (Baker, 2010; Dietler & Hayden, 2001, MacDonald, 1995; Reece, 1993) and heed feminist scholars’ arguments that the study of the feast must consider the labour involved (Aristarkhova, 2012). Feasting is a common and important aspect of hospitality protocols. Therefore, I explore hospitality in historical context and as a metaphor for interaction (Baker, 2010; Derrida, 2006; Reece, 1993; Rinon, 2007; Still, 2011).

Transformational rituals are seen as foundational to theatre practice as well as hospitality, and I research the meanings and uses of ritual in performance (Schechner, 1985; Sheperd & Wallis, 2004; Turner, 1974).

Feasting and performance are social acts. I draw from social theory, particularly the concepts of hospitality and postmodernist hospitality (Derrida, 2000; Still, 2011), and feminist work on hospitality (Aristarkhova, 2012). As well, I rely on theories of relational art practices
Talking with our mouths full

that are infused by the politics of equality, such as relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002), métissage (Chambers & Hasebe-Ludt, 2008; Donald, 2012), and event art (Manning & Massumi, 2014). I ground *The Big House* event in the philosophical concepts of Deleuzian becoming (Grosz, 2005; May, 2003) and ecology of practices (Manning & Massumi, 2014; Stengers, 2005).

**Significance of Research** As *The Big House* was aspirational, so too is this paper. I document and bring insight to traditional feasting, in which food is intricately woven with performance, and how it can be used to build intercultural dialogue. The subject matter itself, VMT’s *The Big House*, is significant as the project’s objective is to build a more inclusive and empowering metanarrative for the community of the Downtown Eastside through celebration and sharing. I address the phenomenon of a community intent on using art to strengthen itself in a non-hierarchical, co-creative way. Artistic practice is not yet taken particularly seriously in intercultural dialogue and conflict transformation (LeBaron & Honeyman, 2007). However, research and practice continues within these fields. It is important to understand the role of community-based arts in creating space for mutual understanding and dialogue through which troubling issues and conflict can be addressed. In studying this event, I add to that body of research. More broadly, in anchoring *The Big House* in ecology of practices and métissage theory, I hope to further the importance of relationality and complexity in scholarship and the larger society. This is in order to strengthen human perception of fields and webs of connectivity, ignorance of which endangers each other and this Earth in which we are guests.
Talking with our mouths full

Scouring the Market: Literature Review

Theatre, in the context of this paper and contemporary performance, refers to a much broader form than that of a literary-based play. I will use the terms performance and theatre interchangeably while I note this lack of distinction is contested. Performance, feasting, and dialogue share qualities and are integral to *The Big House*, which was an event that enacted hospitality. By expressing culturally formed meaning, rituals animate these social acts. I have chosen to review the literature on elements of community-based theatre and feasting as intercultural dialogue in four sections: community-based theatre and relationality, artistic practice and conflict transformation, feasting and hospitality, and ritual and performance. The separation of the sections is somewhat arbitrary as no phenomena happen alone; the subject of each section exists in fields of interaction, or a “relational soup”, with subjects of other sections (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 107).

Community-based Theatre and Relationality For the Roman poet Horace, theatre has the capacity to delight, thus eliciting an emotional engagement and igniting empathy and catharsis (Sheperd & Wallis, 2004). Community theatre – that is, theatre by and for a community (Jellicoe, 1987) - extends Horace’s delight from an audience to members of a specific social group. “Community-based” theatre work refers to collaboration between professional artists and community members; the limit to the definition is only the relationship between professional and community artists. The re-integration of art-making into contemporary social life is a central theme (Barndt, 2008). Jellicoe (1987) considers this theatrical form an animation of social networks; the essential action is not the play itself, but the opportunity for the continued evolution of community. Participants are the core of the project while experienced professionals are guides (Jellico, 1987; Jumblies, 2014). Paradigms and agendas imposed on community
Talking with our mouths full players usually fail (Harris, 2006). In discussing the broader field of community art, Barndt (2008) considers the form to be dependent on context, people, and purpose. Driven by active listening rather than a vision, community-based theatre mobilizes the creativity of community members and develops an “ecosystem” (p. 345) that is attuned, interrelational, and fluid. However fluid the work, Jellico recommends implementing professional standards, as production and performance skills enrich the social as well as aesthetic aspects of the project.

While insisting on artistic rigor and merit, Howard (2014) states community art does not necessarily need to address issues within the narrative, yet the form itself is activism. Barndt corroborates Howard’s point. Whether the text represents overt social binaries such as the oppressed versus the oppressors, or power as it infiltrates more psychologically through societies, community art is essentially a collaborative process of knowledge production that builds a community’s capacities to nurture, educate, inspire, and mobilize. Community art bridges the poetic and the political. Thompson (2009) argues that to focus only on the end results or political aspirations of a project ignores the power of engagement and affect, meaning sense perception. It is defeating to separate the aesthetic and joyful from the effective. Community theatre as a mix of artistry, celebration, and work towards social wellbeing has historical underpinnings.

In the West, Medieval cycle pageants are the antecedents of modern community plays (Schechner, 1993). Pageants were large-scale public dramas intended to affirm collective purpose and celebrate important occasions (Gross, 1986). While existing religious, political, and economic power structures were confirmed by both the content and form of these performances,
there was also an element of misrule, the intentional playing with status and power, which allowed for expressions of individuality and dissension (Gross, 1986; James, 1983). The leaders of 1381 Peasants’ Revolt used a popular Corpus Christi pageant, with its messages of liberation through sacrifice, to launch their march to London (Aston, 1994). The primary intent of more recent pageants produced by Welfare State International was the creation of a “kind of Utopia” where hierarchies would be “dissolved” (Welfare State International, 2006). After 38 years of community-based pageants, rituals and celebrations, the company’s final event was a ritualistic play about locality and loss, which included brass bands, mass choirs, and puppets made from junk, for the town of Longline, site of UK nuclear weapons manufacturing.

Community-based theatre has developed into many models, which are all to varying degrees built from the sensibilities of inclusivity and connectivity, often with a keen sense of misrule (Thompson & Schechner, 2004). It encompasses a range of forms and functions from street demonstrations to complex community plays. For example, street theatre can include Medieval-like pageants, such as Mardi Gras, a religious street festival marked by masks and puppets, earthy revels, and an inversion of social roles or guerilla theatre such as the HIV/aids activists Act-Up falling as dead in the streets of New York to demand action in research and treatment (Schechner, 1993).

Community plays may be created to celebrate community and/or to improve the well being of marginalized members. For example, Horitz (2001) recounts a community play in the city of Bournemouth that gave voice to marginalized teenage boys and the elderly. The teenage boys physicality and edginess were incorporated into the play as dance narratives and older actors performed autobiographical scenes of historic events. Community performance has also been helpful giving voice to particular social struggles, and galvanizing activism. Canadian
community-based practitioners have confronted conflict-ridden systemic social issues such as homelessness (Hamel, 2013), mental health (Headlines Theatre, 2015), and inner-city life (Howard, 2014). In rural Texas, townspeople, battling ill health due to petrochemical pollutants, used performance techniques to research issues and strategies that helped build capacities to fight for removal of pollutants affecting the neighbourhood (Sullivan & Lloyd, 2007).

As well as empirical studies on community-based theatre practice, there is theoretical work that examines the relational aspects of art-making. In response to trends in the 1980s and ’90s, in which postmodern artists worked to fracture the boundaries around disciplines and artistic spaces, and between audience and creator, critic Bourriaud articulates a theory of relational aesthetics that thematizes and multiplies connections between art and social life, and argued for figuratively and literally bringing art to street level (Ross, 2006). Bourriaud believes the power of art is to build connections where none may have appeared to exist rather than to reinforce binary positions (as cited in Ross, 2006, p. 171). He argues that artistic practice has capacity to resist capitalism and hierarchy, and by privileging harmony and connectivity, relational aesthetics expresses solidarity (Bourriaud, 2002). Ross does acknowledge that this art is still often subject to judgment of taste through the process of curation, placing art back into hierarchy. The feminist writer Scarry, questioning the efficacy of art as social change, believes more directly active dissent is necessary (as cited in Ross, 2006, p. 172).

