

DECOLONIZING RELAXED PERFORMANCE: A VISUAL TRANSLATION OF VITAL ECOSYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

This essay draws on the visual translations produced by artist Sonny Bean in response to the 2022 report, *Relaxed Performance: Exploring University-based Training Across Fashion, Theatre and Choir*. Relaxed Performance (RP) is a wide-reaching movement toward accessibility in arts that challenges normative comportment in performance contexts and has evolved into a contemporary cross-sector vital practice rooted in disability justice. Through a selection of illustrations, Bean transforms human-centric data about RPs into a vital ecosystem that extends to the more-than-human world, denoting the complex interconnectedness of RP production in a settler colonial state.

KEYWORDS

Relaxed Performance,
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This essay focuses on artist Sonny Bean's visual translation of the 2022 arts-based research report, *Relaxed Performance: Exploring University-based Training Across Fashion, Theatre and Choir*. Relaxed Performance (RP) is a wide-reaching movement toward accessibility in arts that challenges normative comportment in performance contexts and instead prioritizes the praxis of letting "bodies be bodies" (LaMarre et al., 2021, p. 200). Through a selection of illustrations, Bean transforms large amounts of data from human-centric research about creative, Relaxed Performances into an ecosystem that extends to the more-than-human world, denoting the complex interconnectedness of RP production in a settler colonial state. Solicited not to serve the original data but instead to engage a critically creative process that "liberates and releases its potential—which resides in that which resists translation" (Bal & Morra, 2007, p. 5). Bean explains that their work of making the invisible visible began with mushrooms:

I began with the mushrooms and mycelium because when reading about Relaxed Performance I had a feeling of interconnectedness. Mycelium shows us how differing forms of communication and different ways of being in the world can go unnoticed, but still connect to

everything. Mushrooms and mycelium illustrate how activist communities grow interdependence and interconnectedness to challenge colonialism, ableism, and other oppressive systems. From mushrooms, to mycelium, to trees, to burrowing foxes, to mountains, to bears and jellyfish; it's a connected ecosystem which is both powerful and fragile, and deeply interdependent. (S. Bean, personal communication, September 10, 2021)

Since 2015, researchers have been tracking the development of RP alongside artists, cultural producers, and students in North America. Broadly speaking, RP is an arts-based intervention invested in "breaking down physical, attitudinal, sensory, financial, and other barriers" to accessing the arts (LaMarre et al., 2019; 2021; Rice et al., 2020). RP emerged from 1990s European arts-based performance interventions aimed at supporting "autism/sensory-friendly" inclusion in theatre (Fletcher-Watson & May, 2018). Since then, RP has branched outward, becoming an influential movement in accessible theatre in Canada—so influential that it has been referred to as the current "gold standard" of industry (Jones, Rice et al., 2022). A key finding across our 2022 research is that RP must be rooted in disability justice, an activist movement led by Indigenous and Black people, people of color, and queer and trans disabled people (Kafai, 2021). Disability justice movements actively call for decolonization in the arts (Rice et al., 2021), and this call is especially urgent across settler colonial regimes such as the lands currently known as the Americas. The work of decolonizing RP exists at a point of tension: "disability" is a concept understood in a multitude of ways, including as a colonial state-based surveillance tool imposed upon Indigenous people who experience bodymind difference (Ineese-Nash, 2020). RPs introduce opportunities to follow Qwo-Li Driskill's (Cherokee) calls for disability justice to center decolonization and Indigenize the work of disability justice activists, including by expanding our understandings of disability and its Eurocentric genealogies and continued connotations (2019).

By illustrating vital ecosystems beginning with mushrooms, Bean introduces a complex terrain of interconnectedness that shows us that RP is an interdependent ecosystem emerging in several directions, one of which can be decolonial:

For an ecosystem to flourish all parts need to be cared for and respected. Some people might think that we don't need to change or that it's



Figure 1. *Mushrooms all together.*
Image description: A composite illustration of several elements within an interconnected ecosystem. Including a tree, spiders with web, bees and hive, an owl, flowers, a bear, the mountains, the moon, several jellyfish, a sleeping fox, and diamonds in the land- and seascapes. Mushrooms with a network of mycelium comprise the central focus of the illustration. Sonny Bean, 2021, licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

too hard to make change but challenging the limitations of oppressive systems, like ableism, through disability justice opens the possibility for creativity, for new ways of being in the world, and for expansive revolution in the arts. (S. Bean, personal communication, September 10, 2021)

