



**Making Noise: An Ethnography of a Community Performance Project between Vulcana Women's Circus and People with Disabilities**

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**Making Noise:  
An Ethnography of a Community Performance Project  
between Vulcana Women's Circus and People with  
Disabilities**

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## ABSTRACT

This study is an ethnographic investigation into the community performance work of Vulcana Women's Circus, a feminist community circus based in Brisbane, Australia. I focus primarily on Stronghold, a community performance project created between Vulcana and a group of people with disabilities, who came to be called The Noisemakers.

I situate my research within the three fields of applied performance, feminist theatre, and disability performance, and consider the potential convergence between them. The gaps that presented themselves in my review of the relevant literature from these three fields helped inform my three research questions:

- How are bodies re-storied in and through feminist circus and physical theatre?
- What are the political and affective labours of creating performance with people with disabilities?
- In what ways can a theory of disability performance inform applied performance and vice versa?

My study thus aims to bring the three abovementioned fields into conversation with one another, discovering where the convergences and divergences lie. In doing so, I also seek to reveal both the complexities and the possibilities of such work.

This research also charts my changing role as ethnographer in the project. The relationships I established in the field were critical in achieving the trust necessary in order to engage with Vulcana's work on a deeper level. I discovered that through my developing relationship with the Vulcana facilitators, I was able to gain a level of intimacy required for good ethnographic practice. I emphasised how articulating an analogy for the research design was useful in clarifying the direction and focus of the research. I propose that these analogies can help ethnographers chart their various subjectivities in the course of their research, thereby illuminating how these positions can affect the relationships formed in the field. In my journey as an ethnographer, I often found myself teetering on the edge of being a reflective practitioner, where I was constantly reflecting in and on action. In this respect, I came to view my role as that of the inquisitive little cousin who is eventually invited to sit at the grown-ups' table.

In order to make greater sense of the work of Stronghold, I drew on a bricolage framework that brought the areas of applied performance, feminist theatre practice, and disability into conversation with one another. Doing so allowed me to examine Stronghold through multiple perspectives, where I engaged with diverse theoretical lenses depending on which part of the Stronghold fabric I was focusing on.

One of the discoveries made was how the space in which the work took place impacted the bodies inhabiting them and vice versa. I considered how the feminist circus space of Vulcana was an 'imagined geography' that afforded 'corporeal inventiveness', therefore allowing for possibilities of how bodies could become re-storied in the space. I realised that the bodies of the Stronghold participants re-storied the spaces they inhabited by redefining space through their unique cultural and somatic experiences. By transforming the imaginative quality of the space, it became an act of reterritorialisation of a space usually populated by 'normative' bodies.

By examining moments within Stronghold through both disability and applied performance perspectives, I observed how applying a disability perspective extended an understanding of applied performance. This discovery emerged strongly when exploring how a genuine climate of dialogue could be fostered. The notion of 'crip time' was a significant finding, and acknowledging crip time in a space shared by disabled and non-disabled bodies served to destabilise the hegemonic construct of 'normate' time. I thus propose that this idea can be extended to other applied performance contexts, where different versions of time are articulated according to those who experience them.

A significant revelation in the search for political and affective labour was the importance of 'stammering', which related to moments of anxiety and uncertainty experienced by the facilitators and researcher. These stammering moments not only helped interrogate a dynamic of authority between facilitators and participants, but they also revealed spaces of joy. Flowing in and between political and affective labour was the idea of joyful chaos, which united both participants and facilitators in joy. This joyful chaos served as a kind of rupture by unsettling the routine rhythms of daily life. The noise made during these moments of joyful chaos and beyond demonstrated how the latent power of noise pushes boundaries, causes commotions, and shakes expectations.

## STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

*This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.*

(Signed) \_\_\_\_\_

Natalie Lazaroo

## RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

*These publications have been informed by my experiences and understandings developed within and beyond the thesis process:*

Lazaroo, N. (2014). We're off to see the Wizard of Auslan: Translating Deaf experience through community performance. *Australasian Drama Studies*, 64, 243-256.

Lazaroo, N. (2013). Circus in the cemetery: Transforming space and unearthing memory in the Vulcana Women's Circus performance, *Grave effects of notable women. Australasian Drama Studies*, 62, 194-205.

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Lazaroo, N. (2015). *(En)Acting Small Change: Creating and performing stories of women and work*. Paper presented at the Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance (ADSA) Conference, June 23-26, University of Sydney.

Lazaroo, N. (2014). *Cutting through the noise: Examining issues of authorship and representation in Stronghold, a community theatre performance with people with disabilities*. Paper presented at the IFTR World Congress, July 28-August 1, University of Warwick.

Lazaroo, N. (2014). *Restor(y)ing bodies: Reflections on Stronghold, a community performance project involving people with disabilities*. Paper presented at the ADSA Conference, June 25-28, Victoria University of Wellington.

Lazaroo, N. (2013). *We're off to see the Wizard of Auslan!: Translating Deaf experience through community performance*. Paper presented at the ADSA Conference, July 9-12, Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide.

Lazaroo, N. (2012). *Circus in the cemetery: Transforming space and unearthing memory in Vulcana Women's Circus performance*, Grave effects of notable women. Paper presented at ADSA Conference, July 3-6, Queensland University of Technology.

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## THE PEOPLE YOU WILL MEET ON THIS JOURNEY

There are various people who have played an important role in my research story, and here I present the names of those who have appeared in it. With their permission, I have included the real full names of the women from Vulcana Women's Circus, and also the real first names of the women involved in the Wizard of Auslan project. I have however made the decision to assign pseudonyms to those involved in Stronghold, be they participants in the project, or staff and support workers from the Partnering Organisation (PO), or the community hall where some of the work took place. I chose pseudonyms that were similar in meaning to the original names of the participants.

### Vulcana Women's Circus

Celia White, Artistic Director and facilitator

Lara Deak, facilitator

Bec Jones, facilitator and community outreach coordinator

Helen Clifford, facilitator

Veronica (Ronnie) Neave, former Artistic Director

### Stronghold

Bev, participant

Bryce, participant

Eva, participant

Gillian, participant

Gwen, participant

Howie, participant

Mark, participant

Mavis, participant

Ricky, participant

Tina, participant

Winnie, participant

Liza, overall support for workshop

Mario, support worker

Leslie, support worker

Lily, support worker  
Reuben, support worker  
Robyn, support worker  
Cathy, staff from PO  
Shirley, staff from PO  
Carl, staff from community hall

Wizard of Auslan

Belinda (Bee), participant  
Julie, participant  
Lynda, participant  
Racheal, participant  
Sally, participant  
Roz, participant  
Shannon, participant  
Jo, guest artist

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# CHAPTER 1: A WELCOME

## Prologue

It is a mild winter's evening in 2011. I feel a combination of nerves and excitement as I wait for my first circus class to begin. I glance around the studio, my eyes taking in the high ceiling, from which a variety of aerial apparatus hangs. I feel a tiny shiver run through me as I begin to imagine myself climbing up on those long, red cloths, or swinging from the lone trapeze near the window. I take in the other women around me, women of different ages, body shapes, and heights. I am the tiniest of the lot.

My two circus trainers call out for the women to gather in a circle for our 'check-in'. They introduce themselves as Anna and Nirvana, and welcome us to the first night of the Circus Essentials class. They tell us that Vulcana is an inclusive space, and that the company's motto is 'challenge by choice'. Anna and Nirvana then get us up on our feet and we begin to play games as part of our warm-up. Fifteen women run around the space, trying to tag one another. We become breathless through our laughter and physical exertion. The silliness continues as we move up and down the rolled out mats in strange ways.

And then halfway through the class, Anna tells us, 'Alright, we're going to practise hand stands.'

I feel a little leap in my chest. In all my 30 years, I have never been able to do a handstand, not even against a wall. I remember as a child, how I would prepare myself by trying to do it on the bed—for a soft landing—but never having the courage to lift my feet off. I am hesitant to try it now, but I watch Anna and Nirvana demonstrate a supported handstand. They emphasise the importance of keeping one another safe, and I feel my apprehension slowly melting away.

It's our turn now. We pair up and I give my partner a smile. I watch her assume a 'ready' position, feet apart and hands stretched out. *She's there, she will catch me.* I take a breath and lunge forward with one foot. Almost like clockwork, my hands are planted on the floor and I feel my feet rising into the air. Then I feel her hands firmly grab my hips. The blood is rushing to my head. I am disoriented. I let out a little gasp.

It is an incredible feeling, being upside-down, holding the weight of my entire body on the palms of my hands. These hands have been described as 'delicate,' 'tiny,' 'bird-like'. When I was 17, a schoolmate even nicknamed me 'Claws' because of the crookedness of my fingers. But these words do not matter now. At the end of the class I leave the space with a sense that my body, as I have known it, has changed.

## **Introduction**

This research project is an ethnographically inspired investigation into the community performance work of Vulcana Women's Circus, a feminist community circus organisation based in Brisbane, Australia. Although the prologue captures my own experience of circus training, this study is not an account of my involvement in Vulcana's training programs. Rather, I focus primarily on Stronghold, a community performance project that Vulcana created with people with disabilities. In my investigation, I seek to uncover the complexities of creating such work. I do however connect moments within the prologue to a more extended understanding of Stronghold by examining how cultural beliefs about certain bodies become questioned and challenged through the company's work.

Crucial to this study is the role of the researcher as ethnographer, and how my attempt to make sense of the work is impacted by the negotiations I had to make within the work created by Vulcana and their project participants. Throughout this thesis, I embed various narrative vignettes that capture significant moments within the research. I hope that including my voice as ethnographer throughout this study will offer insight into not only the challenges involved in ethnography, but also the significance of critically understanding the work from an insider-outsider perspective. I argue that the role of the ethnographer in applied and community theatre practice is important, especially so in this particular context of Vulcana's work, where creating performance with people with disability is relatively new even for the practitioners themselves. While there are challenges in terms of power relations that exist in these contexts (I examine these issues in Chapter 3), the ethnographer can offer a valuable critical perspective on the work and thus contribute to more reflective practice.

In this Introduction, I first offer an overview of circus as a cultural form prior to and in tandem with the emergence of women's circuses in Australia, thereafter tracing the beginnings of Vulcana Women's Circus. I also contextualise the company's work within the scope of community theatre and women's circuses in Australia. I then situate my research questions within the literature drawn from the three inter-related fields of feminist theatre practice, disability, and applied performance. In doing so, I also explain why I examine Vulcana's work within the larger field of applied performance. Next I chart my research journey, in which I describe the performance projects that inform this study and position my multiple roles within the company's work. I also offer a narrative description of the Stronghold performance that took place. I conclude with a breakdown of the organisation of the thesis.

