

Nightswimming • Pure Research • Final Report

The Getting Better Part: Gesture Experiments in Stroke and Story

By Anne Wessels

This Nightswimming Pure Research project was conducted at the Tarragon Theatre's Extraspace from January 23 to 25, 2023. Thank you to the Tarragon for its partnership and collaboration on Pure Research. This report published July 2023. For more information on Pure Research, please visit nightswimming.ca.

Research conducted by Anne Wessels, Andrea Nann, Brian Quirt, Gloria Mok and Nathaniel Hanula-James

INTRODUCTION

This research inquiry came out of a curiosity about my lived experience of a stroke that had happened six years ago. At the time, I lost the ability to walk and to swallow. My rehabilitation required two months in hospital and two additional years of physiotherapy. I sensed that there was something to be explored and a potential story to be told but the form of that work was not clear to me. I did suspect that the body/mind experience of stroke had to find its way into narrative through the body.

Pure Research offered to support this inquiry and dancer, choreographer and Artistic Director of Dreamwalker Dance, Andrea Nann, agreed to be the Associate Artist. The Nightswimming team of Brian Quirt, Gloria Mok and Nathaniel Hanula-James offered their full participation and dramaturgical expertise to the early stages of the work imagining the physical experiments that would follow. Full participation continued as the work unfolded over three days in Tarragon's Extraspace as we experimented with objects, gestures and sensations associated with stroke experience.

In addition to the space that Tarragon offered, we were fortunate to have had the support of David Mallette, the Extraspace Technician and John Sutton, his assistant. Pure Research, then, offered the space, time, collaboration and funding to explore these research questions. I am very grateful to Nightswimming and Tarragon and I deeply thank each one of the team for so graciously and generously entering in and running with these questions.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. How might the working processes of a “stroke-informed” body be different?
2. In what ways has Andrea Nann’s Conscious Body practice altered the approach to the inquiry?
3. How might gesture create a narrative of stroke?
4. How might this way of working alter storytelling structures that are based on the illness narrative of ‘I was well, I got sick, I got well again/got better’?

Questions 1 and 2 emerged out of our early team Zoom conversations and the Conscious Bodies practice offered by Andrea Nann. Questions 3 and 4 are versions of questions I asked in the initial proposal. I want to note that Andrea offered another important question in our first Zoom meeting when she asked, ‘what might be the moments of grace within this experience?’ Guided by this question throughout the work, we were attuned to moments that seemed full of grace both as they were recollected from experiences in the past and in the present as our awareness of these moments grew in our work together.

Each of the research questions features the body centrally. The first question asks about what we anticipated would be the optimal working conditions for a stroke-experienced body. The second question asks about the ways that a physical practice like Conscious Bodies contributed to the work at Tarragon. The third question asks about physical gesture and its potential for constructing narratives of stroke. The final question asks how ways of working physically might enliven and nuance the telling of stories of illness.

THIS REPORT:

This report is intended as a gesture of transmission –a gaze into our experiments created in response to the research questions. Each of the research questions will be discussed according to their methods and findings. As well, a photo diary is included to support and illustrate how our experiments informed the research questions one by one. Before turning to the data and analysis, however, it will be useful to contextualize the research, offer a rationale for it, and summarize our conclusions.¹

¹ ADDENDUM TO FOLLOW:

I should note that in my initial proposal to Nightswimming, I outlined a plan for Knowledge Mobilization that would include participation (workshop and video) in the annual conference of the Canadian Association for Theatre Research at the Fountain School of Performing Arts at Dalhousie University, Halifax on June 16, 2023. For the report on my presentation at the CATR conference, please refer to pages 41 and 42.

RATIONALE: WHY SUCH A PROJECT?

The Ontario Stroke Network suggests that “Stroke is the leading cause of **adult** disability in Canada and the third leading cause of death.”

(http://www.ontariostrokenetwork.ca/pdf/Final_Fact_Sheet_Stroke_Stats_3.pdf)

As stroke is responsible for a high proportion of disability and because my personal experience of it felt profound, I wanted to explore what more there might be to say. I read many accounts of stroke after Robert McCrum’s (1998) extraordinary book, *My Year Off: Recovering Life After Stroke* and quickly realized that there already exist enough written accounts. Then I thought this work might take the form of a podcast but I was troubled by the absence of the body. I sensed I needed to find an embodied means to experiment with narrative through gesture, intention and movement. How might working in a physicalized way offer points of entry into neurological difference, and how might this expand and nuance existing narratives?

One of the governing narratives of illness stories is what sociologist Arthur W. Frank (1995, 2013) calls the “Restitution Narrative” of ‘I was healthy, got sick, got healthy again’ (p. 77). As Frank suggests, that particular story structure does not fit with so much of illness, such as cancer remission, stroke or even aging. I am grateful to have experienced what the medical community labeled ‘full recovery ’but that has not meant a return to the ‘well ’state I experienced before the stroke. There are lasting changes that may improve over time, but I suspect will never ‘fully get better’. It was this messy in-between between ‘got sick ’and ‘got better ’that interested me as a place of exploration for this proposed Pure Research inquiry.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS:

Reporting can validate what a project has done and how money has been spent responsibly. Seeing that necessity, I also want to create this report as a kind of breathing place, a time for gathering a mass of thoughts and experiences and putting them in some kind of order that is accessible for people who were not in the room. We used an embodied approach and a variety of methods to experiment as we collectively explored stroke and stories of illness. Compiling this report then, acts as a form of settling in, letting the activity of experiment slow down, and if I can borrow words from the Conscious Bodies practice, ‘to notice what we have noticed’.

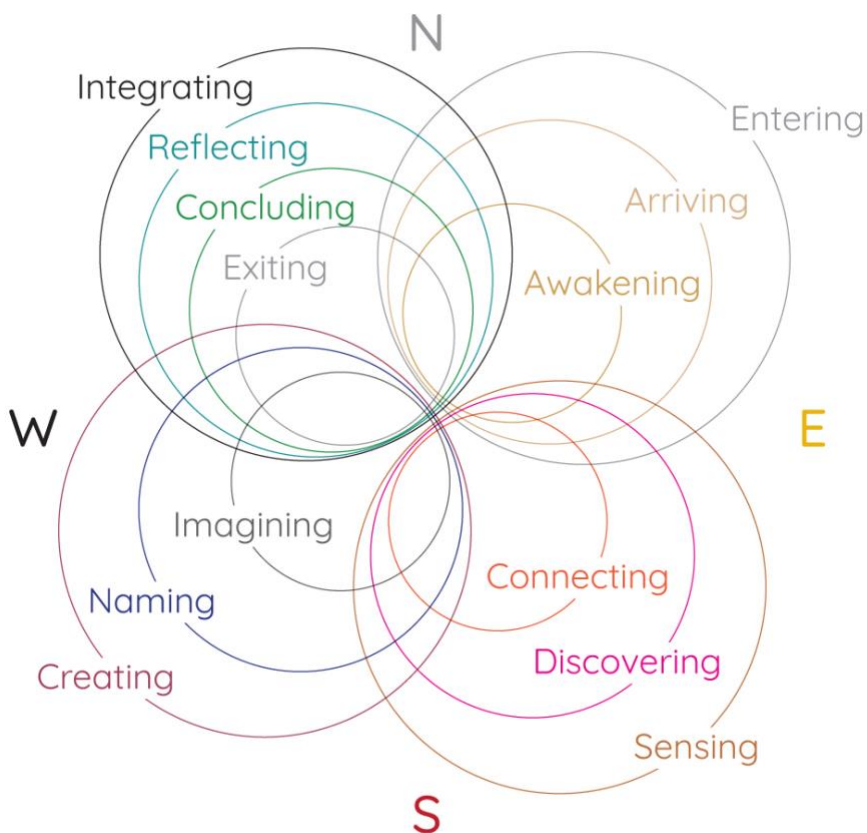
The data analysed are:

1. Large banners with the research questions written on them posted in the theatre, with sticket note comments and questions added by the team.
2. Video, drawings and photographs of movement and gesture, and recordings of sound that we made throughout the experiments.
3. Felt experiences remembered. This includes my memories and the memories of the team.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

EARLY WORK WAS IMPORTANT:

What we found was that a long early stage of discussion of stroke body particulars coupled with the ongoing movement practice of Conscious Bodies helped us figure out the conditions that needed to be in place in order for the work to flourish. The collectively created script/daily plan for the experiments at Tarragon was structured around the Conscious Bodies Cycle of Activations with intentional openness to allow room for the surprising and unexpected.² It was structured but also flexible, with down time earmarked for rest and nourishment.



ASSEMBLING LIBRARIES LAID GROUNDWORK FOR EXPERIMENTS WITH OBJECTS AND 'VIRTUAL ROOMS':

² Conscious Bodies Cycle of Activations

Entering, Arriving, Awakening, Sensing, Discovering, Connecting, Creating, Naming, Imagining, Integrating, Reflecting, Concluding, Exiting

Image by Elysha Poirier with Dreamwalker Dance Conscious Bodies Ensemble.