The revolution to which Bean alludes is one that attends to the colonial histories of institutional settings in which RPs take place, including arts and performance spaces, university and college classrooms, houses of worship, and elsewhere in which many artists develop and deliver performances. Place carries history, so responding to the ableist colonial sensibility, or white-centrism and normativity of space, means questioning what has happened in that space and who has, and has not been, welcomed. We experienced this tension in our RP research during moments of discomfort and failure as we learned with and from impacted communities, including disability communities and local Indigenous and Black communities, and communities of color (Collins et al., 2022; Jones, Collins & Rice, 2022; Jones, Rice et al., 2022). As disability justice activist Lydia X.Z. Brown (2016) notes, higher education spaces can create “cultures of perfection” wherein people are not able to make mistakes. RP seeks to avoid the creation of cultures of perfection and instead aims to understand its own context and grow through mistakes. This means learning about traditional territories where the RP will take place, as well as challenging disciplinary and community norms through which the RP unfolds and attending to what our bodies can do and where they can be on colonized land. For example, weather conditions such as heavy snow and climate change-induced flooding on Turtle Island, the Anishinaabe name for North America, are significant realities that must be accounted for in performance-based planning. So too is the geographic location and the sociocultural barriers to accessing the arts in particular locations. As Jen Deerinwater (Cherokee) explains, “if your reserve doesn’t have roads, you aren’t getting [accessible] transit” (CBC, 2020). By representing RP as a complex ecosystem that can simultaneously carry history and nurture “new ways of being in the world,” Bean’s illustrations offer a visual translation of the incompleteness and ongoingness of RP as an accessibility intervention within an ableist colonial context.

Further drawing on the vital attention to place, Bean pulled on their understanding of salmon fisheries on the Northwest Coast of Turtle Island

for their illustrations. In conversations that took place while the illustrations were in progress, Bean explained that under colonialism, the ecosystem which supported salmon began to collapse. However, ecosystems of bear and salmon can be preserved through settler collaboration with and respect for Indigenous knowledges and honoring treaties and agreements with local First Nations communities. Responding to the 2022 *Relaxed Performance: Exploring University-based Training Across Fashion, Theatre and Choir* directive to decolonize RP, Bean also explained that their illustrated bear represents the tensions which exist in this collaboration as it is set in the context of white supremacy and ableist colonialism. “Many people have a deep reverence and fear of such beautiful and powerful animals, and they are only welcome if they don’t infringe on our cities,” they told us during two meetings with the authors and a graphic designer (S. Bean, personal communication, November 30, 2021). The purpose of these meetings was to brainstorm visual translations of the data for a forthcoming illustrated guide to implementing RP. We learned about Bean’s process by asking them questions such as: How would you describe your creative practice? How do your illustrations relate to the text from the illustrated guide? What illustration came to mind first? What do you want readers to know about your illustrations and the connections you have illustrated? These meetings also included discussions about licensing arrangements and payment, which are important disability justice topics related to equitable labor engagement with artists. Ultimately, following guidance from the Canadian Artists’ Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC), Bean was hired to produce twelve illustrations and paid for their consultation time.

In their ecosystem illustrations, Bean also drew on bees and their hives. For Bean, bees represent a piece of the ecosystem that is needed and yet feared, explaining “we are reliant on them and yet so dismissive (and often scared) of them and this resonates with me as someone who has been othered by society through ableism and sanism” (S. Bean, personal communication, September 10, 2021). A queer illustrator and visual storyteller, Bean lives with experiences of mental health issues and chronic pain, noting, “this is how I understand being different or othered by society through ableism and sanism. As someone who has experiences with living on the margins, that feeling of being not wanted and yet being needed, like bees and spiders, resonates with me” (S. Bean,

personal communication, September 10, 2021). Just as disability justice can show us new ways of living together in the world, so can bees and spiders. Disability justice is an activist movement led by Indigenous and Black people, people of color, and queer and trans disabled people whose work transcends mainstream rights-based movements and includes centering the lives and interests of impacted communities in the arts, including through RP (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Bean was commissioned in 2021 by Re•Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice to illustrate findings from a research report about Relaxed Performance. Initially, these illustrations were intended to provide another mode of engaging with the material and were rooted in our understanding of access as a political project (Hamraie, 2017; Ignagni et al., 2019; Chandler et al., 2021). However, the process of learning from Bean proved even more expansive than we anticipated. This process taught us that visual translation is a vital practice as it responds to, and expands, crip culture through experimentation with visuality as access praxis.