### **Situating Vulcana Women's Circus within the context of circus as a cultural form in Australia**

The circus is a kind of mirror in which the culture is reflected, condensed, and at the same time transcended.  
(Bouissac, cited Arrighi, 2014, p. 201)

Circus has a long history in Australia. Although it has since closed, the Ashton's Circus, a family-run enterprise, is one of the oldest performing companies, with its history tracing back to 1852 (see Milne, 2004). St Leon's (2006) extensive research into the history of Australian circus offers some insight into understanding circus as a cultural form in Australia. He articulates how the 'oldest surviving circuses are the relics of some of Australia's earliest entertainment organisations while the newest reflect contemporary Australian cultural practices' (p. i). To condense over a century of cultural history of circus in Australia is beyond the scope and focus of this thesis. Therefore I offer only glimpse into its past and present, drawing here on the work of the few scholars (Arrighi, 2009, 2014, 2015; Lemon, 2011; Mullett, 2014; St Leon, 1983, 2006) who have written about circus in Australia.

St Leon (2006) addresses how Australian circus has been a 'continuous process of adaption and refinement of the original English model'. In its early years, circus shows often presented equestrian acts, which Lemon (2011) states 'reflect[ed] the central role of horses in the emerging [Australian settler]

colonies' (p. 4). In fact, St Leon notes that the first time the words 'Australia' and 'circus' were used together was in the name Royal Australian Equestrian Circus, which opened in Sydney in 1850. He also observes that the period between 1850 and 1914 signalled the 'emergence of an "Australian" culture [which] set the scene for Australia's cultural development for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century', and that the characteristics defining and affecting this Australian culture were similarly reflected in the evolution of Australian circus (p. xvi). For instance St Leon acknowledges the growing commercialisation of popular culture, which meant that Australian circus 'became increasingly professionalised, mobile and accessible' (p. xvii). Similarly, Lemon reinforces how circus has always been 'a mirror to popular culture, absorbing cultural influences, and reflecting popular cultural fascinations' (p. 4).

St Leon (2006) also notes that American cultural influences were being felt in Australia during the abovementioned time period (1850-1914), and Lemon (2011) affirms this observation. She documents how Australian circus performances were quick to embrace highly acrobatic equestrian acts, and often 'performed American-influenced "spectacles"' (p. 4). St Leon offers a cursory statement that despite its early English and American influences, circus in Australia 'has developed and exhibited artistic and organisational characteristics that are uniquely Australian' (p. ii), thus finding its own unique cultural identity. According to St Leon, 'by 1914, and probably earlier, aspects of Australian circus were recognisably Australian, neither wholly English, nor wholly American in character, and its performers recognisably Australian in the circuses and other venues of England and the United States'. He explains briefly that this identity reflected a kind of 'Australian colonial culture [that] assumed some hybrid characteristics' of other cultures' (p. xvii).

St Leon (1983) outlines the decline of traditional circus as an Australian institution:

The traditional circus in Australia, as elsewhere, in the Western world has ceased to proliferate in the strength and numbers as it did once. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century swung into its stride with a vast array of technology, as standards and expectations of material living have increased, so public appreciation of the traditional circus as artful entertainment waned. (p. 173)

Lemon (2011) identifies also how technology, television in particular, adversely affected traditional circuses. In addition, she cites the 'animal liberation politics [...] mounting regulations, paperwork and accounting' (p. 6) as taking their toll on the culture of traditional circus. But St Leon (2006) identifies other factors that led to shifts in popularity of traditional circus. He considers how traditional Australian circus underwent a 'crisis of relevance', a response to the 'changing economic, social and cultural realities' (p. 383).

A new wave of circus, aptly termed 'new circus', began to emerge in Australia in the 1970s, most notably through companies such as Circuz Oz and the Flying Fruit Fly Circus (Milne, 2004). Tait (2005) reveals how this movement, occurring also in Europe and North America, was motivated partly by 'an attraction to the mythology of a self-contained world outside mainstream culture ... It emulated circus skills but not traditional circus organization' (p. 126). Mullett (2014) acknowledges that these new circuses evolved partly from the radical theatre of the 1960s and 1970s, and Arrighi (2014) describes them as being '[r]e-imagined paradigms of circus and variety' (p. 199). The beginnings of Australian new circus can be located in what Milne (2004) identifies as a 'second wave' of Australian theatre, existing in a climate that saw a 'new nationalism in Australian culture' (p. 123).

Milne (2004) writes that one of the oft-cited factors differentiating the new circus tradition from that of traditional circus was the avoidance of animals in shows. Milne stresses however that:

there is more to this form than just traditional circus minus menagerie. Of course many of Australia's new circus companies feature juggling, clowning, aerial work, acrobatics and acrobalance, fire-eating, tight and slack wire, cycling and other accustomed apparatuses and acts. But they also incorporate foreign influences, especially from China, that are newer to Australia ... (p. 361)

Farrell (2007) confirms that Chinese acrobats became 'cultural envoys' to Australian new circus and physical theatre performers in 1983, and that since then, 'Chinese trainers became a permanent influence on Australian new circus' (p. 36).

Further to adopting foreign (Chinese) influences, Milne (2004) also notes that new circus performances were used to explore a number of themes, some of which were of a social and political nature. St Leon (1983) similarly mentions

the work of Circus Oz as being 'coloured by political and social comment' (p. 173), while Mullett (2014) describes the company as 'one of the most overtly political circus groups in its early days' (p. 99). This angle appears to differ from traditional Australian circus, which was 'largely apolitical in nature and impact, an agent more of prevailing social taste and economic circumstance than of a ruling hegemony' (St Leon, 2006, p. xvi).

Mullett (2014) recounts how the politics of the founding Circus Oz company were representational, dealing with issues such as gender and sexuality (p. 100). In an earlier text, Tait (1994b) notes that the early feminist contributions to new circus in Australia parodied and satirised society as well as circus gender stereotypes. Furthermore, she credits the development of a women's circus to the 'legacy of women's theatre groups which had generated physical and comic modes of performance' (p. 112). Tait (1994b) acknowledges Robin Laurie and Jane Mullett who were key in the development of Circus Oz, and who also created the Wimmin's Circus.

The Women's Circus in Melbourne grew out of founder Donna Jackson being inspired by the earlier Wimmin's Circus, which I mentioned above. Richards (1994) describes the Wimmin's Circus as 'Australia's first circus group run by, for and with women' (p. 153). Richards (2003) explains further that Jackson's 'decision to found the first [Women's] Circus program was an extension of her previous work with young women at risk, and with survivors of sexual assault' (p. 222).

Milne (2004) describes Vulcana's work as being 'reminiscent in many ways of the ... Footscray Women's Circus [also the Women's Circus]' (p. 363), which emerged out of an initiative of the Footscray Community Arts Centre in Melbourne, Australia (Richards, 2003, p. 222). Both companies however have different beginnings. Vulcana Women's Circus was formed in 1995 by Antonella Cassella in conversation with Kareena Oates. Both women had been members of Rock 'n' Roll Circus, which evolved in 1987 out of a major circus show under the same name.

Although Vulcana's Circus in a Tea Cup project in 2006 also involved working with women who were survivors of domestic violence, Cassella formed Vulcana in response to a perceived lack of women working in circus. Cassella and Oates had been frustrated by the limitations placed on women's involvement in circus, and Vulcana was created as an accessible space for

women to participate in circus training and activities, where they could feel both physically and emotionally safe doing so.<sup>1</sup> Hayes (2012) outlines briefly Vulcana's mission statement, which emphasises:

the creation of a non-competitive environment where women can develop physical skills as well as collaboration with diverse communities, fostering community cultural development and the production of pathways for professional creative endeavours. (p. 166)

Cassella herself was a committed feminist, and since her departure from the company, all of Vulcana's Artistic Directors (AD) have had to articulate their feminist positions when applying for the position. Vulcana's current AD, Celia White, plays a significant role in this thesis as my co-researcher. She first began her role as AD in 2003, served in this position until 2009, and then returned to take over the position from Veronica (Ronnie) Neave in 2013. Celia's<sup>2</sup> feminist stance involves constantly assessing how performers challenge stereotypes about the (gendered) body. In her early involvement with the Sydney-based physicality theatre company The Party Line, Celia and her collaborators explored the ideas of French feminists as well as those of Judith Butler to redefine notions of 'the feminine' (Grant-Iramu, 2013). Tait (1994a) writes of how she was invited by The Party Line to collaborate with them, following a talk she had given on the relevance of Butler's ideas to feminist theatre practice. She explained that the ideas explored by The Party Line were theoretically informed, particularly by Butler's notion of gender as performative act, which sought to 'create panoramic shifts across images of images of feminine identity' (p. 85).

During Celia's first tenure as AD, there was a change in arts funding, and Vulcana responded to the politics of art funding by developing programs that involved not only women. This shift reflects Richards' (1998) observation that there has always been a state of 'interdependence of activity and government policy in Australia' (p. 208). Despite the redirection of the company's community

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the scant literature published about Vulcana Women's Circus, I have gathered the history of Vulcana through conversations with Veronica Neave (Vulcana's former Artistic Director), Celia White (current Artistic Director), and Michelle Grant-Iramu (Vulcana's first Community Cultural Development Coordinator). I have included transcript extracts of my conversations with the women in the Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to Celia by her first name here because of the collaborative role she has played working with me to develop the insight I have for this thesis.

projects, Vulcana sought to ensure that those projects were led by women, and that it continued to employ women in positions often assigned to men. It was also important for Vulcana that the insights gained from and perceived benefits of the women-focused community projects could be extended to creating performance with other communities, such as refugee communities.

Even though my thesis focuses primarily on Vulcana's Stronghold project, I argue that it is necessary to consider the company's history within the context of community theatre in Australia. In doing so, I align myself with Binns' (1991) assertion that '[i]t is important to live in the present but each present moment has a past and future which exist in memory and imagination' (p. 13). As Richards (1998) foretells, '[m]ore change is probable; the [women's circus] cannot remain static ... if it is to function effectively in terms of the goals it has set itself as a women's performance company' (p. 212). Vulcana's work, while still privileging women's experience and participation, seeks to engage 'a broad range of community participants' (Vulcana Women's Circus, 2015), and Stronghold can be understood as an example of this engagement.

### **Contextualising the research**

The impetus for conducting this study emerged primarily out my passion for physical theatre, in the kind of work that gives the body primacy in the articulation of meaning and expression. I have always been drawn to physical theatre styles, and revelled in the physical theatre workshops in which I had participated. I extended my interest in physical theatre through research, and in 2011 completed a Master's thesis that examined physical actor training and performance in Brisbane. This passion for physical theatre was combined with an interest in feminist studies gleaned from my undergraduate days, as well as my professional experience as a drama educator creating theatre work with young people. I saw Vulcana's work as existing at the 'intersection of ... feminism, physical theatre and community arts' (Richards, 2003, p. 222), three areas of interest to me.