Event art extends the concept of relational aesthetics. Also intent on relationality, event art is a dynamic field, or web of activity, rather than an object. It is co-created art-making, with pursuant discoveries and relation building extended over time (Manning & Massumi, 2014). Spaces for art-making may be decorated or infused by objects of art in order to enhance engagement of the senses, making the event more fully experiential, embodied, and significant,
but the art itself is the relational experience, or in earlier terms, the “happening” (Schechner, 1976). Chambers and Hasebe-Ludt (2008) also emphasize the importance of relationality in art by exploring métissage, or interdisciplinary practice that considers the intersubjectivity (the conceptualizing of a web of relations) of multiple artists, audiences, and forms. What might appear disparate strands, or elements, are interwoven with the intent of creating fresh connections. The space between the strands, where the mixing takes place, becomes the space of exploration. There is a political aspect to métissage, which rejects hybridity, or homogenization (the name references the once derisive term métis). Métissage informs a decolonizing research sensibility in which Indigenous knowledge systems are woven into Western scholarship, thus reframing colonialist constructs (Donald, 2011). Like relational aesthetics, métissage is concerned with breaking down hierarchies and boundaries, and discovering new ways of thinking and being.

The philosophical concept of ecology of practices anchors the theories and practices of community-based theatre in an holistic ontology (Stengers, 2005). Ecology of practices formulates the comprehension of endeavor and knowledge as existing in webs of coexistence and co-reliance. Thoughts and actions do not stand alone, and outcomes cannot be predicted; the
practitioner explores and allows, and therefore discovers. Singular entities connect by metaphorical and real threads, or energies, creating solidarity or a plurality of interrelating singularities. Like art, ecologies have the capacity to hold paradoxes (Manning & Massumi, 2014).

The emphasis on complexity and webs of relations in these theories reveal the inner-workings of The Big House. Relationality also informs the community-based performance work being done with people suffering from war, and with peace negotiators themselves (Le Baron & Honeyman, 2006).

**Artistic Practice and Conflict Transformation** Anti-apartheid leader Albie Sachs wrote a paper for the African National Congress (ANC), *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Guidelines*, in which he stresses the necessity of the arts in building a post-apartheid South Africa (as cited in Gainor, 1995, p.146). He argues that the use of culture as a weapon of struggle was simplistic and divisive if “seal[ed] off from the transformative powers of dreams and humour” (p. 150). He understood the power of the performing arts both to engage and amuse, and to represent complex, concrete social alternatives. Referencing the Canadian experience, Le Baron (2004), warns that conflict amongst Indigenous, settler, and later immigrant populations, has been met with systemic oppression and misunderstanding whereas in fact, conflict transformation requires the capacity to reconcile paradox, embrace difference, and hold multiple meanings. Both Sachs and Le Baron argue that these capacities are strengthened by the arts.

Scholarship articulates a consensus that intersubjectivity is central to arts-based peace building (Cohen, Varea & Walker, 2011, Le Baron, 2004; Lederach, 2005). Lederach (2005) suggests the essential theme for negotiation is the “moral imagination” - that is, the ability to imagine “something rooted in the challenges of the real worlds yet capable of giving birth to that which
Talking with our mouths full does not yet exist” (Lederach, 2005, p. ix). This is reminiscent of Barndt’s (2008) contention that community-based arts can provide the space for articulating specific perspectives while representing worlds of paradoxes and complexities.

Relationality and imaginative thinking are both necessary for and the results of artistic practice, which has capacities both to embody, or acquire sensory physical ways of knowing, and to inspire imagistic language and profound narratives. In arguing for embodiment, Beausoleil (2013) uses recent neuroscience studies on the physiology of emotion, attunement, and creative thinking. Neurological evidence shows that elevated stress levels reduce cognitive function and perception. Furthermore, movement patterns predict how a person makes decisions. Beausoleil concludes that a body in even subtle motion, as opposed to one bound in tension, is able to access a broader range of thoughts and behaviours in response to conflict. All performance encompasses the use of narrative whether linear or not, and language that resonates whether literary or not. Kuusisto (2009), argues that storytelling, constituted of narrative, language, and imagery, is essential to conflict transformation. Metaphors connect the unimagined to an experienced narrative; peace narratives and metaphors “(do) not assume harmony or promote passivity” (p. 287), but rather offer stories that resonate with identification, action, and hope. Kearney (2002) emphasizes that storytelling is foundational to sense making; it “provides [the] most viable forms of identity – individual and communal” (p. 4). Narratives can address psychic and physical loss and suffering. Experiences are imaginatively acted out in the process of grappling with, managing, or transcending them. Performance, as embodied narrative sharing, can be understood as an extended metaphor that synthesizes relationality, movement, and narrative, while inspiring moral conflict transformation.
Practitioners are building an international body of work that integrates theatre, community, and conflict transformation (Cohen, Varea & Walker, 2011). Citing an example of work in a context of extreme conflict, Varea (2011) recounts a project with survivors of a brutal regime in Peru, where a theatre company supported speakers testifying before the Truth and Reconciliation Committee with vigils, marches, installations, and performances. The president of the committee found, “art is a catalyst to express the inexpressible” (Febres, as cited in Varea, 2011). However, Thompson (2009) warns that sites of serious conflict are fraught with multiple power differentials and antagonisms, and the borders between private and public are porous, suggesting practitioners need to recognize the limits of practice.

**Feasting and Hospitality**

Culturally defined protocols offer established means to negotiate through tricky relations or to establish belonging. While hospitality protocols may smooth the difficulties of the “self” meeting the “other”, feasting as a meal-sharing ceremonial event is used as a powerful way of creating social identities (Hayden & Villeneuve, 2011). For Dietler and Hayden (2001), feasting is central to social practice and a point of departure for understanding culture and social life.

![Image of a table runner](image-url)
Evidence of early feasting dates back as far as the Upper-Paleolithic (Hayden, 2001), and connects the feast to sacrifice. Fischler (2011) argues that the feast, in its spiritual beginnings, transcends eating as a biological imperative, and transforms the selfish act of eating into a shared act. Feasting, as a public rather than lone event, is a celebration of relationship. For Elias (1978), celebration intrinsically includes food and conviviality. Visser (1991) points out that food and drink cannot be endlessly hoarded and must be shared. Foods used in feasting are usually rare and labour intensive, served in quantity, and have symbolic meaning. Feasting may include alcohol or drugs, for the feast itself is a heightened, symbolic action (Dietler, 2001). Artistic expression likewise enhances symbolism and may also amuse, express hierarchy, and aid digestion. European Medieval feasts, for example, included juggling, music, and dancing between courses. The feast was often followed by a play. The elite sat along tables on one side so that the rest could watch, marking feasting itself as performance (Elias, 1978). If the market is “a crossroads and vibrant site of food, conviviality, and performance” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, 1999, p. 17), so too is the feast.

A feast stokes the fires of social solidarity, including contested unpalatable social structures. Participants can reenact uneven power relations by affirming the prestige of the host or defining elite groups. The feast may reiterate or legitimize institutional status differences, create social debts, or channel social competition. For example, Tsimshian society practices a variety of feasting types dependent on purpose, one being a forum for governance of sociopolitical relations (MacDonald, 1995). While feasting includes and bonds equal and unequal participants, it also excludes outsiders (Dietler, 2001; Fischler, 2011). Labourers involved in substantial work (from agricultural to culinary preparation, as well as serving and cleaning up) are frequently excluded. The majority of these workers have been women. Yet, as Aristarkhova (2012) argues, for all the
gendered sociopolitical aspects of feasting, the feast is founded on the maternal archetype, because the primary actions of maternal relations are welcoming and being welcomed. The offering of hospitality is also the foundational gesture of the feast.

Aristarkhova (2012) sees the primary hospitality relationship as the nursing mother and child pair while Hellenic tradition pairs the host and stranger/guest as the primary couple. Zeus protected the hospitality protocols of the elite know as xenia, an heroic, dominant male narrative (Rinon, 2007) that became the archetype for Western hospitality. Developed in direct response to xenophobia, xenia rituals re-made the stranger the same rather than the other (Baker, 2010). The home’s threshold, a potential site of conflict, became the place of practical and ritualistic cleansing and dressing, thus diminishing the physical proof of otherness. The guest was not asked to reveal his name and credentials until after eating the host’s food, and therefore transformed to a state of belonging. The most powerful gesture for transforming the outsider to an insider and cementing the guest/host relationship was the shared libation or sacrifice (Reece, 1993).

