

Figurations Following the Ethical Turn

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Abstract

As militarized border enforcement is materialized in the everyday of asylum seekers—in Canada, as well as for those caught between Mexico and the US, and indeed most other locations—this text focuses on situations of intense ethical demand for artists. Incidents of artists claiming a personal failure are not unfamiliar in what might be described as a time of ethical and moral preoccupation. Outside of art, a proliferation of ethics—as a term, marketing trope, regulation, or the sincerest of intentions—contrasts with blatant disavowals of the dignity of immigrants in public discourse. In a set of serial and interrelated entries, ethics is examined here as a topic, critique, meaning, or feature produced in and through art. Four sections reflect on how ethics is made productive through its failure, its political work, its relationality, and its own aesthetics. Considering where the failures of migration policies intersect with Indigenous resurgence and territorial claims, this text focuses on artworks that serve to figure or mark specific temporalities and locations in which ethics does (or fails at) its work. Described as figurations (Braidotti) or ecotestimonios (Driver) the artworks highlighted here activate non-metaphoric specificities—territorial and geopolitical.

Figurations #1: Unethical Art and Other Failures

At a 2016 event called “Poetics of Approach” poet Jordan Scott told the audience how the texts, photos, and sound works that we were about to hear and see for the first time, had been created through an ethically flawed process.^[1] Scott relayed how despite careful consideration and extensive research, including a clearance application process that had lasted a year, participation in a media tour of the Guantánamo Bay detention centre was in later estimation wrong.

“As soon as I arrived, I felt that my presence was unethical,” Jordon Scott wrote in *Lanterns at Guantánamo*, a chapbook published a year after “Poetics of Approach”. In it he elaborated,

When I watched those men pray and eat behind two thick panes of reflective glass in Camp IV, was my position ethical?

What would be an ethical response or reaction to that experience?^[2]

How thick is that glass? What is that distance between the artist and their subject that produces a failure of ethics? Scott's experiences, including personal insecurities about the ethical validity of the artist's presence on site at a detention facility operating outside of the US federal court system, is itself a window into perspectives of artists whose work is situated in locations of intense ethical demand. Following Scott's inquiry, the questions raised are whether ethical failures necessarily result in artistic failures. Or, is the failure as experienced by the rest of us through the art a catalyst from which our collective answerability to persistent human rights violations finally becomes our own urgent and unavoidable demand?

Whereas Scott's questions about the ethical validity of working as a poet-visitor at the detention camp dominated the 2016 presentation, in writing the chapbook Scott allowed those doubts over proximity and distance to be buffered by artistic inquiries. Questions asked in *Lanterns at Guantánamo* included: What can be learned about linguistic dysfluency in a location that hosts state interrogation? ("I went to Gitmo to investigate correlations between stuttering, dysfluency, and lying"); What is the nature of witnessing in a location of trauma, terror, and extreme visual, auditory, and textual information control? ("Where can the poet witness if no language survives? If nothing remains?"); What is the nature of light and power in the camp, and in racialized sites of power more broadly? ("I want to think more about light and death. Two kinds of light: one light that grazes surfaces superficially, the other a light that invades, colonizes, and occupies").^[3] These are substantial inquiries for poetry and art and they are questions that reach out toward substantive ethical questioning regarding how torture and human rights violations become justified, institutionalised, and avoidant of public scrutiny.

Dysfluency; no language; light and death. With these words Scott's project took up the prison's aesthetic failures fundamental failures of expression as ethical failures in themselves. This territory is familiar for the poet. So, calling on this proximity Scott documented the poet's positionality with what appears to be a selfie taken in the highly controlled quarters reserved for journalists and writers, and the following words:

Can poems possibly emerge out of such an encounter? Should they?

I am tasked with speaking to you today about witnessing. But when I see this image [Scott's headshot], I see only my complicity and unethical witnessing a desire-selfie marking my place: I was there pissing on a territory as if to imagine myself as the ONE, the NO ONE who "bears witness for the / witness."^[4]

Lanterns is here citing another poet, Rachel Zolf, who in writing about the artist as witness imagined that *NO ONE* presents a third space between the experience of the one harmed and the witness. Zolf, a witness to the Gaza War, described the artistic methods that were needed to tell the story: "collage, disjunction, parataxis, dissonance, and other aspects of form." For Zolf direct testimony could not be trusted: "Speaking for myself, I do not trust the poet as direct transparent witness; I do not trust the 'modest witness' as ethnographic fieldworker. I do not trust the speech of 'I was here,' so I am entitled to speak."^[5]

Everyone those harmed, those witnessing, and those reading of it experience a dysfluent harm that hovers and haunts. Harm's fallout cannot be dodged. Zolf described it this way, "During a suicide bombing, the body, in an act of sublime necropolitics, becomes the ballistic weapon, and the primary target isn't the victim/enemy but the witness who must attempt to make meaning from shards of bodies melding in a precarious we."^[6] In the work of making something artistic out of the insurmountable ethical failure carries the shrapnel, sometimes deliberately and sometimes inadvertently.