Images, writing, music, photos, video, lighting, water, air, food, a stopwatch and material objects offered the tools for the gesture experiments that took place. One of the gesture experiments involved the stroke-related objects and the other experiments took place in 'virtual rooms' (an image imported from my post Conscious Bodies Practice writing that described a space created by reflected light outside my practice room window). Bringing this image of 'virtual room' into the experiments at Tarragon, they offered exploratory spaces that were coached and nurtured with gentle prompting and question asking. These virtual rooms were animated with imagination, recollection, struggle and longing, as well as the exhilaration of grace-filled slippages or escapes from perceived constraints.

WORKING COLLECTIVELY:

These physical experiments were not done alone. We either participated fully as a group (the physical object experiment) or worked as a pair with reflection offered by the group (the virtual room experiments with Anne and Andrea). Another form of collective reflection evolved on the research question banners (that were attached to the walls of the theatre) as the team posted drawings, commentary, insights and questions. Group reflection also formed as 'word clouds' hovering above the group as they lay on the ground with their heads together, naming their individual experiences and observations in chorus into a communal space above them.

ZEROING IN ON THE 'GETTING BETTER'

STAGE OF STORIES OF ILLNESS AND GESTURE:

The learning about storytelling was multi-faceted. Although the story of stroke was my personal history, the team worked to tap into vital aspects of the story that were new to me.

What we found was not a finished story waiting to be told but one that was alive and in the room. This was not a story of the past recounted but a tapping into the vitality of a living story explored in real time and in relationship with others.

This invited us to expand our notions of gesture beyond just the capacity to represent but also to offer affective experiences. Through our experiments, we experienced a quickly expanding repertoire of stroke-related gestures that moved, mapped, marked and even created sound.



COMPONENTS OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

THE EARLY STAGE:

How we would conduct the research had to be thought through and planned carefully. Refining the research questions was a regular part of Zoom planning sessions. Parallel to these meetings was the Conscious Bodies practice that Andrea offered to me, a practice that she had developed with Dreamwalker Dance Company. This practice acquainted me with language and concepts associated with movement and perception; it strengthened my body and taught me

how a physical practice could also incorporate psychological, geographical and spiritual components.

THE MIDDLE STAGE – AT TARRAGON:

For three days at the end of January 2023, we gathered at Tarragon in person to collectively inquire into the revised research questions through various experiments both with our team and, briefly, with a small group of willing Tarragon staff. Conscious Bodies was integral to the collective work-in-person that was done in this middle stage. The flow of each day followed the basic CB Cycle of Activations sequence. And from the CB practice, I was able to bring writing and images to the Tarragon experiments. These experiments are the focus of this report.

THE LATER STAGE – ANALYSIS AND WRITING:

Following the work-in-person at Tarragon was a period of reflection and writing when I, as lead researcher, reviewed and reflected on the materials/data that had been collected. We then met as a team to debrief and discuss significant/memorable moments of the shared work.

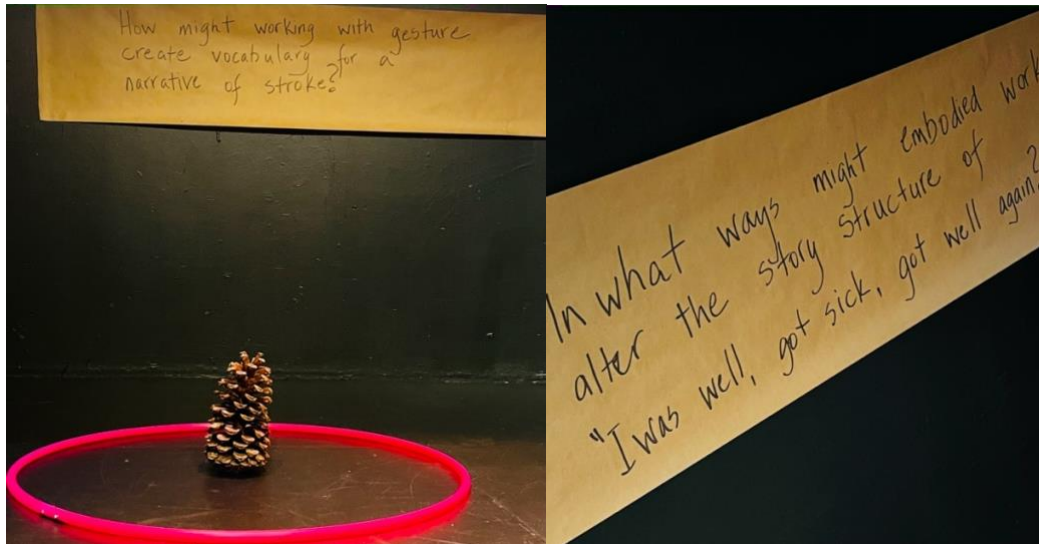
THE BANNERS AND OTHER SOURCES OF DATA COLLECTED

A METHOD TO KEEP THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS VISIBLE AND CLOSE BY

The Tarragon Extraspace is a small flexible theatre that seats just over 100 people. Walking into the space – it had been painted black, floor, walls and ceiling. In preparation we requested spaces for rest, for food sharing, for storage, and places to support quietude. There is a small off-stage area for the storage of props and materials and this area leads to a Green Room furnished with a couch and a food prep and storage area. Past the Green Room are two dressing rooms.

One of the first things we did was work with the house technician to adjust the general lighting. We arrived at a balance between work lights and stage lights to create a 'hospitable' lighting environment for our work. Then we attached to the walls four craft paper banners with a research question hand-printed on each. These research questions were visible throughout our time at Tarragon. On a folding table I unpacked large, medium and small sticket notes and markers. At that moment, none of us could have known how each of these banners would become valuable sites of discussion focused on the research questions.

Throughout the three days at Tarragon all of us regularly attached sticket notes with comments, questions and drawings to the banners and these became an important source of data. We also collected photographs, video and sound recordings. To this list I would like to add another form of data –the memory imprints on both body and mind from the experiences of our collaborative work. We have the shared Google Drive that acts as an archive but we also have the archive of our felt experiences as this process unfolded.



Day one - banners posted on the theatre walls with research questions.



Day two - research question banners with sticker notes attached with comments, drawings, insights and questions.

1 – RESEARCH QUESTION ON BANNER HOW MIGHT THE WORKING PROCESSES OF A “STROKE-INFORMED” BODY BE DIFFERENT?

The subject of stroke informed the content of what we did while a stroke-experienced body informed the approaches that we took.

EARLY STAGES

THE DUAL ROLE OF RESEACHER AND THE RESEARCHED:

Brian insightfully commented that I was both the researcher and the researched. Positioned this way I see that this required me to be the stroke ‘knowledge holder ’at some points but I also had to relinquish the role of ‘expert ’to explore what was not known yet. Otherwise, there would really have been no purpose to the research. I knew parts of my story, but I did not know what might be found exploring it physically and what might be learned by focusing on this troubled and incomplete notion of a story that does not end with ‘getting better ’or ‘fully better’.

DREAMWALKER DANCE CONSCIOUS BODIES PRACTICE TAILORED TO STROKE:

In the section that focuses on the second research question (pages 11 – 15), I will detail the Conscious Bodies practice more fully but I need to introduce it briefly here because it serves as an example of how so much of our shared work was tailored to a stroke body.

In October Andrea met with me on Zoom to offer me a movement practice that she had developed with Dreamwalker Dance called Conscious Bodies. She thought it would be useful to our work together and in the months that followed, I would practice regularly at home. Following the movement work, I would open the shared Google Doc and write about the experiences of moving that particular day. This became part of an archive of writing that Andrea and I referred to in our conversations as we imagined the work ahead. Starting the Conscious Bodies practice, I had no idea how fruitfully it would reverberate and inform our experiments in January when we met to work live at Tarragon.

Tailoring the Conscious Bodies practice, Andrea offered three movements designed specifically for a body with lived experience of stroke. These included diagonal tracing of the body with the hands, circular arm motions at chest height and lifting both arms at the same time until my fingertips met above my head. Then with my eyes, I followed the movement downward to the ground. All of these stroke-specific movements – the diagonal, the circular and looking up and crouching down – had been challenging for me in the years that followed my stroke. Andrea offered just the right amount of challenge in a manageable and ‘doable ’dose.

IMAGINING TARRAGON SPACE AND THE WORKINGS AND NEEDS OF A STROKE BODY:

Addressing the fatigue associated with stroke, in our team Zoom conversations we discussed the importance of taking rests, breaks and even walking outside in the work we were planning

for our residency at Tarragon. Tarragon confirmed that there would be a couch for resting in the Green Room.

MIDDLE STAGE AT TARRAGON

STROKE AND REST:

We built resting into the working day following our lunch break. Initially, I found it very hard to settle into this part of the routine – I didn't want to miss anything. I tried to tame my galloping planning mind and bring a calmer kind of concentration into the remaining time that afternoon. The rest time became an opportunity to regroup as much as attend to fatigue. Other team members made use of this time by ordering our space and readying it for the afternoon's work.

