

Community as soma: reflections on a community-conscious theatre gathering

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ABSTRACT

Taking as a point of departure the ongoing and ever-evolving interaction between theatre arts and communities, this article expands upon ideas on bodies and communities bringing together somatic, theatre and community studies. It uses as a case study a somatically inspired theatre praxis gathering that took place in the village of Kato Garouna (Corfu, Greece) during summer 2018 (23-26 August). The gathering is identified as a 'community-conscious' project which led to the awareness of 'community as soma'. This approach to community inquiry, supported by the openness of somatic and practice-research methodologies, allows the integration of embodied differences and dualities within creative co-presence. It also prompts the emergence of new interactive possibilities between newly-shaped and existing groups through critical and ethical attention to invitations. Reflecting upon the methods that underlined the gathering process, communities are examined in relation to the invitations that developed them and their critical implications.

KEYWORDS

soma/somatic, somaticities, theatre praxis, community-conscious, decentred communities, third/thirdness, embodied differences, invitations

INTRODUCTION

The interconnectedness between theatre arts and communities has been an ongoing investigation since the origins of theatre practice. Recent studies on these dynamic relations (Fişek 2019; Galea and Musca 2019) highlight the changing notion of theatre communities combined with the understanding that 'the idea of a *theatrical community* is never a given and that it is best approached as a problematic, or a question' (Fişek 2019: 5, original emphasis). The diversity and multiplicity in defining and understanding communities and community phenomena through various research methodologies has also been an observation in the current field of community studies (Crow 2018: 12). While in theatre studies the investigation of communities has been primarily a subject of 'applied' and 'community theatre', Marco Galea and Szabolcs Musca argue that such view narrows the theme within 'amateur or semi-professional theatre-making' (2019: 2). In resonance with this new perspective along with the ideas of relationality, ongoing change, openness and diversity, this article adds upon discussions on bodies and communities within the context of somatic theatre praxis.

The term 'somatic theatre praxis' is used here to identify a growing area of theatre studies that brings together theatre practices, somatic research and arts-praxis methodologies (see among others Zarrilli et al. 2013; Evans 2015; Worth 2015; Murray and Keefe 2016). Somatic research in performance studies is commonly related to dance and is informed by methods of somatic movement education (SME) (see among others Bresler 2007; Eddy

2016). The notion of the somatic in this body of work derives from the discourse of the philosopher and practitioner Thomas Hanna (1928-1990). According to Hanna, who reintroduced soma, the Greek word for body: 'A soma is any individual embodiment of a process, which endures and adapts through time, and it remains a soma as long as it lives. The moment that it dies it ceases to be a soma and becomes a body' (1976: 31). Therefore, the adjective somatic according to Hanna, defines the embodied processes of all living bodies. He also coined the term somatics in order to introduce a field of experiential practices that develop upon this embodied awareness (Hanna 1976: 31). In my research I move further by examining diverse and intersubjective experiences of somaticity as the state of being or having experienced bodies along with the broader notion of the somatic as noun within and beyond somatics.

By integrating somatic methodologies with arts praxis as 'theory imbricated within practice' (Nelson 2013: 16), somatic research finds multiple applications in contemporary practice research and supports the emergence of new transdisciplinary discourses (Kapadocha 2021). As part of these discourses, that originate in theatre-performance and somatic studies while also transcend them, my research has been developed upon critical interrogations on intersubjective/intercorporeal dynamics within actor-training and performance environments (Kapadocha 2016, 2018). Either in-between actors, actors and educators, actors and spectators, I investigate these dynamics through methods of somatic witnessing and theories of intersubjectivity that advocate the significance of *differences* within experiential *co-presence*. Co-presence in somatic witnessing suggests embodied and equally active engagement between multiple individuals or groups supported by movement, contact, vocal or verbal interaction (Kapadocha 2018a: 206-208). Bringing somatic witnessing in dialogue with Jessica Benjamin's theoretical notion of intersubjective thirdness (Benjamin 2018), I have also introduced the significance of a transformational space that embraces the integration of embodied engagement and diverse individualities in theatre contexts through the experience of *witnessed thirdness* (Kapadocha 2018a).