In *Lanterns*, Scott demonstrated this third space and the inevitability of the fallout, even upon arrival at the camp. The presence of an artist on a Guantánamo Bay detention centre media tour was an anomaly, of which Scott was aware. Written into *Lanterns* is a description of how the public relations officer met on arrival declared that Scott was the first poet to visit, “outside of the walls, that is.”^[7] The chapbook also describes how Scott’s presence and creative methods (making ambient sound recordings) caused minor disturbances among security operations. Scott quotes verbatim a low-level minder relaying their ambient sound recording activities by radio up a chain of command:

... A poem, sir. A poem. A poem. Yes. Ambient sound for a poem. Sir. I’m not sure. Yessir. A poem, sir. Yes. Ambient. Sir. Yes.^[8]

As Scott described, “The ambience and redactions that Gitmo engenders are representations of sonic operations of power, containment, and torture.”^[9] The presence of the poet in this place of *power, containment, and torture* proved to be an intervention obliging the military apparatus to apprehend creativity into its systems of security and risk assessment. This apprehension and its experience in the poet’s body (described in part through the selfie) is what finally enabled Scott’s direct ethical critique.

What emerged from Scott’s fieldwork and publications were embodied accounts of a poet working inside the heavily monitored zone between a prison’s inside and outside. In this way, Scott’s work is similar to Behrouz Boochani, the Kurdish-Iranian journalist indefinitely detained on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. Boochani also resorted to creative methods incredibly, both a film and a novel created by incrementally and clandestinely transmitting *WhatsApp* messages in what could be read as a failing or limit of facts-based journalism.^[10] Scott’s and Boochani’s figurations relayed the work of the camps on their bodies to the rest of us. In this way their testimonies force us to confront the inescapability of the camps’ unavoidable ethical demand.

Incidents of artists claiming personal failures in the face of an ethical demand are not uncommon in a time of ethical and moral preoccupation. A proliferation of ethics as a term, marketing trope, regulation, or the sincerest of intentions can also be linked to a widespread expansion of participatory, community and engaged art, and activist art practices. Claire Bishop, one of the clearest critics of unexamined ethical framing, when present in participatory art practices, describes how an artwork’s value becomes linked to productive use through collaboration or political engagement, among other things. This produces a kind of ethical one-upmanship and a problematic criterion of participatory and social art practices, in Bishop’s estimation.^[11] But the context for ethical failure is a public space inundated with the ethical framing of public and private life: ATMs that are literally framed with trademarked slogans such as “Make Good Money”; and the marketing of *ethical oil* from the Alberta oil sands as an alternative to *conflict oil* from the Middle East. Here artists are either interpellated into a rhetoric of risk aversion through ethics, or, like Jordan Scott, they adopt the language of ethics, fearlessly declaring failure, as they approach their worlds’ uncompromising ethical demands. This overuse of ethical framing presents another way to frame the challenge for artists like Scott: how to sustain *fidelity* to insurmountable ethical demands when its overproduction becomes an inoculant. In Simon Critchley’s writing, the aesthetic realm is one setting where the excessive demand of ethics can be actualised. Drawing on Alain Badiou, Critchley describes how an individual’s impulse to confront a specific ethical wrong overreaches its specificity:

[Badiou’s account] permits ethics to be approached as a subjective process or, better perhaps, a process of the formation of ethical subjectivity, where a self commits itself with fidelity to a concrete situation, a singular occurrence that places a demand on the self. Yet, this emphasis on the singular

and the concrete does not entail relativism, but rather a situated universalism where an event can only be justified if it is addressed to all. My commitment to the situation motivates ethical action whose justification exceeds that situation and works to bring about its transformation and amelioration.^[12]

By Critchley's analysis, if an artwork discloses the insurmountable excess of ethical demand encountered by artists during work about specific political situations, it materialises an ethical responsiveness that is not contained. By extension, an expressed ethical choice (or an inability to make a choice) demonstrates a recognisable pull towards making a response or contribution in the face of a multitude of dilemmas or harms or injustices. Following Badiou's train of thought, the truth that is demanded is not at all universal but rather multiple and internal to the situation.^[13] In Critchley words, "Politics is now and many."^[14] Are attempts and failures of artists to respond to the "now and many" an ethical method one that makes turning towards action as universal as the multiple demands are specific?

Whether a turn towards ethical failures in artistic figurations is effective politically will be considered in "Figurations #2", but here as an artist grappling with theory and practice after the ethical turn, I am working to locate and understand artists' responses to insurmountable demands.

