



## Stitching Language: Sounding Voice in the Art Practice of Vanessa Dion Fletcher

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper engages with the artistic practice and work of Vanessa Dion Fletcher (Potawatomi and Lenapé) from my perspective as a non-Indigenous academic and curator. Dion Fletcher and I have worked together over the past several years through discussions about her work, studio visits, and various events. In her art practice, Dion Fletcher uses porcupine quills and menstrual blood to inquire into a range of issues and concepts including Indigenous language revitalization, feminist Indigenous corporeality, Land as pedagogy, decolonization, and neurodiversity. In particular her work confronts the ways that Indigeneity, the queer and gendered body, and disability are rendered expendable. In this paper I engage with Dylan Robinson's "sovereign sense": a transcorporeal mode of perception that is affective, land-based, and formed through relations between human and non-humans. Dion Fletcher's work makes palpable this sense of sovereignty through its unruly and mutating feltness. Further, her work makes visible feminist Indigenous artistic acts of resurgence alongside the frictions at the intersections of settler colonialism and disability. Following Karyn Recollet, I contend that Dion Fletcher's work activates an Indigenous affective experience of futurity and creative intimacy that in turn imagines disability and Indigeneity as sites through which new pedagogical relations can be formed.*

**KEYWORDS** Indigenous art; affect; disability; healthism; futurity

### Introduction

This paper engages with the artistic practice and work of Vanessa Dion Fletcher (Potawatomi and Lenapé) from my perspective as a non-Indigenous academic and curator who has engaged with Dion Fletcher and her artwork and practice over the past number of years. Following Leah Decter and Carla Taunton (2013), my approach takes up settler responsibility in decolonization. Decter and Taunton contend that non-Indigenous artists and scholars have a role to play in forging settler and Indigenous relations,

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ISSN: 1911-4788



including artistic actions. As a white settler academic my position and privilege are inseparable from my methods and perspectives. I acknowledge that my entanglement with Dion Fletcher's work is entrenched in, and fraught with, complex relations of colonial power, including academic and curatorial language, representation, and interpretation. In order to be attentive to such tensions, I approach Dion Fletcher's work, and my writing here, through what Emily Johnson and Karyn Recollet (2020) name as radical relationality. Radical relationality is composed of relations of care, kinship, and intimacy. Radical relationality, which I experience and identify elsewhere as a touching encounter (Springgay, 2018), asks questions about consent and is grounded in generativity and love. In placing radical relationality at the heart of my curatorial work with Dion Fletcher, I recognize the limits of my writing about this work from a white settler perspective. At the same time radical relationality allows me to foreground the intimate care and respect I have for the artist, her work, and the role they play in decolonization. In coming to know Dion Fletcher and her practice I experienced the affective forces and bodily entanglements of her work. We spent time over tea holding the porcupine quills that are central to her work and inhaling their musty fragrance. I engaged Dion Fletcher's various performances, installations, and video works sensorily, allowing them to enter my body and senses. These experiences helped me counter conventional academic readings of the work and I have attempted to include this affective texture into the writing in this paper alongside academic language. This hybrid writing practice and style is meant to point to the tensions of settler writing and scholarship on Indigenous artists.

Many of Dion Fletcher's art works incorporate porcupine quills, a traditional textile used in Indigenous art and design. Dion Fletcher uses quills "to reveal the complexities of what defines a body physically and culturally" (Dion Fletcher, n.d.). One still image from Dion Fletcher's video work, "Testing," reaches beyond the screen. It pictures her mouth, lips sealed tightly around the ends of seven porcupine quills, quills slightly obscured by fingers in the foreground of the photograph. The fingers on the left side of the image hold another quill and inch slowly toward or away from the tip of her index finger on the right side of the image, the fingertip already speckled with blood. The image quivers with both violence and intimacy. It conjures in me thought, memory, and feeling: the pain of a pin prick endured while sewing or embroidering; the fleshiness and porosity of a leaking body; self-harm; legacies of settler colonialism; a dead animal carcass; the obliteration of Indigenous languages – a mouth that cannot speak. Yet, there is a simultaneous tenderness to the image. The closeness of the mouth and fingers suggest that we are witnessing something private – a touching encounter of kinship between human and nonhuman. The image pulses with contradiction.

