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Attunement as an embodied methodology for conservation practices

Abstract

This article proposes attunement as an embodied methodology for conservation practices, grounded in relationality, intra-dependence and affective responsiveness. Borrowing from agential realism and posthumanist, queer, feminist, Indigenous, Black and anti-colonial scholarship, it critiques dominant conservation frameworks rooted in settler colonial and capitalist logics that prioritise extraction, certainty and control. In contrast, it explores how caring for artworks-as-cultural-heritage—and as emergent, indeterminate parts of the world—requires attentiveness and responsiveness to the ethical, political and affective dimensions of artworks and their extended material-discursive ecologies. Attunement is positioned as a practice of listening-with and allowing oneself to be stilled, reconfigured and mobilised toward more reciprocal and coalitional ways of knowing and doing. Recognising that the knowledge we produce is not neutral but intra-actively constituted through our methods, this article foregrounds attunement as a methodological counter to the epistemic violence enacted by extractivist, habituated and universalising conservation practices. It invites conservators to reckon with the inheritances and violences of colonialism and capitalism in their work—including around how knowledge is generated and recorded—and to imagine conservation as part of a broader practice of solidarity work, relational care and world-making.

Keywords

contemporary art conservation; agential realism; deep listening; attunement; conservation ethics; anti-colonial methodology

Introduction

In a window of the Whitney Museum of American Art—facing onto the so-called Hudson River and the other unceded and traditional lands of the Lenape—three red neon signs are glowing (Fig. 1). They are the work of Diné artist Demian DinéYazhi' and they read:

'we must stop imagining destruction + extraction + deforestation + cages +
torture + displacement + surveillance + genocide!
we must stop predicting apocalypses + fascist governments + capitalist hier-
archies!
we must pursue + predict + imagine routes toward liberation!'

Thirteen letters in the neon signs are flickering, spelling: f r e e p a l e s t i n e. In their flickering, they point to the lives of those thousands of miles away in Gaza and the other occupied territories of Palestine that continue to flicker out through an ongoing genocide, enacted, like so many others, through technologies and policies produced by Western colonial powers.

If and when this work is acquired by a museum, the conservators charged with ensuring that its integrity and authenticity are safeguarded for the future will be driven first and foremost to find resolution to technical, material and conceptual questions. To guide their interventions, they will seek answers to questions like: how is the flicker generated, and what

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Fig. 1 Demian DinéYazhi', *we must stop imagining apocalypse/genocide + we must imagine liberation* (2024), installed at the 2024 Whitney Biennial. Photo: Jonny Lott.

'properties' or 'behaviours' are essential to maintain? Should the glass tubes break, the neon gasses leak out, what degree of material (re)fabrication is acceptable? How should the signs be positioned in an exhibition space—should they always be placed in a window?

Implicit in this common line of questioning—most often directed at the artist in interviews—is an ontological assumption that the boundaries of this work lie in the material boundaries of the signs themselves. According to this assumption, the work is understood to be manifested or actualised in physical objects which may or may not allow for material re-substitution depending in large part on what the artist says. Keen questioning may go as far as to consider the work as a performance, manifested by complying with certain parameters or specifications—more than an electric sculpture but an event or series of events that unfold to audiences over time, constituted by a web of human and non-human actors that contribute to its ongoing materialisation(s).

In an interview with CNN, DinéYazhi' explained how the work's hidden message is a call:

'for a permanent ceasefire and an end to occupation, genocide, forced migrations of Palestinian peoples and the right of self-determination for Palestinian peoples ... It asks us to consider what healing and building future societies could look like if we were all liberated from disharmonic and divisive political systems, police states, and nation states.'¹

They added in an interview with the *New York Times* that, 'The piece in its final form and as it currently exists today is a response to being situated within settler colonial institutions [residing on stolen and occupied Indigenous lands]'.²

Given the privilege we afford to the artist's voice in our determinations of what constitutes an artwork's integrity—and by extension what its conservation might entail—does a care for this work really end at its materialisation within the gallery setting? To be faithful or 'true to the work' (*Werktreue*) in our engagements with it, does it not require us to heed

¹ Jacqui Palumbo, 'A Whitney Biennial Artist's Hidden Message, "Free Palestine", Asks Viewers to Take a Long Look', *CNN Style*, 20 March 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/20/style/demian-dineyazhi-whitney-biennial-free-palestine-art/index.html> (accessed 25 July 2025).

² Zachary Small, 'Whitney Biennial Artists Send Message to Gaza', *New York Times*, 14 March 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/14/arts/design/>

its calls to ‘imagine routes towards liberation’, to reject colonialism in all its forms, and to help enact what it could not be more explicit in asking us to do? Is it not *antithetical* to the work—indeed, corrosive to what we might call its integrity, and counter to its care—to perpetuate, engage in or remain complicit with practices that go against these explicit calls?

In this article I aim to unsettle the presumed universal applicability of empirical methods we borrow from the ‘dominant sciences’,³ and challenge the idea that the scope of what we attend to in relation to our work as conservators in providing ‘care’ to artworks has a predetermined finitude or limit. I question the premise—or ethical cop out—that conservation and other museological practices are simply happening *alongside* of or *in the wake* of the entangled polycrises of our time: the climate crisis, unabated resource extraction, war and global conflict, ongoing settler colonial genocides, and other systemic and structural inequalities rooted in the logics and legacies of imperialism, colonialism and (techno)capitalism. To suggest that museum practices of acquisition and conservation unfold in isolation from these forces—that is, to ‘cut’⁴ these practices away from a care for the world of which we are entangled parts—is not a neutral position. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes in her discussion of colonial formulations of space, Western thought ‘generates ways of making sense of the world as a “realm of stasis”, well-defined, fixed, and without politics’.⁵ This is to say, Western, colonial logics reinforce the illusion that practices like conservation can remain apolitical—sealed off from the relations, histories and systems of power in which they are entangled. But just as doing nothing is also doing something,⁶ to limit our practices of care to that which fits between the physical and conceptual walls of the museum is an *enactment*, one that we contribute towards and are partially responsible for if it is one we help perpetuate.

What forms might conservation practices take if, rather than presuming the world to be made up of separately existing, occasionally interacting entities with determinate properties and knowable boundaries, we began instead from a place of inherent indeterminacy, entanglement and intra-dependence?⁷ And what might it look like to ‘care’ outside of—or in resistance to—practices rooted in settler colonial logics, characterised by an anxious and insatiable impulse to capture, extract and possess material resources and knowledge?

In this article I propose *attunement* as a methodology of conservation that resists colonial-capitalist logics—grounded in entanglement, relationality and ethical responsiveness. I use the term to describe a mode of embodied attention through which one listens and adjusts to the ontological, ethical and political frequencies of a work and its extended ecologies—particularly where these are marked by histories of violence, resistance or ongoing struggle. Attunement entails a willingness to be reshaped by the appeals, principles, logics and ethics woven through a work and the larger field of relations that gave rise to it and continue to sustain its meaning. I consider how my thinking with queer, feminist, posthumanist, anti-colonial and Indigenous theoretical terrains and scholarship—alongside several artworks I have encountered through my practice—has reconfigured my understanding of the remit of conservation and my approach to its doings. I aim to expand what conservators attend to in our ‘being true to the work’ in our engagements, our understandings of a work’s integrity and ontology, and the effective and affective limits of our practices.

As a white, able-bodied, queer, cismale conservator—born in the United States and working within national institutions in the United Kingdom and Ireland—I approach this inquiry from a position shaped by the privileges and inheritances of settler colonial systems. This work is, in part, a reckoning with those inheritances. My intention in engaging with Indigenous and

[whitney-biennial-art-palestinians-message-gaza.html](#) (accessed 25 July 2025). They indicated on their Instagram account (@heterogeneoushomosexual) that this last part of their quote was deliberately edited out by the *New York Times*.

3 Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–99.

4 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

5 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3rd edn (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 60.

6 Jonathan Ashley-Smith, ‘The Ethics of Doing Nothing’, *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 41, no. 1 (2018): 6–15.