Tait (1994b) explains that the women's circus, which emerged out of feminist theatre practice in the 1970s, is a phenomenon unique to Australia. There have been previous studies on the work of other women's circuses in Australia, such as the Women's Circus in Melbourne (Richards, 1994, 1998,

2003; Tait, 1994a, 1994b), and Circus WOW in Wollongong (Hayes, 2012). In addition, research and documentation into women's theatre practice has often been dominated by literature from North America and the United Kingdom (UK) (Richards, 2003, p. 231). This gap in recent research into Australian feminist theatre practice and women's circus thus invites more investigation into this area, and through my research, I hope to examine how Vulcana can 'create its own diverse and flexible legacy' (Goodman, 1993, p. 6).

While previous literature has often positioned the work of women's circuses within the field of community arts and community theatre (Milne, 2004; Richards, 1998, 2003; Tait, 1994b), I find value in considering how Vulcana's work operates within the wider field of applied performance, under which community theatre/performance falls. Applied performance literature has rarely included discussions of community circus work, and I aim to fill this gap by offering an examination of Vulcana's Stronghold project through a lens of applied performance. Arrighi (2014), writing about the cultural history of community circus in Australia, proposes that this work could possibly be termed 'applied circus' (p. 207); I take this suggestion further by positioning Vulcana's work directly within the field of applied performance, drawing on theories and discussions that emerge from this field in order to examine the Stronghold project.

Vulcana's work on Stronghold encouraged me to extend my investigation into the field of disability and disability performance. In this context, I found Conroy's (2009) claims both a challenge and a welcome. She writes that '[t]here is no recognisable field of disability in applied drama ... the two fields of applied and community drama and political disability have no coherent meeting place in discourse' (p. 11). While she acknowledges this lack of discussion, she contends that 'the meeting of applied and disability offers a productive area of discursive practice' (p. 12). Further, Fox and Lipkin (2002) emphasise the need for 'feminism and disability studies to productively inform one another' (p. 82). My research project aims to contribute to this discussion by bringing the three fields into conversation with one another. I seek to discover where the convergences and divergences lie, thus revealing both the complexities and the possibilities of such work.

By situating my research within the fields of applied performance, feminist theatre practice, and disability, what emerged as preliminary meeting

points were firstly notions of the body, particularly in relation to hegemonic and cultural narratives of (disabled) bodies. Further, the literature yielded ideas surrounding political and affective labour, which relate to the political positioning of the work, and the search for affect, joy, and beauty. From my review of relevant literature, and the gaps that presented themselves, I thus developed my three research questions:

- How are bodies re-storied in and through feminist circus and physical theatre?
- What are the political and affective labours of creating performance with people with disabilities?
- In what ways can a theory of disability performance inform applied performance and vice versa?

I conceptualise these questions within the larger discussions in the relevant fields, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2.

### **Charting the changing research journey, situating the projects**

When I first embarked on my research journey into Vulcana's work, I was keen to understand how and why certain groups and communities of women become 'othered'. In part, I drew from my own personal experience growing up in a small Southeast Asian country seemingly obsessed with the notion of 'race'. This obsession stretched to the extent that a person's race is printed on their national identity cards. As a young child in primary school, I often had to tick the box marked 'others' whenever I filled out any documents that required one's race to be identified. Even as a child, I used to wonder why I was classified as an other, feeling almost indignant at the term, as if I was not important enough to be given a 'proper' term.

My initial research focus was to examine how Vulcana, as a feminist social circus, sought to empower communities of women who are deemed marginalised. I admit that I did not initially set out to write a thesis about disability in/and performance. But the shift in Vulcana's community program meant that as an ethnographer, I had to remain open to change and uncertainty, and as my research questions indicate, I had to respond according to the direction in which Vulcana was moving.

### The first project: Wizard of Auslan

Wizard of Auslan first began in 2011 as a 16-week skills training workshop with women from the Deaf<sup>3</sup> community. The skills training workshops continued in 2012, but these workshops were later developed through a creative process into a performance held in the Vulcana studio, the audience comprising mainly family and friends of the performers. My involvement as a researcher commenced during the creative development period, which ran from July to October. This project was facilitated mainly by Ronnie, who was serving as Vulcana's AD at that time. Celia had been invited on board as another facilitator in the project because of her ongoing connection with Vulcana as well as her history working with the Deaf community. During the project, Vulcana invited two Deaf guest artists to work with the women in order to develop their physical expression. Bec and Lara were also involved in Wizard of Auslan—Bec as community outreach coordinator and Lara as guest artist teaching puppetry skills. Excluding the facilitators and guest artists, the participants were made up of seven Deaf women, one hearing woman with a Deaf child, and three hearing women who were involved as aerialists.

This project served as a kind of looking glass for me. Throughout my research journey, I constantly drew on my developing understanding of Vulcana's work through Wizard of Auslan, using it as points of reflection in order to make sense of Stronghold as well as my deepening role as ethnographer in Vulcana's work.

### The project that almost was: Crashmat

Following Wizard of Auslan, there were plans for another project with women to take place. The next project, Crashmat, had been developed for women who identified as experiencing mental illness. Crashmat was initiated in 2012, and scheduled to continue in 2013. Crashmat aimed to explore the stories behind the lived experience of mental illness, and Ronnie had plans to work towards a performance that drew from the women's shared stories.

In early April 2013, while I was working with Celia on a small-scale performance for Vulcana, she informed me that Ronnie had taken time off from her role as AD due to personal reasons. The Crashmat project began to fall by the wayside, although I held on to the hope that it would eventuate.

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<sup>3</sup> In keeping with conventions in the field of Deaf studies, I use Deaf with a capital 'D' to signify Deafness as a mark of culture, of which a unique sign language is part of the identity.

### The second project: Stronghold

In the space of waiting for news about Crashmat, Bec invited me to be a part of Vulcana's Stronghold project, which was to begin in July 2013. I entered the project, just as I had with Wizard of Auslan, as a researcher-ethnographer. Throughout the course of Stronghold, however, I observed the changing nature of my involvement, which I discuss throughout the thesis. As mentioned earlier, my ethnographic account of Stronghold is the main focus of my thesis; I do however draw on moments from Wizard of Auslan as points of reflection.

Stronghold consisted of both men and women with various disabilities. Some were wheelchair users, while others were not. Three of the participants had support workers with them during the sessions. There were 11 participants who embarked on the Stronghold journey, but 2 withdrew halfway due to personal reasons. One participant fell sick on the day of the performance and was not able to be a part of it.

To develop Stronghold, Vulcana received in-kind and funding support from an organisation in Queensland.<sup>4</sup> Stronghold ran over a period of 4 months, and the workshops were divided into two main phases. The first phase focused on puppetry and took place mainly in a community hall. The staff and some of the members from this community hall<sup>5</sup> were also working in collaboration with the partnering organisation (PO) as part of Stronghold. The second phase of the project was run in the Vulcana studio, and this involved more movement-based work. The workshops were a part of a creative development process leading up to a short performance as part of the PO's annual event, which took place at the Visy Theatre of the Brisbane Powerhouse in November 2013.

### The Stronghold performance

The Stronghold performance itself was composed of a patchwork of various 'scenes' that emerged in the creative process. I offer a short narrative description of the performance below. I have chosen to write the narrative in present tense to capture the immediacy of my experience being a part of the performance and sharing the stage with the Stronghold participants:

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<sup>4</sup> As the focus of my thesis is on Vulcana's work, I refer to this organisation simply as the Partnering Organisation (PO).

<sup>5</sup> I also retain the anonymity of this organisation by using a generic term like the 'community hall' to refer to the space in which Stronghold took place. The staff from the community hall were aware of my research role, but understood that I was focusing on Vulcana's work (see Chapter 3).

In semi-darkness, the performers take the stage. The Stronghold performers are accompanied on stage by the Vulcana women and Liza who are dressed in black, and who move with them. The performers wear hats of different shapes—some are tall with red pom poms attached, some are short with red felt around the brims, and some are silver and sparkly. Each performer has on a red clown nose, and wears a costume-shirt designed with bows, or stripes, or buttons.

The lights come on, the music plays, and the performance begins with four short puppet scenes, which move from one to the next. As Eva and Ricky finish off the puppet pieces and take their bows, the music changes. The familiar circus tune, 'Entry of the Gladiators' blasts over the speakers and the performers blaze through the space, banging away at their instruments—hand bells, tambourines, and maraca—in a high-energy circus parade. It looks like chaos.

As the parade mellows, Eva takes centre stage, and everyone moves to form a semi-circle around her. There is a moment of silence, and then Eva raises her arms and all at once, the performers begin to create vocal and embodied sounds. Eva leads this vocal orchestra, taking the group through valleys and peaks of loud and quiet. The orchestra dissolves as Eva takes her bow as the orchestra conductor.

Ricky moves forward and holds up a hula hoop. Hats and noses are removed, and one by one, the performers approach the hoop, and as they are framed by the large circle, announce themselves in their own way—by voicing their names, or moving their bodies. The last person to present herself is Gwen. She sits behind the hoop, a cheeky smile playing on her face. There is an air of suspense as everyone waits.

Ricky moans, 'Oh dear,' which causes the audience to break into laughter. Suddenly, Gwen 'rocks out' in her chair, humming as she moves her body back and forth. The audience applauds and cheers.

The pace changes again, and Bryce takes the lead, moving in a slow pace around the stage. The Vulcana women move with the other performers in wheelchairs, following the pace set by Bryce. In and between the spaces created by wheelchair ballet, three other performers and I, each holding a large red velvet ball, weave our way through.

Bryce makes his way to the upstage centre, a signal for everyone else to form a line upstage. The performers face the audience and journey their way forward, as if to say, *This is me. Here I am.*

It is important to note that the title of my thesis has been inspired by the Stronghold participants themselves. Eva, one of the Stronghold participants, suggested that the group be called The Noisemakers. The idea of making noise extends throughout this thesis, suggesting the notion of ruptures, pushing boundaries, and causing commotions. It is also indicative of the numerous times when the Vulcana facilitators and I experienced moments of uncertainty and mess, which became revealed through the challenges of the Stronghold process.

Earlier, I noted the relationship between the status of community arts and funding policies, and that the issue of funding has or has had an impact on Vulcana's work. Certainly, the collaboration between Vulcana and the various partnering organisations has led to the creation of projects that may not have been possible without supported funding; nonetheless, it is worthwhile to bear in mind how funding can affect the focus and direction of a company's work.