These contradictory vibrations are further explored in Dion Fletcher's performance "Offensive/Defensive." Here, again with quills in her mouth, she approaches audience members and offers them a quill. This gesture of

“contact,” of reaching out and connecting, suggests both force and affection, themes that quiver and course throughout Dion Fletcher’s work. In both “Testing” and “Offensive/Defensive,” the mouth becomes the conduit through which the encounter of touch is extended. It is an orifice that ingests, spits-out, desires, is silenced, and speaks. The quill mouth is an assemblage of corporeal gestures, one of many that Dion Fletcher makes in her oeuvre, an inquiry into a range of questions, concepts, and experiences including Indigenous language revitalization, feminist Indigenous corporeality, Land as pedagogy (Styres, 2019), decolonization, and neurodiversity. Her work confronts the ways that Indigeneity, the queer and gendered body, and disability are rendered expendable. In this paper, I suggest that Dion Fletcher’s art practice resists “settler legibility” through its affect and feltness (Robinson, 2017, p. 98). Settler legibility, according to Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) (2017) occurs when settlers read/interpret/understand Indigenous artwork through settler ways of knowing, or through settler perception and aesthetics.



*Figure 1.* Still image from Vanessa Dion Fletcher’s video performance, *Testing*, 2015 (photo: Vanessa Dion Fletcher).

*Image Description:* Close up image of a mouth, lips sealed tightly around the ends of seven porcupine quills. The quills are slightly obscured by fingers in the foreground of the photograph. The fingers on the left side of the image hold another quill and inch slowly toward or away from the tip of the index finger on the right side of the image, the fingertip already speckled with blood.

Dion Fletcher’s resistance to settler legibility is framed well by what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) (2016) names as acts of resurgence. Simpson identifies practices that re-invest Indigenous ways of being and regenerate knowledge traditions as important parts of

decolonization (2016). Similarly, Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora) (2017) understands Indigenous art as a sovereign act. Dion Fletcher's performative works are thus direct acts of sovereignty.

Dylan Robinson (2017), however, cautions against settler ways of being and understanding Indigenous art. He argues that settler modes of perception are driven by hunger and knowability that can further colonize Indigenous artistic practices. What is needed, he contends, are transcorporeal modes of perception that are affective, land-based, and formed through relations between human and non-humans. Robinson describes a sense of sovereignty. It is this sovereign sensation that Dion Fletcher's work makes palpable through its unruly and mutating feltness. Further, her work makes visible feminist Indigenous artistic acts of resurgence alongside the frictions at the intersections of settler colonialism and disability, where both Indigeneity and disability are expendable. Following Karyn Recollet (Cree) (2018), I contend that Dion Fletcher's work activates an Indigenous affective experience of *futurity* and *creative intimacy* that in turn imagines disability and Indigeneity as sites through which new relations can be formed.

The first section of this paper considers the materiality of language and opens up the conception of words to include sound. I consider how Dion Fletcher's performance of "Finding Language: A Word Scavenger Hunt" operates affectively, beyond modes of conventional settler legibility. I suggest the performances, which entangle the revitalization of Indigenous textile art with Indigenous languages, are gestures of learning words or texts, and furthermore about sounding voice and agency.

In the later section of the paper I take up the biopolitics of purity and healthism and the ways that Indigeneity and disability are framed as matters of contamination within this discourse. I think-with Dion Fletcher as I discuss her cervical works (i.e., the many different performances she's created and performed with and about the cervix). I consider in particular her use of menstrual blood to challenge the logics of boundaries. Her work, in its viscous porosity, enacts an Indigenous futurity that is affective and intimate.

To conclude the paper, I consider the ways Dion Fletcher's work ruptures and mends pedagogical relations. In addition to the interventions in how Indigeneity and disability are taken up in education, I suggest that her work attunes us to a pedagogy that is intimate, porous, vulnerable, and felt. With Dion Fletcher, I imagine what pedagogy might be if it was conceived as an encounter between bodies, mouths, quills, and blood.