STROKE AND EATING TOGETHER:

Another aspect of our embodied process involved food sharing and eating together. Given the Covid protocols at Tarragon, we kept our food in our Green Room, away from the theatre's main kitchen. Every day we would clear the table of its clutter, put on the tablecloth and sit down and share food and talk. People brought soup and sweets for each other. On the third and last day of the work, in an effort to celebrate the day I brought in mashed potatoes with butter, the first food I ate when my ability to swallow returned.³

STROKE AND COMMENTS FROM THE TEAM ON STICKET NOTES:

Attached to this banner were sticket notes of all sizes on which were written the following comments,

Gentleness

Words and images do not have to be illustrative or literal

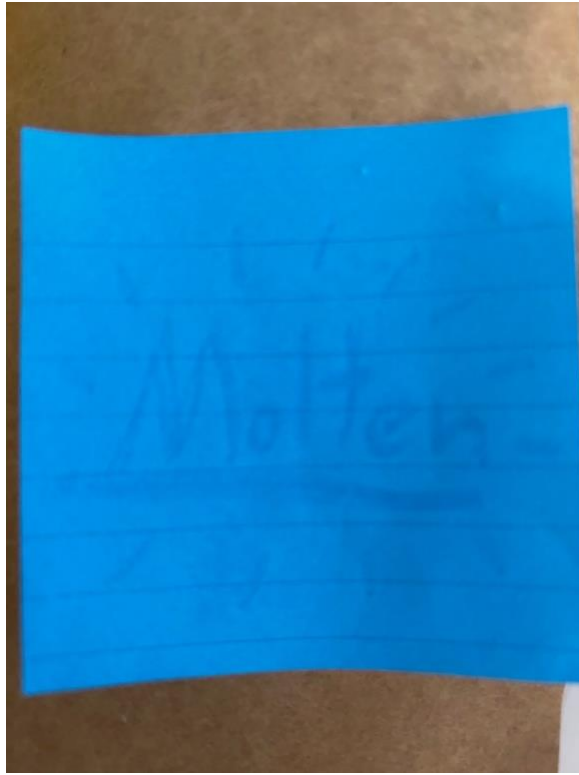
Working with an awareness of my own body's abilities, particularities and limitations

'MOLTEN 'AND THE TENSION BETWEEN RISK AND SAFETY:

I would like to feature one particular sticket on which 'Molten 'was underlined and had lines radiating out from it for emphasis. Thinking about this observation I made associations with flow, warmth, expansion, explosive, volcanic, lava and subterranean. This word suggested a forceful, slow burning, churning up flow. This stroke story with all its associated emotions was alive and in the room. This was not a finished story from the past but present and ongoing. This sticket helped me to consider that what we were doing with this inquiry was not excavating but

³ In our debrief long after the time at Tarragon, Nathaniel commented on the mashed potatoes as significant for him as they offered moments of rest, camaraderie and insights into stroke experience. Gloria also mentioned the muffins that we shared on the first day. Given that the food was remembered as enjoyable, social and possibly educational – I would venture to say that this is one of the ways that working so intentionally with the body, and a stroke body in particular, enabled a qualitatively different process.

experimenting with tapping into a story or set of experiences that were alive. Sap running. Blood pumping.



Perhaps 'Molten' suggested the ways that we were exploring how flow had become stuck by fear of a stroke returning or happening again. To explain, during my home-based Conscious Bodies practice, Andrea invited me to attune to the blood flowing through the body. I was surprised by my resistance to this flow, recognizing that it was blood flow that lodged the clot in my brain stem. In a way that I had not been aware of – I was able to see that I had tried to manage this blood flow so that a stroke would never happen again. Over time, this holding became what Andrea described as a kind of 'bracing'.

On October 10th this is what I wrote in my Conscious Bodies practice notes:

Facing north – water flow and blood

How I was flooded with the thought that the blood took the clot and it got lodged in my brain stem. I protect and sometimes feel that if I can just get still enough, there will be no more clots carried to places where they get stuck and harm me. Stroke and stopping flow – fearing flow.

On October 15th this is what I wrote:

receiving the blood clot – injured me

did it dissolve – anti coagulants

what did it do and where did it go.

I don't feel like I want to receive it ever again.

I am offering no place of reception. But how to avoid locking down? Stuck.

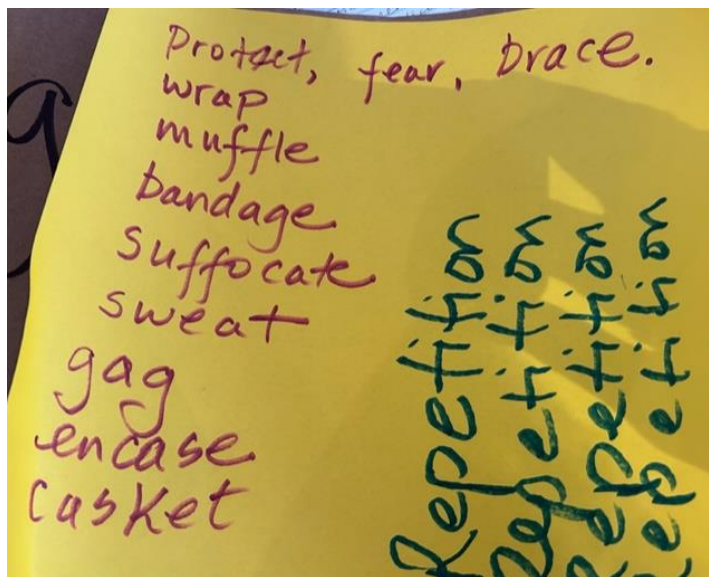
On November 23rd this is what I wrote:

research and my associations

how might they be briefcasing what I really want to do

how to unlatch

This longing for 'unlatching' and 'debriefcasing' suggests an alertness for ways to loosen my holding. I started to see that the extreme need for protection could be holding me back by removing/distancing me from living. I wondered if this has been true for other stroke and brain injured people.



Anne's sticket note.

My sticket addresses the tension between safety and risk – the need for wanting to stay safe but how that attempt can also deaden life. Eager to explore this tension, we experimented with unlatching and debriefcasing. The theatre had loaned us several briefcases and we experimented with opening and closing latches and recording these sounds. As we listened to the recording being played back we found that these sounds of briefcases unlatching were not as evocative as the sound of bicycle and ski helmet latches opening and closing.⁴

There are many ways that a stroke body informed the practices and process of this inquiry. The experiments in sound, Conscious Bodies practice and the sticket note posting offered insights into the tension between protection and risk in this lived experience of stroke. Moving into this more nuanced discussion of stroke experience, the notion of 'got better' is found to be more

⁴ On a sidenote - I am left wondering if these sound experiments could be considered a kind of gesture made with sound? Is there such a thing as a sound gesture? Or were the opening and closings of the helmet clasps gestures that produced sound?

complex than simply returning to good health. As well, in this early discussion about what constitutes gesture, it is evident that gesture may be broader and more encompassing than I had originally thought.

In the discussion of the following research questions and their associated experiments, we will continue to see the importance of Conscious Bodies practice – both the movement and the writing as well as the generative conversations that developed on the research question banners through the interactive posting of stickets.

2 – RESEARCH QUESTION ON BANNER ***IN WHAT WAYS HAS THE CONSCIOUS BODY PRACTICE*** ***ALTERED THE APPROACH TO THE INQUIRY?***

WHAT THIS PRACTICE INVOLVED:

As described in the discussion of the first research question, the Pure Research in-person experiments happened in late January but the planning was extensive during the five months prior. The experimental work began long before the three days at Tarragon during Zoom conversations, learning and practicing Conscious Bodies and gathering recordings of the Zoom meetings, photographs, video, music and writing on a shared drive. These resources were an integral part of the work described in this report. I will refer to them as the ‘early part of the work’, rather than as preparation. Our shared work and tentative early experiments were well underway, as Andrea noted, by the time that we came to Tarragon.

EARLY STAGE

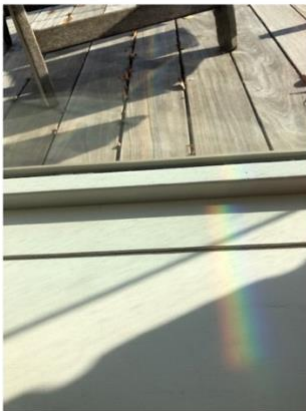
CONSCIOUS BODIES PRACTICE AS EXPERIMENT:

Andrea guided me through a Conscious Bodies experience over Zoom. We recorded the session so that I could practice at home. She tailored it to include three movements specifically designed for people with lived experience of stroke. This was a practice that I could do. I looked forward to doing it and my days seemed to go better when I did do it.