On the day of writing this text, I am a witness to incomplete stories and video fragments of journalists' investigations of the experiences of families attempting to enter the United States through irregular processes are flooding my computer screen. Intransigent defence by Attorney General Jeff Sessions of the practice of segregating children of all ages in immigration detention (and the practice of incarcerating all irregular immigrants upon arrival) has been buoyed by quotations of biblical fragments, positioning the detention practice as an invocation of a divine call to "enforce the law".^[15] The irony that an overarching *law* to love one's neighbour is listed later in the same biblical passage, but was wilfully avoided in the rhetoric, summarises the extent of this time's ethical failures. I have witnessed a bombing.

Figurations #2: Turning at the Border

On 18 December 2016, during the interregnum between the election and inauguration of Donald Trump, artist Elena Berriolo followed an impulse to protest by staging a performance artwork on board a Turismo Express bus as it travelled from San Diego (San Ysidro) to Tijuana. Since it was a weekend, the bus was filled with families, laden with allowed-to-import American goods, on their way to visit relatives and friends. Berriolo boarded the standing-room-only bus with a photographer and with a sewing machine.

Once the journey was underway, Berriolo announced to fellow passengers:

Hello! I am an artist and I would like to make a Book as a Bridge as an act of protest against the wall Trump is planning to build at the Mexican border. I am going to start sewing now on my accordion book and by the time we will get to Tijuana the sewn line will need to stretch from the back of the bus where I am now, to its front, having grown over the US-Mexico border from San Ysidro to Tijuana, making a bridge.^[16]

As sewing of a single line through a long pre-folded page progressed from the back of the bus, passengers were obliged to assist in the task by holding and then passing the lengthening page so that the line would be

supported and continuous, from the back of the bus to the front, and back again. Berriolo recounted later how the action involved young people translating explanations of the event to older people; nearby women with better eyesight than hers assisting with machine-threading issues; and, generally, the crowd's conviviality with the demands of the performance. At the border, for instance, the passengers all waited patiently for the artist and her sewing machine to clear customs so that Berriolo could be the first one to re-board, settle in at the back and prepare for the book to be unfurled so the sewing could resume once underway.^[17]

Whereas Berriolo's previous sewing machine performances received institutional support, *A Book as a Bridge across the Mexican Border* did not come about that way.^[18] Partnership with the transit company was not arranged, and neither were the participants prompted or asked to sign photography releases. *Book as a Bridge* was simply a publicly situated creative response made at a time when there was, as Berriolo explained to me in an email, "a feeling of powerlessness many people felt after the 2016 presidential election, and the desire of many to do something about it."^[19] A similar performance, titled *A Book as a Bridge from Wall Street to the Bronx* (2015), resulted in a book sewn on a subway between a region of New York of which Berriolo noted the median annual personal income hovers around US\$ 1 million and a destination where it is about US\$ 26,000. David Brody, in an interview with the artist, asked if performances like this were fuelled by the artist's family history of migration from Italy after World War II.^[20] Fascist history was on Berriolo's mind during the time of the inauguration and the Women's March, but Berriolo later explained, "[Brody] thought that had to do with my past, but to tell you the [truth] I am not sure about it."^[21] In the video documentation of the US-Mexico border performance, the aims are simply described this way: "By sewing a line from the back to the front of the bus, and from the US to Mexico, a bridge was made linking the two countries as an act of protest against the wall wanted by Trump."^[22]

The task of *A Book as a Bridge across the Mexican Border* was poetic: there was no planned social amelioration or direct political action, other than offering an occasion for the passengers on the bus to discuss with each other how the artwork is a response to political events that affect them directly. But the setting situated it inside a larger context of acute inequity and violence. Recalling *Operation Gatekeeper* in the 1990s, when the most westerly portion of the border became impenetrable through a double fortification next to Tijuana reaching into the Pacific Ocean and caused soaring death rates among the region's irregular asylum seekers, Trump's wall rhetoric was an ominous portent. Echoing the economic critique produced by the earlier sewing performances between Wall Street and the Bronx, and Manhattan and Staten Island *Book as a Bridge* pointed to the persistent economic disparity in the region as well as other harms disproportionately carried by those immediately south of the US-Mexico border. These include the escalating violence in the years leading up to and following the 1993 signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) particularly 1,200 kilometres east of Tijuana, at Ciudad Juárez, immediately south of El Paso, Texas. The background of this acute violence, including what is termed *femicide* or *feminicide*, has been the subject of much cultural production, including novels Roberto Bolaño's posthumously published *2666* from 2004 is a prominent example movies, documentaries, video artworks, journalism (particularly photojournalism), and countless other creative forms.^[23]

The violence of feminicide in and around Juárez has been the subject of cultural production so frequently that it caused Alice Driver to reflect on the ethics of its representation. In *More Or Less Dead: Feminicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico* Driver described how as a journalist she approached Juárez photographers Jaime Bailleres and Julián Cardona about making a documentary based on interviews with photojournalists and filmmakers. Bailleres was emphatic about the failure of results in the proliferation of responses to the violence and its representations:

