

Whisper Game: Practising Attention Through Caring and Pacing

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In conversation with *Judah Attille, Giovanna Bragaglia, Maria Costantino, Fabiola Fiocco and Alison Green*

As children, we often played a game called “Whisper Game” (some alternative names depending on locality are “Broken Telephone,” “Deaf Telephone,” “From one ear to another ear,” “Game of the Ear,” among others). The game relies on one person whispering a message to another person’s ear, who passes it further until the message reaches the final participant, who is expected to speak it out loud. Often, the message changes from its initial meaning. The process of retelling and whispering is entirely dependent on the participants, and it is up to them whether the message maintains its original accuracy. The game portrays a cumulative error in communication arising from inaccuracies, erroneous or deliberate alterations, impatience, or unreliability of human memory. There is something enchanting about playing this game; waiting for a message to arrive then anticipating how it might change again. The message itself becomes an agentic object carrying traces of embodied knowledge as it passes through the chain. How each participant chooses to care for this object, or manipulate it, belongs to the mechanics of the game.

In June 2021, we ran a workshop entitled “Whisper Game: Practising Attention Through Caring and Pacing” at a conference “Situated Knowledges: Art and Curating on the Move” organised by Zurich University of the Arts, Tai Kwun Hong Kong, and the Migros Museum. We decided to engage with the Whisper Game in the context of Donna Haraway’s vibrant notion of “situated knowledges”¹ to explore spaces opened up by the game, in which meaning is created via a collaborative act of passing a message from one person to another. The objective of the workshop was to depart from the linguistic focus of the game to offer a space and time for an interrogation of the methods and instruments participants use to perform care while passing on a message. Whisper Game is not only a leisure activity performed by children or a way of obtaining and forwarding information, distorted (un)purposefully or not, but also a critical practice which makes us re-consider our individual and collective relationships and interdependencies in mediating knowledge. Similarly to Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledges” being attentive to interrelational sharing beyond the duality of objectivity-relativism, Whisper Game, as a method, gave us an opportunity to explore specific positionalities via “mapping practices”; the boundaries between messages that in themselves are generative and productive of meanings. Haraway proposes, “Bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction.”² The workshop aimed to make visible the multidimensional and incomplete connections *in-between* and *with/in* and to question how we can think with/in positionings that carefully attend not only to boundaries, but also thresholds. How do the boundaries between messages generate and materialise meanings? How do we practise attention to connections in-between and with/in? The intention of the workshop was to think *with* each other and learn about the collaborative act of sharing

a message which is always partial, situated and in motion. Approaching knowledge from the perspective of movement, as a journey in time and space, thinking-*with* others, requires a particular form of attention manifested in caring and pacing while making knowledge move.

The game was initiated with a text, a “gift,” we sent to the first participant (see fig. 1). It was *Radical Tenderness Is...*, a living manifesto written by Dani d’Emilia and Daniel B. Chávez in 2015.³ Each participant was asked to choose a new cultural text that responds to the one they had been given. It could be any format they wished, and we asked them to choose something that was meaningful to them and that responded to the overarching idea of the text we shared. Each participant was given five minutes to consider the gift and send a related gift to the following participant, along with the instructions. Once they passed on the message, they were asked to spend time with the gift they received, using “critical tools” (e.g., highlighters, scissors, glue, images, pens, pencils, needle and thread, smartphone camera—whatever they had around them) to alter it, adding their own thoughts, reactions, and references. Everyone was asked to take pictures of their process and upload them to the dedicated Padlet board⁴ in the section dedicated to Workshop 7 (see figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4).

The order of participants was decided randomly. In the same order in which the cultural texts were shared, we asked participants to reflect on the process and the discussion that followed. This text is a record of our workshop. Co-authored with almost all its participants, it follows the format of the Whisper Game. The reflections follow the logistics of the game and the ways in which we treat information as an object to receive and an object to give away. They reveal tensions, hierarchies, and agencies that shape the spaces with/in which we speak, listen, and are heard. They demonstrate the economies of our everyday conversations and the vulnerability involved in making connections with others. Most of all, they show what happens when we communicate with care, applying thought to where knowledge emerges from, how it is handled, and where it might travel to.