### **Stitching Language, Sounding Voice**

I'm sitting in Dion Fletcher's studio at the Ontario College of Arts and Design University where she is artist-in-residence. She is explaining the process of doing quillwork. As I understand it, there is a steadfastness to it: collecting quills from a porcupine carcass, soaking the quills in water to

soften, dying them, flattening them to prepare them to be used with a needle and thread. Quillwork, like other textile practices, is a method of knowing and being that is spatial and temporal, and which emphasizes the tactility of becoming (Springgay, 2018). Dion Fletcher takes her time describing the process. Handmade objects are neither uniform nor reproducible. Even if an artist creates a series of handmade objects, each one contains different compositions; no two are the same. In our conversation, Vanessa speaks of quillwork as a language. In its corporeality of stitching and labour, the tactility of holding and bending the quills, and also in the visual designs created, quillwork has cadence and meaning. She opens a jar of plucked quills, passes the jar, and invites me to inhale the warm, musky scent of a porcupine. This language, sensory, embodied, and transcorporeal vibrates between the porcupine, the quills, the hands that pluck, soak, dye, and stitch, the patterns stitched on the cards, and the bodies and elements that compose the room. The studio walls are covered in quillwork – on 6 x 9 inch cards,<sup>1</sup> jars full, and crates ready for shipping to an exhibition. It is a carpet of quills – cautioning me on where I might step. Quills, Dion Fletcher tells me, are all different. Unlike beads that were introduced through contact with European settlers, quills are of varying diameters and lengths. Quills, she says, are evocative of Land, where porcupine becomes teacher and/or co-learner. Land, writes Sandra Styres (Mohawk) (2019), is more than simply a geographical place for Indigenous peoples. It is “spiritual, emotional, and relational; Land *is* experiential, (re)membered, and storied; Land *is* consciousness – Land *is* sentient” (p. 27). This is what Styres names Land as pedagogy. As a practice of honoring Land, quillwork, then, is about reciprocity and relations between humans and more-than humans where language is sentient and felt, not merely coded and transcribed. Quillwork counters dominant settler understandings of language as external to the body, modeled on mastery and codes.

Tania Willard (Secwepemc) (2018) locates Land art as an art form typically attributed to white male artists and often described as “pioneering” or avant-garde. Settler art histories replace Indigenous art practices. Indigenous peoples, she writes “have been making ‘Land Art’ since time immemorial” (p. 189). Extending from both Willard’s analysis and Dion Fletcher’s self-reflection, Dion Fletcher’s use of quills indexes her relationship to land. Willard writes:

Art is one of these great forces, imagining impossible futures for disappeared bodies, languages, and generations. In my own practice of Land Art, land *is* art: an interconnected power to create, imagine, and make real connections to the world, as well as to those who fly and those who swim, in an ever-expanding stitch that coils us all together. (2018, p. 190)

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<sup>1</sup> Approximately 15 x 23 cm.

Dion Fletcher uses quills across a number of artistic modes and projects. In her interactive performance, “Finding Language: A Word Scavenger Hunt,” presented at the 10-day event *Indelible Refusal: Bodies, Performances and Walking Resistance* (WalkingLab, 2018a) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) in 2018, and in 2019 in a different iteration at the *Crippling the Arts Symposium* at the Harbourfront Centre for the Arts, Dion Fletcher’s quill designs appear on 6 x 9-inch cards juxtaposed with text prompts (in English). For “Indelible Refusal,” Dion Fletcher gathered participants in the OISE library and led us on a tour through the library showing us words on books, games, and other objects that resonated with the prompts she offered such as “A word that makes you remember.” As participants wandered the library, we were asked to question and consider the indeterminacy of language, its falterings, and hesitations.

This performance resonates with the work of Julietta Singh (2018), who reminds us of the colonial project of “mastery,” in which libraries and educational institutions play a significant role. Singh proposes that in order to “unthink mastery” we must embrace discomfort and “forms of queer dispossession” that enable different ways of inhabitation and illegibility (p. 8). The colonial master is convinced of their superiority through material conquest and an insistence on the supremacy of their worldviews that render the master as legitimate. Singh writes:

As a pursuit, mastery invariably and relentlessly reaches toward the indiscriminate control over something – whether human or inhuman, animate or inanimate. It aims for the full submission of an object – or something *objectified* – whether it be external or internal to oneself. (2018, p. 10)

Dion Fletcher’s library tour and quill-stitched cards resist this “masterful” approach to language. In “Finding Language,” language is emotive, sensory, and hand made.