Perhaps we should discuss the series of lamentations, how many people have gone to Juárez and written reports, conducted research, created works of art, photo exhibits, sculptures, narratives, theatre, literature, and documentaries about the deaths of women, the narcos, the violence, and the maquilas... However, nobody, absolutely nobody and nothing, will do anything for the anonymous worker at the maquiladora, who in a condition of invisibility will wake up at 5 am each day to leave her two children with her grandmother. She will do this and then go to work a double shift, only to return home at 5 or 7 pm, 12 hours later, in silence, watching the time pass by.^[24]

Cardona likewise challenged the idea that the proliferation of cultural representations could penetrate or change feminicide's realities:

The state has given way to a parallel State. I want to be very explicit about this: the official version is that most of what happens in Juárez is a drug war between gangs... That's too reductive; that argument does not include the decomposition of the entire Mexican system, one that we see every day. [Instead] [t]hese circumstances that we now witness are the result of a failed State.^[25]

While much of the cultural representations and journalistic searching for causes of the eruption of feminicide in Juárez have aimed at change through international recognition, these image producers and journalists have been left doubtful that anything has been accomplished locally. The cultural productions have failed as a whole, these weary journalists seem to be saying. In contrast Berriolo's performance staged a participatory creative, and somewhat futile act without any hope of making a change. A staged failure, in terms of changing the incidents of violence and inequity, the awkwardness and unconventionality of producing this representation of the border only expected collective action for the duration of a bus ride.

At the end of "Figurations #1" I recounted how ethical failure was intensified by religious rhetoric in the immigration practices of the current US administration. This selective moralising, combined with ethical tropes in marketing, remind me of a political critique of the *ethical turn* in philosophy coming out of South and Central America. Antonio Y. Vásquez-Arroyo has argued that the ethical turn of Anglo-American humanities and social sciences needs to be historically situated as a persistent albeit diffident outcome more or less originating in the 1968 global student uprisings.^[26] Also coincident was the expansion of human rights codes and statutes. The UNHCR 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees greatly expanded the definition of *refugee* to include people who were made refugees outside of Europe. In other jurisdictions, including Canada, civil and human rights charters were established or revised in the 1960s. Vásquez-Arroyo argues that the ethical turn within intellectual circles, alongside the development of human rights discourse, resided in a specific temporality fed by moral narratives focused on the wrongs of World War II. Within this specificity, public and intellectual imaginings of recurrence, or indeed occurrence, of violations outside the War became more remote and infrequent. This distancing of responsibility or avoidance of the ethical demand was part of a compartmentalising of state atrocities and egregious violations to a European war-torn past. A failure of the ethical imagination prevented the proponents of the ethical turn to recognise the political response needed to address current issues, including the Algerian war largely without critique from continental philosophers and the deliberate collusion of the US government with dictatorial governments that committed human rights offences in South and Central America and the Caribbean also without comment from intellectuals. Vásquez-Arroyo describes how, instead, ideas generated in the ethical turn offered a focus on interpersonal practices of living, such as Foucault's theorising on the *care of the self* and *hypomnemata*.^[27] Vásquez-Arroyo's analysis is carried

through a spatializing metaphor “the ethical colonization of political life”. As with the non-metaphorical colonisation that so depleted South and Central America and the Caribbean, the ethical turn was effectively enabled by a thoroughly invasive structuring of what Vásquez-Arroyo’s describes as depoliticised politics.^[28]

Similarly, for other critics of the ethical turn in theory, spatialities and temporalities surrounding constructions of subjectivity are of central importance to their arguments. Homi Bhabha asks what choices are available to the immigrant, a subjectivity constitutive of its various cultural manifestations. For immigrants, choices over language, assimilation, and education are not at all served by foundational ethics. Described as *agonistic and ambivalent* within newfound social milieus, a newcomer or newcomer family experiences a sense of cultural disequilibrium.^[29] In the daily lives of immigrants travelling by bus between a new home and the old, an inherent ethical dilemma exists over the nature of free choice and the singularity required to enable those choices.

Figurations #3: Ethics in Relationality

Alice Driver’s book formulates a new term, *ecotestimonio*, to describe methods of representation that are used to reflect both personal and geographic signifiers.^[30] An example provided is the ad hoc practice in Juárez of painting black crosses with pink backgrounds onto the surfaces of service poles and walls near locations of violence against women. This practice appeared in Lourdes Portillo’s 2001 documentary *Señorita extraviada* (Missing young woman) and was a grassroots action initiated by the organisation Voces Sin Eco (Voices without echo). When *Señorita extraviada* was released, it challenged previous methods of representation by including the identities of the victims and the demands of their families for accountability. Portillo recalls, “I decided that the most respectful thing to do was to treat them like human beings at their best, the way we represent ourselves. I decided to use their names, to use the pictures that the mothers loved, and to never really show the destruction of their bodies.”^[31] In Driver’s analysis, the specificity inherent in the *ecotestimonio* method demanded that creators offer not only dignity to those most affected, but also, in the absence of public accountability, details and data generated from loved ones and activists as evidence of specific injustices. In this way, *ecotestimonio* served as a kind of public record in the absence of other forms of accountability. Standing in where journalistic or investigative accountability fails, *ecotestimonios* are born of the relations that surround those affected by violence and human rights violations.