### **Positioning myself**

Coffey (1999) highlights how '[t]ime, space and emotions are all invested in ethnographic fieldwork' and that '[o]ur own subjective personality is part of the research and is negotiated in the field' (p. 57). Throughout this thesis, I constantly draw on my reflections and on my feelings, sharing them with the reader as I navigate and try to make sense of my observations in the field, of the work unfolding.

It is also necessary to document my relationship with Vulcana, and the multiple roles I have played within the company's work. As highlighted in the prologue, my relationship with Vulcana began in 2011, when I enrolled as a student in the company's Circus Essentials classes. Since then, circus training has become an ongoing part of my life, and over the years, I have volunteered at many Vulcana events—serving drinks at their fundraising cabaret, making hula hoops, and even donning a high-visibility jacket as a car park attendant at the Toowong Cemetery for their show, *Grave Effects of Notable Women*. I have also performed at some of the company's events, and was part of their major

show, *Small Change*, at the Brisbane Powerhouse in 2014. In Chapter 6, I draw on a memory from the creative development of *Small Change* to reflect on a moment in Stronghold. I am perhaps what one may call a ‘Vulcanista’—a term given to the women who are part of Vulcana, whether as a full-time staff member, a trainer, or a participant in their circus classes.

My role as a researcher adds another layer to my relationship with the company, and I acknowledge from the outset that my personal investment in the company outside my thesis may open up questions about the level of objectivity in the research. Still, I argue that my involvement with the company creates a strong element of trust. I can be open and honest about my work, and invite collaborative feedback from the Vulcana facilitators. As Coffey (1999) asserts, ethnographers need to establish trust and genuine empathy with those in the field. I continue to present the discussions surrounding ethnography and relationships in the field, as well as issues of collaborative meaning-making in Chapter 3.

### **Organisation of the thesis**

In this chapter, I have provided a brief history of Vulcana Women’s Circus, and contextualised my research questions within the literature drawn from applied performance, feminist theatre practice, and disability. By charting my changing research journey, I revealed how my role as ethnographer required considerable flexibility in terms of having to shift my original research focus in order to respond to different directions that Vulcana was taking, such as working with people with disability.

In Chapter 2, I interrogate the fields of applied performance, feminist theatre, and disability performance more thoroughly, and frame the focus of my research into Vulcana’s community performance work, specifically that of Stronghold. I begin the chapter by examining each of these fields separately, but conclude by tracing the meeting points between them. In this chapter, I also outline my use of a bricolage framework (Kincheloe, 2001, 2005) as a philosophy of approach, which proposes that researchers use multiple interpretive methods in order to study different aspects of the situation. I draw on this framework to support my synthesis of the different fields in which I situate Vulcana’s Stronghold project.

Chapter 3 presents my methodology, and like in Chapter 2, I see my methodology as producing more meeting points. I begin by framing my position as a feminist researcher examining the work of a feminist company, offering some perspectives regarding the complexities surrounding feminist research and knowledge. I then discuss the meeting points between ethnography, applied performance, and (researching) disability, and consider the ethics of power that are present in such contexts. In this chapter, I also explain my analogy of the house to describe my research design, and elaborate on the relationships developed in the field as an ethnographer who begins to teeter on the edge of reflective practice.

Chapter 4 is the first of three chapters that plunge the work into the heart of Stronghold. Here I examine the relationship between bodies and spaces, and how the interaction between different bodies in a shared space allows for a (re)consideration of cultural narratives often created about the (disabled) body. This chapter welcomes the reader into the first moments of the Stronghold project, the community hall space, and introduces in more descriptive detail the Stronghold participants. In this chapter I question how the work of Stronghold can aim to achieve instances of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004), and the importance of understanding the politics that inform the spaces in which we move and work.

Chapter 5 captures the tensions that emerged in the creative process of Stronghold. These tensions are framed by a series of questions posed by Preston (2009b) in her introduction to the ethics of representation in applied performance. I suggest that through these moments of tension, acts of 'stammering' (Thompson, 2009, p. 133) become important in the work of applied performance facilitators. These stammerings are important because they help us ask difficult questions about applied performance work, and help us 'own [our] discomfort' (Kuppers, 2014, p. 11). Through examining the acts of stammering in the Stronghold process, I discover how a disability perspective can help expand an understanding of applied performance work.

In Chapter 6, I focus on the moments of joy that were created in the space of Stronghold, suggesting that these moments can help alleviate the sense of guilt that can often accompany our stammerings. I consider the connection between joyful encounters and the idea of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1968, 1973), and how joyful chaos can become a process of

inversion, 'turning the world upside-down' (Lev-Aladgem, 2010, p. 66). I explore spaces of waiting and the intimate spaces of touch, which reveal possibilities for finding moments of beauty in the work. I conclude the chapter by exploring the idea of longing, and how capturing expressions of longing offer applied performance facilitators and researchers the opportunity for having second, third, and fourth chances (Gallagher, 2007).

Finally, in Chapter 7, I highlight the discoveries made through my research by revisiting my three research questions. I consider the impact of my research and its limitations, and make suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2: MEETING POINTS 1—APPLIED PERFORMANCE, FEMINIST THEATRES, AND DISABILITY PERFORMANCE**

This chapter interrogates the three fields of applied performance, feminist theatre, and disability performance, drawing on related literature from these fields to frame the focus of my research into Vulcana's community performance work, and particularly on the work of Stronghold. As such, it is not my intention to offer a comprehensive overview of the literature here. Instead, I draw and build on the literature presented here in the chapters that follow, using them to illuminate the themes that have emerged in my study. In addition, I maintain that the core of this review comprises literature from the field of applied performance as this is where I mainly position my research. Thompson (2005, 2008) articulates the notion of guest-hood in the field of applied performance, and emphasises that '[w]e are only ever visitors within the disciplines into which we apply our theatre' (2008, p. 20; see also Chapters 3 and 6 for further elaboration).

I have titled this chapter 'Meeting Points' to signal the potential convergence of the three fields that I have drawn on to help frame my study and provide the context to my three research questions:

- How are bodies re-storied in and through feminist circus and physical theatre?
- What are the political and affective labours of creating performance with people with disabilities?
- In what ways can a theory of disability performance inform applied performance and vice versa?

My notion of meeting points likewise finds parallel with bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001, 2005), where researchers become more aware of 'multiple layers of intersections' (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 688). While bricolage has often been used in relation to methodology, I draw on it here as a philosophy of approach, using it to support my synthesis of the different fields in which I situate Vulcana's Stronghold project. As Kincheloe (2005) argues, the researcher needs to 'dig, scratch, and analyse from different angles and employ multiple research methods and interpretive strategies to examine different aspects of the situation' (p. 330). Importantly, as Kincheloe (2001) asserts, a bricolage approach is concerned with 'diverse theoretical and philosophical notions of the various

elements encountered in the research act' (p. 682); it encourages what Koppers (2014) describes as 'cross-field encounters' (p. 29). By 'chasing complexity' (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 325), there is rich reward in drawing together these different fields in order to locate the meeting points, and thereby understand the work of Vulcana on a deeper level.

I begin my discussion by reviewing the research into key concepts of applied and community theatre, considering some of the different ways these terms have been used and articulated. I thereafter employ the term *applied performance* as it resonates most strongly with how I position Vulcana's work. In addition, I focus on the politicisation of the work created by professional theatre-makers with disempowered communities; specifically, I investigate the claims surrounding transformation, empowerment, social change, and the related ethical concerns and problems associated with such intentions. I then make the claim for community and social circus to be considered as a form of applied performance, highlighting the gaps in the scant academic literature on community and social circus to take into account participants other than youth.

In the second section, I draw attention to literature on feminist theatre, focussing on situating Vulcana's work within a feminist theatre lineage, and more specifically within the work of women's theatre and circus in Australia. I examine also the idea of feminist theatre practice and the importance of space and body within feminist theatre. I argue that current research into the work of Vulcana helps to revive the scholarship in the area of women's circus and feminist theatre practice in Australia.

The third section of this chapter engages with disability and disability performance literature, where I first provide commentary on the overarching notions of disability in order to understand how disability is variously perceived in society. I then briefly contextualise disability arts by drawing on literature that has emerged from the UK and Australia, before reviewing the scholarship on political disability performance, where notions of the body once again come to the fore. I posit that examining Vulcana's work can extend this relatively nascent field and contribute to the possibilities for ongoing dialogue.

I conclude this review by locating and re-tracing some of the meeting points across the three fields, bringing them into a three-way conversation. These meeting points, however, are not always smooth; boundaries are blurred

and edges are jagged, signifying ambivalent relationships between them at times.

## **Applied performance**

In the introduction of my thesis, I contextualised Vulcana's work within the field of community theatre, specifically (work occurring) in Australia. Here, I wish to consider Vulcana's work within the wider scope of applied performance, although I do so not without some trepidation.

### 'Applied theatre': A conflation of terms

Even though I have been using the term applied performance up to this point, I begin this overview with the term applied theatre as it is most widely used in the literature. Here I discuss this field in light of the conflation of terms; applied theatre is a wide and diverse field—an umbrella term (see Snyder-Young, 2013)—and studies in applied theatre often widen out into different areas such as prison theatre, Theatre for Development (TfD), Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), and Theatre in Education (TIE), just to name a few (see Prendergast & Saxton, 2009; Prentki & Preston, 2009; Thompson, 2008).

Other arguments in the field have made the case for community theatre to be considered as a branch of applied theatre. P. Taylor (2003) for example, highlights the status of 'community theatre [as] an applied theatre form' (p. xviii), while Nicholson (2005) outlines that community theatre 'is one of the three interrelated movements that have made significant contributions to twenty-first century applied drama' (p. 8). Although meant as an introductory text providing an international overview, Prendergast and Saxton (2009) usefully outline the range of practices they believe constitute applied theatre, stating that it is an inclusive term 'not carry[ing] any limiting fixed agendas' (p. 6).

In her doctoral thesis, McEwen (2008) notes that 'the term "community theatre" may have lost currency in favour of ... "applied theatre"' (p. 24). Adding to this discussion are the statements made by Kuppens and Robertson (2007), who use the term community performance instead. They posit that:

Community performance has theatrical elements, but it is not theatre ... Community performance is enriched by the discipline of dance, but it need not include choreography. In fact, community performance is not bound by the arts

as it crosses into other, less conventionally artistic practices, such as economic development, human rights politics, disability culture, community redevelopment, capacity building ... Instead, community performance moves with and through wider contemporary art practices, creating links between different realms, spaces, stories and bodies. (p. 1)

Therefore, even though Vulcana positions itself as a group that works with communities and creates community performances, and along with Richards' (2003) convincing argument of the Women's Circus as 'radical or community theatre' (p. 226), I have chosen deliberately to move away from seeing Vulcana's work only through the lens of community theatre. Instead, I find some ground in considering Vulcana's community performance projects—and this includes Stronghold—within the wide field of applied theatre, which has been suitably characterised as something that takes place 'in non-traditional settings and/or with marginalized communities' (Thompson & Jackson, 2006, p. 92).