The guest/host relationship, dependent as it is on ownership of home and goods, raises issues of status and autonomy, and hospitality protocols can be honoured or dishonoured (Derrida, 2006; Shrylock, 2012). In his call for radically rethinking the European treatment of the other, Derrida (2006) reframes xenophobia and xenia. He argues that hospitality needs to extend the personal to the national treatment of foreigners, refugees, and immigrants. Furthermore, Indigenous peoples worldwide are fully aware of the problem of contested sovereignty within the guest/host relationship (Baker, 2010; Shrylock, 2012; Still, 2011).

**Ritual and Performance** Protocols, or rituals, are deeply imbedded in hospitality and feasting; they are also intrinsic to performance. Ritual refers to a broad array of actions, from everyday politeness, religious celebration, and peace making, to rites of passage (Schechner, 1998; Turner
Talking with our mouths full

1974; Visser, 1991). For Gruenwald (2003), ritual addresses survival and is a response to existence; sacrifice is its core component. Schechner (1993) suggests that rituals mediate what are almost always interactions concerned with hierarchies, territories, sexuality, and procreation. He further argues that theatre is rooted in ritualized sacrifice, and transformation through performance is possible, especially in performance that engenders catharsis. Turner (1974) focuses on rites of passage, the ritualizing of emergence from one state to another, or transformation. The threshold refers to either a ritualized space of passage, or metaphorically, a transitional state of being. In performance terminology, a transition is a site of chaos when the drive of the narrative is unclear and many possibilities exist. While the threshold is the real or metaphoric place of transformation, liminality is the state of being in flux. Those grouped in heightened transformational circumstances tend to deeply bond; communitas is the relationship of those on the threshold together (Turner, 1969). This is not an abstract prescribed state of being, but is spontaneous, immediate, and concrete, brought about by collective engagement in a ritual. Communitas is a “basic primordial mode” (Turner, 1969, p. 266). Schechner (1985) understands communitas as a communal sense of oneness.

Schechner (1993) argues that although bonding and conviviality are strong, violence is always vibrating under the surface, threatening to unbalance structure and communitas. Turner (1974) makes the point that there is a constant tension between structure, or form, and the chaotic state of communitas. For Schechner, rituals, and by extension performance, are amoral. For examples at the extremities, a welcoming Naming Ceremony is ritual performance, as is a filmed beheading. However, Schechner adds that artistic amorality gives space for a performance to model change possibilities, which is the function of the avant-garde. Ritual is not spectacle, but participatory. Schechner suggests it is not a cognitive experience, and the process of
transformation requires surrender to the flow. He makes the point that some more than other theatrical forms are given to participatory flow, and therefore, to ritual and communitas.

In discussing Esiaba Irobi’s work, Diala (2005) argues that the Nigerian theatrical experience is a ritual experience. “Indigenous African acting style is initiatory and mythopoetic” (Irobi, as cited in Diala, 2005), and the distinguishing features of pan-African performance are entrancement and possession. Ritual drumming guides the action, and summons spirits and spiritual powers. Irobi’s concern was the ways in which the synthesis of incantation, oral poetry, chant, dance, and enactment awakens the participatory audience. Irobi sought to integrate this Nigerian/African aesthetic with a more literary European tradition; for example, he adapted The Tempest, a play in itself about ritual and transformation, as well as inclusion and exclusion. As avant-garde theatre breaks down the definition of performance and incorporates intercultural and diverse practices, the possibility of transformation grows.
Talking with our mouths full

Polishing the Silver: Method

**Framework** Using ethnographic case study as the framework for research, this paper considers *The Big House* outreach programs, preparation, and three performative feasts as one event.

Ethnographic research studies people in action with their worlds (Walsh & Devane, 2012). The worldview that all human activity exists in relationship is central to this research strategy (Walsh & Devane, 2012), it reflects my own analytical approach, and also reflects the purpose and action of VMT’s project. *The Big House*, as a community-based theatrical feast that evolved over time, was a complex subject of study, and required detailed preparation involving many participants. I chose to make a case study, a method to acquire an in-depth understanding of a complex “real life, contemporary setting” (Creswell, 2013. p.97). Fine (1993) cautions the researcher about the pitfall of reducing complex lived experience, filtered by the ethnographer into written text, and case study gives the combined focus and depth to help avoid that particular trap. I strove for “authenticity…relational and ethics-centred criteria [and] community-centred determinations of validity” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 199).

Wilson (2008) positions the values of relationships, collaboration, respect, reciprocity, and equality as essential to Indigenous research. While I am an immigrant Canadian, these values were integral to my entire research process.

**Sample** VMT was formed in 1983 as a non-verbal, interdisciplinary theatre company (Vancouver
Talking with our mouths full

Moving Theatre, 2015). After years of international touring, founders Terry Hunter and Savannah Walling settled in the Downtown Eastside to raise their family. They also co-produced *In the Heart of a City: The Downtown Eastside Community Play*, and the acclaimed *Crime and Punishment*; and have produced eleven *Heart of the City Festivals* that celebrate neighbourhood-based artists. Hunter and Walling continue to deepen and broaden their relationships with the area’s social welfare, arts, and culture groups as well as with the City of Vancouver. At least six years ago with Jumblies Theatre’s artistic director Ruth Howard, they began to think about feasting as a framework in which to share culture and strengthen community. Previous to *The Big House*, VMT had produced five feast events, partnering variously with Oppenheimer Park, Dr. Sun Yat-sen Classical Chinese Garden, Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House, Heart of the City Festival, and Carnegie Community Centre. *The Big House* feast was envisioned as a six-night event that wove together various communities, but funding shortfalls reduced that to three nights. For these three nights, VMT partnered with Aboriginal Front Door, Carnegie Community Centre Cultural Sharing Program, Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House, Drug Resource Users Program (DRUC), EartHand Gleaners Society, Jumblies Theatre, Oppenheimer Ladies Tea Party, and The Association of United Ukrainian Canadians (AUUC). VMT outreach workshops, hosted by these organizations, offered free art-making sessions lead by *The Big House* artists between February and May 2015. AUUC hosted the three feasts, on May 8th, 9th, and 10th, 2015, with the first night highlighting Ukrainian culture amongst aspects of Indigenous, Chinese, Japanese and Ukrainian cultures. The second feast, which broadened its focus to the Downtown Eastside, emphasized local First Nations cultures. The final feast maintained these cultural elements and also included delegates from the *Train of Thought Symposium* (the 7th Canadian Community Play & Arts Symposium) as participants. These delegates are members of VMT’s
Talking with our mouths full community.

My sample for in-depth interviews included Walling and Hunter as directors of VMT and also as director and producer respectively of *The Big House*. I also interviewed the lead artist in-depth: Beverly Dobrinsky, Music Director; Rosemary Georgeson, Culinary Artist; Paula Jardine, Décor Designer; Sharon Kallis, Contributing Décor Designer; Kelty McKerracher, Community Engagement Facilitator; Sarah May Redmond, Assistant Director; and James Fagan Tait, Strategizing and Staging Consultant. I interviewed community partners: Bill Beauregarde, Interim Executive Director, Aboriginal Front Door; Kathy Gibler, Executive Director, Dr. Sun Yat-sen Classical Garden; Ethel Whitty, Director, Carnegie Community Centre; and Baldwin Wong, Social Planner, City of Vancouver.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight feast participants after the event, and documented forty-eight table runners on which participants were invited to leave messages and drawings. Feast participants were mainly representatives of community partners, their clients and members, and performers. Seven participants I interviewed were Downtown Eastside residents, and one was a member of the Ukrainian Hall. I purposefully did not record their names or genders. I considered naming their cultures, as this was a culturally specific event. In the end, I chose against it, as each person lives in multiple cultures and spoke for themselves as individuals.

**Data Collection Procedures** I used multiple methods to collect data: participant observation, field notes, photography, and both semi-structured and in-depth interviews. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2001) consider participant observation to be the core of ethnographic fieldwork; they stress the importance of highly descriptive and detailed written notes in order to accurately capture the specificity of the case. I participated, observed, and notated four community workshops in order to understand the preparations required for the feast, and to build relations
Talking with our mouths full

with the company itself, the project artists, and community participants. I decided to fully participate in the workshops and took field notes after, as it felt rude to do otherwise. Although this made for less detailed fields note, being fully sociable with the small groups in each workshop was valuable to my relationship building, and seemed less intrusive to the dynamics within the workshops. I observed and recorded meetings with the writer, producers, director, designer, and consultants on the project. The artists and producers included me in discussions. I interviewed The Big House lead artists during the planning and construction process. The themes of my in-depth interview questions regarded the purpose and possibilities of The Big House, experiences of art-making in community, cultural expression and sharing, aesthetic and practical considerations, and personal meaning. I tried to balance the introduction of these themes with the spontaneity of conversation. Gubrium & Holstein (2001) describe an in-depth interview as requiring a certain intimacy needed for mutual openness. Interviews are co-created (Heyl, 2001), as were the in-depth conversations I had with all ten participants. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and sound recorded so that verbatim passages could be analyzed later.