I want to extend the *ecotestimonios* method and apply it to artworks encountered that have served to figure or mark specific temporalities and locations in which ethics does (or fails at) its work. As *ecotestimonios*, artworks can highlight how non-metaphoric specificities “territorial or geopolitical”, in Rosi Braidotti’s words and form figurations. Braidotti describes figurations this way:

Figurations are not mere metaphors, but rather markers of more concretely situated historical positions. A figuration is the expression of one’s specific positioning in both space and time. It marks certain territorial or geopolitical coordinates, but it also points out one’s sense of genealogy or of historical inscription. Figurations deterritorialize and destabilize the certainties of the subject and allow for a proliferation of situated “micro” narratives of self and others. As often is the case, artists and activists respond more promptly to the call for more creativity than professional academics do.^[32]

Though situated in a geopolitical condition or position, there is an expectation that for figurations’ expression to be productive (for them to *deterritorialise and destabilise the certainties of the subject*), creativity is required. I am following Braidotti’s lead here in exploring how and why artists and activists are vital to the process of

disrupting certain fixed and damaging cultural claims about migration and feminicide. This analysis considers, broadly, the effectiveness of art that functions in or around political and politicised contexts.

Presented first are artworks that work as ecotestimonios in places near the US-Mexico border zone. Alongside these are projects that respond to murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls in Canada. In relation to each other, these ecotestimonios led me to reflect on how creative productions aim at political engagement through displays of specific experiences and material evidence. In these examples, art's capacity to incite empathy through material and phenomenological encounters is a consideration, as is the way in which ethical zones of engagement, sometimes ceremonial, become a way of working.

In *Mi Tierra: Contemporary Artists Display Place*, a thirteen-artist survey of Latinx art at the Denver Art Museum, Santa Fe-based sculptor Daisy Quezada installed *Desplazamiento/Contención* (Displacement/Containment, 2017). Quezada explained in conversation how the multimedia installation followed a practice of ceramic slip casting using pieces of clothing given to the artist by individuals with direct experience of oppression in relation to migration into the United States.^[33] In this and other sculptures, the lifeless clothing takes form through draping and the casting of fired porcelain. In *Desplazamiento/Contención*, the elements of the gallery installation included a commercial shipping bin to contain the ceramic articles, silver leafed strapping around the open box, concrete tiling on the ground, recorded ambient sounds of voices recounting migration experiences, and mesh fencing to contain a slice of the installation space. Trapping the audience, as well as the recorded voices, the installation became a site of mourning where elements once treasured in colonial migrations (ceramics and silver) were displayed as inert inside an aborted journey.

In 2006, the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston opened *Frontera 450+*, a group exhibition marking approximately 450 unsolved murders of young women in Juárez from 1993 to the time of the exhibition. James Harithas, director of the Station Museum, describes the museum as an activist organisation that, through exhibitions, “question[s] our society’s morality and ethics,” making it a welcoming site for an artistic response to the feminicide epidemic in nearby Mexico.^[34] For *Frontera 450+* Harithas used an uncompromising and alarmist tone to introduce the exhibition:

Because these murders are perpetrated just over the border with the United States and because a significant number of the victims are US citizens, I would think that the outcry would be deafening, but given the shameful anti-immigrant paranoia of the Republicans and some of the Democrats, the total lack of compassion and criminal incompetence of the GW Bush and Fox administrations, inept border policies, and the drug violence that borders on anarchy on both sides of the frontier with Mexico, it is clear that this terrible femicide will continue in Juárez and spread to other cities until determined steps are taken by the citizens of both governments to end the silence and find the perpetrators.^[35]

Reviewed today through the lens of the project’s extant documentation (I didn’t see *Frontera 450+* myself), the exhibition seems to have been both productive and problematic. I note that a number of the eighteen artists in the exhibition used the opportunity to spend time in Juárez and other border cities and then work in direct response. The documentation of this major exhibition project provides me with examples of the proliferation of feminicide representations that Driver and her respondents were recalling (and that I commented on in “Figuration #2”). For many of these artists the challenge to represent border zone violence to an American audience came early in what has become a focus of their practices. Teresa Margolles’s *Cimbra Formwork* (2006), which was included in *Frontera 450+*, was an exploration into how personal materials recovered from sites of

violence could be integrated into artworks and why. This way of working was later expanded by Margolles to other sites of violent death in Mexico and elsewhere. Margarita Cabrera exhibited sewn sculptures of the appliances made in the factories associated with the femicide incidents in the series *Maquila (Factory)*. As an El Paso resident, Cabrera has gone on to produce community art projects that similarly utilise techniques and materials specific to immigrant conditions and issues.