Witnessed thirdness as co-presence that resides in a third intercorporeal experience which embraces different groups and individuals, is also innately connected with the integration of dualistic notions of individuality within collectivity and difference within sameness or vice versa. Reflecting on the above through the scope of community discourses, I started identifying common notions and areas of investigation with my research (Fişek 2019: 41). Therefore, borrowing from Galea and Musca, even though community inquiry has not been a conscious intention of my praxis, the nature of my research has been inevitably 'community conscious' (2019: 1-14). Nevertheless, the first time the notion of community evidently emerged in my critical reflections was when I organised a practice-research gathering in a small village in the island of Corfu in Greece during the summer 2018. Questions that came up through the process of the gathering activities included: what can be the connections between somatically inspired inquiry and the awareness of communities? What can we understand about communities through modern perspectives on somaticities? Can somatic methodologies support the building of 'third' or co-created communities and why would that be important? These questions represent a latest direction of my research which is in progress towards the development of new work. At the same time they generated original insights on the interrelations between somatic, theatre and community studies discussed in this article.

Using the Corfu gathering as a case study, this article advances ethical ideas of integrating embodied differences and dualities in theatre-community discourses and critically examines the significance of invitations as a method towards new or 'third' possibilities in community-conscious arts praxis. It outlines the emergence of these ideas as an inextricable part of both

somatic and practice-research methodologies which intentionally allow openness to the 'not-yet-known' (Heron and Kershaw 2018: 46) and 'third' potentialities. According to Benjamin, 'the idea of thirdness tries to capture the original idea of free association to the not yet known, what arises without coercion and constraint' (2018: 15). I develop the structure of the article by first outlining and situating the gathering in relation to somatic, performance and community contexts. This is followed by an overview on the nature of the communities that were developed through the gathering and how they were related to the invitations that shaped them. The analysis of this process is critically supported by intersubjective and ethical perspectives on invitations that praise integration and co-creation within differences. The content of the article is complemented with texts from the actual invitations as well as images from the process. The last part offers a link to how reflections on the project additionally invited somatically-oriented online participation moving beyond the main research activities. I indicate a further connection with the nature of online communities and the future of the project, acknowledging that I am revising this article during a collective somatic and community turn due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

SOMATIC THEATRE GATHERING: THE CONTEXT

The Somatic in Theatre and Performance Research Gathering was a four-day series of somatically inspired workshops that took place in Greece (Kato Garouna village, Corfu, 23-26 August 2018). This meeting introduced the exploration of somaticities in theatre and performance, beyond the existed interaction between dance and the field of somatic practices or somatics (on the field of somatics beyond Hanna 1976 mentioned above, see Eddy 2009, 2016; Johnson 1995, 2018). The activities were inspired by practices that are directly connected to somatic lineages such as Alexander Technique, BMC® (Body-Mind Centering), IBMT (Integrative Bodywork and Movement Therapy) and Authentic Movement as well as by investigations on somaticities in theatre practices such as post-Stanislawski and post-Grotowski approaches. The aim of the gathering was a co-exploration of theatre and performance-based themes such as: the somatisation of text, somatic orientations, soundscapes and landscapes, somatic costumes, somatic modes of listening, the soma in the collective, multiple definitions of the somatic and modes of somatic reflections within current practice research or praxis. In that sense, the gathering had a dual objective: 1. to contribute to practical questions in theatre and performance studies and 2. to inform broader theoretical discussions through modern practice-research or praxical methodologies.



Figure 1: the poster of the gathering on the wall of Kato Garouna Village Hall, Corfu, Greece. © Christina Kapadocha.