I observed and participated in the three feasts as a table host, which meant making introductions, starting conversation, explaining a few key points, and co-devising a toast given by the table. The initial feast seemed to have opening night nerves, myself included. I felt a bit like a mother hen and concerned to be the perfect host, but by the third feast, I was more laissez faire, more at ease with the process and therefore, more spontaneous; I experienced more communitas and less structure. Participants were prompted to add to the paper table runners, and immediately after each event, I documented visual and written texts. I had planned to conduct short interviews after each feast, but because we were co-participants in an immersive experience, I did not want to interrupt the process of leave-taking with interviews; it was an event that moved beyond
Talking with our mouths full cognitive ways of knowing and it was also four hours long. With the two people I did approach, no matter how conversational I tried to be, I sensed being off key. However, I did talk with people later in the evening or the next day. I reduced my semi-structured interviews to two questions on the participants’ experience of the event and how that may affect their broader community.

**Data Analysis Procedures** Following Creswell’s (2013) process of data analysis, I engaged in deep reading, questioning, and coding the content of collected data; I discovered sense and meaning. Creswell’s pathway is spiraled, indicating that the work is not linear and analysis is done throughout the research process. The researcher is responsive to new discoveries and interpretations. Creswell advises to “immerse yourself in detail” (p. 183), which I did. However, I found immersion and analysis, or flow and structure, sometimes paradoxical and hard to maintain together. My analytical path was sometimes spiraled, sometimes tangled. I tentatively coded as I took field notes and transcribed (endlessly). Once transcribed, I grouped interviews under reoccurring themes and language, yet there was a tremendous overlap that gave me headaches. I also sensed something crucial was missing. I put away my charts, mind maps, and stacks of note cards and read more theory. Ecologies of practices and métissage enlightened the coding process and new themes started to
emerge. Through personal interpretation informed by purpose, literature review, and theory, I eventually gathered four major themes with related subthemes by which to frame this analysis.
Picking The Bones: Data Analysis

The Event We all walked through an archway of spiky branches, went down the stairs decorated with evergreen boughs, and entered the lobby, or as one participant called it, the parlour. We were greeted and given cards with which we would find our table places. We could smell dinner cooking; senses were already beginning to quicken. A display about the Ukrainian Hall was right in front of us. The hall started as The Ukrainian Labour Hall, was a centre for the socialist movement in Vancouver, and the nursing station for injured strikers in 1938. To the right, there was a display of Ukrainian beadwork, some made recently at the Aboriginal Front Door, an organization that helps build skill sets and guides clients through government and legal bureaucracies. A handmade decorated time-line of The Big House, referencing the project’s past and present, hung on the far wall. In the centre, Sharon Kallis, the project contributing designer and a fibre artist, and some elders talked as they wove and braided bark and dried grasses. We went upstairs past the words for “all together” posted in various languages, a welcome sign, and a century-old bonsai tree. The hall was decorated with hanging lights, antique Chinese lanterns, and bunting in colour palettes that represented the seasons. The tables were arranged by season, and the spaces between the tables represented the four directions. We entered the room from the south, under an arch of thin branches. An altar honouring First Nations and Chinese Ancestors occupied the
Talking with our mouths full

north, and there was a performance space in the centre. Each night, a representative of one of the founding nations offered a formal welcome. Grandeur was punctuated with commentary and jokes. The Ukrainian hosts responded with a welcome song and a ceremonial presentation of bread and salt. For the rest of the meal, servers came into the centre before spiralling out to their tables. Each night, Kallis explained which local plants were currently growing - the fireweed was knee high - and told participants when the vegetation used in fibre work would be harvested. She explained that plants live in communities, and some are better at it than others. Some are invasive species. Over the course of the feast, we made three formal toasts and drew or wrote on the table runners and chatted with each other. Musicians played and sang, and presenters explained histories, cultural practices, and experiences. For each feast, storytellers, a poet, and a rapper stood up and performed, and three toasts were made. A participant at the third feast interjected with thanks to the First Nations who harboured the few Japanese who went into hiding instead of submitting to internment. The feast progressed as a journey through the seasons, and we confronted both loss and renewal. The Ukrainian choir sang from their seats, offering visceral beauty from amongst the participants. Each of the performers, but for the chef who appeared from the kitchen to tell her story, arose from their seats where they also were feast participants. There were occasional speeches while we ate; this form of knowledge sharing is a Coast Salish practice. Each night ended with the event dramaturge singing and drumming an Ojibwa round dance. Almost everyone joined in and the hall was jammed with dancers. Then the accordion, violin, erhu, and shakuhachi wove into the drumbeat; the dance morphed into a Ukrainian round dance, which finished with young dancers doing trick steps in the centre.
TALKING WITH OUR MOUTHS FULL

As The Big House unfolded over the three performances, it became clear to me that although the artists conceived the feast, created the space, and hosted the event, the feasting itself was co-created by the artists and the guests/participants. Data revealed each night to be similar in form, quite different in tone, and for the most part, pleasurable and inspiring for guests.

Ecology of practices. The philosophical concept of ecology of practices offers an overarching theory to illuminate The Big House. The construct, based on current physics (Stengers, 2005), has given theory to the understanding that existence consists of fields of coinciding, interrelated, and surrounding energies, probably limited only by one’s perceptions (Manning, 2009; Stengers, 2005). To varying degrees, nervous systems vibrate in response to the dynamism between subject/objects; bodies respond to field dynamics before cognition (Manning & Massumi, 2014). All three days Kallis told the feasters the Squamish word for the spatial and temporal interconnectedness of all life forms that she had just been taught: Eshalah 7Kyhiws. This, the beauty of The Big House décor, and the visceral rawness of drumming and Ukrainian singing certainly made me vibrate. Perceiving the world as a web, or ecology, of related actions is constitutive of theatre practice; my training and practice as a theatre artist and mother emphasize being attuned to the dynamics of multiple surrounding fields. This point emphasizes artists’ ability to perceive subtle complex connections. Barndt (2008) refers to the capacity of community-based arts to strengthen attunement needed to read subtle complexities in the field, if you will excuse the pun. The understanding of complexity, multiplicity, cognitive unknowing, and co-existence within this holistic concept is central to the work of The Big House. Redmond, the assistant director, struggled to define her experience of the event:
Talking with our mouths full

That is another really intriguing thing in investigating what the container is of this feast. Like what the shape of this expression is or cultural happening is… because there are the things that we, the core group of artists that have been planning it, can shape and to some extent control … we’ll set up a really nice room and [we’ve] got some nice meals planned and we’ve got a really interesting roster of people that are going to do cool things… a kind of ongoing discovery is how much of that can be shaped and how much of that is just human interaction that you can kind of set up a little bit with some kind of framework… You can’t control an outcome… you can’t be too prescriptive, especially with the structure of it being a meal, because it’s a real meal, its not a symbolic meal… so then there are other things that you don’t know how long will it take … it’s a tricky line. It’s a funny thing to integrate.

Ecology of practices can appear a mess, like life. One participant who had also attended the technical rehearsal admitted that they thought, “What a shemozzle… [but] the artistry made it work.” The philosophy constructs a world of seeming chaos. There are multiple layers within an ecology of co-existence, and it is not entirely possible to separate them out; the concept embraces paradox. There was an extraordinary amount of people, making detailed plans, finding financing, coordinating, rehearsing, and creating, all in separate fields and practices that were threaded together in the enactment of
Talking with our mouths full

*The Big House.* The word “ecology” conjures ideas of diversity, harmony, balance, and wholeness.

