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## A Meta-Staging of the Initial Investigative Operatics Working Group, With [x number of] Original Cast Members Playing All the Parts

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## A Meta-Staging of the Initial Investigative Operatics Working Group, With [x number of] Original Cast Members Playing All the Parts

*Bethany Ides, Fan Wu, Ora Ferdman, and Zoe Tuck*

### *Reflection*

In late 2020, Bethany Ides sent an open invitation to prospective collaborators (friends, colleagues, mentors, former students, acquaintances, plus all of their friends, etc.) to meet for eight consecutive weeks on Zoom to explore the contours of a mysterious field called “investigative operatics.”<sup>1</sup> A cluster of entangled questions immediately emerged: *What is this phenomenon called “investigative operatics?” How do we study an idea that’s still fuzzy, that no one is an expert in yet? How do we go about this study cooperatively and mutually supportively while still getting to know each other?*

“Opera” is the plural of opus. It is a way of conceiving of works or doings as a whole, but perhaps especially as something sprawling and ambitious because all those works and doings must cohere. What holds these works and doings together? A common impetus? A feeling of interdependence? In the roots of the word “investigate” are tracks, traces, *vestiges*.

We consider this piece a flurry of breadcrumbs. It’s an axiology, a performance score, a reenactment, a remix, an activity book, a reference list, an archive, and probably other things we haven’t figured out yet. It is a text both of and for community writing. Our play insists that the reader play, too. Maybe assign dance moves to the Annotational Schema and wear costumes, for instance. Maybe rotate who plays who. Experiment with sound and lighting, fast and slow, high and low. Some parts may feel like poetry whereas others might feel more like a sing-along. Go with those feelings, see where they lead. Along the way, we’ve noticed that nonknowledge and incomprehension can often leave space for pleasure.

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1. Participants of the Investigative Operatic Working Group included: Linda Austin, Abril Barajas, Alexis Bhagat, Ali Bonfils, Ell Davis, Abner Delina, Bill Dietz, Kerry Downey, Emma BB Doyle, Ora Ferdman, Marshall Gardner, Karen Yvonne Hall, Bethany Ides, Rindon Johnson, Jimie Lerman, Stephanie Loveless, Dakotah Weeks Murphree, Annabel Paran, Michael Quintanilla, Mahshid Rafiei, Julia Santoli, Yasmeen Siddiqui, Toleen Touq, Tim Simonds, Zoe Tuck, Fan Wu, Alex Zandi.

## *A Note to the Readers*

If you are reading this having endured the strict discipline of a conventional PhD program that systematically discourages pleasure and wonder in learning, our hearts go out to you. To meet “academic standards,” you likely had to subject yourself to some of the methods of control that academia adopted from colonialism, white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, ableism and all the rest. These systems thrive by classifying people, power and intelligence into categories that can be measured, managed and ultimately exploited. To succeed in academia, a person must accept and abide by rules defining what’s worth studying and why, and how (not to mention when and where). The process can be filled with drudgery. And then, the folks who struggle through that sometimes become gatekeepers themselves and end up perpetuating the whole thing (as much as they probably also hate it), worried for their jobs or feeling stuck in a system they’re now complicit in. The rotten truth is that, within institutional systems like academia that are alienating by design, almost everybody is being used, and even brave innovations must be retrofitted to suit that structure of authority in order to function.

If you are reading this, feeling like you don’t fit in academia—if you dropped out of school, found an unbeaten path, and/or created your own hacks and workarounds to immerse yourself in the ideas you’re interested in among people with whom there’s reciprocity and shared respect—we are with you. (That’s us, too.) If you want to hold up the elders who are not (yet) embraced by the academic canon by exploring strategies for study and mutual support that are meaningful to you but which the gatekeepers may have deemed too “inaccessible” or difficult, this is for you. We trust that you can handle strangeness.