To describe it in more detail, the practice took about 45 minutes and included an exploration of the body in space, positioned on the land, in relation to the sun, feeling the flow of water, gathering rot and roots from the earth as well as sensing air. Inviting explorations of reciprocity and balanced flow, both gathering in and offering/giving away, the imagination was activated through what was suggested by facing the four cardinal directions and realms above and below. Body centred, these intentional activations offered the opportunity to consider the ways that the body is permeable to the larger environment and to the present, past and future. Because of this outward focus, I found myself noticing the contours of the room I was in and also what lay beyond my window. I became aware of light, cloud cover, the changing and dropping leaves as the fall turned into winter.

As suggested by Andrea, after the practice, I wrote about what I had noticed and experienced throughout the session. Some days I would take photographs or video or draw and all of these responses to the practice were posted on the shared drive as a record for the team to read.

I include here examples of photos of things I noticed as I practiced during the months of October to January. I did not know it at the time, but the prismatic light would feature in our later experiments as well as the play of shadow. None of this material would have been available without the CB practice that asked that I become body-aware, space-aware, and time aware – particularly where the exterior of the room permeated the interior of the room.



Conscious Bodies practice at home. Prismatic light – spectrum. Exterior permeating the interior of the room.



Conscious Bodies practice at home. Shadows.

MIDDLE STAGE AT TARRAGON

At Tarragon, we drew on the Conscious Bodies practice and Cycle of Activations to structure each day and sometimes the day would close with the stroke-specific gestures from the practice. We also experimented with the images and 'noticings' from the CB practice I had done at home.

WHAT THIS PRACTICE OFFERED

1. IMAGES AND WAYS OF WORKING

The CB practice was instrumental to this research because it offered guiding principles for working together: patience, kindness and deep listening. It offered a shared vocabulary of movement and relationality, acquainting me with ways of working physically and offering me a means to explore my own body in relation to space, land, geography and time. In addition, without CB practice I would not have seen the prismatic light and shadow that featured so prominently in the inquiry. I would not have noticed the virtual room that became so important to our experiments. (These images will be described in fuller detail on page 23 and 24).

From post-practice writing on November 7, 2022, the virtual room outlined in prismatic light:

lingering image
the room space created with reflections, outside
virtual and lined or demarcated, bordered with prismatic light
not real and yet not not real
what light, sunlight passing through glass can create
- where the virtual meets the real
a virtual that is visible outside (not on a screen)

a room of possible

Posted on a sticket attached to the research question banner was a question that asked how my way of working had been altered. To answer, I had not previously gathered materials that became portable libraries that could be brought into theatre-based inquiries. I see the use of building these libraries beyond having resources on hand to refer to quickly and efficiently. For example, when I was talking through the music library with musician friend John Welsman, I sensed we needed a framework to guide the music search:

- A) lurching music that suggested struggle
- B) music that shifted into a new register – a kind of surprising or sideways lift into new territory/new sound
- C) drone to suggest lingering stroke fatigue

This search for music alongside John's description of what he was hearing became an early articulation of the shape of this stroke narrative. Building these libraries more generally offered the opportunity to approach story obliquely or indirectly through sound, visuals like photos and video and music.

Related to this question posted on the banner was another that asked about my artistic identity pre- and post-stroke. To respond, I have spent most of my working life interpreting scripts as an actor or working with youth to create their own pieces of theatre as a teacher. In my academic work, I used drama to explore student perceptions of suburban Toronto. Pure Research, however, was the first time that I had worked with personal material using embodied approaches as a starting place for inquiry. CB practice opened a window into these embodied approaches to working that were welcoming and not intimidating.

2. RELATIONALITY AND CONFIDENCE BUILDING

Another aspect of the CB practice, combined with our Zoom team conversations in the early stages of the work, provided a relational leg up for the time at Tarragon. We were not strangers gathering but people cultivating relationships, entering into the work as it evolved over months. I have never spent so much time in the early stages of a project, planning, revising, attuning to and clarifying both intentions and approaches to the work ahead.

Another question from a team member that was added to this research question banner asked, has CB practice opened up ways of working that take the stroke body into account? To answer this question, I would like to focus on another aspect to relationality that Conscious Bodies fosters as it asks you to imagine people from your past that you can invite to be present with you. Drawing on parents, grandparents, teachers, artist/inspirers and friends, over time I sensed how I might be supported relationally in this inquiry. Given that I am 67 years old and have a stroke informed body – I did feel like I was moving out of my zone of comfort into such physically focused work. I sensed that the presence of these people who cared for me, inspired me and have taught me strengthened my ability to enter the work more fully.

LATER STAGE/AFTER TARRAGON

Andrea suggested that gestures might arise out of the continuation of the Conscious Bodies practice. She recognized that working with sequences of gestures that have become routine and require no thought or effort to do are a means of accompanying a spoken narrative.⁵

Returning to the CB practice at home – I found three gestures. One was an electrical impulse down my right side. The second was four fingers tracing down the left side of my face – then across my neck and all the way down my right side and back up. The third imagined both forearms laden with heavy snow.

To summarize, the CB practice informed our early work, the work at Tarragon and the time following Tarragon in important ways. The guiding principles of patience, care, kindness and deep listening permeated our work together in person. This long early stage including Zoom conversations and the CB practice, helped me to develop trusting relations with the team and to learn more fully about what each person might offer to the work ahead. This meant that at Tarragon, I felt that I could bring forward so much of myself with less hesitation. Conscious Bodies was a practice that generated so much more than useful writing. I see that it was an experiment in itself and that it became central to the experiments that followed. I continue to be most grateful to Andrea and her company for creating it and sharing it with me⁶.

3 – RESEARCH QUESTION ON BANNER *HOW MIGHT WORKING WITH GESTURE CREATE VOCABULARY FOR A NARRATIVE OF STROKE?*

GESTURE, MOVEMENT, MARKINGS AND SOUND

This research question focuses on the time at Tarragon as gesture could really only be explored live and in person. There were three different methods used to try to explore this research question focused on gesture and its relation to narrative.

1. Stroke-related objects: imagined and real uses
2. Entering virtual rooms with spoken prompts
3. Shadow gestures with spoken prompts

⁵ Andrea attributes this additional practice of pairing cyclical gesture sequences with improvised storytelling to the work of dance-literature artist Sarah Chase. Sarah Chase is Canadian dance artist and choreographer based on Hornby Island, in the Salish Sea. For many years her work has been centred on biography, memoir and storytelling, overlaid with looped sequences of gestures. Through deeply embodied listening, Sarah focuses on how to draw upon story, narrative and memory from our own lives to create and enliven personal gestures and movement patterns in new and unexpected ways. She searches for ways in which people may share their rich inner worlds and magnify the gestures that belong to them in a danced expressive language. Sarah Chase is a Dreamwalker Dance core collaborator, creating, directing and guiding work for and alongside Andrea Nann since 2006.

⁶ One lingering question I have for Andrea concerns balance and rawness as a place from which to explore. Given my intensive physio following the stroke, I have worked very hard to reclaim my balance. I wondered if there were times that the explorations might have been different had I been less balanced.

Before describing the specifics of these methods, I want to emphasize that although I am writing about them in a somewhat orderly fashion after they happened, these methods were experiments in themselves. In other words, they emerged through experimenting and offered ways to explore further. It is only after looking at the video and banner data, that I can see what we did. For example, I did bring in the objects but I had little idea if experiments with them would yield anything useful. Methods 2 and 3 were guided by Andrea, but they too, were emergent and experimental with no guarantee that they would be productive. These were methods that emerged as we felt our way along, listening, trying something out and then adjusting in response to what had just happened. Our planning was intensive but it kept much room open for what happened as we went.

SHARING THE LIBRARIES:

On day one after Entering the space (creating a hospitable working environment; sharing greetings; meeting host venue staff; setting lighting and room temperature; unpacking food and beverages; unpacking objects and materials, cameras, computers, papers, pens; and setting things in space), we practiced Arriving by creating a circle of care, checking in with one another and orienting ourselves on Land and in space. During this time we posted the research questions to the walls. We followed this with Awakening our senses and grounding together and flowed organically into and through CB Activation phases while going through the libraries of photos, video, music and material objects we had collected, viewing photographs and video from the Google shared folder and listening to various pieces of music throughout the day. I introduced the library of objects that were related to my stroke experience.

METHOD OF EXPLORING GESTURE #1 – EXPERIMENTING WITH OBJECTS ASSOCIATED WITH STROKE – IMAGINED AND REAL USES

Much like a kindergarten classroom organized around a series of stations, I offered the following 'suggesting-stroke experiences' to the team. I want to underline the importance of *suggesting* a stroke experience through these activities. "Finding a way to approach another's experience while acknowledging you will never KNOW it" was crucial to keep in mind. (from sticket attached to the research question banner).

Finding a way to
approach another's
experience while
acknowledging you
will never KNOW it.
(Anne)

Sticket emphasizing the word “know.” These objects were intended to ‘suggest’ stroke experience but that a full understanding and ‘knowing’ of stroke experience was impossible.