Indeed, ecology of practices recognizes the possibilities of the “creative power of the multitude against hegemonic capitalism” (Stengers, 2005, p. 187). *The Big House* was a moment of unity, expressing not homogeneity, but singularity in a plurality, as is characteristic of the multitude, meaning a complex social body that acts in concert for common good (Tampio, 2009). Multiple individuals came together to express commonality, yet with individual voices. Table runners articulated neighbours playing with each other: “E., this is your aunt L. speaking! Listen to your elders!!!” or expressing democratic views: “sharing consciously art and traditions – no hierarchies” and pleasure: “warm breezes, strong friends”. Walling quoted a participant’s description of the event as “a working and living model of how we can truly interact with one another because it brings diverse people together in a collaborative artistic and compassionate way.”

Collaboration, informed by the empathy engendered through artistic practice, is an example of Tampio’s social acts of common good (2009). Kallis speaks to the individual elevation of skill and sense of common good that is brought about by collective work:

> When people are willing to give of themselves for something for a larger project… it is a part of something else, when they have those opportunities to give of themselves for a common goal, or a common good, and they do that over and over again, it lifts them from being a sideline participant to being a peer in whatever way.
Talking with our mouths full

The question remains to what extent the particular coming together of *The Big House* can influence the larger social body but in an ecosystem, diversity, interconnection, and movement are the *status quo*.

**Community-based theatre as event art.** Regarding community-based plays, Jellico emphasized the evolution of community rather than the piece being made (1987). This places community-based theatre practice squarely in the category of event art. Manning and Massumi (2009) define event art as a process of collaboration, participation, extension, and sharing, through which knowledge is formed. A community partner found: “The process is most important, VMT brings everyone into the process.”

Lead artists alternately described the place/space of *The Big House* as a location for “crossing boundaries”, and “sharing,”; the event created a gathering place for honouring and strengthening connections through performance. Performance is interplay amongst audience and actors. In *The Big House* this was acutely the case as the performers were also participants. Interaction was vital to the art-making. A participant remarked that they like the performers being in amongst the tables and in the centre rather than on a stage. Performance is fleeting and ephemeral, yet as it embodies the qualities of event art, it is a site of knowledge: it informs. Schechner insists, “Information, not things, is the matrix of cultures” (1985, p. 114). Dobrinsky explained:

… it goes beyond art, it does give you that feeling of real, it was really intercultural, a real meeting place for people that was very friendly and welcoming and honest. Right? And gave a way that people can meet their neighbours essentially … the people that they live amongst but don’t necessarily know. So it brings together art and ceremony and customs and all those things together so that
Talking with our mouths full is very fascinating.

*The Big House* gave an opportunity to know an open way of being amongst others, and sharing deeply held ways of knowing, in an experiential way. The elder who took care of the ancestors’ table said she learned about and identified with Ukrainian history over the course of the event. The event became a living, active expression of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002). Jardine, the project designer, who would have preferred the title “relational aesthetician”, believes “…art is what humans do… art is part of who we are and it’s how we communicate with each other, so it builds relationships.”

**Event art and hard work.** Much planning was given to allow for genuine interaction between feast participants, keeping the timing right for the kitchen, and weaving in the rehearsed performance pieces. According to Manning and Himada (2009), there must be “allowance for things not to take the shape you imagine” (p. 2). Most project artists spoke about either being “interested but too busy to think about what [would] transpire” from the feast, or being “consumed” by or “slogging” through the work, or felt that they were at the point they could only do the work, not analyze it. Certainly the “product” did not appear fully formed like Athena from Zeus’s head; it evolved, sometimes painstakingly, sometimes with pleasurable flow.

**Métissage and Intercultural Weaving**

**Artistic practice and métissage.** The event director Walling often used “weaving strands” as a metaphor for her work. To use the terms of métissage, *The Big House* was a multi-stranded project in which art, ceremony, food, and feasting customs were woven together in order to exercise community. Métissage focuses on relating, responding and
resonating; like event art, knowledge production goes beyond cognition (Chambers & Hasebe-Ludt, 2008). The interdisciplinary texture of métissage was a natural fit for the intercultural feast. The artists came from fibre arts, pageantry, dance, theatre, poetry, music, storytelling, and of course, culinary arts. They found interdisciplinary work hard and exciting. Kallis, a fibre artist, saw this project as a way of “expanding out” in terms of both artistic skill and in belief systems. Karras, choreographer for the Ukrainian Hall dance company and of the feast, responded to a question about collaboration by saying:

    We are asked to be able to create choreography to this piece of music, we’re working with a table setup we are not a hundred per cent sure we know, so the choreography therefore has to be adaptable… how do you start a dance standing up on a chair? It is exciting. And it’s different. I wouldn’t have thought of this, I wouldn’t be doing this.

Here, Karras also speaks to the discoveries that can arise when being attuned to the threads that connect practices, as in ecology of practices (Manning & Massumi, 2014). For Tait, the staging consultant, the most successful aspect of the feast was the most interwoven:

    [Georgeson] comes right out of the kitchen and tells a story of her family and food … we are eating the fish, she is talking about the very fish we are eating, and she goes into the history of her life on Galliano, her family, her band is from Galliano … So her sharing is a good example of the kind of sharing that is theatrical. She guides us through as story and we are struck by the sense of home, the sense of the First Nation history here on this land, we sense that food was very important to her family and to her band … And her story is very, like, a magical example because it talks about the
Talking with our mouths full

food and it’s also a really well constructed story. Her personality shines right through, her storytelling is very personable and we relate. We actually identify and relate to her because, and she’s our cook, you know. So that is very multi-layered when she comes out of the kitchen, I would say for me, one of the most successful engagements one has with *The Big House* feast because the cook is out of the kitchen talking and that seems very cool and right, you couldn’t get more authentic than that because it has an informality, like she breaks the wall between the kitchen and the entertain, she comes straight out of backstage so we are dealing with the deconstruction, and that is very exciting, you know, 21st century principles of theatre to deepen our experience.

**Intercultural métissage.** The point of the theatrical feast was not to create a new mixed culture, but to share existing cultural practices with the authenticity on which Tait reflected. Métissage “affirms rather than polarizes difference” (Lionet, as cited in Chambers & Hasebe-Ludt, 2008). From a political standpoint, practitioners of métissage reject hybridity. Each strand has to maintain its own integrity. Otherwise it risks colonization (Donald, 2011). Beauregarde, director of the Aboriginal Front Door, confided that other administrators agreed to participate only because they were persuaded Indigenous cultures would be authentically represented. A Tsimshian artist did not smudge the workshop she lead as this is not Tsimshian practice, and she thinks it important that First Nation cultures themselves do not hybridize. While one participant thought the event as an intercultural experience was nothing new, another expressed how moved they were by the interconnection they saw, and by the “energy of friendship” between cultures. In métissage theory, the space of meeting or the space between is the space of discovery and creativity (Manning, 2006).
Artists from the Ukrainian Hall expressed a mix of pride in their culture and the desire to make sure it was relevant and open. Karras saw her culture as a tree secured by deep roots in the ground, “or the mother” (meaning pre-Christian Earth Mother), and with branches “reaching out” to others. Dobrinsky, also a representative of Ukrainian culture, added that the branches simultaneously let the other in. She spoke of ghettos both as closed, culturally defined neighbourhoods, and as a frame of mind. She considers them a necessary protection but also self-limiting, and confided:

I didn’t know I was going to say this, but that is what I feel and that’s part of what keeps people away, that goes on both sides, some people aren’t willing to open up to something that they consider foreign to them, they’re also stuck in their own world, whatever it is, you know, and so that the more cultural mixing there is…it does come from both sides.

Wong, a City of Vancouver social planner, suggested that sometimes blurring boundaries “needs a trigger,” and saw The Big House as a catalyst where cultural sharing was made intriguing and friendly. For Walling, if The Big House was a trigger, it came with a responsibility with which she struggled:

[I am] wrestling with what does it mean if you are integrating art that is arising from these deeply imbedded cultural screens…it’s around what can you do to help nourish the communities of which you are a part …how do you reclaim and restore
Talking with our mouths full

these kinds of learnings and processes and make them relevant to this time and place and in ways that are respectful, that there is a mutual respect among all that are gathered together.

Although this weaving together was not without struggle, data revealed participants’ willingness to respectfuely travel beyond societal boundaries: “sharing consciously art and traditions – no hierarchies,” “together forward,” and “hand in hand we journey together.”

**Strands of food and storytelling.** Dobrinsky thought that allowing change in the ghettoized mind requires trust. Georgeson, *The Big House* chef, who is also a Coast Salish and Dene storyteller and filmmaker, understands through her cultural knowledge and practice that food sharing helps build trust: “…if you create that comfortable environment, like I grew up with, with the food and the sharing, it’s always easier for people to talk about those stories. There is a relaxing point. ’Cause you create that comfortable safe environment, I think.”

