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# Re-Locate Response

MICHAEL GERACE, P. JOSHUA GRIFFIN,  
AND JEN MARLOW

We are grateful to have been invited by *Resilience* to write a companion to Julie Sze's essay "Environmental Justice Anthropocene Narratives: Sweet Art, Recognition, and Representation." Compelled to take an honest look at our practice, we've made an attempt to be rigorous in naming what we may be becoming as we continually discern how to more justly go about our work. We offer here an outline of scholarship, theory, and practice for an "ethnographic art" that aspires to move, with sustained engagement, through and beyond representation and participation toward material, political, and affective transformation. As incomplete and provisional as these gestures may be, they are perhaps iconic of the contemporary epoch. Kivalina's situation raises the question of what options are available to any community, and those working with them, whose particular needs, interests, and desires exceed the "domain of the possible." If the Anthropocene is an age of unprecedented inequality, entanglement, and uncertainty, then what modes of being and making could capacitate the flourishing of particular subjectivities, ecologies, built environments, forms of cultural practice, and political possibility today?<sup>1</sup>

—Re-Locate

## Toward an Outline for an Ethnocompositionist Manifesto

"Compositionism takes up the task of searching for universality but without believing that this universality is already there, wait-

ing to be unveiled and discovered. . . . From universalism it takes up the task of building a common world; from relativism, the certainty that this common world has to be built from utterly heterogeneous parts that will never make a whole, but at best a fragile, revisable, and diverse composite material.”

—Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’”

“Ethnography . . . means coexisting with the subject of one’s concern, sustaining an engagement over time, in his or her place, on his or her terms. . . . But it can also be a window of opportunity, a way of understanding oneself from the standpoint of another, or from elsewhere . . . one may come to the realization that knowledge and identity are emergent properties of the unstable relationship between self and other, here and there, now and then, and not fixed and final truths.”

—Michael D. Jackson, “The Prose of Suffering and the Practice of Silence”

## I. Duration

A. Tempo: slowly and with caution

1. “To render slow violence visible entails, among other things, redefining speed.” —Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*

B. Historical, emergent, speculative

C. Endurance

1. “Endure the systemic risk of subjectivity, referentiality, and worldliness that characterize this threshold.” —Elizabeth Povinelli, “The Will to Be Otherwise / The Effort of Endurance”

D. Sitting side by side, love

E. Resilient: committed without definitive shape

## II. Co-composition

A. Art and ethics as the cultivation of the open

1. Ethnographic art experienced as an iterative assembling of immanently changing affinities and strategies of making. Such assemblages are made under intense negotiation, not only with one’s shifting self, but with multiple others, many of whom come from worlds very different than one’s own, yet with whom we live, work, dream, fail, and accomplish.

B. Production, or making, plus deep immersion (tensions and complementarity)

1. “If the social artist’s impulse is to *produce* situations, it may be tempered by the ethnographer’s commitment to immersion in an *already existing* lifeworld.” —P. Joshua Griffin, Jen Marlow, and Michael Gerace, “Beyond Vulnerability: Transdisciplinary Composition for Climate Adaptation in Arctic Alaska” (forthcoming)
  2. Tension between “providing context” and “co-composing” prospects from within a situation
  3. Multiple forms of belonging, identity, participation; aesthetic autonomy
- C. Utopian tension between real and fiction
1. End of nature
  2. “My utopia is actual life, here or anywhere, pushed to the limits of its ideal possibilities.” —Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias*
  3. “Unheard-of social and cultural transformations” —Slavoj Žižek, “The End of Nature”
  4. Social practice: manifesting fiction in place
  5. Representation of the *otherwise* and of the “project” to secondary audiences
- D. Lightness
1. And there is also the day-to-day, the mundane and administrative, requiring us to continually engage the powers and sovereignties that form and threaten to determine, if not undermine, material prospects and social futures in Kivalina. To survive the administrative demands in the short term—and especially the prevailing capitalist and bureaucratic logics—we have a need to maintain long-term, conceptually rich spaces of speculation, possibility, and activity.
    - a) Italo Calvino’s lightness is required to “escape the inexorable stare” of Medusa without turning into stone. Seeing past our face-to-face encounters requires us to compose with and expose what’s rigid and violent without becoming these things ourselves.

### III. Universal and particular

#### A. Self and other

1. Freedom of the zero level and potential solidarity

- a) “When you are reduced to some kind of zero level, then another subject emerges who is no longer the same self.”  
—Slavoj Žižek, *Demanding the Impossible*
- b) See also III.C
- 2. Intersubjective vulnerability, mutual recognition, and communion
- 3. Multiple selves, selfless, multiple-shifting subjectivity (nomadic subjects)
- 4. Resisting dispossession (of others or one’s own community) without relying on the legal logics of property, ownership, or the sovereign self
- B. Polycentric agonism
  - 1. Local decision making, self-rule, autonomy
  - 2. Education, administration, training, reclamation of local institutions
    - a) “Movements arise only from the immediate and practical necessities of social life, and are never the result of purely abstract ideas.” —Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-syndicalism*
  - 3. Dissensus and the political, “conflictual consensus”
- C. Mutual global aid, solidarity, and making (alternative global commons)
  - 1. Zones of abandonment and the zero ground of politics
    - a) “Fissures, cracks, and ‘free’ spaces form . . . nodes for experimentation with new . . . possibilities.” —Erik Swyngedouw, “Post-Democratic Cities: For Whom and for What?”
  - 2. Reinhabiting empire
  - 3. Autonomy and integration in and around the otherwise
  - 4. Social freedom
  - 5. Solidaric union
    - a) Because we experience all this work as being essential to the practice of ethnographic composition, and ethnographic composition as being essential to the making of free and just worlds in the Anthropocene, and because we are so few people working in one place, we must join with others in the staging of dialogical spaces for our mutual education about these issues. This is true not only for the “immersive” parts of Re-Locate’s work (the relationships that take shape between us and Kivalina’s people) but also for our “movement outward” (between you and us).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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NOTE

1. For more on the work being done in Kivalina, Alaska, see “Colleen Swan Speaks about Climate Change and Relocation Efforts in Kivalina, Alaska,” Vimeo video, 1:40, produced by Sharon Daniel and Re-Locate, posted July 2015, <https://vimeo.com/129930837>.