In the circulated invitation to participation, the identity of the gathering was outlined as follows:

This four-day gathering belongs to the current burgeoning interest in the dynamic interrelations between somatic practices and modern research, within or outside scholarly environments. It emerged from my ongoing curiosity and own research on somatically informed or somatically inspired practices in the field of theatre and performing arts, beyond the relatively established dialogues between somatics and dance. Reflecting on the work of artist-researchers, practitioner-researchers, practitioners and artists who have become part of my journey and who study various expressions of somaticities (directly or indirectly), I became intrigued to bring us together in one shared multidisciplinary environment.

I also outlined the thinking behind the location of the gathering:

The reason I chose Corfu as the actual environment for this gathering is that, in my perception, this island becomes a metaphor of multiple interconnections. Beyond the fact that it is part of my cultural heritage and identity, Corfu to me ideally somatizes the harmonic integration of diverse traces and landscapes. While it challenges geographical, historical, ideological and cultural boundaries, at the same it seems to preserve and acknowledge each individual characteristic. Within this 'holding' the island also offers an ideal transition to a rich natural environment that can generously 'nurture' our shared explorations.

As a Greek-born who lives in London, England, Corfu clearly represents a threshold between my home country, my present home and the rest of Europe (see Figure 2) through a culturally, historically and naturally diverse environment. This environment became even more specific when the activities were set to take place within the community of Kato Garouna village. Through this community-conscious choice, the project can be situated in relation to a growing phenomenon of artistic gatherings taking place beyond traditional city-based and formal cultural or academic environments. Consequently, these alternative places become an additional component of the explored research inquiries. For instance, as Galea and Musca suggest, it is not random that their edited collection *Redefining Theatre Communities* (2019) is the outcome of a conference that took place in the Mediterranean island of Gozo, Malta, bringing together academics, theatre makers ‘and the historically and socioculturally complex environment that this Mediterranean island represents between Europe and Africa’ (2019: 2). Reading this interrelation through Benjamin’s perspective on thirdness as a transformational space, a community-conscious environment can become ‘that shared space of fitting in, coordination, or purposeful negotiation of difference’ (2018: 2) that can allow the emergence of new findings and possibilities.

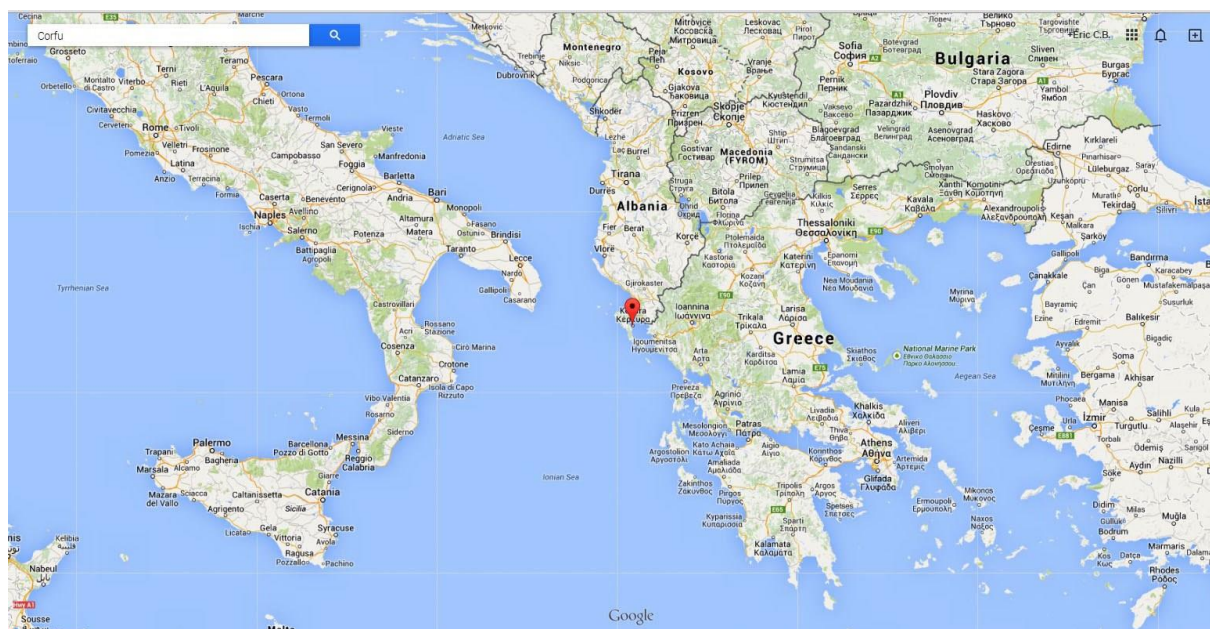


Figure 2: the geographical location of Corfu through Google Maps. © Google Maps.