OBJECTS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE:

This is a list of the different stations intended to offer experiments in ‘suggesting’ stroke experience.

1. With an oven mitt on the non-dominant hand, participants were asked to use tweezers to move tiny nails from one side of a tray to the other. This was intended to suggest the change in dexterity and loss of fine motor skills. (Source: Occupational Therapy)



2. On a cushioned mat – walking with a narrow gait becomes challenging. To increase the challenge – participants were asked to turn their heads and look at a spot on the wall, first one way and then the other. This was designed to show challenges with balance. (Source: Physical Therapy)



3. A yellow balloon filled with water moved freely on a tray. This was intended to suggest a kind of 'water brain' that follows a stroke body a bit delayed after turning in a circle or taking a curve in a car. Balancing the water brain on a tray suggested its weight and also its somewhat unpredictable lurching movement. The experiment with using a cell phone to light the balloon made it glow and the air bubble inside became more visible.



4. A mitt hand sewn out of insulated plastic packing material placed on the hand was intended to suggest reduced temperature sensation on the stroke-affected side. The tray was filled with ice packs, sandwich size plastic bags with ice cubes and cold cans of carbonated drinks to test the blunted sensation.



5. This weighted exercise vest was put on over the head like a sweater. It was intended to suggest the fatigue associated with stroke.



6. Bubble wrap laid out on the floor could be stepped on to create sudden bursts of sound. This insulating material used to pack fragile objects could also be used for wrapping parts of the body.



7. Small balls for exercises to strengthen the neck and to improve swallowing function.
(Source: Speech Language Therapy)



8. Chalk was used to create a line that marked a straight path for walking backwards safely.
(Source: Physical Therapy)



TELLING THE STORY OF STROKE THROUGH THESE OBJECTS:

I told my particular stroke story by demonstrating the uses of these objects. Brian commented that he felt the story of the stroke was better told through these objects than as a sequential, chronological account. This object-based approach to the narrative invited the listener/watcher to piece together fragments of descriptions of the physical work associated with 'getting better'.⁷

The objects served as more than just the anchors from which to describe specific aspects of stroke and recovery. The team could also experience these suggestions of stroke experience through these objects. Later, with the same objects we were offered the opportunity to interact playfully transforming the objects and their utility. This created some humour through physical play and, in my opinion, they offered a place to diffuse some of the more vulnerable emotions that had surfaced. At the same time, these interactions through play and experiment offered a new set of interactive gestures.

Knowing that we would invite Tarragon visitors the next day we devised a time-framed, prompt-based score that we could project onto a large screen in the space to guide a welcoming participatory and interactive sharing experience. This score slide offered the following invitations:

stroke play round 1

(11 mins)

offer an object

receive an object

wrap or be wrapped

challenge your balance

⁷ Brian also commented in the debriefing that there was a vividness to the demonstration of the yellow water balloon and the way that moving it in circles worked to convey a kind of liquid brain sensation. He also described the group's attachment to the balloon by saying, "we adopted it".

explore textures or sensation

allow your curiosity to merge with someone else's experience and attend to their experience

sound without words

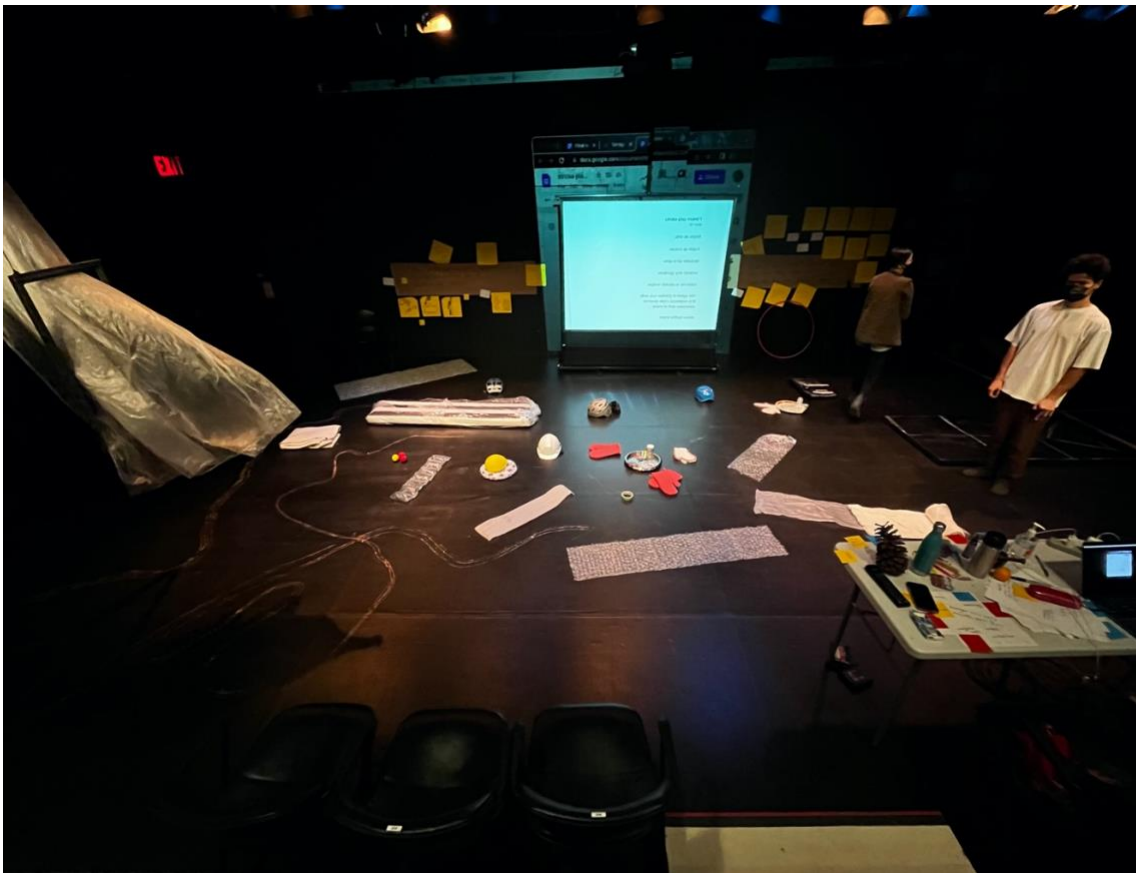
stroke body show and share

(Anne)

stroke play round 2

(7 mins)

reflecting



The theatre ready for our Tarragon visitors. The instructions were projected on the screen. The objects were ready for use/play. In the background the banners with the research questions were now covered with sticker notes with reflective comments and questions to consider.

EXTENDING OUR EXPLORATION TO TARRAGON VISITORS:

On day two we planned to offer this object exploration and associated storytelling to our Tarragon guests who would visit in the afternoon of day three. We activated our score, inviting these visitors to explore the space and common objects for a duration of 11 minutes during which the team welcomed them and 'cared for' them, wrapping their wrists and guiding them safely into the theatre space and tending to them as they began their own explorations.

After their initial explorations, I shared my stroke story through demonstrating the uses of the objects – much as I had done on the first day with our team. Following my story, more time (7 minutes) was offered to the guest participants as they were invited to return to their own exploration of the objects through the now 'stroke-informed' context.

At the end of this second period of interactive exploration, the guests and the team reflected on the experiences through conversation. We learned from the guests that some had parallel stories to tell of their own health, long covid fatigue and their relationship to their own body in places of work. They felt that by initially exploring the objects without their purpose being defined allowed them to wonder and experience exchanges based in care and caretaking. This suggested to us that our approach was palpable and was noticed.

As our guests moved in response to objects, we witnessed how fragments of narrative were explored both quietly and alone and with a high degree of social interaction.

TENTATIVE THOUGHTS ABOUT GESTURE, RELATIONALITY AND THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN:

As we watched and participated in the guests' explorations of the objects, we saw how these objects generated gesture and movement. To give some examples: people were chasing pins rolling across a tray, the 'balloon brain' shimmered and rolled as people tried to carry it on the tray. The oven mitts and insulation mitts became hats, envelopes for carrying other objects and, at one point, they became like paving stones as a walker jumped from one to the next.

I wonder if gesture is too narrow a word to encompass all the physical ways that we worked together to build, share and reflect on stroke experience. Or perhaps gesture is broader in its scope than I initially thought and may include the social interactions and associated movements we saw. Either way, perhaps this research question needs to be rephrased so that both movement and gesture could be acknowledged for their contribution to emerging narratives/vocabularies of stroke. These human-to-human movements and interactions with the objects formed part of a growing repertoire of gestures and movement.