But choosing to use the term applied theatre to consider Vulcana's work has come with an element of trepidation, as I have earlier mentioned. Even though it has been argued that community theatre can fall under the auspices of applied theatre, could Vulcana's Stronghold project really be considered as such? Admittedly, throughout my engagement with the work, I struggled with attempts at classification. I examined further how other scholars defined applied theatre work; in her book, Snyder-Young (2013) employs the term to refer to 'a wide range of practices in which participatory dramatic activities and/or theatre performances are used for a broad set of purposes including education, community building, rehabilitation, conflict resolution, and advocacy' (p. 4). Her articulation of the wide range of practices and broad set of purposes encouragingly encircles the Stronghold project, nestling it (somewhat) comfortably in a seemingly all-encompassing field.

Snyder-Young (2013) elaborates further, stating that her use of the term applied theatre:

focus[es] on collaborative, artistic intervention. Theatre is live, performative, storytelling. It requires that participants work together to find aesthetic solutions to creative problems emerging in the production process. Applied theatre orients this process towards a particular goal or set of goals. It operates as dialogue—an artist or a team of artists with expertise in theatre-making collaborate with

participants and/or audiences with expertise in their own experiences, lives, and concerns to create theatrical events. (p. 4)

Shaughnessy (2012) makes similar arguments to Snyder-Young (2013), writing that '[d]evising is a collaborative methodology, underpinning the process involved' (p. 10).

When considering the term theatre, further difficulties are encountered. Earlier, I referenced Nicholson's (2005) arguments regarding the status of community theatre within applied theatre. By using the term applied drama, Nicholson acknowledges the distinction made by P. Taylor with regards to the terms applied drama and applied theatre, signalling a focus on process for the former, and on product for the latter. Prendergast and Saxton (2009) also reference Nicholson's arguments, recognising applied drama as 'a separate field of practice that is process-based and does not generally involve a theatrical performance to an audience' (p. vi). Nicholson, however, chooses to use the terms interchangeably, with the aim of giving equal weight to both. Attempting to frame Stronghold as an applied drama project was met with uncertainty, mainly because the term drama carries with it a certain element of stories being shared and explored. For instance, Nicholson places a large emphasis on narrative and storytelling in her book, arguing how '[d]rama is in itself a narrative art' (p. 63), and that 'many of forms of theatre-making in applied drama have an interest in how fictional narratives might illuminate lived experiences' (p. 66). She does however offer a useful way of thinking about narratives, which could help alleviate the uncertainty of framing Stronghold:

practitioners will be alert to how different narratives – personal, cultural, social and artistic – converge in the process. This is not, of course, confined to dramatic forms which have an obvious narrative structure – a wider description of narratives would include games, rehearsals or drama workshops which convey something of the messiness of reality and explore its incoherence, and to which participants bring the complexity of their experiences of life, however fictionalised and incomplete. (p. 65)

Shaughnessy (2012) too ponders the terminology of applied theatre and brings focus to Nicholson's (2006) rewording of the scope of the journal *Research in Drama Education*. Nicholson acknowledges how terms like

research, drama, and education have been increasingly challenged; she thereby addresses the journal's aim in foregrounding interest in 'applying performance practices to cultural engagement, educational innovation and social change' (p. 2, cited also in Shaughnessy, 2012, p. xv). In drawing reference to Nicholson, Shaughnessy expresses her preference for the term performance, stating that it 'embrace[s] the fullest range of practices originating in theatre and visual art and to demonstrate affiliations with the academic field of performance studies' (p. xv).

I am aware that the term applied performance had arisen before Shaughnessy's (2012) use, but her articulation of this term resonates strongly with how I have positioned Vulcana's work. In her text, she makes the claim for the term, stating that it focuses 'on contemporary performance practices within social and educational contexts and the implications of a shift from a theatre dominated paradigm to a *performance centred one* [emphasis added] in the twenty-first century' (p. 13). Even though Shaughnessy draws on cognitive science to examine examples of applied performance practices—which is not my intention—the term creates an opening through which to consider Stronghold. As such, I try to use the term applied performance with as much consistency as possible when referring to Vulcana's work on Stronghold (and Wizard of Auslan). This issue of multiple namings and conflation of terms may occur however when I cite directly from the literature. Henceforth, whenever I write applied performance, I take it to include discussions on applied drama/theatre and community performance/theatre.

#### Applied performance and political agendas

In framing my research within the field of applied performance, I wanted to consider not only theoretical perspectives, but also research that foregrounds reflection on practical work, thus finding the meeting points between theory and practice. Because my investigation into Vulcana's work aims to extend scholarly research and writing about contemporary applied performance practice, I have also taken into account doctoral theses on applied performance projects as part of my mapping of the field.

In providing accounts of various applied performance projects, P. Taylor (2003), whose writings on applied performance are widely cited, attests to the wide potential of theatre: helping people reconstruct their identities, providing a

process of healing, facilitating dialogue where dialogue has previously been absent, finding alternatives, heightening awareness, and challenging contemporary discourses; these are but a few examples of how applied performance work can transform people and communities. For Taylor, the politicisation of the work can be understood as 'transformative encounters,' and 'applied theatre operates from a central transformative principle' (Taylor, 2003, p. 1), occurring as a praxis that involves action, reflection, and transformation (Taylor, 2003, p. 9). His determination to place transformation at the heart of applied performance sets up a rather idealised context:

The theatre is applied because it is taken out from the conventional mainstream theatre house into various settings in communities where many members have no real experience in theatre form. The theatre becomes a medium for action, for reflection, but most important, for transformation – a theatre in which *new modes of being* [emphasis added] can be encountered and new possibilities for humankind can be imagined. (Taylor, 2003, p. xxx,)

Although a bold claim that carries a hint of existentialism, this concept of transformation transfers across many other writings about applied performance. Like P. Taylor (2003), Preston (2009a) also draws on the theories of Paulo Freire; specifically, she engages with his discussions of achieving transformation through a process of "cultural synthesis" where a climate of dialogue and reciprocity enables people to realise their capacity to discover their own transformative possibilities' (p. 304). Her focus on the interconnected notions of dialogue and reciprocity imply the need for participants to claim greater ownership of the work created, as opposed to a kind of transformation enforced by practitioners.

In order to evoke such transformative encounters, P. Taylor (2003) further outlines the role of applied performance workers, claiming that they are 'driven by a desire to provide insight, to interrogate understandings of community, and to contemplate notions of the better, the just' (p. 3). Similarly, Nicholson (2005) notes that 'most practitioners working in applied drama are motivated by individual or social change and there is, therefore, a similar interest in the effects and usefulness of the work' (p. 6). These arguments suggest that the intentionality held by practitioners is a crucial factor in evoking

any sense of transformation in participants, and moves the discussion in the direction of ethics. Ackroyd (2000, 2007), for instance, problematises the unquestioning view that all applied theatre work are acts of good will; Ackroyd (2007) even employs the term 'dubious' to describe work with less than 'humanitarian ends' (p. 3). Likewise, Thompson (2008) cautions against a 'cultural invasion'; he asserts that even with the best intentions, 'change set from the outside is more often an imposition than an act of liberation' (p. 41). Nicholson (2005), while acknowledging practitioners' motivations, expresses doubts regarding 'claims that drama always transforms beliefs and attitudes for the better [as] this is based on the understanding that no social encounter ... is exempt from other social narratives and alternative perceptions of power' (p. 82).

Given the problematic nature of applied performance's claims of transformation, I am uneasy using this term in seeking to understand the work that Vulcana does. In this respect, I align my ideas with those of Thompson (1998), who expresses the difficulty of ascertaining any form of major transformation through just one project. It is also noteworthy that Prentki and Preston (2009) problematise the idea of transformation in applied performance—particularly towards P. Taylor's (2003) view—acknowledging that 'the transformative possibilities of applied theatre are contentious' (p. 14). Preston (2009a) warns of the need to eschew 'romantic notion[s]' of transformation, especially when it tends to be associated with ideas of "saving" and "rescuing" people from their impoverished situations' (p. 304).

Other articulations of the objectives of applied performance include evoking a sense of empowerment. This term has occurred on Vulcana's official website (Vulcana Women's Circus, 2011). In both the Wizard of Auslan and Crashmat programs, for instance, Vulcana uses the word 'empowered' to describe the potential and perceived outcomes: '[t]hese workshops enhanced the health and wellbeing of all participants particularly developing physical strength and personal empowerment' (Vulcana Women's Circus, 2012a), and 'participants will use their stories in positive ways to empower themselves and benefit others' (Vulcana Women's Circus, 2012b). Although they mention the term 'transformation,' Boon and Plastow (2004) offer another way of thinking about empowerment:

Empowerment is to do not with the amelioration of oppression and poverty per se, but with the liberation of the human mind and spirit, and with the transformation of participants who see themselves – and are often seen by others – as subhuman, operating only at the level of seeking merely to exist, into conscious beings aware of and claiming voices and choices in how their lives will be lived. (p. 7)

The term empowerment, however, may be viewed with as much contention as transformation. Similar to the idea of transformation, much of the literature on applied performance discusses issues of empowerment. Haedicke (1998) cites the work as collaborating with communities ‘to understand and empower that community’ (p. 128). Lev-Aladgem (2006) reflects on the processes of applied performance with the Mizrahi group (Jews originating from Arab countries), stating that by drawing on participants’ personal stories to create an artistic performance, it ‘facilitates [both] individual and group empowerment’ (p. 270). For this particular group of people, Lev-Aladgem argues, the recollection of personal memories and stories is empowering because it seeks to reclaim it from a ‘master commemorative narrative’ that has erased the Mizrahim from the Zionist master narrative (p. 272).

Similarly, Boehm and Boehm (2003) affirm the potential for empowerment through applied performance work in the community. Their study focused on the combination of community theatre and social work with six women in Jaffa, Israel, who had experienced issues of disempowerment through a low level of education, economic struggles, and unemployment. The authors also outline the common problems faced by members of that particular (geographical) community: a high level of premature school leavers, unemployment, drug problems, and domestic abuse. Boehm and Boehm explain that empowerment can include ‘feelings of self-respect and self-esteem, [and] a sense of power, control and autonomy’ (p. 285). Bolton and Brooking (cited in Boehm & Boehm, 2003, p. 285) further indicate what they describe as ‘sub-elements’ of empowerment: self-efficacy, mastery, perceived competence, and assertiveness. It is promising that the findings from Boehm and Boehm’s study suggest that empowerment can indeed be achieved. Their reliance on interviews as a primary source of data however indicates that an in-depth examination of the actual process of the performance work can potentially yield richer findings. Even with their inclusion of video recordings, the lived

experience of the researcher within the community of participants is negated, and this lived experience and embodied understanding is what I hope to bring through my research.