Arguably, the mix of comfort, safety, and food, echoing primal maternal hospitality, is universal rather than culturally specific. Tait, who has worked extensively with the Splatsîn Band, said the Secwepemc Nation would never invite a guest in without serving food. I wondered who would - certainly not my Scottish parents; prototypical xenia specifically required food for the guest (Reece, 1993). In any case, for Tait, the primary action of the event was to come together over a meal. He felt there was an authenticity that people come to in the act of eating together. Georgeson maintained sharing a meal makes people more open to each other: “People speak differently when they are eating.”

For Georgeson, who works with narrative as a healing practice, food sharing is vital in creating an atmosphere of trust: “When you are feeding your spirit and your soul and you are
releasing these really hard stories, it creates a comfort zone that is safe to do it in.” This points to the crux of *The Big House*: the creation of a zone of comfort and vulnerability where there can be genuine meeting. Hunter, Walling, Tait, Dobrinsky, and Georgeson all agreed that “hard” stories about loss were essential to the feast. Dobrinsky summed this up:

I do think that Canada is a very young country, a big experiment, and people have lost so much by coming here or lost so much by other people coming here if you are First Nations, all the things taken away. So all that loss is a huge part of what we share, right, so coming to some kind of acknowledgement about our loss, our collective loss, I’ve never said this before but it means something to me, this collective loss will allow us to really see each other, to move forward and to heal.

Georgeson emphasized personal storytelling as an act of healing and empowerment, or renewal. It was important for her that one tells personal stories. She has a cultural ethic of Indigenous stories. Whose story does one have the right to tell is a question of culture and politics. Further, from her perspective, storytelling is not performance so much as testimony that is witnessed. Kearney (2002) argues that a main function of narrative memory is “an identification with as many fellow humans as possible…our own memories –personal and communal –can be exchanged with others …where the familiar and the foreign can
Talking with our mouths full

change hands” (p. 63). Like witnessing, this viewpoint on narrative may be culturally specific. Georgeson lead me to wonder, are you nobody if you have no story? How then can the familiar and the foreign, or the self and the other, change hands?

**Politics and Relational Art Practices** In Lederach’s work with communities in conflict, opposite views, even paradoxes, can be held together in a creative act, which “brings into existence processes that have not existed before. To sustain themselves over time, processes of change need constant innovation” (Lederach, 2005, p.73). He argues that effective conflict negotiation practices require imaginatively discovered solutions, and Sachs advocates for political action inspired by delight and dreaming (Gainor, 1995). Relational art forms can offer experiential knowledge of creating connections in which the integrity of each strand is maintained. This is not hybridization, which can manipulate, alter the meaning, or obscure (Donald, 2011). Métissage, relational aesthetics, including event art, and community art are animated by the democratizing impulse and inspiration of collective art-making (Barndt, 2008; Bourriaud, 2002). The project’s Community Engagement Facilitator, McKerracher, spoke about the relational imaginatively created possibilities ignited by both artistic practice and co-creation that she witnessed as a community-based artist and participant in *The Big House*:

> Creating a place for relationships to be built, this is what happens in the arts, you can step out of boundaries of what already exists and imagine something different, we are going into an imaginative space of the feast and a ceremony … it is something new and things can happen… if we are staying in literal reality, we are kind of bound by it. In the imaginative space, a lot of new things can develop.

McKerracher addresses the power of creatively discovered action. Nevertheless, the act of coming together can be fraught where uneven power differentials exist (that is to say,
everywhere). This is certainly the case in the colonized Downtown Eastside. Beauregarde acknowledged that some Aboriginal Front Door directors opposed involvement in *The Big House*:

One of the things they were sort of feeling is why are we having white people doing programming for us to do our work? We should be doing our own planning and there is some truth to that. I said it really has nothing to do with who is doing the programming, as long as we are doing our art... we are bringing our culture to the table and to the art, and I said that is the important part, those things, our skills. Well that was some of their thoughts, but once I clarified we did this last year guys, what’s the issue this year (laughs). Yeah, they came around to accepting it for the simple fact that it’s representing, it’s us representing ourselves, you know? Given the opportunity to do that. That’s why I say the feast is important. For us to do our own art work, show our own culture to people and maybe they get a little cultural understanding.

Suspicion and the defense of Aboriginal voice and control are more than understandable given normative Canadian power structures. Beauregarde also speaks to the necessity of art-making in maintaining identity and voice, and the lack of art-making outlets for Aboriginal peoples: “…if you can get people back into their art culture, their roots, that helps address who they are.” Relational art tries to address the question of who gets to experience art or art making and who gets a voice (Bourriaud, 2002).

Attending art-making workshops, I witnessed a relaxed concentration in the small groups; there was gossip about their neighbourhood, and pleasure in the making. Nevertheless, Jardine expressed concern over fair exchange and wondered, “What is this person getting out of this workshop?” In a neighbourhood where at minimum one is on guard in public places, she mused
that, “Maybe it’s enough to sit and relax, making beauty, smelling the beeswax, as a quiet part of the day, in the concentration of working, talk about what is going on in the Downtown Eastside.”

McKerracher reported that in another workshop, two participants raised the question if they were being taken advantage of. Over the course of two workshops, the art-making itself became engrossing and a source of pride.

For Tait, a theatre director and performer, doing theatre in and of itself is his social agenda. He believes that theatre is a very important aspect of society and “pulling it apart” to, for example, make distinctions between community-based theatre and mainstage theatre undermines the value of theatre; all theatre embodies the dual actions of coming together with others, and of recognizing oneself in the performance:

What you’re identifying with and recognizing, you’re doing so in the company of others, in a community, that’s a very important kind of - I mean if you laugh …and the whole group is, you are exercising your community. Or if you are all weeping together you are exercising your community. … Identification is really critical.

Here, an idea being articulated is that being in community is an active experiential event; one enacts community. Tait added that enacting community can be destructive, raising a point about intent and the power of acting en masse as opposed to the modern left construct of assemblage, which is a plurality made of singular people and technologies (Tampio, 2009). In Tait’s

Figure 14 table runner May 10
Talking with our mouths full

construct of theatre, an individual can have a singular event of self-recognition that is revelatory, and at the same time act in concert with a plurality of others. *The Big House* was gave the opportunity to recognize oneself and the other. This reintroduces the element of hospitality, which to be genuine, requires the stranger and host make themselves vulnerable to each other, as the lead artists argued. From a more dystopic viewpoint, protocols of hospitality can be empty ritual, or may even be embedded with hostility (Derrida, 2006), making guardedness more necessary than vulnerability.

**Hospitality, Relationality, and Affect** The maternal gesture of genuine hospitality, welcoming and being welcomed, was foundational to *The Big House*. Jardine correlated her socially engaged art to volunteer work and “the ladies Auxiliary at church”, which may, depending on your experience, prove Derrida’s (2006) point, but that is not what Jardine meant. She asked, “Women hold culture, maintain culture - who made this work marginal?” In patriarchal societies, while women traditionally have the greater share of labour, and share the benefits of feasting only if they have power and status, the maternal hospitality and feminine culture-maintaining tasks have been appropriated or demoted. (I do not suggest maternal and feminine are synonyms for mother or female.) Nevertheless, Still (2011) argues that welcoming and being welcomed are the foundations of political and social life; openness to others is primary to ethics. Openness implies responsiveness to affect, the “dynamic, kinesthetic relations between bodies” (Young, Genosko & Watson, 2103). Thompson (2009) argues that for an event to have impact, it must create affect. He further argues that participants become attuned to affect and engaged with the other when pleasure is allowed expression. Communitas, as a state of deep attunement, requires embodied affect rather than cognition, and necessitates giving way to flow (Schechner, 1985). A palpable instance of flow
Talking with our mouths full occurred in the second night of *The Big House*. There was drum circle mid-feast, and at that point I felt the room’s energy had shifted and the event seemed to take on its own life. This is reminiscent of Diala’s (2005) scholarship on Nigerian theatre and ritual. Post event, McKerracher asked me if I had a feeling of flow and when; as it turned out, she had the same experience at the same time. Other participants articulated affect in text and comments, but more in laughing, hugging, and milling about. Collected from the three nights, eight table runner notes commented on the power of the music and nine noted grateful responses to the affective experience. Texts included: “wept with the Ukrainian singing,” “culture is enacted in the songs we sing and the dances we do, and I smile,” “seeing that, I’m melting,” “gratitude for the blessing of good people, good food, true sharing who we really are with love, music, and song”.