The first gift sent to Participant 1

RADICAL TENDERNESS IS ...

A LIVING MANIFESTO WRITTEN BY DANI D'EMILIA AND DANIEL B. CHÁVEZ

RADICAL TENDERNESS IS TO BE CRITICAL AND LOVING, AT THE SAME TIME

RADICAL TENDERNESS IS TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO USE STRENGTH AS A CARESS

RADICAL TENDERNESS IS TO KNOW HOW TO ACCOMPANY ONE ANOTHER, AMONG FRIENDS
AND LOVERS, AT DIFFERENT DISTANCES AND SPEEDS

RADICAL TENDERNESS IS WRITING THIS TEXT AT THE SAME TIME, FROM TWO FARAWAY
CONTINENTS

...FROM THE SAME BED

WRITING WHILST CARESSING

RADICAL TENDERNESS IS TO KNOW TO SAY 'NO'

IS TO CARRY THE WEIGHT OF ANOTHER BODY AS IF IT WERE YOUR OWN

...IS TO SHARE SWEAT WITH A STRANGER

RADICAL TENDERNESS IS TO DANCE AMONG DISSIDENT BODIES IN A WORKSHOP

...TO BE COMPLETELY OVERWHELMED AND MAINTAIN OUR SMILES AND CELEBRATIONS

RADICAL TENDERNESS IS TO ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE SEEN: TO ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE

[ENG]RadicalTendernessManifesto_Dani...
PDF document
padlet drive

fig. 1 The first gift sent to Participant 1, *Situated Knowledges. Workshop 7*, Padlet, 2021



fig. 2 Words “radical offer” translated via Google Translate, phone screengrab, *Situated Knowledges. Workshop 7*, Padlet, 2021



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Adrienne Harris Ph.D.

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fig. 3 Gift shared by Participant 2 with Participant 3, *Situated Knowledges. Workshop 7*, Padlet, 2021

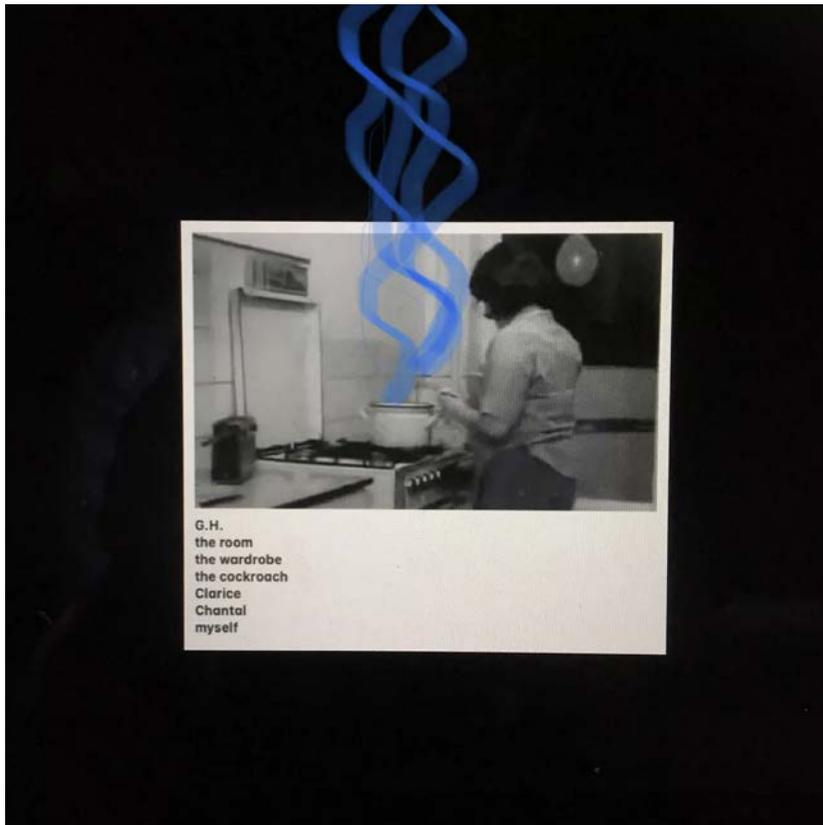


fig. 4 The gift shared by the Final Participant, *Situated Knowledges. Workshop 7*, Padlet, 2021