Where Boehm and Boehm's (2003) study on the empowerment of the participants through applied theatre lacked the insight that could have been provided by a more involved researcher stance, Fisher's (2011) thesis offers a more practice-based perspective. Through a reflexive-practitioner approach, Fisher's study sought to 'empower those who are oppressed to stand up for themselves' (p. 17). In her practice, Fisher aligns her principles with those of Taylor (cited in Fisher, 2011), believing that theatre is a 'platform that empowers a transformation' (p. 37). Drawing partly on Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* and the *Rainbow of Desire*, Fisher offers insight into the methods and structures she employed in order to encourage her participants to address the issues that affected them, 'empower[ing] the women to explore and interrogate the meanings they hold about their behaviours and the impact those have on their bodies' (p. 185). Arguing within a feminist framework, Fisher's aim, through the workshops and performance creation, was to give a voice to overweight and obese women, especially in examining 'inherent issues of inequality, power dynamics, and oppression' (p. 33). In doing so, Fisher reflects on the opportunities that the theatre activities provided her participants to carefully examine how societal representations of overweight and obese women, specifically in the media and the medical community, can be an oppressive force. Although my own study does not look into Boal's methods as Fisher's does, her work offers more insight into how the workshop process and the creative space can create moments of empowerment.

It becomes apparent that even while trying to avoid the term transformation, the term empowerment itself is a controversial one. Neelands (2007) warns that theatres that 'claim to lead to "empowerment" [can] further normalise historical patterns of inequality and disadvantage' (pp. 313-314). Earlier, I drew on Boon and Plastow's (2004) suggestion about what empowerment could entail, but even they problematise the term, asking 'who is being empowered by whom, and to what end? How can practitioners in the area prove that what they do is empowering?' (p. 5). Bearing these contentions in mind, claiming the empowering potential of applied performance work is therefore not without challenges; this is an issue I would need to take into

consideration when examining how Vulcana aims to empower its participants and perhaps reframe what empowerment could mean in the specific context of Stronghold and, to a lesser extent, Wizard of Auslan.

These challenges are a reminder of Ackroyd's (2007) call for vigilance. While certainly important, the fact that there have been descriptions of the empowering potential applied performance work has to offer is undoubtedly promising. It is therefore important to articulate what empowerment entails and reflect on the processes undertaken in order to enact such empowerment in participants. The preceding debates and discussions can open up further inquiry into what already exists as a multitude of applied performance practices, and I seek to ask how—and if—providing a space for participants who are deemed marginalised to engage in collaborative performance creation can help empower them as Vulcana hopes it is doing. The existing literature, which raises issues about the ethics of empowerment, lays the ground for my own research into Vulcana's Stronghold project: what are the processes undertaken? Is there a dialogic process between facilitators and participants? Does empowerment arise out of reciprocity, or is it enforced upon the participants? Moreover, J. Hughes and Riding (2009) claim that the 'search for an empowering set of practices is an ongoing, methodological and philosophical challenge for applied theatre' (p. 223), and I propose that my study contributes by offering another perspective on understanding these challenges.

Perhaps here it may be useful to consider Lev-Aladgem's (2010) notions of empowerment, of which she appears confident in applied performance's potential to generate. She readily distinguishes empowerment at the interface of theatre and welfare, signalling that 'welfare bodies' often approach empowerment in terms of 'good-will,' while theatre practitioners commonly 'engage with theatre as a consciousness-raiser and symbolic weapon with which to stimulate social change' (p. 12). Using different theoretical lenses, Lev-Aladgem explores how participants in different applied performance projects gained empowerment; one example of note for my own research into Vulcana's Stronghold project is Lev-Aladgem's use of 'carnavalesque enactment' (p. 64), which she draws from Bakhtinian thought. In her work, she considers how carnival 'manifest[s] the process of inversion rather than the inversion itself, that is, not an inverted reality in its complete form, but the inversion in its liminal stage, in the process of its becoming' (p. 66).

Lev-Aladgem's (2010) arguments about the evocation of inversion as a weapon for social change relate to the notion of challenging and disrupting hegemonic narratives. She asserts that applied performance has 'subversive potential [that] threatens the status quo' (p. 13). This argument finds allies in other writings. In her doctoral thesis, Sinclair (2004), synthesising the arguments of Baz Kershaw, bell hooks, and David Watt, maintains that:

community artists are in fact activists with a responsibility to promote democratic processes in community settings, in a politicised public space. This is not to say that those who don't foreground the political nature of their work are not engaged in a politicised activity. It is possible that some practitioners and commentators take the political subtext underlying community arts practice as a given. The commitment to critique and change, to the giving of voice to the voiceless and marginalised, could be seen as one of the most pervasive identifying characteristics of community theatre. (p. 43)

Likewise, Nicholson (2005) claims that '[d]rama provides a powerful opportunity to ask questions about whose stories have been customarily told, whose have been accepted as truth, and to redress the balance by telling alternative stories or stories from a different perspective' (p. 63). Thompson (2008) too traces his political principles as the crucial need to 'giv[e] voice [and that] theatre gave voiceless communities an opportunity to speak out' (p. 30). When working in the context of prison theatre, however, Thompson discovered a challenge facing his initial principles, that by attempting to give voice to the voiceless, it gave rise to the 'ethically complex problem' of having created a space for 'abusive rhetoric' (p. 31) to also occur. Neelands (2007) also identifies tensions that can occur within certain contexts. He draws on Nicholson's contention regarding 'contextuality and ... the politics of space' (cited p. 308), asserting that frictions can emerge 'between the political imaginary of democracy and the politics of spaces which are not democratic' (p. 308). These reflections on such complexities lay the ground for my research: in documenting and interrogating the work of Vulcana, especially in Stronghold, are there certain processes that aid the empowerment of some while silencing/excluding others? What are the ethically complex problems that can happen in the space of making work together? How do the politics of the spaces in which the work of Stronghold is created impact the political imaginary of democracy?

Considering the complexities of applied performance projects becomes a core focus in Snyder-Young's (2013) work. She recognises that discourse on applied performance often focuses on 'spaces of resistance to the status quo'; she cautions however that hegemony allows for inequalities to seem 'natural and constant' and that this process complicates the notion of challenging hegemony. She argues that individuals may comply with social rules that maintain the status quo instead of challenging it. Her work thus examines instances where artists, participants, and audience members 'buy into' the social rules of the hegemony, and argues that these moments reflect the limits of theatre for social change (p. 4). Snyder-Young focuses on applied performance projects created mainly in the United States, covering 'some of the most common forms of theatre used towards the goal of social change' (p. 15). I propose that her study creates an opportunity for me to consider the work of a community circus project in Australia and the tensions that emerge, especially for the facilitators, when trying to create social change. I draw on her argument that scholars and practitioners 'rarely deal with [commitments to making change] as a *problem* or *obstacle* preventing them from making desired changes or realizing the goals of their projects' (p. 2, emphasis in original). Further, the relative recentness of Snyder-Young's text indicates that the ground is fertile for more scholars and practitioners to engage in this discussion.

Prentki and Preston (2009) state that:

Frequently those who engage in applied theatre are motivated by the belief that theatre experienced both as participant and as audience, might make some difference to the way in which people interact with each other and the wider world. For both practitioners and participants there may be an overt, political desire to use the process of theatre in the service of social and community change. For other practitioners and participants, the intention is less overt (but potentially no less political in its effect) and concerned with using theatre to draw attention to or reveal the hidden stories of a community. (p. 9)

These arguments within the field of applied performance encourage me to consider Stronghold in light of such political desires, whether they be overt or less so. Hence, I am motivated to examine the political labour of Vulcana's work in Stronghold. I am further motivated by the writings of Thompson (2009), particularly in light of his arguments for the affective realm in applied

performance. Thompson positions affect and politics as having a symbiotic relationship:

‘the vital *affective register* of participatory arts ... should not be accidental or peripheral but need[s] to be central to the purpose and thinking about the work, so that, following Deleuze, what has reached us through the senses becomes foundational to the practice and crucially *politics* of applied theatre’ (p. 115, emphasis in original).

The depth with which Thompson (2009) engages with theories of affect is beyond the scope of the thesis to reproduce here. Rather, I wish to direct focus to a key argument that ‘the attention to affect can be the basis of an ethical focus for applied theatre that, rather than taming the political, can, in fact, become a generator of its radical intent’ (p. 118). Thompson’s use of the phrase ‘taming the political’ is of course in reference to Neeland’s (2007) article critiquing pro-social forms of applied performance that tend to ‘distance [themselves] from the universal claims of equality and egalitarian redistribution’ (p. 315).

While Thompson (2009) draws on various theorists in order to define affect, I find his reference to Clough particularly relevant:

Affect refers generally to bodily capacities to affect and be affected or to the augmentation or diminution of a body’s capacity to act, engage, and to connect, such that autoaffection is linked to the self-feeling of being alive—that is aliveness or vitality. (cited p. 119)

Thompson stresses further on how ‘[f]un—and its many corollaries in delight, awe, or astonishment—should not be disentangled from what inevitably becomes the more commendable purposefulness of efficacy,’ arguing that focusing on affect and locating its power within practice allows for a richer reflection (pp. 130-131).

Thompson (2009) bemoans how the focus on ‘effects—identifiable social outcomes, messages or impacts’ can often ignore ‘the radical potential of the freedom to enjoy *beautiful radiant* things’ (p. 6, emphasis in original). The importance of beauty is emphasised by Winston (2008) who argues that ‘beauty’s power is instinctive, that it delights, that is of deep human value’ (p. 72). In a later text, Winston (2013) conceptualises the ‘language of beauty,’ and

how its diverse manifestations impact on the drama classroom, which can certainly be extended to other applied performance settings. He argues the need to recognise beauty beyond an articulation of formal qualities to considering the relational experience. Winston stresses that knowing something to be beautiful emerges only when one is able to feel it, and this notion connects to Thompson's (2009) arguments on affect and its capacity to engage and connect. Further, Winston asserts that when beauty is seen as 'sensual and passionate', it gives rise to 'hopeful energies [...] that stir us to action'. As such, this idea of beauty 'values the body and what the body can feel and do' (p. 137).