More specifically in Greece, among the established annual artistic gatherings which grew out of their rural identity are the ‘Music Village’ at Aghios Lavrentios in Pelion and ‘Zagoriwood’ at Kato Pedina in Zagori, Epirus. These initiatives stem from a conscious choice of decentring artistic explorations into natural habitats of smaller communities. Taking from the Corfu project experience, I argue that a fundamental characteristic of such gatherings is an ethical responsibility to acknowledge the members of the existing-‘hosting’ communities as additional contributors to the gathering processes. I propose that, as a result, these activities can prompt the development of ‘third’ communities between the ‘sameness’ of the gathering members around shared artistic interests and the ‘difference’ of the hosting community members. Furthermore, this understanding of witnessed thirdness which inspired by Benjamin recognises both ‘sides’ of individuals or groups as active members of the same process (Benjamin 2018: 247-259), can emerge only from the somatic interactions prompted by the gathering activities per se. The activities discussed here develop upon a state of

heightened shared experience that embraces embodied differences, multiplicity and inclusion. Focusing on the multiplicity of the brown body, ethnographer Cindy Cruz notes: 'The body prompts memory and language, builds community and coalition' (2006: 72). I add upon this idea by suggesting the understanding of *community as soma* that can grow out of ongoing and shared processes of community-conscious invitations to the 'not yet known'.

Within the context of my research, the interconnection between diverse processes of embodiment and decentred communities can be identified as well in the development of movement-based actor-training traditions. In Europe, for instance, it can be found differently in the lineages of Michael Chekhov through the impact of the Michael Chekhov Studio at Dartington Hall (Devon, UK, 1935-1938, see Autant Mathieu 2015: 82-95) and Jerzy Grotowski, particularly in the example of Włodzimierz Staniewski's Centre for Theatre Practices established in 1977 at the Polish village of Gardzienice (see Allain 2005: 19-26). Looking at these two strands, embodiment in the acting community spans from Chekhov's acknowledgement of the actor's self to the priority of the collective and mutuality in Staniewski's practice. Especially in the latest, the Gardzienice theatre group has been exploring various ways of acknowledging dynamic interactions with village communities within and beyond Gardzienice through shared gatherings, expeditions and performances (Cioffi 2013: 214-215). The same community-conscious dynamics between individual and collective experience are very much present in the lineages of somatic education and practices too.

The individual-collective dynamics in somatic inquiry tend to be 'nourished' by the environment of rural or village communities. In my experience of the UK-based IBMT somatic training with Linda Hartley, I studied the practice in two English villages that became one with my learning process; from the journey to the village, to staying with members of the local community and participating in village activities such as a barn dance. I understood this interaction as a way of 'demystifying' the generally perceived as 'alternative' training activities to the people of the village. Overall, community as co-created experience is at the heart of somatic methodologies. Specifically when it comes to community inquiry within somatics, the themes of 'community organizing' and 'community building' are primarily connected with the context of 'social somatics' (Eddy 2016: 235). Social somatics activists 'can bring somatic attention to all arenas related to the body – most notably environmental, humanistic and health justice issues – or use somatic practices to enhance their own sustainability' (Eddy 2016: 235). Furthermore, there are ongoing efforts towards more diverse and socially 'inclusive somatics' that wish to fully embrace the concept of difference within the studied creative interconnectedness (Johnson 2018).