Following the library tour, Dion Fletcher invited participants to search for our own words and phrases in the library and write them down on the hand stitched cards. The quills, dyed in bright hues of yellow, orange, green, and red, rupture the linear text with their colour and zig zag patterns. The prompts on the cards read:

*A word that makes you feel good.*  
*A word that makes you remember.*  
*A noun you identify with.*  
*A word to whisper.*  
*A word just for you.*

These prompts are propositional, open-ended invitations. They incite a form of intimacy and render attempts at mastery vulnerable and fragile. They impress the materiality of language, its feltness and vibrancy. The prompts

are a reminder that language is not static or stable but mutating, evolving, and deeply personal.



*Figure 2. Vanessa Dion Fletcher, Finding Language: A Word Scavenger Hunt at OISE, 2018 (photo: Stephanie Springgay).*

*Image description:* A group of seven people gather closely in a semi-circle in a narrow library aisle. Surrounded by books they gaze at artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher, centre, who kneels and pulls a book off of a shelf. Everyone else is holding notecards and pencils.

A number of contemporary Indigenous artists are revitalizing the use of traditional materials including Amy Malbeuf (Métis) in her use of tufted caribou hair in her sculptural and performative work, Nadia Myer's (Kitigan Zibi Anishinaabeg) beading of Canada's Indian Act, and Ursula Johnson's

(Mi'kmaq) use of basket-type woven installations. This revitalization works to hold and guide tradition. Sherry Ferrell Racette writes, “the simple act of retaining and protecting knowledge was political – the materials themselves often believed to be living and potent, and the gestures of weaving and stitching deeply personal and meditative” (2017, p. 115). In “Finding Language,” Dion Fletcher’s performative tour vacillates between revitalization of Indigenous language and material traditions and the ways in which language is materially elusive and invasive.

Dion Fletcher’s neurodiversity, a learning disability that includes challenges with short-term memory, subtly bends its way through “Finding Language”. Yet, though quillwork and the Lenapé language, she remembers and moves tradition. In this work, Dion Fletcher mobilizes bodily forms of knowing and the ephemerality and hapticality of language in order to confront the traumas and violence of the loss of language and culture, of ways of knowing and being, while affirming the ongoing vitality of Indigenous life and futurity. At *Crippling the Arts*, Dion Fletcher performed an adapted iteration of “Finding Language.” This performance begins as she lays on her back on stage, a sound piece playing in the background. The sounds of ice crackling, geese calls, and her grandmother's voice intensify as text appears on a screen. A transcript forms as the stenographer types out the sounds from the soundtrack. The artist rises and removes hearing aids from a small basket, cups her hands to her ears and asks, “can you hear me?” She notices a tiny spider as she sits on the floor.

She kneels in front of the audience, fingers tracing the Lenapé dictionary in her hands. The room is silent except for Dion Fletcher turning the pages. As the performance continues, she moves around the space. The room is a large meeting space at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, filled with small round tables, around which are placed conference style chairs, about two hundred people sit in the audience. As she moves through the room, she reads aloud words and symbols from various signs – a wheelchair symbol, the heating control unit – she repeats the English words and reads the Lenapé words (in Lenapé) and meanings (in English) from the dictionary. Using her cell phone, she transmits what she sees onto a large screen on the stage.

She turns over a chair and repeats, “chair, chair, chair,” and then speaks the Lenapé words for different kinds of chairs. She reflects on how there’s more to words than the mundanity they take on: “I used to think that ‘chair’ was a banal word. But then I thought about all the times I was stuck in a chair with the teacher or my mom. Somebody told me I had to sit down and stay still... ‘chair’ as a word is a lot less boring.” The performance is interactive – she moves through the room and reads out loud found words, her focus seemingly on text. But I encounter her performance as one also steeped in auditory sensation, where speech becomes sound and sound becomes haptic or bodily. Dominant forms of language are understood as speech which is legible through spoken language and written language (on the page or projected on the screen) and can be mastered. Feeling language is rendered as

noise, something to be commodified and controlled and made into speech or silenced. “Chair, chair, chair *lehëlēmatahpink*.” Bifurcating speech and noise determines who and what belongs. Yet, Dion Fletcher’s performance ruptures this bifurcation through affective modulations of sound, making the words do something other than making legible sense. In sounding and feeling language, she allows the visceral body to interrupt the primacy of the visual and textual representations.