Participant interview responses echoed the same, saying “I loved it,” “my heart is beating so fast,” “I’m blown away by the Ukrainian community,” “I’m very moved.” While these texts articulate emotion, which is not the same as affect, I suggest they speak to the relational, engaged, and embodied character of affect and to the openness to others of Still’s (2011) primary ethical relationship.

**Hospitality, vulnerability and respect.** Hospitality customs usually requires the intimacy of sharing food (Reece, 1993). For Visser (1991), the act of eating in public makes one vulnerable; we open our mouths, diners may be using knives, we are hungry but have to control greed; we show our soft underbellies and are human. Vulnerability and trust were recognized by a number of *The Big House* artists. Deleuze used the metaphor of “garden rather than a tree” to explain a network of conflicting and interweaving groupings (Tampio, 2009, p. 285). The garden is sustained by the perception of threads of connection, as visualized in the
concept of ecology of practices. If we close down perception we become un-attuned and insensitive, and the Deleuzian garden withers or becomes overgrown. With no open lines of connection, there can be no genuine hospitality. Vulnerability requires openness and attunement, which are embedded in community arts work (Barndt, 2008). Kallis spoke of vulnerability and community art-making:

When you are in a community process and you are involving others in your process or it’s happening in a public way, the failures are as visible as the successes and there is a vulnerability in that. There is also a vulnerability just from the participants standpoint in them coming, being open to learning with you, being open to sharing what they know, so there is a vulnerability from multiple perspectives that everybody has to just be OK with and have some, even if it’s somewhat unconscious, kind of an awareness of and a sensitivity to and a support for one another. And my experience is for the most part that happens in a very natural intuitive way.

The direction and design teams were attentive to how they interacted with community members. Collins, as workshop leader, was careful to ensure she was culturally sensitive. For example, she started her workshops for First Nations elders with a narrative from her own Tsimshian ancestry, and never asked participants to name themselves. Jardine considered attention to quality and beauty to be an expression of respect. As indicated in the quote above, Kallis articulated respect for her art form and for community members. Georgeson ensured that the food was served at table so that participants would not have to line-up at buffets, as many people in the neighbourhood have to line up for food and services. Walling pinpointed her underlying purpose as “…to learn how to be in relationship with one another, ourselves,
Talking with our mouths full

creation”. The established ethos, or the threads of relationships within an ecology, was one of concern for the creation of hospitable, egalitarian, “relational environments” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 145).

**Hospitality, relationality, and leadership.** The lead artists spoke about their nuanced mix of responsiveness to participants and heeding their own knowledge. Walling explained her experience of bringing together many voices and elements:

There is a part that’s been of service and serving and there is a part of giving expression to those things that are really, really important to me and I deeply value… it’s listening … and it’s listening to that kind of complexity and beauty in this place as what is to be taught and shared among these different social and cultural groups.

In articulating her commitment to her community and her ethics, Walling expressed a potential paradox. While community engagement means being attentive to expressed community needs, she has to be attuned to her own values and artistic aesthetic. Kallis explained her efforts to balance collaboration, ethics, and aesthetic:

I know from working on an installation, for instance, and we start off in our investigation in one way and we are all working merrily one way and busily building something and at a certain point I step back and recognize that, OK aesthetically this is not working, there is something here is not, or we need to shift directions or technically this is too challenging or whatever the reason is that I am shifting tack, I always do that in a really verbal way of working through with the community what is happening, so it becomes a communal learning opportunity and a communal decision of how things are being shifted, even if I am usually the
Talking with our mouths full

one who is instigating it, as the project lead on a creative project, others voices are
a part of that and are often where the creative solutions come from but having that
key person as the kind of key critical lead is important, and having that person
have a very sensitive and astute communication skills is critical.

This statement articulates the mix of sensitive flexibility and
purposefulness needed to lead community event art. Tait maintained
that good humour was vital. The nimble reading and delicate
responsiveness to situations, requires sensitivity and goodwill. Chen
(2012) considers sensitivity to the other to be essential in intercultural relations and boundary
crossing; Taoist understanding is that creativity and sensitivity are elemental to empathic
response.

**Hospitality and limitations of practice.** Crossing boundaries may be an act of
coming together, or may be an act of invasion. Although Dietler and Hayden (2001) consider
the feast to be universally central to social practice, they acknowledge that asymmetry in
feasting exists between labour and benefit based on class and gender. Derrida also
acknowledged that hospitality and ways of thinking about it tend to be influenced by gender
(Aristarkhova, 2012). Derrida (2000) reflects that in practice hospitality is fraught with uneven
power relations, and issues of class and race. Questions arise regarding who is giving and who
is receiving, who has power in the exchange, and how the relationship of giver/receiver can be
abused (Aristarkhova, 2012; Derrida, 2000; Still, 2011). At The Big House, because of the
limited seating capacity, the guest list was limited. This foregrounded the question of who was
receiving hospitality. The danger was that the feast unwittingly played into organizational and
Downtown Eastside hierarchy. As one participant was aware that there were “not a lot of
Talking with our mouths full

really low income people here”, while another wondered that organization leaders were participants, but were many clients? To illustrate, on the bus after the technical rehearsal, I witnessed an area resident discover he was an hour late getting a child in his care back to their social worker; he was distraught. He might have found some comfort and strength from *The Big House*, but he had no invitation. I wondered if the majority of those invited belonged to an elite subculture that already believed in cultural sharing? It was almost refreshing to talk to a guest who seemed to barely participate except to draw a tree and moon. She politely said the event was “okay” but that she had suffered a loss in her family that week. I started thinking if some distance from, or integration of, suffering is needed to make or participate in art.

In planning the invitation list, the producers struggled with balancing inclusivity and obligation. Capacity was slightly fewer than one hundred tickets per night with a dizzying number of participants to include. Nor was the hall wheelchair accessible. Exclusion was a reality, and the question remained, to whom is *The Big Feast* hospitable? While infinite hospitality is the xenia ideal, Baker (2010) argues that this is only remotely possible for the most elite and is therefore an oppressive, even destructive concept. VMT in the end decided giving each organization tickets to distribute was the most democratic way. However, a director of a participating organization
was concerned about their executive being honoured at the feast when board members and clients were not. Certainly, seats for the broader community were limited.

**Hospitality and emergence.** There is an emergent expanding quality to the welcoming and being welcomed gesture, as hospitable affect tends to spread. This radiating out hopefully will mitigate the problem of limited capacity. Furthermore, who is to say what may emerge from the experience of participation, even for those suffering loss? Tait likened *The Big House* to a wedding reception:

> One of the things about it is it’s an opportunity for people to connect in a way that you do at a wedding, that you are placed at a table with six or seven people that you might not know and what happens is by the end of the wedding you’ve made really strong bonds with one or two people or you’ve fallen in love with a couple of people. Now once the wedding is over, you may never see them again, but…the whole thing of it, the food and the booze and the speeches and everything, you end up having a sense, not a false sense, but quite a profound sense of connection.

Connection also was evident in the lead-up work to the feast. With hope, this sense of camaraderie and good will, or in ritual terms, communitas will be carried out into the larger neighbourhood. Dobrinsky asks, “How do you reach out to community but by making relationships with people, and that one thing leads to another if people are interested. So here we are the hosts, VMT is the vehicle and then what happens after that is really up to the people involved, who knows, right?” In Walling’s experience with similar projects, participants had carried their experience forward.
Talking with our mouths full

*The Big House* had a utopian impulse; producers were looking to influence the future for the good. Walling expected the experience of inclusivity would, in her words, “ripple out”. In philosophical terms, from Heraclitus to Deleuze, we are always becoming; life force and forms inherently flow, never arriving at a fixed state (Grosz, 2006; May, 2003). As event art within an ecology of practices, affect will continue to flow out past the event’s circle dance endings in ways that are impossible to quantify. A participating Haisla elder told me that the Ukrainian Hall had received and accepted an invitation to perform at the next Aboriginal Day celebrations. With willingness, Downtown Eastside organizations will better understand each other, and working together will be enhanced. A participant summed up the affect produced by the event by saying, “We exist outside as well as in here”. The participant is alluding to the reverberating quality of affect. As Wong put it, in his experience communitas “expands over time. You carry some of it with you, the experience becomes part of you by the end.” We are changed by what we have perceived, or understood at an embodied level (Manning & Massumi, 2014).