As part of a similar investigation of embodied dynamics within social theory, Brenda Farnell talks about two 'somatic turns' which mark the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century (2012). According to Farnell's *Dynamic Embodiment for Social Theory*, the first somatic turn 'moves us from disembodied social science to a focus "on the body"' and the second situates the moving body in the centre of embodied social action (2012: 4). I filter my present reflection through this theoretical evolution that replaces the Cartesian dualism of 'I think therefore I am' (Descartes 2017: 83) with the embodied perception of 'I move therefore I am' (Farnell 2012). I suggest that this advanced somatic attention combined with the awareness of ongoing co-creation and integration of differences could also benefit the understanding of the 'community building' process as part of creative and community-studies methodologies. Mingling community theories, Benjamin's thirdness and ethical perspectives

on invitations, in the following part I outline the Corfu gathering process as an additional container for emergent community-conscious findings.

A PROCESS OF COMMUNITY-CONSCIOUS INVITATIONS

I am considering as the grounding community that was shaped out of the gathering the one created through the meeting between the contributors and the participants to the activities. This group was made in two phases around a shared interest in the work of somatic theatre praxis. As Graham Crow notes 'communities may be constellations of people with shared interests' (2018: 12). Nevertheless, the intention of the project was not homogeneity or sameness given that 'such communities built around a common interest can still be quite heterogeneous' (Crow 2018: 13). The challenge of homogeneity as well as the shaping of a shared space that would allow openness to new findings beyond hierarchies and divisions were the main intentions of the project. Critical reflection on the gathering as process allowed me to observe that these intentions were facilitated by the way I structured the invitations to the activities. Borrowing from Benjamin's understanding of the third (or Third), '[a]n *invitation* to join a shared Third of looking together at "what has happened between us" may be procedurally more liberating than the attempt to figure it out for oneself' (2018: 72, emphasis added). In resonance, I realised that I have been consistently using intersubjective/intercorporeal invitations as a research method in my projects, either within pedagogical or performance contexts.

Addressed to actors in training, active spectators and participants or fellow artist-researchers, invitations in my praxis have been broadly characterized by elements of choice and openness to new interrelational possibilities through somatically inspired practice. These qualities suggest conceptual and embodied principles of shared presence, care and sensitivity. They are influenced by somatic education methodologies that tend to replace instructions towards predetermined knowledge with invitations to 'emptiness'. Janet Adler on the practice of Authentic Movement would note: 'Before us is an empty space [...] All of it, all of this emptiness, is a reflection of our potential experience of emptiness within. I invite you to enter this emptiness as a mover' (2002: 20). The openness to the potentialities of 'emptiness' can also be seen in line with the 'not-yet-knowing' in practice-research methodologies. Therefore, I was drawn to the significance of invitations as a *processual research method* towards new knowledge within the wider spectrum of practice research. This complements various forms of dynamic interactions involved in practice research (see Nelson 2013, Arlander et al. 2018) as well as the use of invitations as part of Performance-as-Research or Practice-as-Research discourses, implicitly or explicitly (see Scott 2016, Bucknall 2018).

The invitation that planted the seed towards the shaping of the gathering community was sent on July 12 2017 to a group of experienced practitioner-researchers and artists with whom we have crossed paths in different times during our professional journeys (for the gathering's final programme, see Kapadocha 2018b). My intention was not to impose my interests to the contributors but to offer a shared research space in which each one of us could bring in their own questions and investigations towards diverse co-creation. As Benjamin points out: 'Form and function coalesce in various phenomenal experiences of thirdness or co-creation--sharing of states, harmonizing, recognition of other minds through matching specificity (Sander, 1991) understanding and negotiating differences' (2018: 95). Through these differences I could discern possible multidisciplinary interrelations and overlaps around the theme of somaticities. Thus, as mentioned in the previous part, the contributors had multiple backgrounds and not necessarily a direct relation to the field of

somatics. For instance, the practice on the collective soma was brought into relation with ecological inquiry and vocal landscapes. This intention for multidisciplinary co-creation was successfully and quickly noticed by the gathering members who described it as 'editing skills' or 'spaces of encounter' curated with precision and care.