Lisa Stevenson (2017) describes the force of saying something as an absent present. She developed this framework in her study of the messages Inuit in Arctic Canada sent to their relatives who had been forcibly removed from their homes and placed in a tuberculosis sanatorium in Hamilton Ontario. The separation was detrimental. The messages were recorded by the Department of Northern Affairs, but Inuit had no direct communication with their relatives. In analyzing the tapes, Stevenson is struck by the repetition of the phrase “I don’t know what to say” (p. 65). She writes, “it seems to me as if speakers ran up against, on the one hand, the impossibility of saying *something* and, on the other hand, the importance of *saying* something — the importance of speaking itself” (p. 66). It is the utterance, not the words themselves, wherein lies the potential of an absent present, or in other words a kind of futurity. She states, “my thinking also depends on the way words are not only vehicles of information or labels that fix the labeled in place but also gestures or even songs that allow a crooked, painful world, peopled by the living and the dead, to come into being” (p. 66). Stevenson suggests that in the act of speaking, multiple worlds are imagined and made possible. Relating to Stevenson’s analysis, while on one hand Dion Fletcher’s performance is about finding and learning language and resisting the ways that language codes and commodifies particular bodies, so too it is about *saying* something; sound is about a calling, where a body seeks another body. This calling, Stevenson insists, asks us to listen and hear differently. Voice, then, contrasts the mastery of language and speech. She suggests that we think of voice beyond intelligibility:

[Consider] voice because its primary function is not intelligibility but sound as it communicates, as it moves between and ties people together. And part of what I am suggesting is that, in moving between us, voice can also animate us, or allow us the space to be whatever it is that we are. (p. 2017, p. 75)

In “Finding Language,” Dion Fletcher’s voice and the ambient sounds of the performance ask the audience to listen to the absent present, to more than what is present in the room. To return to Robinson’s framework, Dion Fletcher’s voice embodies a sovereign sense (p. 98). He writes,

Indigenous resurgence is based not only on the forms our works take, but on the ways we perceive form in general. Decolonizing settler perception similarly involves reckoning with the ways in which looking and listening take place in

order to move beyond forms of hungry, starving, and extractive perception. (2017, p. 99)

I take this to mean that a sovereign sense is not, for example, about Dion Fletcher learning Lenapé through the accumulation of independent words and syntax or an ever-expanding lexicon and vocabulary; both Robinson and Dion Fletcher refuse the mastery of language here. Instead, we might think about sovereign sensing as a shift from the revitalization of art and language, which implies recovery and as such loss, to a collective way of being, a seeping between the quills and words and bodies like a spider casting a web.

### **Creative Intimacy**

Dion Fletcher uses menstrual blood and the cervix to challenge the logics of boundaries and in doing so brings together disability and colonialism. In the immersive installation and performance of “Own Your Cervix” at *Tangled Art + Disability* in 2017,<sup>2</sup> audience members were invited into a small room enclosed by white curtains and a deep red-painted wall for a guided cervical self-examination. Participants were invited to sit on an examination table and use a plastic speculum, flashlight, and mirror, to see a seldom seen part of their bodies. Dion Fletcher reflects:

I’m interested in the act of looking and describing in contrast to a medical or anthropological definition of a body to create a space where I or others can create their own definitions and descriptions of their physical bodies. There’s a kind of agency and ownership in that process, individually, and then collectively when the stories are brought together or people come together in the space. (Robertson, 2017, para. 4).

The “Own Your Cervix” installation at *Tangled* (Dion Fletcher, 2017) included an examination room, video of previous participants’ cervical sightings, and wallpaper patterned with a pelvis and legs, blood dripping to the ground.<sup>3</sup> Nearby sits a Victorian settee, intricately embellished with patches of sharp, raw porcupine quills, and on the wall hangs a series of embellished textile pieces that feature red splotches.

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<sup>2</sup> I have not experienced “Own Your Cervix” live but have accessed it through digital images and conversations with Dion Fletcher.

