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Introduction

Sensing Place, the fifth volume of *Refract*, investigates the intersections of ritual, place, and the sensorium: it asks how rituals reify power, resist structures of oppression, or construct senses of identity. The expansiveness of this theme is evident across the contributions to the volume, which suggests that concepts of space, place, and site, distinct as they all may be, are at the same time rich, varied, and overlapping. By drawing on diverse and sited articulations of somatic experience, the essays in this volume explore the ways in which ritual is influenced by its material and ideological surroundings while contributing to the creation of place. This leads us to consider: What can be said of embodiment, a visceral experience of space that articulates place as a site of ritual? In so doing, this volume contends with an otherwise empty conception of space as neither here nor there, inviting the lived, embodied, and repetitively performed elements of place to take hold: *sensing place*.

The ritualesque site of meaning-making through writing at the intersection of art, place, senses, and ritual necessarily evokes conceptions of belonging, collectivity, agency, and oppression. Rituals can constitute embodied claims on space, which may influence notions of belonging or self-concept that give rise, in turn, to new forms of ritual activity in dialogue with the fluidity of place and with evolving definitions of individual and communal identity. As the essays in this volume show, articulations of identity, both individual and collective, often arise at the intersection of place, ritual, and the senses. As such, representations of the intricacies of place require attention to the production of knowledge, and a close examination of networks of power, particularities, and differences.

This prompts us to ask the question: How do we position ourselves within or in relation to a place? What rituals do we create and practice to help place ourselves? In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed notes that when we are in a location, we also have an orientation; the way that we approach a place affects how we experience and interact with it.¹ Place—or at least our understanding of it—is, then, all about relationality. *Where am I?* becomes *What am I near? What am I far from? What can I feel? What can I see? What am I facing? What am I turned away from?* Ahmed argues that “some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others.”² In other words, the way that the world is built—the way power is structured—leaves some of us perpetually disoriented, unable to recognize, or even be afforded, a place of our own within the systems we are subject to. Ritual exists as a way to combat this effect, as a way to ground ourselves in a time and in a place, and as a form of resistance against the systems and structures of power under which we live.

Such efforts to (re)orient oneself may be productively understood as a rejection of systems of power, but ritual can also—and at times simultaneously—reinscribe forms of hegemony. In “The Right to Shrine: Global Celebrity, Colonial Logics, and Local Knowledge in Aspen’s Mountainside Memorials” (2019), the religious studies scholar Cody Musselman examines a tradition in Aspen, Colorado, in which skiers build shrines and memorials whose accessibility depends on insider knowledge of the activity and familiarity with the mountains where it takes place. Musselman notes that the construction and collective maintenance of these assemblages foster a tangible sense of “local” belonging in the wake of Aspen’s transformation into a luxury resort destination. She also highlights the ways in which this place-marking activity and the identity it instantiates are predicated on rarified access to the slopes and related “logics of territorial entitlement” that contribute to evolving settler colonial myths and undergird the capitalist exploitation whose effects the shrines may initially appear to ameliorate.³ Taking a cue from Musselman and from other scholars in religious studies, “Sensing Place” is interested in how ritual can include activities and interactions that trouble the religious versus secular dichotomy. When writing our call for content, the *Refract* editorial board discussed devotional art and the sensory experiences and ideological orientations it facilitates or precludes, but we also considered daily skincare or workout routines, and the rise of contemporary wellness culture as a by-product of and contributor to our unsustainable economic system.

Museum spaces and exhibitions are often discussed as sites of ritual. In volume 5, *Refract*’s 2021–22 undergraduate intern Angel Chan reviews *Strange Weather*, an exhibition of contemporary art that ran from April 14, 2022, to August

16, 2022, at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History. Through a discussion of the exhibition's layout and the ways in which artworks enter into dialogue with one another, Chan offers compelling insights into their analyses of the contemporary climate crisis. In "Maurice Denis (1870–1943) and the Sacred Grove: Temporality in Fin de Siècle France," Lucile Cordonnier examines the work of an earlier artist engaged with notions of "nature" and change. Through an analysis of spiritual, decorative, and mythical temporalities in three paintings by Denis, Cordonnier argues that representations of forests become sites of spiritual contemplation and ritual in a period experiencing rapid religious, technological, and environmental change. Her essay offers thought-provoking ways of considering, and complicating, what can be viewed from a twenty-first-century standpoint as a reactionary or conservative approach to place. In another discussion of the relationship between bodies, space, and notions of nature, Jillianne Laceste discusses the role of water and place-making in the early colonial Americas. In "Land, Water, Explorer: Place-Making 'America' in the Early Modern Period," Laceste describes how depictions of water and images of the physical bodies of European explorers on early maps and depictions of the Americas mark the space as one of European conquest and Indigenous dispossession.

Other contributions invoke the ways in which place is formed through the senses as a self-reflective, experiential interaction with one's physical surroundings, demonstrating how beings actively engage with space. Given that locales often encompass social relations of power and domination, studies of place can seek out sites of meaning-making that foreground or even necessitate resistance, highlighting their emancipatory potential. This imperative calls to mind the ethics undergirding Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges," glossed as embodied instances of thought, experience, and insight whose claims to a form of objectivity are contingent on their partial and limited nature.⁴ Taking Haraway's ideas into account, it is worthwhile to attend to "highly specific visual possibilities"⁵ and to strive to avoid appropriating or erasing the intricacies of identity, individuality, collectivity, and difference in any given locale.