Another element that became evident in the identity of my invitations to both contributors and participants was the intended blurring of lines between the two subgroups. For the theorisation of this deliberate blurring which extends to the inclusion of the village community, I find particularly helpful Jacques Derrida's advancements upon Emmanuel Lévinas' philosophy on hospitality as ethics (1999). For my invitation to the contributors, I was drawn to the idea that: 'The one who invites is invited by the one whom he [sic] invites' (Derrida 1999: 42). In other words, it was the nature of the work of the invited contributors that triggered my invitation to them without nonetheless suggesting that the members of the shaped group were the only ones who could contribute to the project. Accordingly, the invitation for participation of professional artists and advanced students was meant to mingle contributors and participants. Derrida discusses the overlapping between a host and a guest in the French language: 'the *hôte* who receives (the host), the ones who welcomes the invited or received *hôte* (the guest) [...] is in truth a *hôte* received in his [sic] own home' (1999: 41, original emphasis). Thus, the *contributing participants* were also offered space in order to explore and advance their own investigations, the impact of which was particularly evident in the reflections. Among them, a participant would identify the nature of the gathering as a 'bio-psycho-social creation'. The finding that came up through this creation is that the emergent gathering community and the witnessed activities that took place in the village, brought up an unanticipated integration with the local community.

My invitation to the village community for possible hospitality of the planned project was initiated a year before the gathering and had inevitably a distinct quality. It was driven by my own somatic bond with the place and its history. Returning to Cruz's ideas: 'The body is a pedagogical device, a location of recentering and recontextualizing the self and the stories that emanate from that self' (2006: 72). At the same time, I noticed that my somatic attention carried an understanding of my thirdness. This time thirdness represents a quality of otherness that suggests something new, whether towards new thinking or knowledge. I may have been spending holidays in my family's house that is interestingly situated in the 'heart' of the village (a spot among the houses as seen on Figure 3 below) but for the existing village community I am unavoidably more of a visitor or other: 'The third is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor' (Levinas cited in Derrida 1999: 32). Therefore, I first had to acknowledge the existing village community as part of the planned project which was driven by 'a *yearned* for grouping' (Fişek 2019: 5, original emphasis); to understand that I was, even indirectly, inviting the village residents into something new and therefore had to check their openness; to ask before inviting 'guests' to their 'home'.



Figure 3: a view of Kato Garouna from a hill at the west entrance to the village. Photo from the author's documentation. © Christina Kapadocha.

Gradually and through ongoing communication with village residents, things started getting into place. The Kato Garouna cultural assembly offered the village hall as the main space for the activities. In response to contributors' inquiries we also started adding venues such as the main church you could discern at the top left of Figure 3 and the village's Handicraft and Agricultural Life Museum. Nevertheless, it was not until witnessing the actual gathering activities the village truly welcomed and embraced the project. Like genuine hosts, members of the local community started offering more venue options, including their own properties and helped with the practicalities of the activities throughout. To mark the completion of the gathering they also organised a closing celebration, culminating in a very much appropriate circular dance. What became obvious to me through this shift and shared enthusiasm was a third component of the project; the understanding of *community as soma* that can grow out of active witnessing and carefully shaped invitations to embodied interactions that intend to move beyond dualism and homogeneity. This is not necessarily an obvious process while it requires time and heightened attention. Analysing the social fabric of community, Peter Block states:

What makes community building so complex is that it occurs in an infinite number of small steps, sometimes in quiet moments that we notice out of the corner of our eye [...] If the artist is one who captures the nuance of experience, then this is who each of us must become.