To summarize, the experiments with the objects served several purposes including:

1. They offered the opportunity to tell the stroke story through descriptions of their uses.

2. They offered opportunities for others to experience a suggestion of pre-stroke and post-stroke experience.
3. They generated a repertoire of collaborative gestures and movements.
4. They also offered a place of interaction with invited guests from which reflective conversation could take place.
5. Given that so many of the activities and associated objects came from therapeutic modalities, they offered the team an opportunity to experiment with and explore the 'get better' stage of this particular story of illness/brain injury. Andrea commented in our debriefing that as she watched this 'play score' and social interaction through the objects, she recognized moments of relational wellbeing and social wholeness within this larger story of illness. She suggested that this experiment may have offered us the opportunity to experience some of the almost paradoxical dimensions of an illness narrative.

In experimenting with these therapeutic objects, she described a high degree of care and suggested that these "gestures of grace" could refer to the months that took place in hospital when the stroke was most acute. Through these comments it is possible to see how the stages of the illness narrative of being well, getting sick and getting better are not discrete. What we experienced was one stage layering or overlapping another. The neat and tidy stages, which we anticipated would progress from one to the next, became more complicated, messier and much more interesting.

METHOD OF EXPLORING GESTURE #2 – STEPPING INTO VIRTUAL ROOMS WITH SPOKEN PROMPTS

This part of the work depended on Andrea who acted as a sure-footed guide through a series of gesture-generating experiments. These experiments were bold inquiries, implemented with a high degree of sensitivity. I followed her lead as she asked gentle questions and opened up what we called the 'virtual rooms' with such care, patience and deep listening.

Andrea had read my post-Conscious Bodies practice written reflections and was able to pull images from this writing and build upon them. One of these images was a kind of virtual room outside my window, made with reflected light. In the following excerpt, I describe this space that became known as the 'virtual room'.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

November 4 post-Conscious Bodies practice writing

stopping and starting the video (*of Conscious Bodies practice led by Andrea Nann*)

noticing and wanting to take pictures

first time I could see the sun facing east

rainbows/prisms all across the deck and entering my window onto the white ledge (*inside*)

I pasteled

took pictures

then opened the door to go out to see more patterns of lines of colour intersecting - this changed depending on where I was

reflected virtual space
to the side (*of our home*)
lined with colour



These photos were taken as part of the CB practice that I did at home for several months before the team met in person at Tarragon. On the right is the prismatic light entering the inside and the photo to the left shows a reflected space that suggested a kind of 'virtual room'.

Andrea brought this virtual room and prismatic light into the experiments at Tarragon and seating herself or squatting in close proximity to me she invited me to describe this imaginary room. I said that it was lined with light and gestured this by outlining the perimeter of the room imagining I was drawing with the prismatic light I had seen in my CB practice.

When I stepped into this virtual room I was very emotional because inside I encountered a longing to run and bound and jump. All of these things are possible for me but they are laboured and not like the freer and more agile movement I enjoyed pre-stroke. In my lived life, I don't spend much time and emotional energy on this kind of longing. What occurred in that virtual room experiment came as a very powerful surprise.

In our debrief, Nathaniel identified this as a significant moment and he described how my voice broke open a well of feeling that informed the rest of our working day. I was particularly grateful for this observation because it reinforced my own experience of that first experiment in the virtual room when I had felt so bowled over by unexpected longing to move without constraint. Buttressed by the others in the room, I felt able to approach this raw place suspecting that it was integral to the work we were exploring.



Drawing of this experiment posted by team member at Tarragon. This drawing charted my description of that virtual room and was attached to the banner with the research question about gesture and narrative.

**METHOD OF EXPLORING GESTURE #3 –
SHADOW DIALOGUES WITH SPOKEN PROMPTS**

Following the virtual room experiment – Andrea invited me to move in front of a light that she had positioned horizontally so that it would cast a shadow of my body onto the theatre wall. As I watched my shadow, Andrea asked that my pre-stroke body speak to my presently stroked body.



Photo of gesturing towards former pre-stroke self and that pre-stroke self gesturing towards me.



Gloria's drawing of this gesture posted to the banner with the research question. Gloria suggested in our debrief that these experiments with the body and shadow gesture were significant and that there was a kind of 'beauty' in these moments.

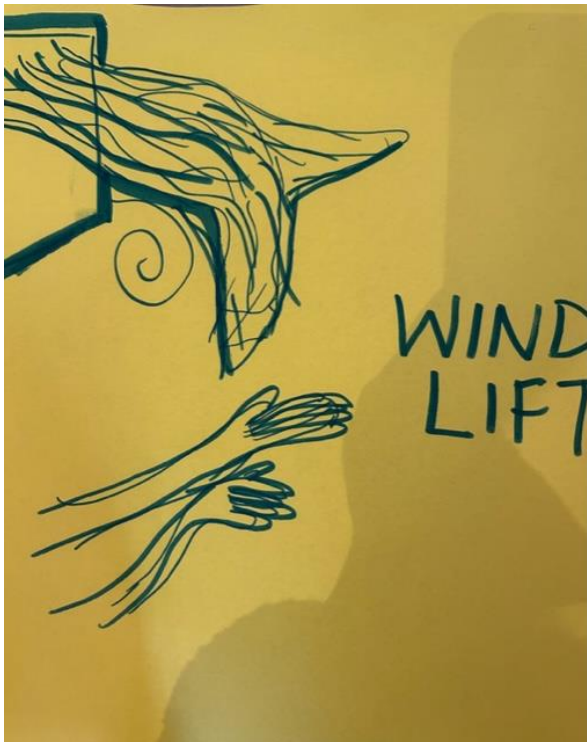
In this shadow work, we explored more fully a gesture that we had found earlier in the virtual room that we named as 'windlift'. This gesture started with one arm helping the other to float and raise up into the air. Then that helping arm would catch the falling arm and lift it again. As I was doing this gesture, I was thinking of the video clip taken months ago outside a building with an open window through which a light piece of plastic drop cloth was lifting and undulating in the wind.

The wind supported and enabled the plastic to lift up and then come to rest. I thought about that movement as I moved my arms – one arm lifting and enabling the other arm to rise. I was not representing what I had seen in the original video – just experimenting with how that principle might work in the stroked body and how that relationship between the two arms and the two sides of the body would feel.





Still photo made from the video taken months earlier. Wind lifting the plastic through open window.



This drawing was attached to the banner – naming the gesture. The three gestures that Gloria drew and posted helped me to see that the act of drawing and posting were also gestures. Drawing as gesture – a gesture of gesture.



Our experiment to create (from the video taken months earlier) the plastic blowing in the wind out of the open window. This photo taken at Tarragon shows the frame borrowed from the props department and a roll of plastic drop cloth. What is not visible is the oscillating fan positioned behind the frame that causes the plastic to lift and balloon out. Is this a gesture engineered by humans but executed by the more than human? Can objects gesture? They certainly can move.

To summarize, there were several ways these gestures came about. The first was starting with storytelling through gesturing with the assembled objects. That was followed by the gesture creation experiment that used the objects to suggest stroke experience. The virtual room experiment also generated gestures developed out of so many sources: noticing light and

shadow and space (part of the Conscious Bodies practice), writing, video, imagination and memory. These gestures were quietly guided and tended as a kind of deep listening and careful witnessing. These were not literal representations of a particular experience of stroke nor were they generated alone but in collaboration with Andrea and the team. Inside the work, I felt that the gestures came partly from recollection and partly from trying to figure something out in real time, in the present. This combination felt alive to me. These gestures created fragments of a story as it was emerging, not a story already made and recounted or re-enacted.

BROADENING SENSE OF GESTURE – MOVEMENT, MAPPING, MARKING AND AS SOUND

Before these experiments, I think I saw gesture as a rough equivalent of a word – something representing something else. Sometimes a gesture does represent something else. For example, we saw gestures that worked to set the scene of the virtual room. Gestures also expressed longing. Gestures demonstrated the relationship of one side of a stroke body to the other. We saw that some gestures were more than representations of other things, they just were, in and of themselves. To explain, some gestures had an emotive power that could be experienced and did not need to reference anything beyond what they were.

THE WHAT OF GESTURE?

EARLY:

- Gestures from the Conscious Bodies experiment
- Gestures of charting and archiving
- Gestures of Zoom
- Gestures of recording experiences
- Gestures of writing

MIDDLE:

- Objects and the gestures associated with them (gestures of grace in the case of the plastic being lifted by the wind, in the demonstration of therapeutic care and in the delight of the play with the objects)
- Gestures of storytelling
- Gestures delineating space – virtual rooms
- Arm gestures
- Foot gestures

- Virtual room and shadow gestures – wind lift
- Drawing as gesturing with markers – pictures of the windlift, virtual room, shadow gesture
- Posting on the banners as gesture
- Eating/sharing food as a gesture
- Making tea as a gesture
- Resting as a kind of still gesture
- Gesturing recollection
- Gesturing figuring something out
- Sound as gesture

Gesture generating sound

LATER:

Gesture as electrical impulse, arms heavy and quiet with snow, fingers lining the stroke territory on the body

Analytical gesture

Gestures of transmission

GESTURES TO BE DISCUSSED WITH REFERENCE TO THE NEXT RESEARCH QUESTION (P. 33 – 36)

Gesture as blurring clear lines

Gesture as footprints

Chalked gestures

THE HOW OF GESTURE?