Alison Green

Aided by a smartphone, I joined the workshop as I stepped into a car that would travel across South London to a birthday lunch for my sister-in-law. The conditions of my participation included a changing cityscape through the car windows, my fellow passengers who I drew into the conversation and who co-designed the response, and putting the project out of my mind to eat and join the lunch conversation, and then return to the workshop whilst sitting outside the Millennium Dome. Reading the gift I received from Basia and Caroline, the *Radical Tenderness Manifesto*, out loud in the car drew hoots of scepticism from my son and husband but it nonetheless led to a real conversation about the accessibility of language, and the spark of an idea of what I could “make” for the workshop. Still in the car, we input the words “radical tenderness” to Google Translate, in various languages, and reversed the translation to see what we happened (see fig. 2). My favourites: in Vietnamese, it became “gentle and progressive.” In Igbo, it became “compassion.” In Hawaiian, it became “soft soft.” In Scots Gaelic, it became “radical offer.”

In my childhood growing up in America, the Whisper Game was called Chinese Whispers. I cringe at the racism of this. So in a small gesture of reparation, I tested “radical tenderness” in Chinese. I note that it retranslates back into English as “thorough tenderness.” Sounds better, I think. The whisper produced nuance instead of broken meaning.

Maria Costantino

London, 14 July 2021

Dear Alison,

I wanted to thank you for the gift...

The Whisper Game: was it a narrative—a story unfolding in space and time? I wanted to be the protagonist, making key decisions that would affect the plot and influence the story, not the antagonist I feared I would be creating obstacles, complications, and conflicts, manipulating the strengths (and weaknesses) of others in the game. Or was it a game? How could I win the game? How strategic should I be in my gift giving? A gift received carries the obligation of reciprocity: a gift of least equal value—if not more—and it needed authenticity to distinguish it—and me—from Alison's gift. In this waiting space-place, I had devised my auto-topographical narrative and transformed a yet ungiven/unreceived gift into a commodity.

I received my gift. But what was it? I was afraid: was this a burden that would thwart my gameplay and threaten the protagonist role that I had imagined for myself?

The last minutes of a podcast by Jane Ward in conversation with Jana Byers.⁵ I tried to listen, to focus: *the problem with the patriarchal system—mutual respect is expected to exist alongside the enduring forms of inequality*. I listened again: “*Women have a lot of work to do.*” A statement of fact. An acknowledgement (and call to arms) of the collective agency of women to effect change. The way Ward said those words—a breezy aside—condemnation, acceptable only because it was from a woman of women and to women: “*Could do better.*” I loved her for being right; I hated her because she was right. My burden was patriarchy's systems and my being. I was complicit in its making. Only in doing—my undoing, our doing, and re-doing—could the system be re-made and with it, our being. I understood the gift. I understood the game.

...the link is on my desktop reminding me that gifts cannot be separated from the givers: in each successive gift, we were carried together by the Whisper Game.