<sup>3</sup> This image, pelvis, legs and blood, is repeated throughout Dion Fletcher’s work, produced in various materials including paint and quills.



*Figure 3.* From Vanessa Dion Fletcher's, *Own Your Cervix*, immersive installation at *Tanged Art + Disability Gallery*, 2017 (photo: Kristina McMullin).

*Image description:* White curtains part to reveal an examination room with a deep-red painted wall. In the middle of the room is a white examination table. Behind the table, on the red wall, is a white shelf with white towels, lubricant, and bright examination light. Below the shelf hangs a round magnifying mirror.

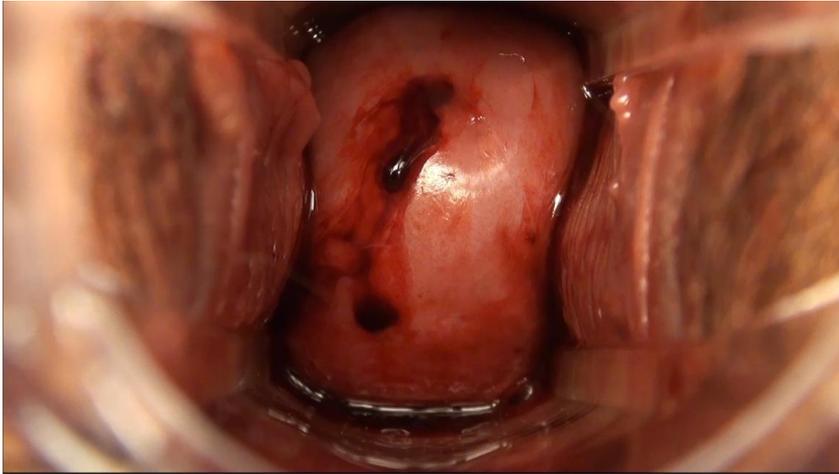
Dion Fletcher introduced cervical sightings performance again for “Toxic Love” (WalkingLab, 2018b), a project I co-curated for *WalkingLab*. Against the backdrop of Hamilton, Ontario’s industrial smokestacks and toxic waterways, Dion Fletcher sat on an inflatable camping mat and used a speculum and mirror to examine her cervix. Participants at Toxic Love were given plastic speculums and invited to view their own cervix. Framed by the industrial landscape and gallery walls, symbols of global capitalism and settler colonialism, her performance became a stark reminder of the ways that Indigenous bodies and toxic water are co-imbricated. Colonialism is conditioned on able bodyminds. As such, Indigenous bodies are rendered disabled through colonial capitalist practices and the resulting environmental destruction. Following this, Indigenous bodies are always already figured as disabled. Disability then becomes a useful means of domination and control through incarceration, elimination, and the removal of unfit Others.



*Figure 4. Vanessa Dion Fletcher, Toxic Love, performance at WalkingLab, 2018 (photo: Anise Truman).*

*Image description:* Vanessa Dion Fletcher sits on a camping mat on the weedy, gravelly ground. The background is water and industrial smokestacks. Three people, pictured from the waist down, gather around Dion Fletcher, who is positioned in side profile. She wears a white lab coat over a grey dress, black boots, and a headset with microphone. She pulls back the skirt of her dress with one hand and holds a mirror between her legs with the other. Legs extended, she looks down towards the mirror at her cervix.

Another of Dion Fletcher's cervical works is "Inside Voices," a video installation of her menstruating cervix. The installation is set nestled within a room of soft folded brown fabric. The video gazes into a cervix close up, through the speculum. Blood seeps and flows on the video monitor, like a pulsating heartbeat, a rhythmic spatiotemporal counter-presence to the medicalization, pathology, and sanitation of menstrual blood. I experienced this work in 2018 at *Say My Name*, a group exhibition curated by Syrus Marcus Ware at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto. I stepped inside the small cozy room and was surrounded by the brown flowing curtains as if diving into the cervical canal. It was as if my body had replaced the speculum.



*Figure 5.* Still image from Vanessa Dion Fletcher's, *Inside Voices*, 2016, 06:00 minutes.

*Image description:* Soft, pink, and flowing blood, this image looks through a speculum, close up and tunnel visioned, at the inside of a menstruating cervix.