7 In this article, and elsewhere, I employ Barad’s agential realist formulation of *intra-dependence* (rather than interdependence) to affirm that the world is not composed of discrete parts in relation, but is a whole in an ongoing, iterative, enfolding becoming.

8 Eva Jewell, 'Towards an Anti-Colonial Feminist Care Ethic', in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminisms*, ed. Gina Starblanket, 3rd edn (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2022), 186 (full chapter 168–92). For those engaging with feminist care ethics, I recommend reading Jewell's essay in full, along with the other contributions in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminisms*, and its earlier editions.

9 Jack McConchie, "'Nothing Comes Without its World": Learning to Love the Unknown in the Conservation of Ima-Abasi Okon's Artworks', *Tate Papers* 35 (2022), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/35/learning-to-love-the-unknown-conservation-ima-abasi-okon-artworks> (accessed 25 July 2025).

10 Jewell, 'Towards an Anti-Colonial Feminist Care Ethic', 186.

11 Jewell, 'Towards an Anti-Colonial Feminist Care Ethic', 186. See also Gina Starblanket, 'Being Indigenous Feminists: Resurgences Against Contemporary Patriarchy', in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminisms*, ed. Joyce Green, 2nd edn (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2017), 21–41.

anti-colonial thought is to expose the limits, failures and harms of Eurocentric ontologies and colonial-capitalist logics that undergird dominant theories and practices of contemporary art conservation or 'care' in (settler colonial) museum settings—logics that too often operate as default modes within the field yet remain largely unquestioned in much of the existing conservation discourse. This engagement is part of a broader commitment to working in solidarity with efforts to dismantle these logics across multiple, intersecting sites of struggle. As Eva Jewell notes in her essay 'Toward an Anti-Colonial Feminist Care', 'for settlers, reconciliation is a reckoning with and commitment to changing behaviours, practices, beliefs, and structures that normalize settler colonial violence and white supremacy'.⁸ I take up what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) terms *epistemic violence*, especially as it manifests in the framing of certain methods—rooted in settler colonial logics—as 'best practice', assumed to be universally applicable in our care of contemporary art-as-cultural-heritage. I take particular aim at empirical methods that seek to 'uncover' certainty and truth by extracting knowledge from a work's creators and formalising it into formats that align with the epistemological expectations of (settler colonial) museums and collecting institutions. This critique extends to dominant museological frameworks which, through their application in practice, can impose narrow limits on both the object of conservation and the forms that its care might take.

In contrast, I propose a methodology of *attunement* as—at its simplest—a mode shift: a way of be(com)ing attentive to, affectively worked and mobilised by the principles, logics and lessons of artworks and their relational ecologies, including those that might be incommensurable with dominant museological and conservation paradigms. This article is, in part, an effort to imagine conservation away from a practice preoccupied with resolution, and toward one that affirms incommensurability and indeterminacy as central to practices of care—what Jack McConchie describes as 'dwell[ing] in uncertainty and the unknown'.⁹ Such an orientation carries significant ethical and anti-colonial implications insofar as it challenges the compulsion to contain or reconcile difference within dominant epistemic frameworks and instead affirms the value of incommensurability—a commitment to holding space for ways of (un)knowing that exceed or unsettle colonial logics. As Jewell writes, 'concepts of care in any one of our Indigenous worlds is a broad practice, a way of life, a profound attunement to the relational matter of kin with transformative possibility'.¹⁰ Following Gina Starblanket, Jewell warns that we must, however, affirm these modalities 'without unwittingly reifying the very structures of oppression we are attempting to dismantle'.¹¹

Because our ways of knowing are inseparable from our ways of being and doing, attunement necessarily implicates ethics. And because dominant conservation practices are structured by colonial and capitalist logics, attunement necessarily requires us to listen otherwise and remain responsive to the principles, lessons, logics of the objects of our care, as well as their entangled sociohistorical ecologies that dominant frameworks ignore or render unintelligible. Attunement as a methodology of care is therefore not simply about retooling practice at the surface—it requires we interrogate and reimagine the very foundations on which dominant conservation practices are built. It involves tracing how colonial-capitalist assumptions shape what we do and how we engage with the world, taking seriously the violences they perpetuate, and cultivating more reciprocal and coalitional ways of being, knowing and doing from the ground up.

This article unfolds in four parts. First, I discuss how thinking with Karen Barad's 'agential realism' has reshaped my understanding of conservation at the level of artwork identity, and how such thinking foregrounds the field's

entanglements with ongoing imperial and colonial formations. The second part develops attunement as an embodied methodology for conservation, drawing on a range of thinkers who have engaged the concept. In the third, I examine Dylan Robinson's critique of settler colonial 'hungry listening',¹² arguing that dominant conservation approaches often reproduce extractive logics, and I explore how attunement might offer a more ethical and responsive mode of care. The final section turns to Sandra Johnston's performance practice—shaped by the traumas of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and her own lived experience—to explore how attunement to modes of stillness, suspension and embodied encounter might reorient conservation away from habituated doing and toward more ethically engaged ways of working. Here, ethics is not confined to professional conduct or procedural duty, but expanded into a mode of being and acting otherwise—one that attunes us to the wider structures we inhabit and navigate, and mobilises us to action.

Knowing from within

Practical approaches to conservation of contemporary art over the last three decades have focussed largely on the use of qualitative, empirical methods borrowed from the social sciences. These methods—such as the use of the artist interview—are frequently deployed as a means to tackle the 'challenge' of contemporary artworks, which are not always identifiable with a finite, discrete physical object, and whose integrity or wholeness is not maintained simply through material fixity. In the case of artworks employing time-based media, installation, digital photography, bodily performance and other social practices, qualitative methods were recognised for their utility in extracting information about what might constitute a work of art's 'identity', understood as a way to help guarantee that a work of art might retain its 'integrity' or 'authenticity' despite material or contextual variation. Textual, graphical and audiovisual documentation created by conservators unsurprisingly took on new relevance as a means to record information to inform future decision-making.¹³

Implicit in many applications of these frameworks in museum settings is the idea that a work of art can be totally known—that is, made totally determinate—through rigorous empirical inquiry. It is as though that is accomplished by asking the 'right' questions in the 'correct' way, and that the answers received can then be adequately 'captured' through textual documentation created by conservators for the purposes of preservation. Often positioned as being the best way to care for a work of art, these frameworks and approaches were developed over the last three decades by and for conservators largely working in well-resourced collecting institutions in the Global North, and conceived primarily around artworks circulating within the art market. In practice, they are often reductively applied as a consequence of limited budgets, overworked and under-resourced staff, in professional contexts where efficiency is regarded as a virtue and complexity, slowness and uncertainty are framed in negative terms.¹⁴ In this way, the best practices currently in operation within most museums of contemporary art are largely those devised by and for a colonial and capitalist model of collecting, undergirded by Eurocentric knowledge systems, logics and assumptions. As a consequence of this musealising apparatus, knowledge that remains with a work's creator(s), knowledge that by necessity remains tacit or embodied, or knowledge that resists methods of textualisation is very often either disregarded or regarded as a risk to be mitigated from the perspective of collecting institutions.¹⁵ Within many dominant conservation frameworks originating in the Global North, knowledge is often treated and understood in Cartesian and colonialist terms as something discrete and extractable, and awaiting discovery

¹² Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

¹³ For overviews of this development, see Brian Castriota, 'The Enfolding Object of Conservation: Artwork Identity, Authenticity, and Documentation', in *Conservation of Contemporary Art: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice*, ed. Renée van de Vall and Vivian van Saaze (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2023), 59–86; and Brian Castriota, 'Variants of Concern: Authenticity, Conservation, and the Type-Token Distinction', *Studies in Conservation* 67, no. 1–2 (2021): 72–83.

¹⁴ For discussions that affirm slowness in conservation practice see Sarah Staniforth, 'Slow Conservation', *Studies in Conservation* 55, no. 2 (2010): 74–80; and Libby Ireland, 'Learning through the Acquisition and Display of Works by Ima-Abasi Okon: Enacting Radical Hospitality through Deliberate Slowness', *Tate Papers* 35 (2022), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/35/learning-through-acquisition-display-works-by-ima-abasi-okon-enacting-radical-hospitality-through-deliberate-slowness> (accessed 25 July 2025).