Gestures of care and patience

Gestures of whimsy

Gestures as devilish, playfully disruptive, mischievous

Gestures of dressing, wrapping as support and care

Gestures of grace

A broadened definition of gesture could include physical movement intended to express something, represent something, have metaphoric purpose, be an interaction between humans and more-than-humans, act as an attempt to make actual the virtual, start in unexpressed longing, be housed in story.

These research experiments offered gestures related to the content of our research questions but they also offered evidence of ways of working and approaches that were imbued with care, patience and deep listening. As the sticket notes suggested, gestures are relational and changeable and they do not happen alone but through guidance, interaction and patient care.

Gestures are more than a movement frozen. Gestures move and I come to wonder if they are far more present and populate and alter space and social relations more fully than I had previously imagined. Gesture is unmooring itself from my earlier understanding.

Gesture has taught me the limits of my own frames of reference.

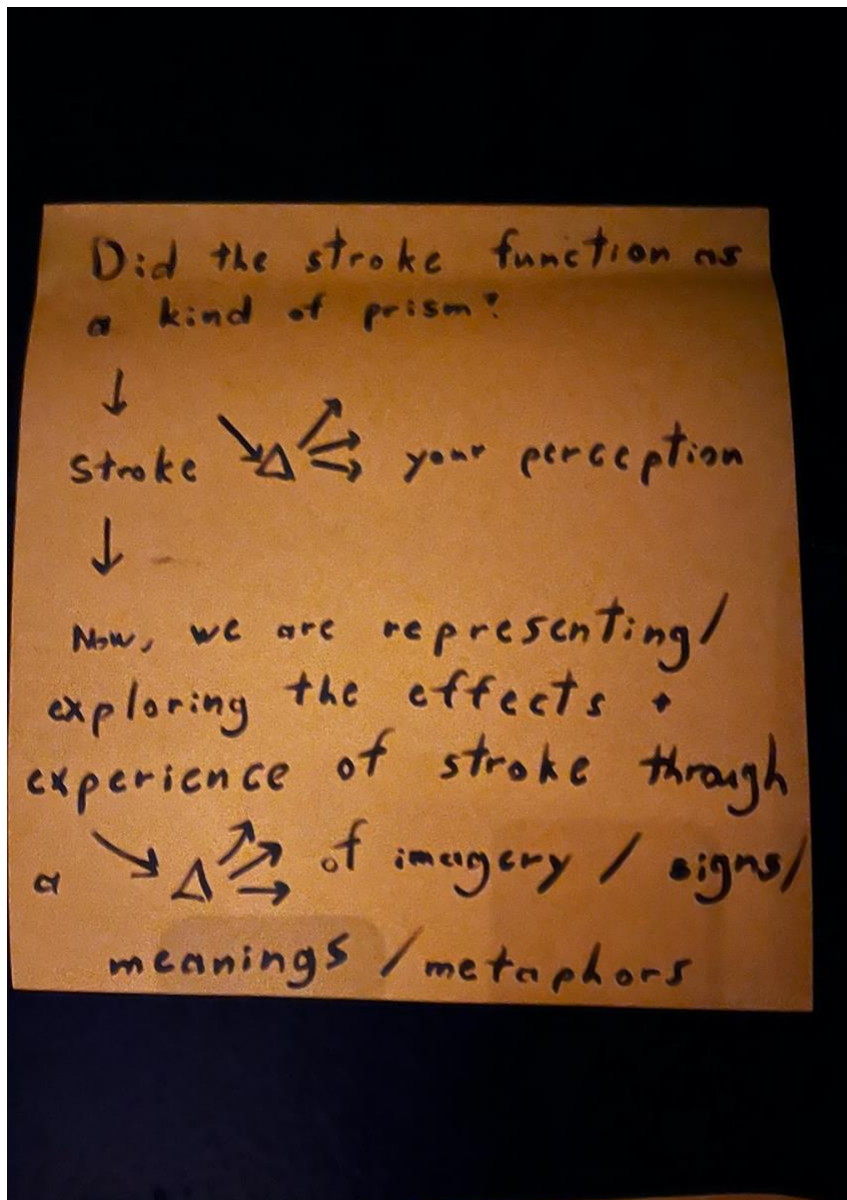
**4 – RESEARCH QUESTION ON BANNER:
*HOW MIGHT EMBODIED WORK ALTER THE STORY STRUCTURE
OF ‘WAS WELL, GOT SICK AND GOT BETTER’?***

GETTING WELL AND GOT BETTER:

As noted earlier, the experiments at Tarragon focused most intensively on the “got better” part of this illness story structure. Looking at the banner with this research question written on it I see that I have added thought bubbles. For ‘I was well, ’the thought bubble read, “didn’t even think about it” (I didn’t think about moving freely or my state of good health). For ‘got sick ’the thought bubble said, “encounter with difference perceptually – ways of being”. And underneath ‘got better ’I wrote, “proceed, process, not stuck, unfinished”.

On another sticket was written “the stroke experience is in the room with us – in its current state. Flow, freeze, desire for flow”. On several small white cards team members had written, “frozen water protecting something – controlling flow, holding on for dear life, virtual room – ‘running, running, running’”. It seems that this so-called ‘being well again ’or ‘getting better ’is a messy place of stuckness and freeze and the desire for movement and flow. This issue of stuckness and flow and the associated tension between protection and risk were discussed earlier in more detail on pages 8, 9 and 10. Here it is evident again. What is apparent is that the ‘getting better ’part of this story structure is not a given nor does it follow an uncomplicated linear or straightforward path.

PRISMATIC LIGHT AS GESTURE-GENERATING IMAGE AND AS A LENS THROUGH WHICH TO SEE:
On this banner was a sticket that discussed prism and prismatic light. As previously mentioned, the virtual room of the first day was lined by prismatic light.



This sticket from Nathaniel suggests that the stroke could be a prism for telling the particulars of my lived stroke story. The story was not a neat sequential one but one that had fragmented into many parallel stories as if seen through a prism or reflective glass. This sticket suggested that stroke was a prism for perception. What had been known before stroke had been broken up and altered. And through the time at Tarragon, what I thought I knew about stroke had also been broken up and altered.

Also, the prism helped us to look at stroke as a place of images, signs, meaning and metaphors. Experimenting with inquiring into this story with a prismatic lens opened it up so that we could see a range of colours, dimensions and images. This suggests that prismatic light was both a generative image with which to experiment and that the prism offered a way of seeing, breaking open what we thought we knew.

Attached to this banner were other stickets that focused on prisms and prismatic light. Later, after Tarragon, as I reviewed this banner I wrote,

Component colours
Parallel
Not straight but rounded
Objects and experience
Element of real and present struggle
Not just sense-making about the past

As was suggested previously, this story is not just recollection or representing an event long over but figuring out what that story is now. In trying to explore fragments of this story, particularly in the virtual rooms, I experienced both struggle and grace.

VIRTUAL ROOM #2: PRISMATIC LIGHT BENDING, FISSURES AND SULCI, ELEVATION CONTOURS

There was a second 'virtual room' on the third day of our work at Tarragon. I had written to Andrea the night before – the end of the second day – to say that I would like to try jumping into another virtual room.

A special (light) was focused on the floor from above to create a pool of circular light about a meter in diameter. I had taken sidewalk chalk – four pieces held in my hand at once and then I drew undulating chalk lines. It looked like a kind of map with parallel roads or possibly elevation contours or even suggesting the grooves in brain matter (fissures and sulci).



Gesture as marking Virtual Room #2.



Gesture marking space Virtual Room #2.

This was a different virtual room but Andrea worked in a similar way by offering CB practice to awaken, attune, and align myself with time, place and others, and warm up physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Andrea continued by prompting with questions, and being a most sensitive and dependable guide. I did jump in – with jumps that brought back memories of standing broad jumping as a child.



Virtual Room # 2 - jump gestures and shadow.



Virtual room #2 - Footprint markings – gesture of chalked feet.

MARKING THE FLOOR AS A SPATIAL GESTURE:

My jumping and associated footsteps blurred the neat parallel lines of chalk. My feet got covered in chalk dust and I left footprints when I walked out of the circle. These chalk dust markings on the floor were gestures created by my jumping feet both inside and outside the chalked virtual room.

LIGHT ABOVE AND SHADOW GESTURE PROJECTED ON THE SPHERE:

Viewing the video of this sequence of work, I saw shadow gestures created by my moving arms in the light that was projected from above me. These gestures suggested to me x rays or MRIs, as if the inner structures of the brain were being projected. But these were not still images but moving ones. Perhaps these shifting shadow shapes in the second virtual room were more like the images created by an ultrasound technician searching for what part of the body needs to be examined. In any case, like

the yellow water balloon, these images could suggest ways of seeing into and permeating what lies beneath the skin and skull.