Figure 2. Bear.
Image description: A bear looks at the viewer while stepping into a stream that runs past a pine forest. Sonny Bean, 2021, licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



Figure 3. Bees.
Image Description: A beehive dotted with honeycombs. There is a large bee atop the hive with several bee shadows surrounding the hive. Sonny Bean, 2021, licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

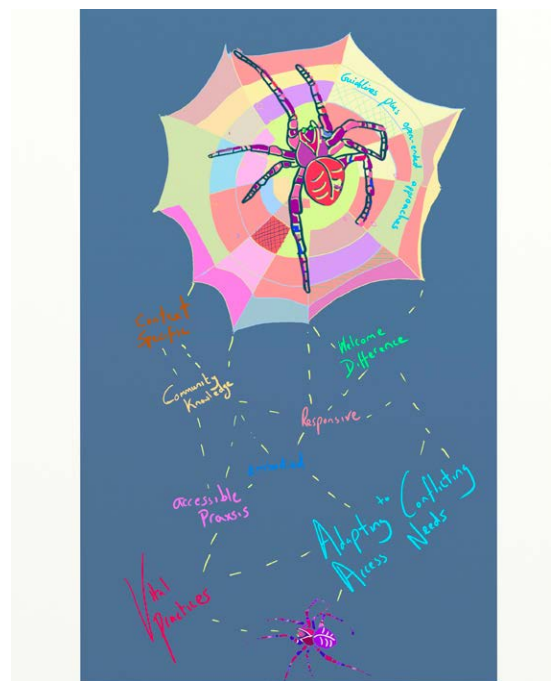


Figure 4. Spider.
Image description: A spider sits atop a web while a second spider spins a web of words and phrases which read, "guidelines plus open-ended approaches," "welcome difference," "accessible praxis," "context-specific," "Community knowledge," "responsive," "vital practices" and "adapting to conflicting access needs." Sonny Bean, 2021, licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Our understanding of access as an iterative, ever-shifting, co-designed process builds on the work of scholars and artists who have been engaging with the entanglement of senses through a disability aesthetic (Siebers, 2005; Cachia, 2013; Papalia, 2018; Chandler et al., 2021) challenging the “dominant culture of sense” (Bunch, 2021, p. 255), which opens new knowledges about culture and bodymind difference (Titchkosky, 2011). Bean’s illustrations advance this expansive access, in part, by denaturalizing people’s experiences of sight and seeing, showing how seeing is produced through entanglements of the physical (there exists wide variation in what people identified as low vision/ blind/nonvisual can see) with the psychic and sociocultural (countless interpretations of any one image can be made by different social actors bringing distinct knowledges and perspectives to their viewing practices), and making it “accessible to analysis” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 156). Indeed, as Bean’s illustrations took shape, new issues and new engagements with the politics of RP and the “sensuous presence” of the world arose (Abram, 1996, p. 123). Through this unfolding ontology via visual translation, it became clear that RP-related data could be transformed into a nuanced story about decolonization, interconnection, and natureculture as understood through disability justice-informed RP.

This process also offered new critical reflections on our RP-related inquiry. We learned through Bean’s work that we unintentionally framed RP as a human-centric arts-based intervention thereby limiting our understanding of the more-than-human entanglements within RP praxis and performances. Abram (1996) employs the term “more-than-human” in reference to the “sensuous terrain” around us with which we are in continual interaction, noting that if we are inattentive to our interactions with the more-than-human, we may unintentionally invisibilize the limitations of the human. Bean’s visual translation makes this invisibilization visible. This move is significant given that we cannot ignore the deep political roots of the visual representation of disability, which includes the invisibilization of some disabled groups (Fraser, 2018, Chapter 2) and reproductions of extractive, ableist modes of staring through the arts (Garland-Thomson, 2006; McDonald, 2017). However, given the interplay between the social construction of vision and the visual construction of the social (Mitchell, 2002, p. 170), Bean’s visuality as access praxis challenges the invisible/visible dichotomy and emerges as a vital practice that attends to

the embodied, shifting, and lively nature of artistry (Chandler et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2022). In this way, Bean “liberates and releases [the] potential” of a deeper engagement with visual translation and arts-based access interventions with culture-of-nature in mind (Bal & Morra, 2007, p. 5). In doing so, Bean’s work highlights the need to engage with the more-than-human as necessary to disability justice and decolonization.

One key finding from our 2022 report that is illuminated through Bean’s illustrations was that unlike compliance-based policy and best practice checklists, vital practices welcome difference and are context-specific, prefigurative, rooted in community knowledge, and responsive to evolving decolonial and accessible praxis (Jones, Rice et al., 2022). Guidelines and shared knowledge can be successfully paired with non-prescriptive, open-ended approaches to justice-oriented RP that supports the creative vision of a web of artists, patrons, and others involved in performance planning in an effort to web together uniquely accessible RPs. Using art to challenge systemic violence, Bean’s visual translation emerges as a mode of knowledge translation that expands understandings of community-specific and justice-focused RP praxis to include the more-than-human world. We close this visual essay with Bean’s words. In summarizing their visual translation Bean notes:

I hope these illustrations hold your gaze and allow you to interact with the text in a different way. I tried to capture feelings and connections with these illustrations, but the connections and feelings I experience might be different from what you experience. These illustrations are meant to leave room for multiple interpretations, and I hope you find them beautiful. (S. Bean, personal communication, September 10, 2021)

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