Despite the productive nature of the engaged aspects of *Frontera 450+* the uncompromising tone of Harithas's introduction reflected some problematic aspects of the exhibition. By focusing on the representation of gender-based violence the exhibition can be understood as having re-materialised it with attendant secondary trauma, and even titillation for some. Harithas's statement situated femicide in Juárez as an aberrant horror needing to be explained and then resolved, when its context would later come to be understood as a complex amalgam of post-NAFTA impoverishment, escalating militarisation on both sides, and pervasive patriarchal cultural production. Jaime Bailleres's and Julián Cardona's denunciation of unfettered cultural witnessing haunt *Frontera 450+*.

Linked through the ecotestimonios method to femicide in the border zone, art production related to Canada's murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls has formed places of honour and recognition while provoking local and international audiences to take action.^[36] Rebecca Belmore's *Vigil* was performed in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in 2002 to honour women missing from that neighbourhood. The women's names, written on the artist's arms, were read aloud by Belmore in the performance. Belmore's actions, including nailing her red dress to a wooden service pole and then ripping free of it, reflected the entrapment of women on unsafe streets, and of the policing environment that was defeating local efforts to investigate and make convictions in the crimes that targeted them.^[37]

Two participatory art projects made in response to murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls in Canada (MMIWG) that have been circulated widely also belong in this ecotestimonio archive. In 2012, Métis artist Christi Belcourt began the project *Walking with our Sisters*, which invited people to take up the Métis practice of beading moccasin vamps as commemorative objects. Belcourt first expected the project to generate around 700 pairs of vamps enough to commemorate the 600 missing Indigenous women reported at the time but over time a total of 1,726 pairs were received. Today the project is no longer considered an art project, but a travelling and ceremonial memorial managed by a collective of Elders and helpers. In its travels it has evolved to work with local communities and follow ceremonial Indigenous Protocols at every installation site, thereby offering the public opportunities to participate in ceremonies specific to each location that hosts it.

Another ecotestimonio to respond to MMIWG is Jaime Black's *REDress Project* which has been realised in various locations, including the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg. For the project Black assembled crowd-sourced red dresses hung from hangers in mostly outdoor public settings, such as university grounds. The hundreds of empty red dresses that accumulated from people eager to participate were meant to each create a haunting in the absence of unaccounted-for Indigenous women and girls caught in Canada's crisis of targeted violence.^[38] Both *Walking with our Sisters* and *REDress Project* necessarily rely on local participation in events that raise local awareness, while linking individual instances of violence to patterns of violence in shared grief and protest.

Braidotti's model of nomadic ethics, from which my use of *figurations* is derived, presents a relational approach to subjectivity that is expressly aimed at transposing philosophical theory into ethical practice through political engagement. Rooted in feminism, this theory recognises a "poly-centred, multiple and complex political

economy” in which a concept for a nomadic subject is located as a “form of political resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary views of subjectivity.”^[39] Not just an awareness of gender, but also an open-ended mixture of “experience, situatedness, accountability and transversal alliances”, nomadic ethics considers power relations and demands geopolitical specificity.^[40]

Along similar lines, but on a micro and interpersonal scale, Brian Massumi articulates how the concept of relationality, particularised through the experience of affect, holds potential for political responsiveness. Massumi writes, “In a way I think [the phenomenological encounter] becomes an ethic of caring, caring for belonging, which has to be a nonviolent ethic that involves thinking of your local actions as modulating a global state.”^[41] This view expects deep care to be a part of artworks which involve artists’ performances in crowds, or which involve affectively charged materials for viewers or listeners to move through. Barbara Bolt similarly recognises the relationality of encounters enabled by art, noting that “through creative practice, a dynamic material exchange can occur between objects, bodies and images.”^[42] The expectation here is that within the material and phenomenological exchange between artworks and those who encounter them, empathy or ethics of care will propel action, or even political responsiveness.

Creators of the ecotestimonios gathered here have derived performative and ceremonial approaches to the difficult work of responding to feminicide in public. In response to the highly relational work of gathering what might be considered material evidence or material response from those affected by the violence, artists like Christi Belcourt chose to situate their work in given ceremonial settings. In other examples, the contemplative aura of gallery installations and street-sited performance art is carefully produced so as to guide the public through affective encounters with feminicide, as it most specifically relates to them.

Figurations #4: And Then, Methods

Ethics, then, is not a criterion by which one can justify a work; it is, rather, a methodology. Walead Beshty^[43]

At the conference *How Art Makes Things Happen Situating Social Practice in Research, Practice, and Action* Steve Duncombe and Steve Lambert, the co-founders of the Center for Artistic Activism (C4CA) in New York, presented a collaborative talk called “Making Art Work”.^[44] They described how they had come up with *affect*, a pared-down approach to put into practice when artists work in social settings. A meeting of affect and effect, *affect* recognizes the necessity for artists to anticipate outcomes for their work its direct benefits to the public or to specific individuals. Eschewing the more traditional preoccupation with the artwork’s production, they urged artists to adopt *clarity of intent* that, they suggested, could be utopic in method and vision.