So-called “experimental literature” is an experiment simply because nobody knows yet what will happen, what it will do, what it’s capable of. Experimentation is a process of working (and playing) with pure potential. We experiment because the experimenters before us taught us what else was out there beyond the accepted standards. They taught us to love feeling ourselves on the edge of what’s becoming possible. When we experiment, we are actively developing practices for becoming free.

Here’s our play.

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## *A Meta-Staging of the Initial Investigative Operatics Working Group, With [x number of] Original Cast Members Playing All the Parts*

An empty theater. A busy internet.

After rehashing for weeks what, in fact, did or might have happened; after scavenging scaffolding remnants, attempting to retroactively configure a plan then comparing that plan to the original intent; after wondering: did our meetings become sequential when they were only meant to be serial? How variable is research as a practice or process; as investigative; as pluripotent? At what point does the expectation of what something might become dissolve into what it is?

### Annotational Schema:

- ↔ PAVANE (moving through)
- ◆ WIRETAPPING (listening in)
- ⇒ STAKEOUT (watching out)
- ⊕ ARIA (holding on)

**Figure:** Trace the perimeter of the visual space of your screen—the limits of your image of yourself ↔. Dim your screen till it's dark and you can no longer see others.<sup>2</sup>

**Counter Figure:** Grammatically sliding into a place as a matter of occurrence, of becoming referable. ⇒ The phantom “what” that we are studying “here” lingers endophorically, from within (the common text of a continuing

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2. Directions provided during Annabel Paran's workshop on/of/from Ralph Lemon's practice and processes, co-facilitated with Marshall Gardner for the Investigative Operatics Working Group, February 7, 2021.

discourse). It's always there in the periphery but, like an aged star, seems to disappear if you try and look straight at it.

**Chorus:** The common text glimmers, too.

**Countra Dancer:** The common text is the discourse in its continuing as it's continuing, comprised both of evident and imagined transcripts, equally referable, whether via digital or non-digital memory files. One is better suited to conceiving of exactitude and information that is extrinsic to change, whereas the other is sensitive, affected by whimsy and decay.

### Flashback.<sup>3</sup>

Like anything becomes knowable as itself, we need a name, we need a thing to say and say we're all gathered around. An organizational arrangement of letters and ideas about order that is familiar and pronounceable enough. A real symbolic point of egress between here and there. Ⓢ Or between major reading and minor reading; the difference between concepts that feel already ordered by other importances and concepts that change direction on a dime. And the interstice; a crease that runs between them where the sweat gathers a scent. We'll tell by smell. In French, *sillage* is the quality of integrity a scent sustains after its discharging agent has passed—how well I sense you later and for how long ♣. Which is a way of qualifying value by way of dissipative currents. ⇒ Sniffing and tracking Investigative Operatics while also emitting an olfactory trail. So many fugitive particles intermingling uncontrollably assures us that we are sensing both ourselves and others in that alembic “what.”

Ⓢ **Proxy Agent:** It's hard, though. It's hard to—what happens when you—when you arrive at a doorway, intending to claim access to a doorway. And you encounter another hallway. Does this path correspond with a motivated tract or does it trace a meandering course of always already

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3. In Yve-Alain Bois's Introduction to Lygia Clark's "Nostalgia of the Body," we find his recollection of Clark demonstrating a flashback sequence in real time for an audience of one (Bois); opening boxes, "unpacking the oldest things first.[...]Nothing that came out of them was made simply to be seen and not touched."

annexed vexation?

**Interpreter:** I hear you saying that arriving “here,” wherever or whenever one does, always means beginning, and beginning always means a backlog of processing information/sensation. Does that sound right to you?

No reply.

**Interpreter:** Arriving “here” by signal?

**Proxy Agent:** All I could think of was the world of sports; the world of gestures, maneuvers, playbook diagrams, allegiances, starting positions. I couldn’t remember how I got here/”here.” Did I arrive like a scientist? Like a detective? ~ Or, like a drunken lover stumbling through the snow, my footsteps fading into ellipses ~?

No reply.