(2018: 33)

CLOSING THOUGHTS THROUGH ONLINE INVITATIONS

Returning to the opening of this article, Block's statement indirectly confirms the ongoing and ever-evolving interconnection between theatre arts and communities. What the discussed project suggests is that community building resides as a possibility in the consciousness of theatre activities that develop upon dynamic interrelations, even when this is not a goal in itself. Particularly by bringing together the openness of somatic and theatre praxis methodologies, the Corfu gathering shows how advanced understanding of diverse somaticities and active witnessing can support the awareness of communities beyond binaries such as sameness and difference, individuality and collective. Acknowledging somatically-inspired attention to differences within co-presence and co-creation, it is evident that new or, according to Benjamin, third possibilities can emerge in the meeting between existing and newly-developed communities. Moreover, the mingling of the employed methodologies inspired further experimentation on whether the project's community-conscious insights could be conveyed to the reader through the dissemination of the research activities. To this end, I set up an interactive post for the Theatre, Dance and Performance Training Blog (Kapadocha 2019).

The post is developed upon the practice of somatic witnessing but this time as an experiential approach to reading. In order to activate the readers' invited witnessing(s) by leaving replies to the post, I outline a simple structure of the practice through the first-person narrative 'I see ... I sense ... I feel ... I imagine ...' inspired by Authentic Movement methods. My writing is combined with a short video and four images while it opens with my own witnessing. In my understanding, this is how I could further support the individual reader's participation and interaction from somatic attention. To my surprise, each reader's experiential response echoed community-related qualities either with direct references to the perception of community/communion or with alternative wording such as closeness, solidarity, communication, unity, togetherness and empathy. Activated imagery also carried shared experiences like a meal around a campfire, festivities and dancing together. From a critical perspective, I should recognise that the specific readers are familiar with embodied practices and their responses were inspired by non-randomly chosen documentation. Nonetheless, it is striking how the somatically-facilitated reading of the offered online documentation carries a vivid experiential attunement with the essence of the activities' 'here and now'. To offer you an example, the researcher and theatre expert Jonathan Pitches writes on Figure 4 (as included in the blog post):

I see ... Two people together and apart, connected and unconnected, both aware of one another and (seemingly) unaware
I sense ... A slippery uncanniness
I feel ... Warmth tempered with uneasiness
I imagine ... An intergenerational duet, drawing a crowd into the square and down the street.

(Pitches 2019: n. pag.)



Figure 4: a moment of tacit communion between a contributor to the project (Chrysanthi Avloniti) and a member of the local community during an integrative performance as part of Lisa Woynarski's final workshop on Ecological Landscapes. (Kato Garouna, Corfu, Greece, 26 August 2018). Photo by Maria Fotiou, shared copyright with the author.

To me, the offered witnessing encapsulates the essence of this reflection on somaticities in communion and suggests new possibilities regarding further interactions between groups and individuals in future steps of the project. For instance, thoughts have emerged on how the members of the village community could become even more active 'hosts' in the following gathering through activities such as guiding us to local walks and other aspects of their daily lives. The moment in Figure 4, which was also witnessed as part of my own documentation, additionally reflects the discussed third, blurring the identities of the members of the village and the gathering communities, the performer and the witness, the 'host' and the 'guest'. In a similar way, I am considering how participants who responded to the first-gathering invitation could take on the role of an active contributor in the next step of the project. At the same time, as I am revising this article during the COVID-19 outbreak and quarantine, the reflection on the project and the interaction with the blog readers brings into my attention dynamics between somatic and online experiences, somatically shaped and online communities.

Drawing on community studies and Barry Wellman's ideas, Graham Crow discusses the benefits of internet-based communities and multiple applications of cyberspaces on caring capacities and well-being (2018: 62). This is undeniably a great aspect of the shared present experience. However, 'the internet has not fundamentally changed the pattern whereby connections between people are made using other media in between episodes of face-to-face interaction' (Crow 2018: 62). As a result, when we are deprived from this embodied communication, something is unavoidably missing. While theatre communities have

productively found their ways into cyberspaces through creativity and diverse use of media, I would suggest that this transition could not be possible without the experience and expertise that derives from previously gained somatic attention and interaction. Thus, even though I have postponed the projects that were inspired by the Corfu gathering, including the following gathering itself, the research at the moment has shifted attention to observations on how somatic witnessing could remain an underlying thread in the 'holding' of theatre communities through online activities and invitations.

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