Maria

Fabiola Fiocco

An essay by Katherine Perrault titled “Beyond the Patriarchy: Feminism and the Chaos of Creativity”⁶ is the “gift” I received from Adnan Arif. My first reaction to Perrault's text was a little daze, unsure how to react to a theoretical essay in five minutes, without being able to properly delve into it. I thus decided to scan through the pages and try to grasp core keywords and ideas. For the text reflects on Caryl Churchill's play *The Skriker*, I also did a quick search on Google Images, and the two things that immediately occurred to me were the concepts of the abject and the monstrous-feminine.⁷ Hence, I chose to react to the “gift” by sending a video of *Saute ma ville* (1968) by Chantal Akerman. Proceeding by means of visual and symbolic associations, I then went back to the text, taking the time to read, highlight, and annotate as well as integrate it with images of artworks and events, falling into a string of hyperlinks and starting a chain reaction that could

have expanded indefinitely. In her text, Perrault observes how the non-linear pattern of the opera represents the essence of the creative act and of its multidimensionality, connecting apparently distant or marginal elements and opening “emergent avenues of perception.” Similarly, in this space of possibilities and stimuli, devoid of instructions and directions, the necessity to go for a less analytical reaction opened to a different connection with the “gift.” Also, looking back, I found this distance between the immediate reaction, given by the timeframe of the game, and the process of returning to the text very significant. As in real life, the discrepancy between the time of reflection and the time of production, marked by deadlines and mechanisms of coercion and external expectations, was reiterated. For a few hours, we “freed” our time and opened it to the unexpected to then re-insert ourselves into the flow of events.

Giovanna Bragaglia

“We are not immediately present to ourselves,” well said Donna Haraway.

Wrapped in a web link, I was gifted the first part of the video *Saute ma ville* (1968) by Chantal Akerman. In an act of desperation to continue the Whisper Game, I quickly tried to grasp and decode the received gift. Everything seemed familiar and strange all at once. And despite the whispering noises and lost information, I knew clearly what it was about.

While unpacking it, I came across the questionings to the feminine universe about the role of care that is assigned to us women and its most emblematic place: the kitchen of the house.

There, I saw the young Chantal, I saw G.H. and Clarice Lispector herself, I saw my mother, I saw myself. At the same time, I saw none of us.

Within the atemporal black and white video scenes, full of anxieties and ultra-productive actions, I felt driven by an unconscious, instinctive act. I hunted for the moments of unexpected openness or the possible fissures that might allow fortuitous encounters. I found myself cooking. I found myself starving to devour something else within the stuttering communication. The what I know that I don't yet know. Thus, it seems that I have finally realised that resistance is in understanding that I don't understand. This is what has been nourishing me.

Judah Attile

Whisper Game: Practising Attention Through Caring and Pacing turned out to be a strategic operation in which invitees occupied a critical geo-temporal continuum to reflect on curation and knowledge transfer processes through metaphor.

From my position of random situatedness located in the conceptual *south* of the Whisper Game, the matrix of time proved unstable. The rule structuring time-sensitivity broke down in the conceptual *north* of the game, positioning the desire of an unwitting “subaltern” to become dependent on the outcomes of hyper-ex-

traction of time from the *north*. To advance a claim for feminist objectivity characterised by a capacity to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life, “Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” includes a critique of “militarised male-dominated culture” that contributes to the production of “the disappearing act.”⁸

Citing a familiar childhood game within its proposition, Whisper Game framed a sequence of time-sensitive events, in which each participant had five minutes to receive, reflect on, and transform a *gift* and advance its potential as knowledge to the next player. Linear time as a model and medium for knowledge transfer proved unreliable because of disparities in access to the commodity of five minutes of directed and directional time to encounter the *gift*. Disparities in interpretations of the significance of time as a dynamic in the appreciation of curated knowledge resulted in stops, delays, deficit, anxiety, frustration, panic, heartbreak, isolation, depression, and the risk of devaluation in the realisation of notional value invested in the *gift*'s potential.

Whisper Game was a demonstration of time as infinite visualising technology that produces hierarchies of communication across physical and virtual space. The project was a welcome intervention to reflect on critical breaks in temporality and the *gift* as a metaphor for relational knowledge.