**Ritual and Communitas.** As community building, *The Big House* was, and in the Deleuzian sensibility is becoming, Gruenwald’s “generative, regenerative and preservative” ritual event (2003, p. 26). It can be understood as a practice that embraces ritual transformation (Schechner, 1998).

In xenia, the threshold, literally and figuratively the doorway between exterior and interior, is where the guest/stranger meets the host. The rituals, or ceremonies, of the threshold create a space of timeless and profound openness and readiness.
Talking with our mouths full

Ideally, in this open, liminal state, alterity and alienation diminish, and are replaced by communitas (Schechner, 1985). Those in a liminal state on the metaphoric threshold share a vivid bond (Turner, 1969). The space where feasting and performance combine the transformational possibilities of hospitality, performance, and storytelling theoretically makes a potent “threshold”. Ideally, the feasting house itself becomes the threshold from which participants emerge changed.

In planning The Big House, Tait advocated for a relaxed atmosphere of conviviality mixed with a slightly heightened quality of ceremony. Both he and a participant commented on the inclusive non-religious quality of ceremony in the feast. I am not sure if some of the ceremony, such as the honouring of ancestors, was not religious expression at least for some participants. Here again is an instance of complexity and of singularities within the whole, rather than homogenization (Donald, 2011; Tampio, 2009). In the event itself, the ceremonial aspect most remarked on by participants was the circle dance that closed each feast. Almost all participants danced; they enacted community in the metaphorical circle, and found pleasure in the music and movement even though it was hot and crowded. In actuality, there were many rituals within the event from individual acts of politeness to acknowledging land titles, welcomings, offering bread and salt, toasting, to referencing ancestors and the ancestors’ table, as well as performance rituals. However, participants did not remark particularly on ceremony itself beyond the dance. There may be three possible reasons for this, the first being my post-feast interviews lacked specific questions regarding ritual and ceremony. Second, as a modern society we tend to be out of the habit of being aware of participating in ritual. Thirdly, ritual itself is a conduit to affect, which precedes cognition (Shechner, 1985). Participants did express how they felt. Here, I circle back to the table runner texts, including: “what a beautiful experience,” and “it lifts up our spirits,”
Nevertheless, there was one questioning text: “Who is here? Who is not here? What happens next? How do we keep things going? Who are we?” These questions echo both hospitality as a site of paradox and conflict (Derrida, 2006; Shrylock, 2012), and unquantifiable but emerging accumulative affect (Thompson, 2009).
Talking with our mouths full

**Digesting It All: Conclusion**

_The Big House_ synthesized a relational narrative (reminiscent of Stó:lō First Salmon Ceremony) with the artistic playfulness and seriousness of purpose in arts-based conflict transformation, and the emergent affective qualities of ceremony, art, and beauty. There was also the paradoxical mix of the welcoming and status reenactments of hospitality protocols. Jardine spoke of the essential human impulse to make art as an expression of relationality, while Beauregarde understood the reclamation of art practices as revitalizing and affirming. Walling acknowledged the impossibility of quantifying affect, but was sure of the “ripple effects” of the feast. A problem with ripple effects is that while acknowledging Deleuzian becoming and emergence, I need to ask, at what point can effectiveness of affect and embodiment be documented? Though it would never be definitive, a later study of how participants have taken _The Big House_ experience along with them over time would be helpful to understand this event as a community-building process. Like this paper, further study would add to current social theories of complexity, relationality, and conflict transformation. In any case, _The Big House_ metaphorically puts the bones back in the water by using ceremony, food, and art so that a community may nourish itself and enhance the possibility of a decolonized “coming together.”

Kearney (2003) suggests the narrative imagination “can give deep empathetic connection” (p. 181). When empathy can shift the binary positions of self and other, or them and us, there is a better chance of peacemaking. Relational art practices carry the potential to open participants to each other through those connections. The simple act of sharing food, and the more complex sharing of deeply held cultural and artistic practices, are bonding experiences. Participants act within an ecology of interconnection and relationality and come away nourished and connected. This is the Utopian reality. There is also the dystopic reality of the impossibility of unconstrained
Talking with our mouths full

hospitality, and of hospitality that reenacts status and hegemonic practices, or that disguises hostility. Perhaps a solution indicated by *The Big House* is to go back to the foundational act of hospitality, the maternal gesture. That is not to say that gesture is not sometimes fraught, nor does feasting and performance as acts of hospitality negate the need for organizing, advocacy, protest, and direct action. However, the powers of connection, responsiveness, and goodwill are real. Art and the concepts of ecology of practices make holding complexities, even paradoxes, possible.

As hospitality and art, *The Big House* juggled the contradictory messages of xenia in a shared, intercultural experience. The designer asked who marginalized culture-sharing practices. I would answer, patriarchy, capitalist hegemony, and greed did. The essential gesture of welcome and being welcomed is not marginal. It is not easy or foolproof, but it is central to building dynamic communities with the capacity to recognize and exercise intersubjectivity.

*Figure 19 table runner May 8*
**Addendum**

A note on documenting event art

Schechner (1985) argues that the ritual experience of the threshold is beyond cognition. Similarly, event art includes but goes beyond cognition, and there are real limits to documenting it. As in a play text or a musical score, this paper lacks the life of the live event. Even if there were an accompanying documentary film, actual participation would be missing. People in attendance had their own singular embodied experience. Event art interweaves coinciding multiple fields of experience. The in-between place in métissage is the space of relationship and connectivity of a particular moment, and cannot be repeated. Furthermore, vibratory sensory responses cannot be captured. There is a fleetingness that cannot be captured either; the event exists from moment to moment and then is done. The word captured is pertinent here. Like a captured and now dead lab specimen, *The Big House* can only be analyzed as dead and gone. As discussed, it may reverberate beyond the closing, but does not exist in any other way. Theory, history of practices, and ideas can be represented by written words, things can be described, but as for what happens in the complexities of dynamic relational moments, analysis can only skim the surface.
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Fernwood Publishing.

Bloomsbury Academic.
Appendix A

Consent Form

Hilary Strang
Student
Masters of Arts, International and Intercultural Communications
[EmailAddress]

Dear Participant;
Thank you for taking time to consider participating in my Masters thesis research titled *Talking With Our Mouths Full: Performance and Feasting as Intercultural Dialogue*. I am studying how Vancouver Moving Theatre is using theatrical performance to explore issues of feasting, dialogue, and community.

My research will consist of interviews, a conversation that will include open-ended questions. I will record interviews by note taking and audio-recording. However, if you prefer I will not sound record your interview. Interviews will last approximately one hour and will be conducted at a mutually agreed upon site. In my documentation, I will not use names or identifying information if you request me to do so.

The data I collect will be analyzed for patterns and similarities as well as singular experiences and will serve as data that becomes the core of my thesis. My thesis is a requirement for my degree. Masters theses are published on-line and I will likely seek to have mine published in an academic journal as well.

If you do choose to participate in my research, I thank you and remind you that you are free to withdraw at anytime without prejudice. If you do withdraw, I will only use the information you wish me to use. If you participate, you are free to only answer a question if you choose. Please contact me if you have any questions about this project. If you would like to see the resulting study, I will be happy to share it with you upon request.

This study has been approved by the Human Subjects Review Board of Royal Roads University, which guarantees that the research conducted meets all mandatory ethical requirements. Should you wish to learn more about this, you may contact [Name] at [EmailAddress]

By signing, you give your free and informed consent to participate in this project:

name: _________________________________________

signature:_______________________________________

Thank you again,

Hilary Strang
Interview Questions

**Interview questions for participants:**
1. What impact did this feast have on you?
2. How has this project affected your sense of being in a community or understanding of what is community?

**Interview questions for key participants:**
1. Why did you want to create/be involved in this particular event?
2. What do you think a performative feast can offer to community and dialogue?
3. What role do you think community-based theatre/this feast has in bringing ideas and people together especially in regards to this overarching theme of feasting as creating community? What do you think others will gain from this?
4. What do you hope are the main ideas that community members will take away from participating in this project?
5. What new insights on have you gained from being involved in this project?
6. Can you describe some moments during the project where you had a “aha moment” in regards to thinking about feasting and community? Why do you think those moments were valuable to you or to the audience?
7. How has this project affected your sense of being in a community or understanding of what community is?