15 There has been burgeoning discussion of the value of embodied knowledge in conservation practices, but this remains largely peripheral and centred around the conservation of performance art. Important contributions include: Ijsbrand Hummelen and Tatja Scholte, 'Sharing Knowledge for the Conservation of Contemporary Art: Changing Roles in a Museum Without Walls?', *Studies in Conservation* 49, suppl. 2 (2004): 208–12; Robert Lazarus Lane and Jessye Wdowin-McGregor, 'This is so Contemporary? Mediums of Exchange and Conservation', *Studies in Conservation* 61, suppl. 2 (2016): 104–8; Héliã Marçal, 'Conservation in an Era of Participation', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 40, no. 2 (2017): 97–104; and Athena Christa Holbrook, 'Second-Generation Huddle: A Communal Approach to Collecting and Conserving Simone Forti's Dance Constructions at The Museum of Modern Art', *Beiträge Zur Erhaltung von Kunst- und Kulturgut* 1 (2018): 118–23.

by knowing subjects.¹⁶ The pervasive, capitalist expectation that workers find ways to do more with less in their support of revenue-generating exhibition and loans programmes and ongoing collecting, means that these best practices are also often unachievable from a capacity standpoint for even these relatively well-resourced institutions.

In my experience deploying dominant, Western contemporary art conservation methods and frameworks, I have found this way of thinking about knowledge productively unsettled by artworks where no amount of rigorous empirical inquiry on my part came closer to revealing the essential properties of the work, that is, achieving determinacy and resolution.¹⁷ I have been struck again and again by artworks that seemed to contradict themselves, where a 'rule' that was locked down at one point in time was, in the next manifestation of the work, disregarded by the artist, where asking a question slightly differently yielded a completely different answer. This wasn't the case of an artist being wilfully evasive, or changing their mind, but rather a symptom of the methods I was employing, predicated on the expectation that deep down there might be a ground of 'reassuring certainty'¹⁸ that could be excavated. What I have come to understand is that I was not failing in my attempt to reveal something fundamental about the artworks I was investigating. Rather, what I was generating were what Karen Barad describes as '*phenomena*',¹⁹ that is, the results of intra-actions between multiple intra-acting agencies.

According to Barad's theory of agential realism—a queer, feminist and posthumanist elaboration of Niels Bohr's work on the nature of measurement—the boundaries and properties of various parts of the world are continually enacted and emergent, 'cut together-apart' through the world's ongoing iterative, intra-active, reconfigurings.²⁰ Whereas a humanist, Cartesian metaphysics of individualism considers the world to be made up of separately interacting 'things' with determinate properties, quantum physics has demonstrated how measurement provides only a momentary and local resolution of indeterminacies—such as the position or momentum of a particle—where the apparatus of measurement is an entangled part of the phenomena that is measured—as exemplified by wave-particle duality and the double slit experiment. Through the act of measurement, agential 'cuts' enact separations and boundaries, including between the 'measured object' and the 'agencies of measurement', separated but entangled and co-constitutive of one another.²¹ In the context of conservation research and inquiry, every act of measurement, inquiry or engagement with and around a work of art entails a cut, such that what is known through our investigations is not the object of conservation *per se*, but rather the phenomena produced through our cut-enacting intra-actions. In this process of inquiry, what we 'know'—and further represent in our documentation and reports—is not the object of conservation but rather our partial sense of the results of particular phenomena-generating intra-actions that we contribute towards.²²

Because we are part of the apparatus of measurement, it is a fallacy—perpetuated by the dominant sciences—that we have access to what Donna Haraway calls 'the view from above'.²³ Linda Tuhiwai Smith similarly identifies the valorisation of epistemic distance in research methodologies—and its conflation with objectivity—as a distinctly colonial legacy informed by Cartesian traditions that position the knower as (benevolently) detached and disembodied,²⁴ one whose enduring influence continues to structure many inherited conservation practices. Conservation reports, for example, are often filled with authoritative, subject-less descriptions of artworks and their 'identity', and passive voice accounts of actions that have been done to them. But as entangled parts of the phenomena produced through our engagements with and around works of art, our knowledge

of an artwork is always from within, not from above or at a distance, and therefore our knowledge is always partial and always incomplete. This is not to say that it is impossible to know anything, but rather, that our *knowing is from within phenomena*. In other words, the knowledge we co-constitute and the determinacy we locally resolve is situated in our embodied experiences and practices—including those we have learned, absorbed and re-enact, often unconsciously—and is diffracted by and therefore inextricable from our methods and positionalities.²⁵ Crucially, this includes not only inherited methods of inquiry—such as posing verbal questions to artists in interviews with the expectation of resolution²⁶—but also inherited practices of documentation and representation—like written reports, photographs or schematic diagrams—that shape how and what knowledge is captured and validated. These practices carry with them the epistemic assumptions of the largely Western institutional and disciplinary contexts in which they arose. In this way, the knowledge we help generate and transmit is not neutral, but a direct trace of our own embodied positionalities and the methods we use in our inquiry and representation.

Is there not a danger, then, in applying the logics and methods of dominant knowledge systems without any critical consideration of our individual positionalities, or the ways in which prevailing methods are not universal but in fact culturally situated and specific, that is, rooted in Eurocentric and colonial epistemologies and world views? In the same way we calibrate other scientific instruments used in technical examination and analysis, don't our methods of inquiry also require calibration—attuned to the principles, politics and cultural territories we enter into, and upon which we may be intruders or, at best, guests?²⁷ What might conservation become were we to reject the colonial impulse that treats knowledge as a resource to be extracted and amassed—along with the violences this default mode of thinking and being enables—and instead elevate other ways of 'coming to know' that refuse, or simply exist outside of, logics of totalising determinacy, intelligibility and capture framed as 'best practice' or care?

'Coming to know'

While the findings of quantum physics—and their uptake in agential realism, posthumanist and new materialist thought—have transformed dominant understandings of method, knowledge and being, many of these insights simply reaffirm what has long been known in other cultures and knowledge systems. Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete highlights how Western philosophical developments, chaos theory, and

'their connections to quantum physics have brought Western science closer to understanding nature as Native peoples have always understood it—that is, not simply as a collection of objects, but rather as a dynamic, ever-flowing river of creation inseparable from our own perceptions, the creative center from which we and everything else have come to which we always return.'²⁸

Cajete describes Native science in contrast to dominant, Western science as:

'a wide range of tribal processes of perceiving, thinking, acting, and "coming to know" that have evolved through human experience with the natural world ... Native science is based on the perception gained from using the entire body of our senses in direct participation with the natural world.'²⁹

Much of the writing within posthumanist, new materialist and feminist care discourses draws on concepts resonant with Indigenous thought yet it often fails to cite or engage with the Indigenous intellectual traditions from which these ideas emerge.³⁰ A key example is the concept of *coming to know*, articulated by Indigenous scholars to describe processes

¹⁶ For an in-depth examination of how colonial legacies shape museum documentation practices outside of the context of contemporary art conservation, see Hannah Turner, *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

¹⁷ This section, in part, condenses arguments rehearsed previously; see Castriota, 'The Enfolding Object' for further discussion.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, [1967] 2001), 351–70, see 352.

¹⁹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

²⁰ Karen Barad, 'On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am (v1.1)', in *Power of Material/Politics of Materiality*, ed. Susanne Witzgall and Kerstin Stakemeier (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2014), 143–64.

²¹ For further elaboration see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; in the context of conservation, see Hélia Marçal, 'Towards a Relational Ontology of Conservation', in *Transcending Boundaries: Integrated Approaches to Conservation. ICOM-CC 19th Triennial Conference Preprints*, Beijing, 17–21 May 2021, ed. Janet Bridgland (Paris: International Council of Museums, 2021), 1–9; Brian Castriota and Hélia Marçal, 'Always Already Fragment: Integrity, Deferral, and Possibility in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage', in *Das Fragment im digitalen Zeitalter: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen neuer Techniken in der Restaurierung*, ed. Ursula Schädler-Saub and Angela Weyer (Berlin: Hendrik Bäßler Verlag, 2021), 63–78; and Castriota, 'The Enfolding Object'.