**Proxy Agent:** All I could remember was an old television commercial panning down a limitless passageway lined with endless doors and windows. The jingle repeated the same phrase forward then backward, that’s how lost we were.

**Interpreter:** Grammatic function and dysfunction seeming indistinguishable what’s implicit and not yet. Every small and large pronoun already mid-doing. Does that sound...? Ⓢ

***Intra- between; mural the walls.***

The chorus of clairvoyants sing from behind a screen or curtain ♦, tuning to remote areas of interest.

**Tuning to Tina Camp:** We can engage a listening sense when encountering images/documents, engaging their anteriority decidedly haptically, ⇒ requiring interrogation of our encounter both at the gateway entry level of opening an archive as well as with the content inside. “It is a method that reckons with the fissures, gaps, and interstices emerge when we refuse to accept the ‘truth of images and archives,” particularly those that institutions use to regulate and reproduce subjecthood through. We can disorder, disrupt that.<sup>4</sup>

**Myung Mi Kim:** A poem (like an image or a document, recording, or live event) might become conceivable “through cycles of erosion and accretion.”

To encounter and to problematize the political and economical terms that function to determine and codify legibility. [...] And in that process, inside the procedures of work and of work proceeding, note: node and pressure point, song making and song gesture. Track: descant, sedimentations, tributaries in any several directions ↻. Show stress, show beat, show changes and alterations in pitch and accentuals. Syllables or tempo stored, ruptured, emended. A valence of first and further tongues. A fluctuating topography, a ringing of verve or nerve–transpiring<sup>5</sup>

**Pause/Interval:** ⇒ We look for evidence of Investigative Operatics in moments of exchange, interchange. We think of anecdotes and scraps as often as titles of pieces or names of artists. We try

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4. Any book might be said to stage an encounter But to touch the pages of this book and to observe oneself doing so is an investigative operatic act.

5. Kim seems to be addressing and revamping Ed Dorn’s project of Investigative Poetics. Kim here invites “tending to the speculative” as part of that project, as an active readerly (as much as writerly), intratemporal process.

out methods or habits as means of finding loose bits, what might come unstuck from applications of quantifiable value.

**Tuning to Isabelle Stengers:** We think of interstices that create their own dimensions and, extensively, each their own scope in terms of what and whom they concern, that open intervals for what might be becoming knowable. “Effectively, the interstice doesn’t give any response, but it generates new questions” (Stengers).<sup>6</sup>

**Sample Question:** Can we return the “folk” to “art?”

**Tuning, in Gestures:** Ishmael Reed recounts how Simon Ortiz met with angry frustration the suggestion of a single location or particular method of education or institutional style being deemed primary with regard to human creative effort/spirit. Ortiz insisted, “I would guide any Native American away from the idea that one place is the center of American poetry today,” referring to Naropa and to an attitude about culture “be-long[ing] to the people” that he was taught in the Acoma village he grew up in” (Reed). “Handiwork and more: belief and art: ingenuity and concept, paying careful attention to things,” Ortiz wrote later, describing a communal building process and how he came to know from his own involvement in that process that the house would “last a long time” because of all of these qualities, but especially humility (Ortiz).

**Tuning to Gertrude Stein:** “Act so that there is no use in a center”). A refusal, also an initiative.

**Email Impersonator:** Let’s consider these terms together as interrelated biomass: “experimental

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6. Stengers’s *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* is a book that is curiously too expensive for most interested readers to own in hard copy (what few copies seem to exist), however it is widely available in PDF online. Its verisimilar publication is so prevalent that the book seems almost hypothetical.



research” and “visitation,” along with peopled pronouns and a pyre of commodified/monetized applications of these processes out from which a ladder boldly extends. Shoots and ladders. Buckets of phosphorescent oceanic bits of life and death. The matter can be re-stirred to re-light it up again, again; re- re-.

