



Dispatch

Finding Language: A Word Scavenger Hunt

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Working in a variety of media, including performance, video, and textiles, Vanessa Dion Fletcher's (Lenape and Potawatomi) art practice is "a process of investigating the influence of culture and politics on the relationships between our bodies and the land" (Dion Fletcher, 2019a). She is interested in the connections that exist between fluency, communication, and understanding within the context of her Lenape and Potawatomi culture. Dion Fletcher's work considers how systemic colonial oppression intersects with her relationship to text as a learning disabled person, and how this results in a lack of access to her ancestral languages (Dion Fletcher, 2019a). During an artist talk for Ryerson University's "Crippling the Arts in Canada" class, she describes her relationship with language:

The Lenape community I come from has very few [Lenape language] speakers – a handful of people who still speak fluently. I learned my family does not speak our language but has the memory of it. My grandmother remembered songs sung in the night while the children slept. I knew there was another world, a world with Indigenous languages. I knew that world had existed but did not exist for me. I was told our languages are oral, filled with languages not written down. This world became my utopia, and I imagined it as a fictional place because colonialism had made it unreal and unattainable. Like utopia, I have glimpses of this world, moments where I can almost find it. (2019a)

Dion Fletcher's interactive performance, *Finding Language: A Word Scavenger Hunt*, enacts a journey to connect to her Lenape language (Rice et al., forthcoming 2021). Dion Fletcher performed *Finding Language* in several different iterations and for different audiences, including at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in 2018 and the Textile Museum of Canada

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in 2019. She performed the final performance of *Finding Language* in 2019 at the *Crippling the Arts Symposium*, concluding her artist residency with the research project *Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life*. *Finding Language* is a space in which Dion Fletcher continues to explore “how [her] relationship with language is fractured and politicized” (2019a). Using an English-Lenape dictionary, a colonial tool through which she is forced to access her oral language, Dion Fletcher “searches for language and words that she has a relationship with” (2019a).¹

At *Crippling the Arts* Dion Fletcher began her performance of *Finding Language* onstage by lying on her back while listening to an audio piece composed of her grandmother telling stories and her nephew singing. When the tape ends, Dion Fletcher sits up holding her grandmother’s hearing aid, which chirps and buzzes next to her ear. She calls into the hearing aid, “Hello, can you hear me?” She puts down the hearing aid, picks up her English-Lenape dictionary, and projects the opened pages of the dictionary onto a large screen using the cellphone that hangs around her neck. Emerging from the stage and into the audience, Dion Fletcher sets out around the large room on a “word scavenger hunt.” She uses prompts she has written on small cards digitally printed with images of quill work. In one instance, she finds the word “chair” written in raised text on the underside of a seat. She finds “chair” in the dictionary and reads out the Lenape words. Dion Fletcher then reflects aloud:

I kind of thought chair was a banal word, maybe a boring word. But then I thought about all the times that I was stuck in a chair, that the teacher, or my mom – somebody – told me that I had to sit down and stay still. Or all the times that I’d been running around and really wanted a rest and there wasn’t a chair. Then I thought, it’s a lot less boring. A chair is a word that I thought was boring, but it isn’t. (2019)

After finding and reflecting on various words, Dion Fletcher offers up her prompts to the audience members so that they too can find words and reflect on language, fluency, and understanding. Her prompts include: “a word that changes,” “a word that makes you feel good,” “a word with so many meanings,” and the prompt which led her to the chair, “a word you thought was boring, but is not” (2019b). She hands pencils and paper marked with colourful fragments of quillwork photocopied onto the page to the audience for taking notes.

In August 2020, Dion Fletcher sat down via Zoom with artist and curator Max Ferguson to discuss *Finding Language* and how experiences of colonialism and disability affect the way they access and relate to language. They engaged the question, “What is language?” and spoke about their shared

¹ Watch or listen to Dion Fletcher’s performance of *Finding Language: A Word Scavenger Hunt* here: <https://bodiesintranslation.ca/finding-language-a-word-scavenger-hunt-by-vanessa-dion-fletcher/>

experiences of language influenced by colonialism and disability. “I see language as a fence, as something that traps us, and traps our perceptions,” Ferguson described (2020). They spoke about using performance art as a means to engage in conversations about subjects, especially uncomfortable ones, through interactive methods that, as Ferguson put it, “move beyond traditional language and words.” Dion Fletcher (2020) described how she experienced language during her performance of *Finding Language at Crippling the Arts*:

This is what I loved about the performance: I would find words around the room. I think the first word I found was “chair,” a word that was printed as a raised text under the chairs in the room. So, you could feel this text... And I did. I was also using my phone to cast the images of the words I was finding onto a projected screen. I would also speak the word “chair,” and an interpreter would sign the word “chair” in ASL [American Sign Language]. At the same time, somebody else would be typing the word “chair” onto the projected live captioning. And what all of this access was doing was allowing people to understand that there are actually at least five or six different ways – and many more ways – to communicate the word “chair” and understand the word on a semiotic level. A chair is an object, the name is written on the object, the text is raised so we can feel the word, we can sign it, and we can write it, and we can speak it. And then, to add to all of that, I would look it up in my Lenape dictionary, which is really hard... to pronounce [the words] correctly without, at that time, really having any training in how to read [Lenape words], which are written in this made-up way of writing. And that’s a whole other thing! Lenape is an oral language, so to create this dictionary somebody just made up a vowel and consonant chart and made-up Roman lettering for all of these words. And then I try and read it out loud.²

By ruminating further on the word “chair,” “a word [she] thought was boring, but is not,” Dion Fletcher considers how the multivocal experience of language is activated by the various accessibility practices at *Crippling the Arts* and offers another layer to the complexity of language. Dion Fletcher situates her ongoing search for “another world, a world with Indigenous languages” (2019), and in the context of crip culture making arrives at the sense that language does not guarantee smooth and effortless communication and understanding, but rather language is an entry into conversations about “how we feel about and relate to language” (2020). How language shapes our worlds, leads us and returns us to the worlds, is what we hope to find.

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² The dictionary Dion Fletcher is referencing is: O’Meara, J. (1996). *Delaware-English English-Delaware Dictionary*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

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