Basia Sliwinska and Caroline Stevenson

The final gift has not reached us on time, but does it really matter? The moment the first participant shared a podcast, the journey started. Morphing into a series of exchanged texts, images, videos, and other creative visuals, the Whisper Game transformed into a collective sharing of voices and knowledges. In writing this text, we did not want to speak for others and suggest what they may have taken from this exercise, but we were interested to see how it fostered thinking with/in positionings and paying attention and care to meanings hidden in-between. Each reflection featured here contributes to a collective of voices that mobilised from a message we first passed. Each voice, individual and singular, became entangled with another, demonstrating Haraway's thinking-*with*. However, on our own reflection, how can a Whisper Game think-*with* in ways that prioritise horizontal and de-centred structures and narratives?

Sharing the *Radical Tenderness* living manifesto, through whispering, was an attempt at imagining a plurality of voices expressed in ways other than speaking. How do we care while passing on the message? How do we depart from shouting, talking, hissing, lipping, chatting, gossiping, or yelling? May a whisper offer us an alternative method of practising attention? Similar to breathing, the act of whispering involves talking in a quiet voice without vibration of the vocal cords. It is intimate and sensitive, perhaps even caressing.

In *Radical Tenderness*, d'Emilia and Chávez refer to the caress and sharing with strangers, carrying “the weight of another body as if it were your own.” “Radical tenderness,” they write, is to, “invent other temporalities,” “embrace fragility,” “embody performative gestures that you would normally reject,” “assume leadership when your community asks it of you, although you may not know what to do,

or how to do it!”⁹ In our game, each of the participants performed their agency and generously shared their chosen gift in response to what they have received. Some of them, like Alison, drew others in and co-designed a response.

With its many vulnerable flaws, it also enabled us to reflect on critical breaks in temporality, as Judah notes above, and engage in a multidirectional creative act of receiving and giving, as Fabiola observes. Some participants engaged the help of others to transform their gifts; some added voices from literature and texts, and some subverted the chain altogether. The flow of the exchange followed an itinerary of a circle, initiated by us. The game should have completed when the final gift reached us. The fact that this didn’t happen only opened the discussion that followed, framing the broader implications of a game based on human-to-human communication. This may be reminiscent of what *The Care Collective* describes as an action of “multiplying our circles of care,”¹⁰ expanding the notion of kinship. Our intention was to explore a range of caring arrangements via a collective of voices suggestive of caring kinships.

Time turned out to be critical for caring. The hierarchy of the exchange did not account for the delays, the waiting and needs of time, which became a material constraint. The rhythm we imagined did not recognise the overarching framework of productivity that constrains us. How can we pace ourselves and embrace the power of intervals? How do we address the discrepancies in collaboration and participate in a way that acknowledges the different needs in terms of availability and waiting? How do we trust one another? How do we get out of the trap of the present when the imagined rhythm is broken? How can we ensure the conceptual *south* gets heard and is allowed to speak? How do we embody multidirectionality in the economy of the conversations we share? Maria aptly notes above that gifts cannot be separated from the givers. And Giovanna further adds that resistance is sometimes grounded in admitting that one does not understand. Care brings nourishment.

Perhaps a generously shared whisper can be enchanting but also healing.

Notes

1 Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, 3 (1988): 575-599.

2 Ibid., 595.

3 Dani d’Emilia and Daniel B. Chávez, *Radical Tenderness Is...*, accessed 2 June 2021, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f5Kd91d2u-5F7iTbPfrSyNoHouQVhsLc/view>.

4 “Situated Knowledges. Workshop 7,” Padlet, 2021, accessed 26 June 2021, https://padlet.com/Situated_Knowledges/2021.

5 Jane Ward and Jana Byers, “The Tragedy of Heterosexuality,” Jane Ward in conversation with Jana Byers, NYU Press, 2020, accessed 26 June 2021, <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/new-books-in-gender/id425400236?i=1000526371186>.

6 Katherine Perrault, “Beyond the Patriarchy: Feminism and the Chaos of Creativity,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 17, no. 1 (2002): 45–67.

7 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993).

8 Haraway, “Situated Knowledges.”

9 d’Emilia and Chávez, *Radical Tenderness Is...*

10 The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London, New York: Verso, 2020), 33.

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