**Enthusiastic Participant:** Let’s co-, co-; as supple, as more porous than more dogmatic and hierarchical formations (academia, non-profit world, certain political or activist milieus). And being thrown, like a piece of stellar matter, outward, but in a patterned and collocated way. A spiral arm, extending and (de)forming as it/ we extend/s. And mapping more in the sense of interested traversal rather than as extractive aide-mémoire. Let’s be concerned with slippage, the transverse archipelagic of an isolarion (becoming scattered?). Plural AND coordinated. To be “here” you have to be coordinated to execute an intention within the social body or, by extension, to explore the possibilities for social action. Or to use the (nonce) word *aesthetion*, as analogue (or adjutant) for action. And something even softer, somatic, preverbal like circulatory systems ♦.

(Having the will, but also the wish.)

**Sample Question:** How would this sound as community in the active voice?

**An Open Chord:** Like scouting, contour, reverberation; like “unnamed sensibilities” (Amacher), “a feature-length we-don’t-know” and an “undertak[ing] to improvise something better than that which has been written” (Greaves);<sup>7</sup> like smaragdinate tabulation, spooky action; like reading billets.

**William Greaves:** “It doesn’t matter whether or

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7. As a strategy for emergent organizing, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm, Take One* became the bookends for the particular series of “episodes” this particular libretto or digital architecture or textual encounter concerns.

not you understand it. The important thing is that we surface from this production experience with something that is entirely exciting and creative as a result of our collective efforts.”<sup>8</sup>

**Fred Rogers:** “What’s important is you can pretend about things and dream about things that you don’t completely understand.”<sup>9</sup>

**Cameron Awkward-Rich:** Trying to “interrogate the assumption that this kind of elegiac memorialization—keeping the dead alive, with us—is actually an ethical thing to be doing, if what that means is keeping them alive in a world that did little to support their living.”

And not knowing and not-knowing meaning needing to. And desiring to know how to.

### A plea, an apology, a eulogy, a rejection.<sup>10</sup>

**Make a selection, then extract a reasonably irreducible part of the selection.**

*This is a \_\_\_\_\_ for people who want to \_\_\_\_\_ about how performed and prospective doings \_\_\_\_\_ our senses of/for \_\_\_\_\_, that is: \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_*

8. Greaves, playing the part of himself/Director addressing the cast and crew (playing the parts of themselves) during the filming of what would amount to *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm, Take One*.

9. This statement delivered directly to the camera during an episode about opera-making in the Land of Make-Believe, appears in Rogers’ handwritten notes in his archives as “You can pretend @ things you don’t completely understand and dream about.” This document can be found at the Fred Rogers Center at Saint Vincent College in Rogers’s hometown of Latrobe, PA.

10. This guideline was given by Abril Barajas and Michael Quintanilla, co-facilitators of an experimental engagement with the tactics of both Lygia Clark and Linda Mary Montano for the Investigative Operatics Working Group, January 10, 2021. Very memorably, each set of ameliorative directions were then enacted or recited by a different group, (intensely) demonstratively.

on purpose, and how that predicate in turn becomes \_\_\_\_\_. So, in practical, \_\_\_\_\_ terms, we're talking about: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, barn raisings, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, etc. For the sake of discussion, we'll call these "convocational technologies" to help us better determine how manners and language pattern our habits of participancy.

Each week, volunteer members of the working group (such as yourself) will co-facilitate explorations of work by practitioners<sup>11</sup> whose projects pose contemplative contours for investigative operatics. Volunteer facilitators are welcome to invent and deviate however they choose so long as the \_\_\_\_\_ are intentionally left open for additions to the repertoire.

There might be

- a. problem solving;
- b. maybe dramatic reenacting;
- c. riffing;
- d. maybe explicating every question ↔;
- e. every implication or ramification related;
- f. maybe translating;
- g. transposing;
- h. or transitioning a premise from one context to another;
- i. maybe dissolving future pasts;

### **A Para-cultural Communicant, a Litany<sup>12</sup>**

⊕ Entering increased dimensions, endless hallways, limitless expectancy.  
*The echo down the corridor manifests as distinct from the echo chamber.*

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11. Practitioners whose oeuvres and preoccupations were conscientiously contemplated and possibly reappropriated as informing a provisional understanding of investigative operatics during the course of the Investigative Operatics Working Group meetings included: William Greaves, Fred Rogers, Augusto Boal, Maryanne Amacher, José Maceda, Lygia Clark, Linda Mary Montano, Dylan Robinson, Juan Downey, Ursula K. LeGuin, Anna and Lawrence Halprin, CAConrad, Yukio Waguri and Tatsumi Hijikata, and Ralph Lemon (in that order).