When I visit Dion Fletcher in her Toronto studio, she shows me images of porcupine blood and quills taken through a microscopic lens. This, is yet another reminder of how her artwork and practice sees and visualizes the body differently. A compelling aspect of Dion Fletcher's projects is their refusal to essentialize the body, gender, and women's experiences. Rather, they question the ways that Indigeneity, race, and disability are framed by "regimes of health and hygiene" (Kafer, 2013, p. 32). Whiteness, settler colonialism, and ableism maintain what Alexis Shotwell (2016) calls "purity politics," which enforce rigid boundaries to ward off contamination. Colonial and racist logics also operationalize the elimination of dirt, blood, disease, and illness. Shotwell writes, "markers of racial purity are in turn entangled and co-constituted with biopolitical practices aiming to reduce or eliminate disability, poverty, and queerness at the population level" (2016, p. 15). Shotwell names the tendency to consider health as an individual and moral obligation as "healthism," wherein "individuals are held responsible for their bodies, and obesity, diabetes, cancer, and other chronic conditions are rendered as moral failings" (2016, p. 29). Healthism points to how disability biopolitics are racialized in material and affective ways (Chen, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2019). This is all too evident in Dion Fletcher's performance as part of "Toxic Love" in Hamilton's Windermere Basin in the shadow of petro-capitalism. Here colonial blood spills into the ground and water.

While menstruation and speculums may seem to point to cisgendered embodiment, Dion Fletcher's work confronts the ways that Indigenous bodies exist both within and outside of colonial conceptions of gender and gender

binaries. The title, “Own Your Cervix,” shifts the narrative towards bodies that menstruate and arguably toward all bodies that shed blood, and claims bodily and gender sovereignty. While colonial violence haunts the spectre of these various cervical projects, as it does many of her works, they simultaneously enact a sovereign sensation. As Dion Fletcher herself points out, when she looks at, touches, and cares for her body these acts unsettle colonial medical models that have always been framed through compulsory heteronormativity. There is something intimately queer in performing one’s own self-exam.

In Dion Fletcher’s work surfaces become porous, prickly, and wet, things ooze. This permeability questions individualism, boundedness and containment, defending itself from pollutants. Eased open (with a lubricated speculum), the individual is released, the body seen from one’s own personal and cultural perspective through a magnifying mirror. The Victorian settee, with its barbed patterns of quills, points at a vulnerability that need not be defended against. It invites touch and threatens borders and boundaries. It foregrounds interdependence between humans and nonhumans. Blood stains intricately patterned from glass beads disturb white damask colonial fabrics. Mel Chen (2012) considers the affections of toxicity and questions the ways that some toxins, cleaning products and perfumes, for example, are encountered as benign or pleasurable, while others like vaccines and lead become threats. Dion Fletcher’s use of menstrual blood (literally and figuratively) and porcupine quills materializes this threat while also complicating it, rendering it beautiful and simultaneously horrific.

The plastic speculum that Dion Fletcher uses in her performative works owes its history to the Sims’ Speculum, invented by Marion Sims from South Carolina in 1845. Sims’ medical expertise was in repairing vaginal fistulas caused by childbirth (Eveleth, 2014). While his medical technology significantly advanced women’s health science, it came at a violent cost. Sims used enslaved Black women to test his surgeries and operated on these women without anesthesia and for hours. Dion Fletcher’s performances work with the affective trauma of this violent colonial history. It conjures Rebecca Belmore’s (Ojibwe) “Fringe,” a life-sized photograph of a female body, back sutured with a beaded fringe. In both Dion Fletcher’s works and Belmore’s “Fringe,” “the female body [is] the site on which colonialism’s traumas are borne” (Morris, 2017, p. 74). “Own Your Cervix” (Dion Fletcher, 2017) and Dion Fletcher’s other menstrual performances underscore repeated medical and sexual violence and also suggest agency and embodied futurity. It embraces what Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa) (1999) calls Indigenous survivance: “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (p. vii). Survivance and resurgence emphasize action and agency. Rather than the affective dimensions of trauma, as locked into a past and present, survivance is an active mode of sovereign sensation that resists victimhood through iterative,

resistant, and affective gestures. By inviting audiences to witness publicly her “owning her cervix” and to view their own, Dion Fletcher shifts the narrative from private trauma to collective intimacy and care. She creates a shared space to experience agency and care for ourselves and others as part of radical relationality.