²² For a more detailed discussion of the ways agential realist thinking reconfigures conservation research and documentation practices, see Castriota, 'The Enfolding Object'.

²³ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 581.

²⁴ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 63.

²⁵ For a discussion of the situated nature of knowledge in the context of contemporary art conservation practices, see Hélia Marçal, 'Situated Knowledges and Materiality in the Conservation of Performance Art', *Art-Matters: International Journal for Tech-*

nical Art History, Special Issue 1 (2021): 55–62, <https://www.amjournal.org/special-issue-1>.

26 In her discussion of inherited practices, Libby Ireland characterises the use of artist interviews in contemporary art conservation practice as ‘a mostly one-way and extractive exchange, where open questions are favoured to ensure the neutral voice of the conservator in the creation of knowledge’. See Ireland, ‘Learning through the Acquisition and Display of Works by Ima-Abasi Okon’.

27 While Ireland frames Tate’s work with Ima-Abasi Okon as an act of ‘radical hospitality’, positioning the institution as host, I suggest—following Dylan Robinson—that it may, in some contexts, be more generative and ethical to imagine the institution as guest.

28 Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 2000), 15–6.

29 Cajete, *Native Science*, 2.

30 For an exploration of the resonances between agential realism and Indigenous philosophies—as well as the structural reasons why these overlaps are often unacknowledged—see Jerry L. Rosiek, Johnna Snyder, and Scott L. Pratt, ‘The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement’, *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 3–4 (2019): 331–46. For a critique of how key Indigenous texts on relationality and reciprocity have been excluded from new materialist and posthumanist discourses, see Virginie Magnat, ‘Towards a Performative Ethics of Reciprocity’, in *Qualitative Inquiry in Transition—Pasts, Presents, & Futures*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Gaile S. Cannella (London: Routledge, 2024), 179–93. For a parallel critique within feminist care ethics, which similarly tends to overlook Indigenous contributions, see Jewell, ‘Towards an Anti-Colonial Feminist Care Ethic’.

31 Gloria Snively and Lorna Wanosts’a7 Williams, ‘“Coming to Know”: A Framework for Indigenous Science Education’, in *Knowing Home: Braiding Indigenous Science with Western Science*, ed. Gloria Snively and Lorna Wanosts’a7 Williams (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 2016), 35–51, see 35.

32 Gregory Cajete, ‘Philosophy of Native Science’, in *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*, ed.

of understanding within Indigenous Science. Too often, this concept has been appropriated and abstracted, detached from the epistemological and cultural contexts from which it arises. Lorna Wanosts’a7 Williams and Gloria Snively describe ‘coming to know’ as a relational, ceremonial and land-based process—not a metaphor for cognition but a lived epistemology rooted in reciprocity and respect. As they explain, ‘The journey to understand the reality of existence and harmony with nature is obtained by calming the mind, turning inward, and achieving an inter-play of human and more-than-human consciousness’.³¹

In his description of Instrumentation as one of several methodological elements of Native science, Cajete similarly explains:

‘Native science relies on the preparation of the mind, body, and spirit, of each person as the primary vehicle of “coming to know”, the best translation for education in Native traditions. A coming-to-know, a coming-to-understand, metaphorically entails a journey, a process, a quest for knowledge and understanding ... The mind and body can be used for careful, disciplined, and repeatable experimentation and observation. Knowledge is gathered through the body, mind, and heart in altered states of being, in songs and dance, in meditation and reflection, and in dreams and visions.’³²

We can see how this thinking of course chimes with an agential realist, anti-Cartesian account of measurement and knowing, as an embodied practice where the mind–body–heart is recognised as an integral part of the apparatus of measurement.

This embodied, multisensory understanding of knowledge creation also echoes through the writing of composer Pauline Oliveros, whose method of Deep Listening insists on listening as a transformative and relational act, and on the sensing, feeling body as central to how we perceive and come to know the world.³³ Oliveros explains:

‘Deep Listening is exploring the relationships among any and all sounds, whether natural or technological, intended or unintended, real, remembered or imaginary. Thought is included ... We open in order to listen to the world as a field of possibilities and we listen with narrow attention for specific things of vital interest to us in the world. We interpret what we hear according to the way we listen ... Deep Listening takes us below the surface of our consciousness and helps to change or dissolve limiting boundaries.’³⁴

In conservation discourse we often speak of ‘close looking’ as a slow method to understand a work of art through our individual observation, often with the aid of magnification. The ocularcentrism of this method and metaphor are unsurprising, given the primacy the field has long placed on the visual arts. But what is ‘close looking’ for a sound installation, for a participatory performance-based or social practice artwork, for an artwork that is sensed and experienced with literally any of the other human faculties? Shifting to an auditory metaphor and method like Deep Listening is generative on multiple fronts, not simply because it accounts for sonic or acoustic elements; listening is always already a more-than-auditory, *bodily* experience, because sound, as vibrations in the air, is not just heard but felt by the body. It is also *literally* transformative of its environment: a note plucked or bowed on one string of a stringed instrument, for example, can cause the adjacent string to vibrate in sympathy. Time-based media conservators are likewise familiar with resonant modal frequencies that occur when certain frequencies in an audio recording, played back in an echoey gallery, become amplified by the room itself.

‘Close looking’ implies that there is a passive object to be looked at from afar by a seeing observer. I am reminded again of Haraway’s discussion of the ‘god trick’ enacted by the dominant, ‘masculinist’

sciences, represented by the all-seeing-eye viewing from above—‘the conquering gaze from nowhere’—as opposed to from within, as an entangled part.³⁵ Deep Listening, on the other hand, accounts for the listener as an entangled part of the measurement apparatus, and the ensuing phenomena produced, intra-actively reconfigured in the process of ‘coming to know’. As Oliveros writes, ‘Deep Listening is active. What is heard is changed by listening and changes the listener’,³⁶ highlighting listening not as passive reception, but as an active, relational process that transforms both the listener and who or what is being listened to.

This also resonates, as it were, with Barad’s figuration of *response-ability*, that is, an ethical responsiveness or ‘being in touch’ with the Other, where subject and object intra-actively reconfigure each other, and the two are cut ‘together-apart’.³⁷ Barad explains:

‘Response-ability, being in touch, is about being ethically in touch with the other, as opposed to pretending to theorize from the outside (as if this is the condition for objectivity, rather than a conception of objectivity that is deeply flawed)—which is a form of violence—and realizing that observers and theorizers are an integral part of it.’³⁸

Responsiveness, methodologically speaking and in the context of conservation practices, implies a mode of being wherein we remain open to being worked by that which we work with in terms of thought and emotion, recognising the inseparability of thinking and feeling. This does not happen passively; it requires a ‘preparation of the mind, body, and spirit’ as Cajete puts it, an active tuning, or attunement, just like when we tune a musical instrument or calibrate an analytical one.

In their essay ‘Attuning to Attunements’—which expands on the work of Isabelle Stengers and Norie Neumark—Anastasia Khodyreva et al. describe their slowing down to attune to attunements as:

‘... a project of “passionate, bodily with-ness” ... of humans and non-humans that is impossible without leaving aside the certainty of possessing truths, however situation-specific they might be regarded as. To slow down is a motion towards a “space of hesitation” with its peculiar ecology of attention invested in cracks and fault lines in ones previously learned theoretical and conceptual imaginaries.’³⁹

Figured in the context of conservation practices, attunement may attend to the formal properties of a work of art, and those that we may endow with significance. But it also entails listening deeply to the ethics, politics, principles and lessons threaded through a particular work, creative practice, cultural expression and its extended sociohistorical, material-discursive ecology,⁴⁰ and not only registering them but also allowing them to resonate—that is, to work into and transform our thinking, our feeling, our doing, and our *being in and of the world*.