The Steves (their names a trope that was performed throughout the talk) then turned more intentionally to the question of ethics. With the conference taking place in an art school, they described in their keynote address how art education isn’t preparing artists for confrontations of values as an inevitable component of creative projects that invite participation of others. Whereas traditionally artists are taught to develop the skills needed in solo studio practices, such as contractual relations with institutions, learning to manage ethical challenges is of greater relevance in most art practices. Artists working solo tend to seek institutional backing and immunity that comes with institutional commissions and appointments, but when faced with ethical decisions professionalised artists tend to withdraw, hoping that they will not make any missteps. Professionally trained artists, the Steves told us, need to learn to “figure it out” to learn to manage ethical challenges as part of an ongoing practice

because, in their words, “ethics is a practice.” All ethical problems appear within a complex social environment, so there are no set formulas to provide solutions for artists in the field, we learned from this artist/activist duo.

In the reader *Ethics* (2015), another resource for artists, editor Walead Beshty presented a kind of challenge. Proposing an *aesthetics of ethics*, Beshty’s book questions how artists are using social relations aesthetically, and what might be the aesthetic forms produced through ethics–methodologies.^[45] *Ethics* argues that while the social turn in art produced dynamic theoretical critique, especially following Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Traffic* exhibition in 1996 and his *Relational Aesthetics* book in 1998, critical criteria have so far focused more on the relational side of social practice than on its more difficult to appraise aesthetic counterpart. According to Beshty, “A turn to ethics is a turn to the affirmative question of art, not as a negation, allegory or critique, but the description of an art that operates directly upon the world it is situated in; it is a definition of art that is not at all premised on representation.”^[46] Whereas the Steves were encouraging educators and mentors to coach emerging artists to develop skills in directly addressing the confrontations of values that might arise in socially situated art or activism, Beshty focused on the value of the art in a complex social world. In both cases, these are directives to do something that artists have a hard time doing, but that ethicists always do: to measure the values and the benefits of the work of art, not as an object but as participatory or socially situated activity.

I began these figurations after the ethical turn with Jordon Scott’s avowed failure of ethics during the act of making art. Both the proliferation of ethics and the political failure of the post-war ethical turn make any return to ethics a dubious proposition. But as ethics are used to so heavily blanket and mask our world’s most egregious failures military detentions of children in the work of border enforcements, for instance theorists and senior practitioners call for artists to improve their ethical literacy. Patricia Reed, another artist-theorist, warned that the neoliberal proliferation of ethics shouldn’t obscure ways to operationalise ethics in art contexts. “When condemning ‘ethics’ *tout court*, do we not risk falling into the trap of the (false) law of a self-evident, alternative-less (Thatcherite) world of impotent activity?”^[47] Effectively intensifying an ethical turn, Reed proposed that when art responds to an ethical encounter there is an *intangible otherness* sounding something like Rachael Zolf’s third space that inspired Scott (in Figuration #1). This other-condition offers a way out of the trap of the political consensus that proliferates among so much ethical failure.

Footnotes

1. *Poetics of Approach* was hosted by Cecily Nicholson and David Chariandy at gallery Gachet in Vancouver, BC, on 22 January 2016.
2. Scott, Jordan. *Lanterns at Guantánamo*. SFU Writers in Residence Chapbook Series. Vancouver: Simon Fraser University Department of English. 2017. pp. 10–11.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3 and pp. 13–14.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12. Scott notes that the quoted passage is from Paul Celan, quoted in Zolf, Rachel. “Noone Bears Witness”. *Canadian Literature, A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*. Autumn/Winter. 2011. Available online at <https://canlit.ca/article/noone-bears-witness/> (accessed 2019-06-13.)
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*

7. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 18. Italics in the original.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
10. Boochani, Behrouz and Kamali Sarvestani, Arash, directors. *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, 2017; Boochani, Behrouz. *No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*. Sydney: Picador Australia. 2018.
11. Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. New York, NY: Verso. 2012. p. 19.
12. Critchley, Simon. *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. New York, NY: Verso. 2007. p. 49. Italics in the original.
13. Badiou, Alain. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Translated by P. Hallward. London: Verso. 2011. pp. 67–68.
14. Critchley, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
15. Ranganathan, Bharat. “The Bible’s Message on Separating Immigrant Children from Parents Is a Lot Different from What Jeff Sessions Thinks.” *The Conversation*. June 18, 2018. Available online at <http://theconversation.com/the-bibles-message-on-separating-immigrant-children-from-parents-is-a-lot-different-from-what-jeff-sessions-thinks-98419> (accessed 2019-06-13.).
16. Berriolo, Elena. *A Book as a Bridge Across the Mexican Border*. Artist’s website <http://elenaberriolo.com/a-book-as-a-bridge-across-the-mexican-border> (accessed 2018-07-13.)
17. *Ibid.*
18. Centre for Book Arts, New York Transit Museum, and Children’s Museum of the Arts in New York
19. Berriolo, Elena. Email to the author. 2 July 2018.
20. Berriolo, Elena. “A Book as a Bridge, in conversation with David Brody”. *artcritical* (blog). 3 March 2017. Available online at <http://www.artcritical.com/2017/03/03/elena-berriolo-in-conversation-with-david-brody/> (accessed 2019-06-13.)
21. Berriolo, Email to the author.
22. Berriolo, Elena. “A Book as a Bridge Across the Mexican Border, performance on December 18, 2016”. YouTube video. 2:55. 15 May 2017. Available online at <https://youtu.be/zqGQOR5ChjA> (accessed 2019-06-13.).
23. For the remainder of this text, I will use the term *feminicide* rather than *femicide*, borrowing the explanation of Alice Driver, who notes that feminicide forwards the performance of gender in an intersectional analysis of these outbreaks of violence. Sergio González Rodríguez instead circulates femicide which, he writes, is a totalising condition affecting every aspect of life in Juárez, including economic dependence. Driver, Alice. *More Or Less Dead: Feminicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press. 2015. p. 16. González Rodríguez, Sergio. *The Femicide Machine*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e). 2012. pp. 12–14.
24. Driver, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
26. Vásquez-Arroyo, Antonio Y. *Political Responsibility: Responding to Predicaments of Power*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 2016.
27. Foucault, Michel. “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress”. In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Edited by Paul Rabinow. New York, NY: New Press. 1997. p. 263.
28. Vásquez-Arroyo, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
29. Bhabha, Homi K. “On Cultural Choice”. In *The Turn to Ethics*. Edited by Marjorie Barber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walowitz. New York, NY: Routledge. 2000. p. 187.
30. Driver, *op. cit.*, p. 103ff.

31. Portillo, Lourdes quoted in Driver, *op. cit.*, p.121.
32. Braidotti, Rosi. *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Malden: Polity Press. 2006. p. 90.
33. My wording reflects informal conversations with Quezada about the work and an artist statement. Quezada, Daisy. "Daisy Quezada – Artist Statement". *Artaxis*. Available online at <https://artaxis.org/daisy-quezada/> (accessed 2019-06-17.).
34. "About us". Station Museum of Contemporary Art website. Available online at http://stationmuseum.com/?page_id=306(accessed 2018-07-14.)
35. "Frontera 450+". Station Museum of Contemporary Art website. Available at http://stationmuseum.com/?page_id=2655 (accessed 2018-07-14.)
36. What is described in this text is far from exhaustive. Not included, for example, is Sylvie Paré's travelling exhibition, entitled *Missing or Forgotten: Akonessen, Zitya, Tina, Marie and All the Others*, which featured work by Hannah Claus, Nadia Myre, Sylvie Bernard, Mariette Manigouche, Diane Blacksmith, Lise Bibeau, Annette Nolett, Diane Roberston, and Akienda Lainé. A more historic and situated grassroots activism project is the Women's Memorial March Quilt, which since 2005 has been a focal point of the annual 14 February march through Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES). It was created by Dianne Wood and has recently been digitally archived by Vancouver Public Library: "VPL Launches New Online Gallery Highlighting Women's Memorial Quilt". Vancouver Public Library. 28 March 2017. Available at <http://www.vpl.ca/library/news/2017/vpl-launches-new-online-gallery-highlighting-women%E2%80%99s-memorial-quilt> (accessed 2019-06-13.)
37. The year 2002 was when serial murderer Robert "Willy" Pickton was arrested in Canada. He was eventually charged with murdering 26 women, though he is reported to have admitted to killing 49 (numerous sources).
38. Ramroop, Sabrina. "History Resurfaces through Jaime Black's REDress Project". *Varsity*. University of Toronto. 26 March 2017. Available at <https://thevarsity.ca/2017/03/26/history-resurfaces-through-jaime-blacks-redress-project/> (accessed 2019-06-13.).
39. Braidotti, *op. cit.*, p. 8 and p. 23.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
41. Massumi, Brian. *The Politics of Affect*. Malden: Polity. 2015. p. 43.
42. Bolt, Barbara. *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*. London: I.B. Tauris. 2004. p. 8.
43. Beshty, Walead. "Introduction: Toward an Aesthetics of Ethics". In *Ethics*. Edited by Walead Beshty. London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel and The MIT Press. 2013. p. 22.
44. The 13th International Conference on the Arts in Society. Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Vancouver. 27-29 June 2018.
45. Beshty, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
47. Reed, Patricia. "Co-Autonomous Ethics and the Production of Misunderstanding". *Fillip*. Spring 2012. p. 28.