Dion Fletcher cultivates alternative relations with colonial technologies. Alison Kafer (2019) contends that disabled artists are “activating, interrogating, refusing, and repurposing medicalized aesthetics and technologies, finding within them inspiration and resources for their art practice” (p. 4). Dion Fletcher invites audiences and participants to feel language, to look at and inside their bodies, to accept an offering of a quill from her mouth - she creates spaces for loving kin. Challenging the ways that health and hygiene capacitate some bodies and debilitate others (Shotwell, 2016; Puar, 2017), Dion Fletcher’s art practices question the ways that various technologies and the mastery associated with them condition bodies to be productive, efficient, and speedy. In other words, if colonialism is conditioned through able bodyminds, then Dion Fletcher’s work disturbs and embraces spectrums of abilities, reproduction, and kin. She exercises her sovereign senses to create openings that foster different relations that interrogate and rupture normalcy and mastery. Karyn Recollet (2018) calls this kind of Indigenous survivance, “kinstillatory gatherings.” Kinstillatory gatherings are ethics and modes of being “defined as urban spaces that mirror the ways constellations gather in radical relationality” (2018, p. 26). The creative intimacy of Dion Fletcher’s practice as a form of radical relationality – gatherings of blood, quills, porcupine, mouths, sounds, voices, bodies – becomes spatiotemporal, “where past, future, and present are remixed in generative ways” (Hudson et. al., 2019, p. 3). Perhaps in the slipstream (Dillon, 2012; Recollet, 2018) everyone – human and otherwise – is sliding through a plastic speculum to listen to and hear what’s inside: the sounds of kin that open out to a world of Indigenous futurity.

### **Intimate Pedagogies of the Quill**

In this final section of the paper, I bring my encounters and thinking with Dion Fletcher and her practice to the work of education. As an artist, curator and scholar interested in the entanglements of contemporary art and pedagogy, I am drawn to Dion Fletcher’s work and artistic practice because of the pedagogical gestures they make. Her work informs, instructs, and reveals various complexities about disability, gender, the body, and Indigeneity. But further, her practice does something to the pedagogical encounter. It enacts a pedagogy of intimacy, one that is leaky, prickly, and fleshy. It counters the ongoing violence of education and its insistence on mastery and proficiency. It disrupts a colonial pedagogical model of docility and containment. Pedagogy and intimacy. These two words combined make

people quiver. Together they are entangled and relational, a threat to conventional pedagogical order. What if we imagined the pedagogical relation as one in which a quill pressed firmly between the lips is offered to another? A bodily encounter always already imbricated in that encounter. A quill pedagogy.

In the fall of 2019, Dion Fletcher was an artist-in-residence at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. She held open studios, gave a public lecture, and facilitated workshops within a variety of classes; her work on display for settler modes of consumption and perception inside an educational institution. Following Sandra Styres (2019), I want to complicate settler consumption and perception of Indigenous art and think about art's relationship to reconciliation.

As a white settler academic I want to be responsible to my relationship with Dion Fletcher and her artwork and practice. I want to think about how Dion Fletcher's work inside an institution like OISE activates sovereign sensations. Conversations about her work, the materials, forms, and content, are necessary, but even more are considerations of the pedagogical encounter. My desire is not to include Vanessa Dion Fletcher on a syllabus as an inclusionary gesture, but rather to identify what we, teachers and students, might learn from her practice about how and who we are. What I learn from my encounters with her work is generosity, reciprocity and bodily. I learn that we need to create spaces for messy, leaky, vulnerable bodies. I have learned so much from Sandra Styres, my colleague, and Vanessa Dion Fletcher about land relations and pedagogy. Dion Fletcher's work presses on me the need to also think about intimacy and how it is always imbricated in networks of vulnerability, harm, and violence and networks of generative care, love and ethics (Springgay, 2008, 2017, 2018). I keep dreaming of the poster in the OISE elevators that announces Indigenous intimacy. It reminds me of the invitation to enter the folded, porous, warm, and intimate spaces of learning. This is the slipstream. The kinstillatory gatherings. Let's make this happen.

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