In 2023 I had the privilege of helping to install a video installation by Barbadian-Scottish artist Alberta Whittle, titled *Lagareh—The Last Born*, at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Fig. 2). At times a celebration of queer Black diaspora identity, survival and joy, *Lagareh* also mourns the violences perpetrated against trafficked and enslaved people via the Transatlantic slave trade, as well as ‘loved ones’ lost to ongoing acts of anti-Black police brutality. The installation includes several supporting elements in both literal and figurative senses: a blanket, as well as seating in the form of various punctuation marks—periods, commas, parentheses—all of which invite visitors to slow down, to pause, to breathe and to relish that ability. As a time-based media conservator, much of my activity supporting the display of this artwork involved optimising image quality and sound

Anne Waters (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 45–57, see 52.

³³ While Pauline Oliveros developed Deep Listening within an experimental music context, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann—a Ngan’giwumirri woman from the Daly River (Naiyu) region in the Northern Territory of Australia—also speaks of deep listening through *dadirri*, a sacred practice rooted in Ngangiwumirri culture. Though they share a name in English, these are distinct practices. I do not discuss *dadirri* further here out of respect for its specific cultural context and because, unlike the published scholarship of Indigenous thinkers discussed here, it has not been offered for critical academic engagement in the same way. For more information, see <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri>.

³⁴ Pauline Oliveros, *Quantum Listening* (London: Ignota Books, [1999] 2022), 37–8.

³⁵ Discussing visualising technologies, Haraway elaborates, ‘Vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all seems not just mythically about the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice. And like the god trick, this eye fucks the world to make techno-monsters’. See Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges’, 581.

³⁶ Oliveros, *Quantum Listening*, 30.

³⁷ Barad credits their figuring of ‘response-ability’ as an ‘ability to respond’ to the writing of Gloria Anzaldúa; see Karen Barad and Daniela GANDORFER, ‘Political Desirings: Yearnings for Mattering (,) Differently’, *Theory & Event* 24, no. 1 (2021): 14–66; and Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987). It is also a concept that has also been taken up in the work of Kelly Oliver; see Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). Hélia Marçal has extended a Baradian notion of response-ability to conservation practices; see Marçal, ‘Towards a Relational Ontology of Conservation’, as well as Hélia Marçal, ‘Vitality and the Conservation of Performance’, in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, ed. Hanna Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emelie Magnin (London: Routledge, 2023), 70–192. See also Castriota and Walsh’s discussion of response-ability in relation to touch and the institutional care of performance artworks; Brian Castriota and Claire Walsh, ‘In the Shadow of the

State: Collecting Performance at IMMA and Institutions of Care in the Irish Context', in Hölling, Pelta Feldman, and Magnin, *Performance*, 147–68. For an explanation of 'cutting together-apart', see Karen Barad, 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart', *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (July 2014): 168–87.

38 Barad and Gandorfer, 'Political Desirings', 24.

39 Anastasia A. Khodyreva et al., 'Attuning to Attunements: Towards a New Materialist Politics of Attunement?', in *Radical Sympathy*, ed. Brandon LaBelle (Berlin: Errant Bodies, 2022), 27 (full chapter 23–48). See also Isabelle Stengers, 'The Cosmopolitical Proposal', in *Making Things Public*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 994–1003; and Norie Neumark, *Voicetracks: Attuning to Voice in Media and the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

40 The term 'material-discursive' is borrowed from Barad's agential realism, which holds that material and discursive practices are not separate spheres but are co-constitutive in the production of phenomena. See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

41 Jo-Ann Archibald writes, 'Listening involves more than just using the auditory sense. We must visualize the characters and their actions. We must let our emotions surface. As the Elders say, it is important to listen with "three ears: two on the sides of our head and the one that is in our heart"'; see Jo-Ann Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 8. See also Rebecca Gordon's engagement with Archibald's work in the context of conservation practices; Rebecca Gordon, 'Indigenous Storywork as an Ethical Guide for Caring With Social Practice Artists', in *Prioritizing People in Ethical Decision Making and Caring for Cultural Heritage Collections*, ed. Nina Owczarek (London: Routledge, 2023), 24–41.

42 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 53.

43 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 53.

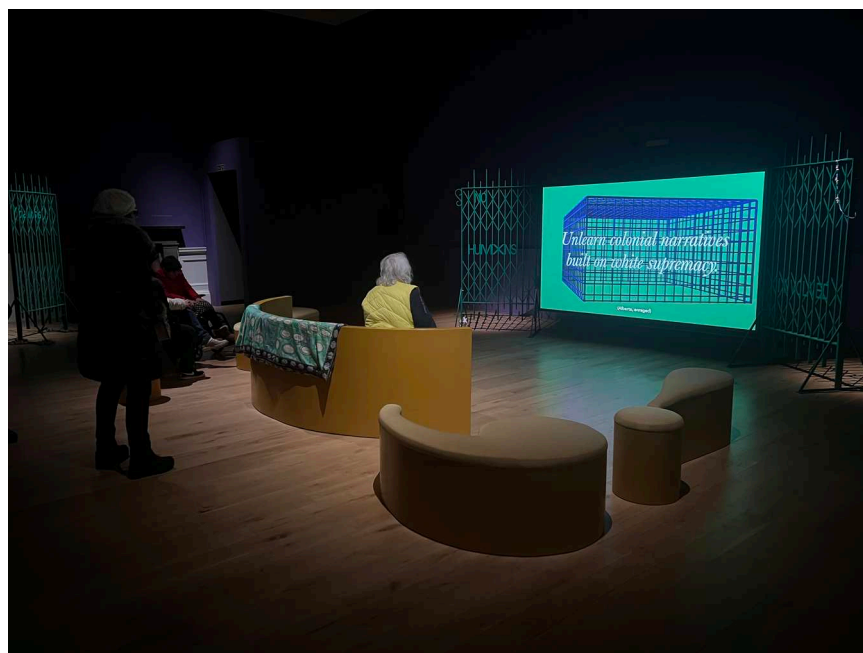


Fig. 2 Alberta Whittle, *Lagareh—The Last Born* (2022), installed in 2023 at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. Photo: Brian Castriota.

levels in the space, and this of course entailed both a 'close looking' and a 'close listening'. But given how this work centres both the importance and radical potentials of collective care, to limit my attention and care for this work to its formal properties (i.e. the normative approach) would be deeply counter to its principles and its lessons that are, arguably, equally constitutive of its identity. To instead listen not just *closely* but *deeply*, with ones 'three ears' as Jo-Ann Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem puts it,⁴¹ implies taking to heart the work's pleas to 'unlearn imperialist narratives built on white supremacy' and to 'invest in love'. To listen compassionately and responsively, to *attune* to *Lagareh*, is to pause and allow the principles and lessons threaded through this work to re-work my thinking, my feeling, and my *being* in and of the world, including how I act in and as part of it. My attuning to *Lagareh* in the context of my own positionality as a white, settler-descended conservator working at the National Galleries Scotland, in part implies directing critical attention to the ways in which practices of acquisition and collecting that I am a part of are also ongoing enactments of colonial and capitalist logics. It also demands a reckoning with the potential violences that these logics and practices have produced and continue to reproduce.

Listening deeply, as guest

In his book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Dylan Robinson characterises 'hungry listening' as the 'starving attitude of settler colonial perception' driven by a desire to consume and make sense of Indigenous sound territories according to extractivist, settler colonial logics and aesthetics.⁴²

'To be starving', he notes:

'is to be overcome with hunger in such a way that one loses the sense of relationality and reflexivity in the drive to satisfy that hunger. Hungry listening consumes without awareness of how the consumption acts in relationship with those people, the lands, the waters who provide sustenance.'⁴³

Hungry listening is a form of knowledge capture 'hungry for the felt confirmations of square pegs in square holes, for the satisfactory fit as sound knowledge slides into its appropriate place'.⁴⁴

Discussing the songs of the Gitxsan First Nation people in the Pacific North West, Robinson explains how:

'Ontologically, many of our songs have their primary significance as law, history, teachings, or function as forms of doing. This is to say they are history, teaching, law that take the form of song, just as Western forms of law and history take the form of writing. Yet they cannot also be reduced to merely an alternative form of Western documentation ... To measure the "fit" of Indigenous processes by Western standards subjects them (and the Indigenous person who explains them) to epistemic violence, and reen-trenches colonial principles and values.'⁴⁵

Robinson notes how 'all of us have adopted settler colonial forms of perception, or "tin ears", that disallow us from understanding Indigenous song as both an aesthetic thing and as more-than-song'.⁴⁶ This tin ear manifests both in an inability to hear and sense Gitxsan legal orders and assertions of Indigenous sovereignty through song, and in the settler colonialist impulse to 'render all knowledge accessible to the ear'.⁴⁷ Trying to understand Gitxsan song according to non-Indigenous logics and aesthetics does not simply miss out on a quality or aspect of it—it subjects Gitxsan song—and the communities to whom it belongs—to epistemic violence. If we consider this in the context of conservation, we can see how dominant practices have the potential to in fact enact the complete opposite of care when, undergirding these practices, is a settler colonialist impulse and desire for 'felt confirmations of square pegs in square holes' as Robinson puts it.