Haseman and Winston (2010) acknowledge the 'emergence of a renewed interest in the significance of aesthetics, beauty and affect in [applied performance]' (p. 465). In her editorial, Nicholson (2014) likewise considers Deleuzian thought regarding the 'ethically positive power of joyful interventions' and how 'bodies in agreement [have] the potential to break the restrictions of living in regulated society' (p. 337). She concludes the editorial by remarking how the contributors are 'finding new opportunities for joyful aesthetic encounters' in their work (p. 339), and I propose that my study contributes to an understanding of this ongoing search for joyful encounters through Vulcana's work. In this search, I consider the affective labour of the Vulcana practitioners in creating and working through the Stronghold project. I understand that the phrase 'affective labour' may carry strong implications; Preston (2013), for example, uses Hochschild's theory of emotional labour to investigate the 'emotional cost' of practitioners who have to manage their feelings. Her examination centres on the concept of emotion work that requires 'very high emotional stakes' (p. 232). I would like to emphasise that my use of the term 'affective labour' to describe the journey of the Vulcana facilitators does not align completely with Preston's articulation of emotional labour. Certainly, I envision that there will be tensions that arise in the process of creating applied performance work; I am, however, more concerned with how the work seeks to create and engage in joyful encounters.

#### Community and social circus as a form of applied performance

In my review of the literature so far, I have positioned the community outreach work of Vulcana Women's Circus as a form of applied performance, drawing on

arguments that community theatre/performance falls under the wide umbrella of applied performance. Literature in the field of applied performance practice, however, has often excluded discussions about community and social circus, and I propose some possible reasons for this exclusion: (a) community and social circus work often focuses on the training and acquisition of circus skills, which may not always explore ideas considered to be political; and (b) performances (if any at all) arising out of training workshops tend to be about the showcasing of acquired skills (often—but not always—to family and friends), rather than a drama with conventional narrative plots/storylines.

Before reviewing more of the literature on community/social circus and arguing for its inclusion in applied performance literature, I first define briefly these art forms. In his doctoral thesis, Bolton (2004) offers some brief definitions and examples of both social and community circus. He notes the signing of a 'charter of social circus' in France in 2002, including the participation of Australian representatives (p. 160). Importantly, he acknowledges that social circus is 'a dynamic tool for social change' (p. 167). Infantino (2015), writing within a Latin American context, describes social circus as 'the use of circus teaching as an intervention tool for working with vulnerable members of the population' (p. 56), thereby finding allegiance with Bolton's statement regarding social circus' objective of enacting social change. The distinction between social and community circus, however, appears rather fluid. Bolton reflects on how '[w]e used to call this [social circus] "community circus"' (p. 161), and cites the work of the Women's Circus in Melbourne as examples of both social and community circus. Arrighi (2014), who also notes that social circus takes an 'interventionist approach' with 'an agenda of social change,' makes the call to subsume her reflections on social circus (along with youth circus) collectively under the term 'community circus' (p. 200).

Despite its frequent exclusion from applied performance literature, I do suggest that community and social circus can and should be included in discussions on applied performance. Richards (2003) proposes that the Melbourne Women's Circus (and by my extension, Vulcana) be seen as radical community theatre, thereby positioning their work within the wide spectrum of applied performance. In addition, the aims of social circus often intersect those of applied performance. Towards the end of the previous section, I considered Prentki and Preston's (2009) articulation of the objectives of those who engage

in applied performance, which includes the hope of making a difference and using theatre 'in the service of social and community change' (p. 9).

Here I draw close parallels to the objectives of social circus, which I quote verbatim from the report presented by Trotman (2012). The benefits of social circus, Trotman claims, are that:

- Anyone can take part and it can offer something for everyone
- It connects people and builds bridges across social divides
- It can promote personal growth (health, fitness, emotional and mental development, self confidence, communication skills etc)
- It supports social learning (it's fun, involves trust, cooperation, teamwork, respect, leadership)
- It can build communities and lead to social change (can overcome prejudice, build a sense of pride and belonging, can connect families and communities). (p. 4)

Trotman's suggestions indicate a move to build inclusiveness, commonly associated with performance, and more importantly, the political desire to effect some kind of personal and social change. Trotman's second point even echoes van Erven's (2001) contention that 'community [applied] theatre everywhere works at bridging difference' (p. 245). The connection between applied performance and social circus is strengthened further through McCutcheon's (2003) useful observation about the relationship between 'action and intervention theatre' and Cirque du Monde, a Quebecois circus group working with youth. She acknowledges how the facilitator's role in Cirque du Monde is that of a 'social artist' (p. 34), and that their work:

seek[s] to establish a relationship dialogue or exchange with the public ... not for youth, but rather with youth. Both [action theatre and Cirque du Monde] emphasize the process of creation and the experiences related to the process rather than the finished product; Action theatre, like "Cirque du Monde", seeks to establish a relationship with society that goes beyond aesthetics and entertainment. (Oliver, cited in McCutcheon, 2003, p. 34)

Arrighi (2014) also suggests that 'social circus and applied drama/theatre share processes, goals and fundamental ideologies'; she even offers the term 'applied circus' for consideration (p. 207). These arguments thus support my proposal for applied performance literature to include more research into social circus

work, particularly work that draws on participants' experiences, leads the group through collaborative creative processes, and seeks to enact social change.

Returning to Trotman's (2012) promising report above, it is important to be mindful that her report was a commissioned research into the benefits of social circus, with the aim of developing community circus in Aotearoa New Zealand. I make the bold assumption, then, that such reported benefits would necessarily be articulated in a way that would promote positive outcomes, thereby inviting government funding. Such pragmatism on Trotman's part again calls for a closer inspection of claims made by Snyder-Young (2013) regarding the limits of theatre for social change as well as Thompson's (2009) cautionary words about the evaluation of projects that need to respond to funding bodies.

Even though the outcomes reported by Trotman (2012) need to be read in the light of its agenda, she does, however, note the trend of the literature on social circus to focus on youth. In addition, Trotman attempts to provide an overview of '*current* [emphasis added] international community circus programmes' (p. 16), including the work of Vulcana as one that 'uses circus as a recovery tool for survivors of domestic and sexual abuse' (p. 17). Similarly, Wellman's (2011) thesis on theatre for survivors reports that Vulcana (and the Women's Circus) 'work specifically with survivors of sexual violence' (p. 27). Both Trotman's and Wellman's use of the present tense indicates a lapse in awareness of Vulcana's current projects; Vulcana's last project with survivors of domestic and sexual violence was reported in 2006 (Vulcana Women's Circus, 2006). By highlighting the obvious gap in currency, I do not wish to discredit the meaningful work that Vulcana has previously done; rather, this gap points to the need for identifying and examining current and ongoing practices in the field of social circus within the context of applied performance.

As outlined earlier, research into the benefits of social circus has often focused on its implications on youth participants. Bolton's (2004) doctoral thesis, for instance, examines how the values and structures of the circus can be a positive developmental experience for young people. Similarly, McCutcheon (2003) situates her study of the circus within an educational context, measuring the success of the programs by their popularity, as well as by the decline in anti-social and other identified destructive behaviours of the participants. In a more recent study, Seymour examines the impact of social circus on children with autism, signalling largely its therapeutic benefits. Even

though she identifies how social circus can aid community engagement, she stresses the 'physical therapy' aspect of her study (p. 60).

Once again, I draw parallels between applied performance and social circus, in the sense that theatre is in the 'service of social and community change' (Prentki & Preston, 2009, p. 9). The literature on social circus, particularly social circus with children and young people, articulates the idea of empowerment through developing confidence and leadership skills, and the ability to take risks. Bolton (2004), McCutcheon (2003), and Seymour (2012) each testifies to the way in which engaging in social circus helps to empower youth participants: McCutcheon discusses the benefits of social circus with young people in providing them with self-confidence, developing hitherto under-developed and unrecognised skills, and empowering them to take on leadership roles; Bolton argues that the circus in fact empowers children to face the challenges of childhood and gain a sense of self-actualisation; and Seymour proposes that social circus can enact social change by 'chang[ing] the way autistic children and their parents are perceived by others' (p. 53). I anticipate that the concept of social change established in these studies will differ greatly from that of the participants in my own study; the gap in the literature on social circus as a form of applied performance indicates that more work needs to be done in this area, and thus it would be useful to consider in more detail the processes of how Vulcana works to create performance with groups of people who might be considered disempowered.

To conclude this section, the call made by Nellhaus and Haedicke (2001) offers a platform from which my research can respond. The authors claim that:

practitioners of community-based theatre [and therefore, applied theatre] remain relatively isolated in their practical work. But they are aware that activity is everywhere and frequently express an eagerness to hear about others' work. What innovations are being explored? Which methods should we abandon? How have problems been resolved, or at least managed? What success stories can we hear to encourage us? (p. 2)

Extending the discussion in the field of applied performance is thus important. By examining the work of Vulcana Women's Circus, I hope to add to this knowledge by providing an in-depth study of one of the many applied

performance practices, and interrogating further the issues surrounding the politicisation of the work.

### **Feminist theatre(s) and the women's circus**

In this second section, I am concerned with the literature on feminist theatre and performance, seeking to situate Vulcana's work within this body of scholarship. In the Introduction, I detailed the Stronghold project as including both men and women, and explained that Vulcana's work, while still privileging women's experience and participation, seeks to engage 'a broad range of community participants' (Vulcana Women's Circus, 2015). Still, I contend that offering a contextual review of feminist theatre is my way of acknowledging Vulcana's lineage as a feminist circus. I maintain that it is important to examine the underlying (feminist) ideologies that come into play when Vulcana facilitators create applied performance work with communities, even if that work is not necessarily considered 'feminist theatre.' Therefore, nestled within the wider field of feminist theatre is a more specific look into the literature on the work of women's circus, which Tait (1994b) espouses is particular to Australia. As such, I draw significantly on the writings of scholars such as Tait (1994a, 1994b, 1996), Richards (1994, 1998, 2003), and Hayes (2012) to help contextualise Vulcana's history and work. Through this review, I also aim to explore and explain the principles of feminist practice and the relationship between feminist theatre/performance/circus, space, and the body; I thus draw on the literature to frame one way of interrogating further the work of Vulcana as a feminist circus.

#### A feminist theatre lineage

In the first section of this chapter, I outlined the discussions surrounding the term applied theatre, choosing instead to use applied performance as it accounts for 'the fullest range of practices [in affiliation] with the academic field of performance studies' (Shaughnessy, 2012, p. xv). Likewise, feminism is a term that often comes under scrutiny and debate. Goodman (1993) makes a concise argument about the term feminism itself, that '[t]he point is simple: there is not one feminism, nor one feminist theatre' (p. 3). She adopts what she describes as a 'basic definition' of feminist theatre: 'political theatre oriented toward change, produced by women with feminist concerns' (p. 1 & 210), but

stresses that it needs to be modified in order to take into account 'an individual woman's political perspective' (p. 210). Aston's (1995) view that 'there is no one single view espoused by feminism' (p. 61) confirms Goodman's point, and Aston maintains that whatever the feminist theatrical model is, it needs to be 'complemented and extended by more detailed understanding of the type of feminist "impulse" which underpins it' (p. 61). Adding to this debate is Tait's (1994b) argument of the instability of feminism as a political position, and that it needs to 'continually respond to the contingencies and circumstances of the change it is making.' As a result, Tait postulates that discussing the meeting points of feminist theory and theatre 'must recognise how these shifting frames of reference impact on feminist knowledges' (p. 10). In line with Goodman's (1993) proposition earlier, Tait also recognises that 'feminist theory must of necessity support social change' (p. 11).