12. This is a riff on a phrase Juan Downey uses to describe his "utopian reformulation of the road trip," which was jotted down during a discussion of Downey's "Fake Anthropology" co-facilitated by Alexis Bhagat and Stephanie Loveless for the Investigative Operatics Working Group, January 17, 2021.

When these meetings have ceased, we'll have asked ourselves and each other: how did I get here?<sup>13</sup>

*The awkwardness of a process corresponds to the frostiness of the route less travelled.*

Meaning: did this path correspond with a tract or does it trace a meandering course of vexation?

*From trace to tract.*

Arriving just in time to deal with the problems of processing a bulk of information.

*And just in time to valorize the counter-processes of nonknowledge.*

⇒ Just because you can observe a distance as awful long doesn't mean it's in your mind.

*Foreshortened, as of space in the role of the bully of time.*

What happens to displacement, what looks so much like coincidence (transience?).

*Probably the way affinity is like weather, how your body can tell what's happening by the measures of change.*

Instinctively, your and my "I"s all arriving, not feeling nauseous, not listening hungrily ♦♦♦, but needing an ethics.

*What could be more exhausting. What could be more emotional.*

This history of holding extended, sometimes contentious, discussion intersects with the history of considering fairness in financial transactions.

*Can you say more about that?*

When it is alright to walk away, to extricate oneself from the situation, to consider one's effort no longer applicable to the matter at hand, to become free to pursue significance elsewhere; to find closure.

*When operatics is taken as the subject of investigation, I found there to be no closure, but the eternal momentum of investigation: investigation's pure energy.*

How a person becomes governable and how a situation becomes governable are both matters of propriety, of conceiving of an interrelated—if not intractable—bundle of rights.

*We all know how a room smells when no one knows who holds the power.*

Another way of describing rights is as predictions.

*A swarm of normies is the oracle of their own entitlement.*

Not only do I have rights to this now, but in the future also—maybe because I bought

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13. This question, posed to participants during Bhagat's and Loveless's workshop, echoes familiarly in a dream, a song, a long stare into the void.

it, because it was bestowed to me, or because I've always considered this intrinsically mine.

*Colonialism as a means to scribble your own prices on the commodities' tags.*

A financial transaction need conclude so that a performance of ownership might commence ↻↻↻↻.

*Nothing falls into my possession; I can't act in belief as though I own anything; I can't close the deal on this feeling.*

If there were no agreed upon amount that one is owed or indebted, then there is property.

*Do you want to buy psilocybin therapy stocks with me, on the speculative market?*

The particular price's symbolic value is always meant to be commensurate with the amount of pain, discomfort, or disappointment involved in concluding matters.

*What's the symbolic value of investigative operatics if there was no pain, multiple flights of glee, a bit of boredom, little sea-flares of curiosity—how to symbolize this bundle?*

Expectation to constantly own, to maintain ownership and ward off expropriation—what could be more exhausting. What could be more emotional.