In contrast to this, Robinson explains that:

'Moving beyond hungry listening toward anticolonial listening practices requires that the "fevered" pace of consumption for knowledge resources be placed aside in favor of new temporalities of wonder disoriented from the antirational and nonsituated settler colonial positions of certainty.'⁴⁸

What he terms *critical listening positionality* or *guest listening* 'treats the act of listening as entering into a *sound territory*':

'... in entering Indigenous sound territories as guests, those who are not members of the Indigenous community from which these legal orders derive may always be unable to hear the specific assertions of Indigenous sovereignty, which is not to be understood as a lack that needs to be remedied, but merely an incommensurability that needs to be recognized.'⁴⁹

Read in the context of dominant conservation practices, the limits—and indeed the potential violence—of many of the methods that are so often framed as 'best practice' in the conservation field begin to come into sharp focus. This is not to say that these methods are lacking something, but rather, as Robinson puts it, that there is simply an 'incommensurability' between dominant practices of conservation and many forms of cultural expression, one that must be accounted for.

While some museums have initiated decolonial programmes—including more inclusive collecting strategies, restitution processes, shared stewardship models, and programmes of Indigenous- and community-led consultation—these efforts often remain constrained by institutional structures and procedures that privilege extractive forms of knowing centred around determinacy. Dominant conservation practices—originating out of a European museological model and colonial epistemologies—often default to conceptualising knowledge as a resource to be pursued and

44 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 51.

45 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 46.

46 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 45.

47 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 53.

48 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 53.

49 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 53.

mined. What might it look like to reorient our epistemic practices in conscious and active resistance to settler colonial logics where knowledge is recognised not as something 'out there' to be possessed, but rather a continuous co-creation and an ongoing process of 'coming to know' that is never finished? What forms might conservation take if we began from a presumption of potential *incommensurability*, as opposed to the assumption that all knowledge can and should be extracted, understood and represented in familiar formats, such as through artist interviews and written reports? What would it look like to 'place aside the "fevered" pace of consumption for knowledge resources' that currently undergirds dominant conservation practices, and embrace our intra-dependence not as risk to be mitigated but as a feature of being in and of the world that should be celebrated and nurtured?

As a conservator descended from white European settler immigrants, including Ashkenazi Jews who arrived as refugees, I write from within the very institutional and epistemological structures this article seeks to trouble. My own queer identity has shaped my sensitivity to what is othered, excluded or rendered unintelligible by colonial logics and systems. While the structural violences faced by queer people are not equivalent to those produced by settler colonialism and experienced by Indigenous and non-white racialised peoples, they do intersect and are entangled—rooted in the same colonial logics that enforce narrow norms of being, knowing and relating, while erasing or denying all that falls outside them. Recognising the colonial foundations of these violences is not about collapsing difference, but about acknowledging that difference as the ground for coalition: a commitment to a coalitional ethics that refuses the logics and structures of extraction and erasure, and stands in solidarity against systems that harm us differently—across lines of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, ability and geography—yet remain rooted in the enduring logics of coloniality.

I foreground the thinking and words of Indigenous scholars here not simply so they can be further mined by Western academic and museological apparatuses to 'make them better'—to do so would be complicit with the ongoing appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and lifeways, and a further enactment of settler colonial logics of extraction. But to ignore them completely—and their obvious resonances with everything else I have been discussing—would be another form of epistemic violence to which they have been repeatedly subjected: one of exclusion and erasure. My engagement with these epistemologies is grounded in a commitment to coalitional ethics, solidarity and refusal—a rejection of the colonial logics that underpin dominant museological and conservation frameworks, along with the presumption that they are universal, superior, or the only legitimate way of knowing and caring. My intention is to dislodge the hegemony of white supremacist, settler colonial assumptions and logics that continue to undergird dominant thinking and practices in relation to contemporary art-as-heritage, and the methods employed to sustain it. The prevailing conservation discourse, particularly with respect to contemporary art, remains deeply entrenched in European epistemologies and ontologies; settler colonial logics of resource extraction; a utilitarian, capitalist valorisation of speed and efficiency; and an anxious and hungry fixation on possessing materials, knowledge and certainty framed as conservation best practice.⁵⁰ What I wish to underline here is that dominant museological methods of acquisition, ownership, knowledge capture and representation are simply *one* set of methods of 'care', conceived by and for Euro-American and settler colonial collecting institutions around a narrow conception of the 'art object', and increasingly reproduced by institutions globally. Wielded uncritically and universally there is a very

⁵⁰ This article sits alongside other recent and growing efforts to challenge the colonial logics that undergird dominant, Western theories and practices of contemporary art conservation. These include contributions to the special issue *Contested Conservation*, edited

real risk for potential violence. But practices of care for our world and its various parts—including creative expressions of human culture—have always been and remain otherwise.

In her essay 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', Audre Lorde offered a critique of rationalist, white, cis-heteropatriarchal systems that favour detachment and control and denigrate emotion and feeling.⁵¹ Lorde instead advocated for the emancipatory potentials of the erotic as a bridge between false dichotomies between thought and feeling. bell hooks' writing on engaged pedagogies—building on the work of Thich Nhat Hanh—similarly challenged 'bourgeois educational structures' that 'denigrate notions of wholeness and uphold the idea of a mind/body split, one that promotes and supports compartmentalization'.⁵² hooks instead advocated for 'the legitimacy of a pedagogy that dares to subvert the mind/body split and allow[s] us to be whole in the classroom and as a consequence wholehearted'.⁵³ Thinking with Audre Lorde and bell hooks' writings, Brandon LaBelle has proposed an acoustic framework attentive to the agentic forces of sound that, among other things, undoes the false dichotomy of body and mind, and the valorisation of the unfeeling, individualist human subject promoted by Cartesian thought and the dominant sciences.⁵⁴ Lorde and hooks' writings, LaBelle explains, 'steer us towards formations of community founded upon personal life experience and the emotional knowledge that are often informing ones' speech and action'.⁵⁵

Methodologies of Deep Listening, critical listening positionality or guest listening, and what LaBelle calls 'listening from below'⁵⁶ all share an ethical attentiveness to the unheard and underheard found within what Kevin Toksöz Fairbairn terms the entire 'panoramic field of entangled agencies'.⁵⁷ These ways of embodied listening—where thought and feeling are affirmed as inseparable—are not simply a more refined tool to uncover more about the world for the sake of capturing a more complete knowledge and understanding of it.⁵⁸ Rather, such forms of listening and attunement entail an ethics of relinquishing the colonialist expectation of determinacy and commensurability, and a centring of the possibility for our thoughts and feelings—or 'thinking-feeling'⁵⁹—to be continually reconfigured by what we come to know. To be wholeheartedly, *affectively* reconfigured requires a *response-ability* on the part of the listener, where such a compassionate responsiveness also carries an ethical commitment to transform how we further engage and intra-act with the world. Listening in sympathetic resonance or attunement therefore becomes an ongoing 'passionate, bodily with-ness'⁶⁰ where our embodied, responsive shifts in thought and feeling—attuned to the Other—are further mobilised into actions.