WINDOW AS “METAPHOR, HARBINGER, GOOD OMEN, SCENE PARTNER”

The other metaphor mentioned on this banner was the window we created with the translucent plastic drop cloth that flowed from the ceiling and through the opening in the frame. As previously described, a fan was used to create the lift and movement of the plastic. This metaphor/image referred back to video that was taken immediately following our first team Zoom conversation during which Andrea asked, “what might be the moments of grace in this experience?”. The moment the meeting finished and I looked out my window I saw some drop cloth plastic wafting through an open window. To me, this seemed like a moment of grace.

On one of the tickets on this research question banner was written “window as metaphor, harbinger, good omen, scene partner”. What we had found was the evolution of a metaphor – first in the original video of the plastic and the window, then in the gesture of one shadowed arm lifting the other (as previously described), in the drawing and now the window and plastic refashioned in this theatre space. There was much experiment and adjusting to get this billowing plastic really working (by which I mean finding the beauty of the original video). On day three I watched the shadow of the plastic ballooning against the wall just as I had done with the shadow of the windlift two days before. The frame with plastic blowing through it was metaphor, harbinger, good omen and scene partner as well as threshold. Watching this experiment succeed and take flight was another moment of grace.



Day Three – the edge of Virtual Room #2 and the frame with billowing plastic.

Social geographer Doreen Massey (2005) writes about space as a place of stories-so-far that are co-created and relational, with many of them happening all at once. This multiplicity of stories, she offers, is heterogeneous, lively and political. Not only are there many stories of experiment in this single story of stroke – but perhaps this is an invitation to inquire into others. This may hold some potential for future work, but what is clear is that the simple illness story structure, ‘I was well, got sick and got better’ reduces dimensions of vibrant experience into a flat narrative that seems almost irrelevant.

The place of the ‘got better’ is pruned open to include a much broader spectrum of experience that includes the many ways that ‘living with’ might be validated as place of both struggle and grace. This research has just begun to explore the wealth of expressions of that lived experience. This is not a ‘getting better’ that insists on getting everyone back to some uniform notion of wellness – this is about not getting better or not fully better and the gestures and movement of that rich terrain.

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CLOSING FOR NOW AND THINKING FORWARD TO THE WORKSHOP AT THE CONFERENCE OF THE CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THEATRE RESEARCH

The ways that we found to address our research questions may hold some interest for other researchers using performance methodologically. Imagining workshop participants who are engaged in their own forms of performance research outside archives and libraries, some of these methods that our team used to inquire into the research questions might be relevant and useful. The insights into illness story structure might be useful for other theatre researchers engaged with inquiries into chronic illness, remission and brain injury.

I want to be clear that this workshop would not offer a model or prescription – but is more an invitation to find ways of working that suit the research questions posed, altering and custom fitting methods to the particulars of an inquiry.

RESEARCH QUESTION BANNERS:

The presence of the research questions posted on banners and attached to the walls of the theatre was generative in ways we could not have predicted. They offered a kind of ongoing conversation and invitation to sense-making. These banners and the posted responses helped to keep us on track, but we also experienced how the research questions changed or were in need of new wording and expansion as the work unfolded.

EMBODIED PRACTICE AS LONGTERM PREPARATION:

An embodied preparation such as the Conscious Bodies practice was invaluable. This practice worked to strengthen my body and attune it to noticing not just inner experience but experience outside the body and even outside the room I was practicing in. Conscious Bodies helped to identify some generative places for experiment – such as the virtual room and prismatic light permeating the window and creating stripes of light on my feet. These images became stepping off places for the later experiments at Tarragon.

CAREFUL PLANNING WITH THE BODY AND ITS PARTICULARS IN MIND:

At Tarragon the embodied practice encompassed both the active explorations/experiments and the breaks. It is worth noting that our bodies were nourished through shared meals and rested through a designated down time thanks to the thinking that happened in the early stages of our collective planning.

A LIBRARY OF MATERIAL OBJECTS:

The objects we explored were not just intended to explicate or demonstrate a story but to activate a suggestion of experience and in this case, lived stroke experience.

GESTURE EXPERIMENTS:

Through embodied experiments, I learned that gestures were so much more than I thought they were. (Please refer to the extensive list on page 29 and 30). I learned that gestures happen interacting with other people and the more-than-human objects. These objects became sources of potential associations and metaphors. An example of this was the yellow balloon that was filled with water. Initially, it was intended as a way to demonstrate the sensation of turning with a swimmy stroke brain that felt slightly delayed. The water-filled yellow balloon became known as 'water brain' and over the three days became quite precious to people as if this vulnerable balloon was representative of a vulnerable stroke brain.

THE VIRTUAL ROOMS:

The virtual rooms hold potential for those who might want to explore/experiment physically activated by memory and imagination. These virtual rooms identified longings and loss and the real limits of the body as it is as well as the exhilaration of imagining that body differently and breaking out of its perceived constraints.

STORY OF ILLNESS AND BRAIN INJURY:

Given that the story was being lived in the room as we worked together, that story, particularly the 'getting better' stage of the story, was something alive and vital that we were participating in, in real time. In other words, we were not creating story as just a means to explicate certain experiences that had already happened. It was more present than that. We wanted to suggest experience but also to generate new experiences in the virtual rooms. These stories were not finished waiting to be recounted because in my case, 'getting better' has been an ongoing process and not an achieved destination. The story where we entered it was both a place of struggle and grace, and both were happening in real time in front of our eyes.

In inquiring into 'got better' as an unfinished and necessarily exploratory place in illness narrative, we learned that this work deserves time and the curiosity to explore what might be the more modest happy endings or more challenging less happy endings. For those of us with chronic illness or lingering conditions, where and how we live is not an ending at all. A lived life of stroke is not just a story but also an experience that continues. This research experimented with ways of suggesting stroke through working with others to play, experience, make sense, all the while attending generously to each other as we shared our efforts.

I really am on the fence about whether the best label for this work is story. We started by recounting experience with the intentions of finding ways to suggest that experience. The intention was not to find ways for non-stroke bodies to 'understand' stroke experience in the same way as a person with lived experience would. But we were able to offer an experience through movement and gesture, through interaction with each other and the objects. From these experiences, I see that there can be great

connection and camaraderie and even artistry in the trying to understand the experience of another person.

Struggle, grace, underground rivers and sap tapping.

Molten.

POST SCRIPT:

When I was stuck to my office chair in front of my computer screen analysing the collected data, I found myself curious about ways that movement might enliven the process of analysis. I returned to the CB practice and noted words like ‘membrane and transmission’. I noticed that there were two virtual rooms out my window and not just the one I had noticed at first.

I tried to imagine how this report writing could offer a kind of permeable membrane – a place to enter into the experiences, the gestures, the conversations and the affective milieu in our shared rooms – on Zoom, the Google Drive, Tarragon and the virtual rooms – where the work was done.

The intention of this report is to offer a transmission of the events of this inquiry, the ways in which we experimented and the sense-making and learning. I hope that this report pays respect to the quality of the work but also offers a sense of the vitality of tapping into a lived experience of stroke.

I trust that this report fairly suggests the extent to which moments of grace happened on the way to learning about and attending to our questions, our experiments and each other.

Knowledge Mobilization for Pure Research: Canadian Association for Theatre Research
Halifax - June 15-17, 2023

The Getting Better Part: Gesture Experiments in Stroke and Story

In my initial research proposal, I added a budget category for Knowledge Mobilization at the 2023 CATR annual conference and want to express my thanks for the conference support from Nightswimming's Pure Research.

The workshop took place at 9:15 in the morning of Friday, June 16th in the brand-new Small Studio in the Fountain School of Performing Arts at Dalhousie University, Halifax. Although attendance was lower than I thought it would be, The Director of the Centre for Theatre, Drama and Performance from University of Toronto, PhD graduate students from University of Toronto and a Theatre and Movement professor from Acadia University attended.

The 1.5 hour workshop was designed for participation and the group fully entered in with curiosity and willingness to ask questions and reflect on the experiences offered. I duplicated some of the experiments from the work days at Tarragon supported by visuals (slides and video) to demonstrate the research in action. I received some excellent suggestions and feedback following the workshop that will result in a slight edit to the report prepared for the Nightswimming website.

I will follow up with each participant with a list of resources as well as the links to the Nightswimming Pure Research Archive.



Anne Wessels, Brian Quirt, Nathaniel Hanula-James, Gloria Mok, Andrea Nann.

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Lochlan Cox - Head of Props, Tarragon Theatre

Andrea Vagianos – General Manager, Tarragon Theatre

Mike Payette – Artistic Director, Tarragon Theatre

Myekah Payne – Associate Artistic Director, Tarragon Theatre

Cameron Johnston – Director of Marketing and Communications, Tarragon Theatre

Olivia Seward – Assistant Producer and Community Engagement Coordinator, Tarragon Theatre

David Mallette – Extra Space Technician, Tarragon Theatre

John Sutton – assistant to David Mallette

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