*Not feeling nauseous, not listening hungrily, needing an ethics. Ⓢ*

## Coda.

**After rehashing for weeks what mimeses, commentaries, heuristics or puzzle games, what communal responses to or participation in senses of the coming-something were maybe activated or represented, in collapsing valences, relaxing overlaps, we (the self-appointed Chorus) are still wondering, as if on repeat:**

How the figure/counter-figure's untitled individual historicity is acting out again, rearranging itself, replacing its recordings with its incarnations, its identifications with its openings. These dear conveners & their ['where,'] with all its official documents covered over, that could draw itself around the name

of non-recognition // contingency of knowledge. They are suspicious of becoming situated too easily. They host combinatory events and invite plural modes of participation. Amateurs

in spacesuits *evince* a sideways entrance[:]  
 unlimited doors linking ‘convocational  
 technologies’—potlucks, parades, tours,  
 workshops, protests, barn raisings, communal camping, research labs, ceremonies,  
 dances—

there at the precipice of *evolve*[,] but no piggy toes curl by evocation alone.  
 The finger(toe) score  
 brings the body into it, carries language out and  
 over the edge. Only a pinky  
 each to steer the ship of fools to markets, homes, meats, nothingness,  
 barn doors, crying for weeks on end,  
 to swiftly drift past vaster reaches.

It springs to mind, this whichever-togetherness,  
 its spoonfuls of stories, of standards, of didacticism offset by  
 dramamine high gone threshingmachinelike; the pursuit of an elocution  
 all the more masterful for sputtering out too soon, or too  
 slow, too sly to appoint one or another to rescue  
 the entire lyrical community approaches.

⊕ ***Congregation for Little Miss Muffet who twirls kidsticks, sups on truffle soup.***  
 (Stomp feet, spit, act like a spider, whisper “truffle soup” in each other’s ears  
 slowly , write as a recipe.)

**Convocation for the choirs who traverse the fission territories feet on coal.**  
 (Spread toes, spread fingers, scratch each other’s backs, tickle each other’s  
 feet, write up a contract ↻.)

**Constituent pluripotent energies: sulfur tongues & a geometry of comfort.**  
 (Blow a kiss to someone in the room, curse someone in the room, build a  
 platform for that.)

**Constellation of crushes and distrust, that old sluicing crossroads.**  
 ⇒ (Make eye contact with someone, break it, repeat, design an interchange.)

**Opera ultimately open-throated i.e. a Yes across the silliness.**  
 (Sound out “yes” repeatedly, differently each time, come up with different  
 words for yes, sound them out simultaneously/overlapping in no order.)

**Investigation as though the magnifying glass were made of lava, half-runners  
 down the “tear here” line of Pandora’s Box.**  
 (Improvise a dialogue void of meaning, transcribe it, perform again using

the transcription but swap lines.)

**I rest my case, i.e. now I awake.**

(Applause.) ⚡

(June 2021)

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## Author Bios

**Bethany Ides** teaches Humanities & Media Studies at Pratt Institute where she is Adjunct Professor with Certificate of Continuous Employment. A writer, researcher and community organizer, she pursues all forms of speculative folklife: evented being-togetherness that intrepidly eludes commodification, monetization and standardization. Her recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Radical Teacher Journal*, *Shifter*, *Ear|Wave|Event*, the *Candidate Journal: Psychoanalytic Currents*, and in the book *Tongue & Cheek* (Montez Press).

**Fan Wu** is a poet, performer, pedagogue, and puppet of crushes. He's currently working on a project that entwines Zhuangzi and Bataille in the territories of the Formless, the Useless, and the Unknowable. You can read his work online at *C Magazine*, *Capilano Review*, and *In the Mood Magazine*.

**Ora Ferdman** is owner/operator of Fora Construction, a trans-centric design & build firm based in the Rondout Valley region of New York. She is also an artist whose work has been supported by residencies and fellowships from Habitable Spaces (TX), Art Camp (ME), SenseLab (QC) and the Good Works Institute (NY).

**Zoe Tuck** was born in Texas, became a person in California, and now lives in Massachusetts. She is the author of *Bedroom Vowel* (Bunny Presse), *Terror Matrix* (Timeless, Infinite Light) and the chapbooks *Vape Cloud of Unknowing* (Belladonna\*) and *The Book of Bella* (DoubleCross Press). In addition to teaching private creative writing and literature classes, Zoe is the co-host of *The But Also* reading series, the co-editor of *Hot Pink Magazine*, and is an active member of the Belladonna\* Collaborative.