'Stilled by an object'

In 2020 several performance artworks by Northern Irish artist Sandra Johnston came into the collection of the Irish Museum of Modern Art where I also work as a freelance conservator. Johnston's performance practice is notably not delegated, unlike so many other live artworks that have entered museum collections over the last two decades; she performs her works herself, either alone or in collaboration with others; these others sometime include humans, but more often than not they include non-humans—Johnston considers the objects she performs with as 'co-participants'.⁶¹ Her practice is one of embodied, haptic, site- and object-responsive enquiry—often unfolding in contested spaces—that confronts the residues of trauma and violence held within particular sites and objects. Rooted in her own experiences and familial memories of the Troubles and the slow metastasis of colonial and sectarian violence in Ireland, John-

by Lotte Arndt and Noémie Étienne, *Museums & Social Issues* 17, no. 1–2 [2023], <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ymsi20/17/1-2> (accessed 25 July 2025); recent issues of *Troubles dans les collections* (<https://troublesdanslescollections.fr/>); the 2024 symposium *Transmitting the Intangible: Indigenous Perspectives on Sustaining Memory and Contemporary Culture* (held at the Nordic Black Theatre, organised by the Future Library Trust and Nasjonal-museet, Oslo, 27–28 May 2024); and the forthcoming book by Hélia Marçal and Rebecca Gordon, *Posthuman Care for Museum Futures* (London: Routledge, 2026).

⁵¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, [1978] 1984).

⁵² bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 16.

⁵³ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 193.

⁵⁴ Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018).

⁵⁵ LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 3.

⁵⁶ LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 9.

⁵⁷ Kevin Toksöz Fairbairn, *Dis/Cord: Thinking Sound through Agential Realism* (California: Punctum Books, 2022), 28.

⁵⁸ Smith notes that the Western pursuit of totalised knowledge is grounded in a colonial logic: 'The concept of totality assumed the possibility and desirability of being able to include absolutely all known knowledge into a coherent whole'; see Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 33.

⁵⁹ Robinson explains that this is an English translation of the Halq'eméylem word *sqwálewel* used for thoughts or feelings; while hyphenated, knowing and feeling are understood in Stó:lō onto-epistemology as interconnected and inseparable. See Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 51, 217, 272.

⁶⁰ See Neumark, *Voicetracks*, 39. Neumark draws this thinking in part from Vinciane Despret, who writes: 'Empathy, in this case, is not feeling what the other feels, it is rather making the body available for the response of another being'; see Vinciane Despret, 'Responding Bodies and Partial Affinities in Human-Animal Worlds', *Theory, Culture and Society* 30, no. 7–8 (2013): 51–76, at 70.

⁶¹ Sandra Johnston and Monica Laiseca, *With Objects in Time* (Glasgow: Goodpress, 2024), 10.

⁶² Johnston and Laiseca, *With Objects in Time*, 11.

⁶³ Johnston and Laiseca, *With Objects in Time*, 82.

⁶⁴ Sandra Johnston, in conversation with Monica Laiseca, *The Old Hairdresser's*, Glasgow, 24 April 2024.

ston's performance practice is itself a process of attunement, both to the emotional atmospheres of the settings in which she performs, and to the charged objects she engages with and responds to in the moment.

Writing about Johnston's performances, curator Mónica Laiseca explains:

'When she is performing, Sandra comes into contact with objects sequentially. Each object is activated in different ways, as if being asked a different question each time, with every interaction further amplifying its presence. Sandra's movements are precise, matter-of-fact, caring, inquisitive. The body is listening.'⁶²

Johnston's interactions with objects during her performances are haptic and instinctual responses to objects that come from her spending time with them and allowing herself to be stilled by them. Johnston explains:

'... all through life we are incessantly touching and moving, yet we are often distracted from being properly aware, distracted from the actuality of swallowing water or feeling cloth against the skin. In performance there is this heightened state, and when you are really immersed in it and utterly present, I think that it allows for a space and time for the audience to remember these sensations as well and come with you.'⁶³

Johnston expanded on this point, describing *Shutter: close to the close*, a work conceived and performed at the Southbank Centre in 2023 on the site of a former British munitions factory (Fig. 3). Among several of the found objects she gathered for her performance were small lead musket balls she found on the banks of the Thames, which she proceeded to roll between her fingers for 2 hours during the performance. In this context, she explained how being stilled by an object entails giving an object time, relenting from forcing our usual or habituated ways of interacting with it, resisting the impulse to control, and instead 'allow[ing] something else to speak back'.⁶⁴



Fig. 3 Sandra Johnston, *Shutter: close to the close* (2023) performed at the Southbank Centre's Queen Elizabeth Hall (4–8 October 2023). Courtesy of the Southbank Centre. Photo: Linda Ny Lind.

Since these acquisitions took place I have been wondering what it really means for Johnston's live performance works to be a part of IMMA's collection, particularly given their time and space specificity, and their live experience relying on Johnston being able and willing to perform them. Importantly, there is no agreement in place or expectation on the part of IMMA that Johnston will ever re-perform these works. I have therefore anxiously (hungrily?) been asking myself: What should I, as conservator, be doing for these works? Is what Johnston supplied in terms of images and documentation sufficient? And what forms might care take for these works?

In her discussion of Johnston's performances as 'acts of kinship' with objects, Laiseca writes:

'Her unbiased attempts at coming close to the objects and amplifying their voices demand that her whole nervous system is involved and is malleable, allowing itself to be reconfigured by these encounters. The objects change with every gesture and so does she. And here lies an understated promise of repair. If we allow ourselves to feel enough, to the point where our relationships with ordinary things around us begin to form anew, then it should be possible that our relationships with others in the world, human or non-human, no matter how wounded, can be transformed too.'⁶⁵

In my own coming to know Johnston's work—proverbially rolling it between my fingers—in my attuning to her practice and allowing its principles and affective dimensions to slowly *sediment*⁶⁶ into my being and affectively reconfigure me, one lesson I have taken away is the generative potential of allowing oneself to be stilled by the Other, that is, to mindfully set aside preconceptions and presumptions, and to switch off my internal, professional autopilot. In my being stilled by her work, letting it burrow into my thoughts and feelings, particularly in the context of care and 'what I can do' for it, I am reminded of the concept of retreatability commonly invoked in conservation, one that Hélia Marçal and I have refigured as *retreatability*: the ability to retreat, to step back, as an ethical counter to extractivist logics and methods, and a legitimate practice of care, both of the Self and Other.⁶⁷ What if caring for Johnston's work is as much about what I *do* as it is about what I prevent myself from habitually forcing or repeating? What if caring for an artwork is to allow its affective potentials to rework our thinking-feeling? What if care—more broadly—demands that we shift how we engage with our surroundings, with each other, with the world, through an attunement that is affective, ethical and political: a refusal of certainty, possession and extraction, and a commitment to being responsive to the practices, relations and material-discursive, socio-historical ecologies we encounter?

Conclusion

What I am proposing here with the notion of attunement is not an alternate methodology of 'doing conservation'—it is in fact much more than that: a way and mode of being in and of the world with care that is critically attentive to its intra-dependencies, and an accomplice to practices of liberation and repair, both of which require the other. Such a shift entails rejecting the colonial fiction that the world's parts—including artworks, people, and their broader ecologies of relation and dependency—exist in isolation. What's at stake is not merely whether conservation can be improved through incremental or technical reforms, but whether we are willing to confront and unmake the foundational logics upon which it rests—logics rooted in separability and extractive possession. Doing so requires a wholeheartedness and openness to being worked by that which we work with, including the artworks we come into contact with; the principles,

⁶⁵ Johnston and Laiseca, *With Objects in Time*, 11.

⁶⁶ I use the verb *sediment* to invoke an agential realist understanding of the way in which material-discursive processes of becoming settle, enfold and reconfigure. Barad writes, 'Sedimenting is an ongoing process of differential mattering. The past matters and so does the future, but the past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and the future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment; rather the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming'. See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 181.

⁶⁷ Brian Castriota and Hélia Marçal, 'On the Ethics of Retreatability, for and with the World' (paper presented at 'Colonial Natures: The Challenge of Conservation', University of Cambridge, 11–12 June 2024).

lessons and ethics woven through them; their human and more-than-human contributors; the sociohistorical, material-discursive ecologies in which they are enmeshed; as well as different ways of thinking-feeling and acting that they might direct us toward.