In a 2012 essay outlining an Indigenous perspective on ethical relationality and decolonizing research praxis, the Cree educator and researcher Dwayne Donald states:

We need more complex understandings of human relationality that traverse deeply learned divides of the past and present by demonstrating that perceived civilizational frontiers are actually permeable and that perspectives on history, memory, and experience are connected and interreferential. The key challenge is

to find a way to hold these understandings in tension without the need to resolve, assimilate, or incorporate.⁶

It is our hope that this volume works toward Donald's call to preserve such tension and resist the impulse toward narrative closure endemic to progress-oriented thinking. Such thinking risks assimilating difference into a network of linked oppressions, a violence often perpetuated by scholarly work. An emphasis throughout this volume is thus placed on articulations of place that are inherently active and interactive, made and remade through a series of performances, experiences, and relations.

Relationality is a principal concern in Kyra Kordoski's essay on the artist Maureen Gruben's project *Moving with joy across the ice while my face turns brown from the sun*, an invited contribution to this volume that considers how a sited installation deals iteratively with time and place through connections with land. For the installation, Gruben borrowed hand-built sleds and positioned them on sea ice outside her home in Tuktoyaktuk, a Western Arctic hamlet. In looking at the sleds' continuous and cyclical significance to Inuvialuit life, Kordoski addresses the tension between site and artwork, problematizing a work deeply invested in the place of its installation, and raising important questions about modes of engagement with land. The artist and researcher Aaron Samuel Mulenga also considers Indigenous subjectivity and memory through his work on the Tenga Tenga, the African porters of World War I, in his piece "Tenga Tenga: Can I Help Carry Your Load?" Mulenga asks how performance can act as a way to interrogate African histories that have been violently obscured by dominant Euro-centric narratives.

Attention to relationality also characterizes "Beyond Borders and Biology: Lisa Myeong-Joo's *Self-Portrait of a Circle (2016)*," in which Soo-Min Shim argues that the artist Lisa Myeong-Joo, who was born in South Korea and adopted into an Australian family, uses her own body to subvert essentialist narratives of place and national belonging in both countries. It appears as well in Alex Wand's project "Mapping Sonic Futurities," which explores the limits and potential of sensory perception along with its embodied relationship to social conditioning and forms of environmental degradation. Wand and his collaborators conduct twenty-four-hour "sound vigils"—or meditative interactions with the perceptible sounds that characterize habitats—on Amah Mutsun land that is currently occupied by the University of California, Santa Cruz and threatened by the land grant institution's long-term development plans.

Community and its intimate relationship to space is a theme that recurs in Hailey Kobrin's essay "Tobaron Waxman's *Red Food*: Jewish Ritual, Mourning, and

Queer Utopia.” Kobrin interprets *Red Food*, a performance by the contemporary artist Tobaron Waxman, through the lens of Jewish rituals of mourning, arguing that the work responds to gentrification and the resultant loss of queer community space.

Karen Miranda Augustine and Laura Boyce also consider loss and the maintenance of relationships in their respective contributions. Boyce’s “If You’re Out There, Please Listen to Me . . . : Voice of Mourning through the *Wind Phone* (*Kaze no Denwa*),” considers the way Itaru Sasaki’s 2011 installation in Ōtsuchi, Japan, structures place-based listening as a practice of mourning, offering an interactive experience that is not necessarily available through traditional material objects associated with mourning. Augustine’s multimedia *Public Displays of Affection* (*PDA*) series considers community, mourning, meaning-making, and diaspora; the artist begins by creating photo transfer images of vernacular memorials found throughout the city of Toronto, which she then further embellishes and elaborates through Yoruba-inspired beadwork mounted on wood panels. The resultant images are multilayered and evince as well as invite close sensory engagement, in a way reminiscent of the work of Christine Lorenz, whose photography is featured on the cover of volume 5.

Lorenz’s *Halophilic 2* series explores relationships between the human and nonhuman, the organic and synthetic, and the interplay between color and light with macro photographic images of salt crystals. Faceted shapes dance against richly hued backgrounds, blurring the visual boundaries between natural and artificial and invoking symbiotic life cycles, industry, consumption, and the extraordinary properties of so-called familiar things.

In an invited contribution to this volume, Maria Evangelatou shares her thoughts on the ways in which rituals and embodied experiences influence the types of questions that we ask about the past, which in turn shapes our contemporary understanding and lived experience and influences the direction of scholarly conjecture. Invoking her own background and its dialogue with her evolving research, Evangelatou attends to how women, a marginalized group in Christian Byzantium, may have been inspired or even empowered by images of the Virgin Mary, and invites readers to consider avenues for inquiry beyond the patriarchal frameworks of traditional history.

Together, the contributions to this volume invite further inquiries into the study of place and its ritual dimensions, helping us to consider how places exert their own influences while being made and remade according to an array of agendas, perceptions, and performances. They allow us to contemplate how places map onto beings, both human and other-than-human, that inhabit them and shape their meanings, and to examine the dangers, slippages, and emancipatory potential

of the ever-changing significations of place. Where and how does violence reverberate across spatial-temporal spheres, and how can sensing instigate liberatory potential? These questions remain, but the contributions to this volume illustrate the significance of sensing place and engaging with it as a locus of potential.

Notes

¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388074>.

² Ibid., 11.

³ Cody Musselman, “The Right to Shrine: Global Celebrity, Colonial Logics, and Local Knowledge in Aspen’s Mountainside Memorials,” *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief* 15, no. 3 (2019): 322–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2019.1603069>.

⁴ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 590, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

⁵ Ibid., 583.

⁶ Dwayne Donald, “Indigenous Métissage: A Decolonizing Research Sensibility,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 25, no. 5 (2012): 534, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2011.554449>.