Attunement as an embodied methodology is not just about coming to know the world but about shifting how we engage as part of it. It entails an ethics of responsiveness—of listening out for and redressing the harms that habituated, patriarchal, colonial-capitalist practices and modes of engagement enact, and of affirming worldviews and knowledge systems that recognise our mutual intra-dependence. Conservators have the power to decide where, through our practices, we cut an artwork-as-heritage-object together-apart from the world, and where we draw the limits of our professional responsibilities. Because we help enact these cuts, we are accountable for where and how they are drawn. Our work does not end at the material-technical, nor even at the human, since we quite literally cannot have art in a broken world. To truly safeguard, sustain and nourish the intra-connected and intra-dependent parts of the world requires us to recognise this entanglement and reject the colonial and capitalist logics that most threaten our collective futurity. This includes remaining responsive to the harms they perpetuate—including the notion that the world is a container of certainties to be extracted and possessed. To be attuned to the objects and relational ecologies we wish to help nourish and secure a futurity for means acknowledging the limits and potential violences embedded in our practices, and cultivating ways of sensing, feeling and doing that affirm indeterminacy and incommensurability. In this way, our caring for the intra-dependent human and more-than-human parts of the world is not just a caring *for* but a caring *with*—one that holds a true promise of repair.

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Resumen

“La sintonización como metodología integrativa para las prácticas de conservación”

Este artículo propone la sintonización como una metodología integrativa para las prácticas de conservación, basada en la relacionalidad, la interdependencia y la capacidad de respuesta afectiva. Tomando prestados conceptos del realismo agencial y de los estudios post-humanistas, queer, feministas, indígenas, negros y anticolonialistas, critica los marcos de conservación dominantes arraigados en la lógica colonial y capitalista que priorizan la

extracción, la certeza y el control. Por el contrario, explora cómo el cuidado de las obras de arte como patrimonio cultural —y como partes emergentes e indeterminadas del mundo— requiere atención y capacidad de respuesta a las dimensiones éticas, políticas y afectivas de las obras de arte y sus amplios ecosistemas materiales y discursivos. La sintonización se posiciona como una práctica de escuchar y de permitirse estar en silencio, reconfigurándose y movilizándose hacia formas más recíprocas y coaligadas de conocer y hacer. Reconociendo que el conocimiento que producimos no es neutral, sino que se va formando interactuando activamente con nuestros métodos, este artículo destaca la sintonización como una respuesta metodológica a la violencia epistémica ejercida por las prácticas de conservación extractivistas, habitadas y generalizantes. Invita a los conservadores a tener en cuenta la herencia y violencia del colonialismo y el capitalismo en su trabajo, incluyendo cómo se genera y registra el conocimiento; y a imaginar la conservación como parte de una práctica más amplia de trabajo solidario, cuidado relacional y construcción del mundo.

المُلخَص

التوافق كمنهجية متجسدة في ممارسات الحفظ

يقترح هذا المقال الانسجام كمنهجية متجسدة لممارسات الحفظ، قائمة على الترابط، والتداخل الاعتمادي، والاستجابة العاطفية. مستفيدًا من الواقعية الفاعلية (Agential Realism) ومن مناهج ما بعد الإنسانية، والدراسات الكويرية، والنسوية، ودراسات السكان الأصليين والسود،

والمناهضة للاستعمار، ينتقد المقال الأطر السائدة لممارسات الحفظ، القائمة على منطق الاستعمار الاستيطاني والرأسمالي، والتي تولي الأولوية للاستخراج، واليقين، والسيطرة. وعلى النقيض من ذلك، فإنه يستكشف كيف أن العناية بالأعمال الفنية كتراث ثقافي - وكأجزاء ناشئة وغير محددة من العالم - تتطلب الانتباه والاستجابة للأبعاد الأخلاقية والسياسية والعاطفية للأعمال الفنية وللبيئات المادية-الخطابية الممتدة التي تنتمي إليها. يُقدّم التوافق كونه ممارسة للاستماع-مع، والسماح للنفس بأن تُسكن، ويُعاد تشكيلها، وتُحرّك نحو طرق أكثر تبادلية وتحالفًا في المعرفة والممارسة. ومن خلال الاعتراف بأن المعرفة التي ننتجها ليست محايدة، بل تتكوّن بشكل تفاعليداخلي من خلال مناهجنا، يُبرز هذا المقال التوافق كوسيلة منهجية مضادة للعنف المعرفي الذي تمارسه ممارسات الحفظ الاستخراجية، الاعتيادية، والتعميمية. ويدعو هذا الطرح المحافظين إلى مواجهة الإرث والعنف المرتبطين بالاستعمار والرأسمالية في عملهم - بما في ذلك كيفية إنتاج المعرفة وتوثيقها - وتخيّل الحفظ بوصفه جزءًا من ممارسة أوسع للتضامن، والرعاية العلائقية، وصناعة العالم.

Resumo

“Sintonização como uma metodologia incorporada para práticas de conservação”

Este artigo propõe a sintonização como uma metodologia integrada para práticas de conservação, fundamentadas em relação-idade, interdependência e responsividade afetiva. Inspirando-se no realismo agencial e pós-humanista, *queer*, feminista, indígena, *Black* e o pensamento anti-colonial, o estudo critica modelos dominantes da conservação enraizados em lógicas coloniais e capitalistas, que priorizam a extração, a certeza e o controle. Em contraste, o artigo explora como o cuidado com obras de arte enquanto patrimônio cultural—e enquanto partes emergentes e indeterminadas do mundo—exige atenção e responsividade às dimensões éticas, políticas e afetivas das obras de arte e de suas ecologias material-discursivas ampliadas. Sintonização é posicionada como uma prática de escuta-com em permitir-se ser aquietado, reconfigurado e mobilizado em direção a caminhos mais recíprocos e de coalizão do saber e do agir. Reconhecendo que o conhecimento que produzimos não é neutro, mas constituído intra-ativamente pelos nossos métodos, este artigo destaca a sintonização como um medidor metodológico para a violência epistêmica promovida pelas práticas de conservação extrativistas, habituais e universalizantes. Este estudo convida conservadores a confrontar as heran-

ças e violências do colonialismo e capitalismo nos seus trabalhos—inclusive em torno de como o conhecimento é gerado e documentado—e para imaginar conservação como parte de uma prática mais ampla de trabalho de solidariedade, cuidado relacional e construção de mundos.

摘要

“协调作为文物保护实践的具身化方法论”

本文提出将“协调”作为一种保护实践的具身化方法论，其理论基础在于关系性、内在依存性和情感响应性。借鉴能动现实主义以及后人类主义、酷儿理论、女性主义、原住民研究、黑人和反殖民学术思想，文章批判了植根于定居殖民主义与资本主义逻辑的主流保护框架，这种框架优先考虑攫取、确定性和控制。相反，本文探讨了艺术品作为文化遗产，亦视为世界中不断涌现的、不确定的组成部分来养护时，需要如何对其及广泛的物质—话语生态的伦理、政治和情感维度保持关注与响应。“协调”被定位为一种“共听”实践，允许自身被静默、重构和动员，从而形成更具互惠性与联盟性的认知与行动方式。通过认识到我们产生的知识并非中立而是由方法互动建构而成，本文强调了协调作为一种方法论，以对抗攫取性、习惯性和普遍化保护实践所导致的认识论暴力。文章呼吁保护工作者正视殖民主义与资本主义在文物保护中的遗存与暴力，包括知识生成与记录方式，并将保护工作想象为更广大的团结行动、关系照护和世界构建实践的组成部分。

Biography

Brian Castriota is Lecturer in Conservation of Contemporary Art and Media at University College London, Time-Based Media Conservator at the National Galleries Scotland, and Freelance Conservator for Time-Based Media and Contemporary Art at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. He completed graduate-level training in conservation at the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University and received a PhD in History of Art from the University of Glasgow. His publications explore how thinking with poststructuralist, posthumanist, and postqualitative theories and methodologies transform how we might understand conservation as both a field of inquiry and a practice of care, as well as the diverse forms that it might take.