In her doctoral thesis, Richards (2003) notes that the documentation and research into women's theatre practice has often been dominated by literature from North America and the UK (p. 231). Prominent scholars writing about feminist and women's theatre within these geographical contexts include Case (1988, 1990), Aston (1995), Goodman (1993), and Dolan (2012), as well as edited collections by Hart (1989) and Martin (1996). These scholars approach their explication of feminist theatre through various methods such as: identifying feminist theatre as an intervention into canonical theatre history; case studies of particular companies, practitioners and performances; applying feminist theor(ies) to readings of performances and play scripts, and examining representations of gender. This description, I admit, is offering a very general overview of the level of engagement in these texts; however, I wish to return the focus to what I have earlier acknowledged as being most significant for understanding Vulcana's work—the narrower scope of scholarship on women's performance and circus in Australia, and the aspects of theory and practice that speak most usefully to it.

Despite acknowledging the gap of research into feminist theatre practice in Australia, Richards (2003) signals some women's theatre projects such as the Women's Good Theatre Company, which created a performance about 'women, age, and eccentricity' (p. 223), and the No Frills Young Women's Theatre Company, whose show about domestic violence and incest toured schools (p. 223). She observes, however, that these groups often existed as

'one-off projects rather than ongoing organisations' (p. 223). Tait (1994b) dedicates a chapter in her book *Converging Realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre* to women's theatre groups, specifically, how they subvert dominant forms. Yet, there is only an examination of two women's theatre groups in that chapter: Vitalstatistix and the Home Cooking Company, the former also receiving some attention in Richards' (2003) thesis. As Tait (1994b) indicates, Australian women's circus 'came directly out of feminist theatre practice in the 1970s and this early formation of distinctive women's circus groups, as opposed to women's theatre groups using some circus skills, seems to be unique to Australia' (p. 119).

The history of the development of the women's circus(es) in Australia has been documented by scholars such as Richards (1994, 1998, 2003), Tait (1994b), and Hayes (2012). Focusing on what is perhaps the most prominent of Australian women's circuses, the Women's Circus, which grew out of the Theatre Department of the Footscray Community Arts Centre in Melbourne, Richards (2003) stresses that it 'operates at the intersection of particular trajectories of feminism, physical theatre and community arts' (p. 222). Richards later expresses that while the Women's Circus is '[s]trongly woman-oriented, it is not overtly identified with any of the theoretically disparate strands of feminism currently at issue in political and academic debate' (p. 229); in an earlier text, Richards (1998) also advocates how the Women's Circus is a 'contemporary product of the women's movement and of the Australian Arts and community theatre movements of the 1970s' (pp. 195-196). Similarly to the community theatre groups that were driven by strong political objectives, the women's circuses 'emphasised political commitment' (Richards, 1994, p. 152). Writing about another women's circus, Circus WOW (Women of Wollongong), Hayes (2012) notes how the group's work opened up the space for 'social change issues often oppressed by mainstream cultures' to be aired (p. 163).

Tait's (1994b) article situates the work of The Party Line as 'indicative of the ongoing practice of women's circus in Australia' (p. 84). The lack of continued and recent research into what is considered ongoing practice is unsettling, especially considering that Richards (1998) makes an important call regarding the status of the women's circus: 'More change is probable; the [Women's] Circus cannot remain static as an organisation if it is to function

effectively in terms of the goals it has set itself as a women's performance company' (p. 212).

Much of the prior research on women's theatre and circuses in Australia has positioned the work within feminist performance theory and practice, examining how the work created by these companies has challenged concepts of gender and femininity. There is however little current research into the work of feminist theatre/feminist circus in Australia, and I thus hope to revive scholarship in this area. While I acknowledge Vulcana's feminist theatre lineage and examine principles of feminist theatre practice that inform Vulcana's work (discussed in the next section), I extend my investigation of the company's work by considering it through the lens of applied performance and disability.

### Feminist theatre practice

In exploring the work of Australian women practitioners, Tait (1994b) considers the strategies of making theatre from a feminist standpoint, although not in as much practical detail as Aston (1999), whose work I refer to later. Tait argues that the women practitioners discussed in her book:

approach the making and doing of theatre with strategies which contravene so-called feminine behaviours and explode the belief systems which reinforce the categories of gender and cultural controls operating within women's lives and within theatre practice. The work of these practitioners represents a visible and physical enactment of personal and political perspectives: the making of different theatrical realities. (p. 2)

While not specifically focusing on women's lives in my examination of Stronghold, I note the significance of Tait's (1994b) concern with how practitioners make theatre to how I observe Vulcana's work. Do the approaches in Stronghold serve to disrupt (explode) categories? Is there visible and physical enactment of personal and political perspectives? In other words, does the work provide space for bodies to transgress culturally defined boundaries of behaviour? This kind of work is what Tait recognises as being 'recognisably feminist' (p. 5). Elaborating further, Tait proffers her definition of a feminist theatre practitioner 'as someone who works with an awareness of the complexity of recent feminist theoretical positions and recognises the diversity and difference of women's social experiences' (p. 12).

Aston's (1999) text on feminist theatre practice offers a thorough and practical guide to making feminist theatre, which is aimed primarily at the different ways of representing gender. She emphasises however that it is 'important to stress that there is no one way of practising feminist theatre,' although she understands the usefulness of having a 'broad-based conceptualisation of feminist aims and objectives.' As such, she puts forth her own suggestions, which I quote directly:

- That a feminist practice may constitute a theoretical domain.
- That a feminist practice may operate formally and ideologically as a 'sphere of disturbance'.
- That feminist practice 'steals' from wherever and whatever is necessary to create the desired 'disturbance'.
- That representational systems (of gender, sexuality, class, race, etc.) are the subject (and are subjected to) this 'disturbance'. (pp. 17-18)

The modality of verbs Aston (1999) uses to describe feminist practice supports her suggestion that it is not meant to abide by predetermined rules nor is it developed to fit theory. Practice, she has argued, is signified by 'endless beginnings, discoveries, unforeseens, contradictions and, inevitably, confusions' (p. 18). My contribution to the discussion can therefore be seen as another voice that offers insight into new beginnings and discoveries. Aston's proposed principles can thus serve as a springboard for considering how Vulcana's work in Stronghold may be understood as a form of feminist theatre practice.

### Feminist space(s)

Feminism's spatial metaphors suggest a deep-seated desire for a shifting of grounds, a movement that is both political and personal, spiritual and material, directed inward and outward, yet always beyond. (Shands, 1999, p. 7)

Once again there is the view that feminist work seeks to create shifts, disruptions, and disturbances. Further, Sullivan (2004) impassionedly proclaims: '[r]ooms of one's own, borderlands, nomads, centers and margins, public versus private—both literally and metaphorically, space long has been an important issue for feminists' (p. 209). Together with Shands' (1999) writing about feminism's spatial metaphors, these arguments validate Tait's (1994b)

proposition that the 'concepts of geographical and imaginary spaces are central to the work of feminist practitioners' (p. 17); Tait elaborates that engaging with 'alternative spaces contributes to the larger scheme of women's work in Australian theatre' (p. 20).

Drawing on specific examples of the work of two Australian women's theatre companies/collectives in the early 1980s, Tait (1994b) identifies that these feminist practitioners were both excluded from and resistant to the confines of 'existing theatre institutions' (p. 130). Her observation echoes that of Aston (1999) regarding the state of affairs in the United States around the same time, of how feminist practitioners had started to 'set up their own "spaces", companies in which they could explore women's issues in a more developed way' (p. 5). Aston similarly acknowledges how 'mainstream playhouses ... failed to give women an equal platform' and thus had to claim a 'counter-cultural "space of their own"' (p. 5). Tait (1994b) posits that feminist theatre can create its own boundaries, and she sees this occurring through the relationship between space and the body. She argues that the 'boundaries of feminist theatre are established by the movement of the performers' physical bodies as they define their own space inspired by feminist ideas rather than conforming to a fixed entity, the recognised theatre building' (p. 130). Tait refers particularly to the work of Sydney's Women's Action Theatre, which she suggests rejected 'male-defined theatre spaces [and their associated] institutionalised practices' in order to 'convey a feminist message to communities who did not attend conventional theatre' (p. 134). I argue that it is important to examine how Vulcana's Stronghold work affects and is affected by the spaces in which it takes place, and consider the possibilities for Vulcana's feminist practice to create its own geographical and imaginary spaces.

Other writings on the idea of 'spaces of their own' point to notions of creating a safe space for women. Richards' (1998) examination of the Women's Circus details how a core aim of the company was to 'encourage women, including survivors of sexual abuse, to develop means of physical expression through theatre in a safe and supportive environment' (p. 195). Similarly, Hayes (2012) argues how Circus WOW provided a 'space for the empowerment of groups of women who may not otherwise be heard' (p. 163). Even though Butterwick and Selman (2003) write primarily within the field of education, they reflect on theatre processes and the importance of 'creating inclusive feminist

spaces that respect difference' (p. 9). In particular, they value the need for the women in their project to have a safe space to 'find themselves exploring, experiencing, and processing emotions, memories, and other aspects of themselves that were previously unknown or private' (p. 14).

Filling the space becomes a critical component of making feminist theatre as well. Drawing on the work of Ramsden and Winter, Aston (1999) frames their personal philosophies to highlight the importance of staking claim in space:

We like to place a lot of emphasis on women taking up space. It's wonderful to see women taking up more space; walking with larger strides on stage, for example, or running with more freedom than they think they are supposed to. (cited p. 49)

Goodman (1993), drawing on Brook's notion of the empty space, articulates:

For feminist theatre makers, that [open and empty] space must be open to new political intervention and interpretation as well. The space to make theatre, to sit down and write or to get together to devise and improvise or to stand up and perform: this space is necessary for the creation of theatres. The space to do all this within feminism(s), or from feminist perspective(s), is one which narrows and fills with other problems and agendas very quickly. It's a space which needs constant clearing. Each feminist theatre opens out to create others; each generation leaves a diverse and flexible legacy to the next. (p. 6)

With this proclamation in mind, I seek to explore how Vulcana's creation of work in marginal spaces (the Stores Building and the community hall) can create its own diverse and flexible legacy. Yet, I do not ignore the tensions and the problems that may arise in the process, and thus consider the complexities of the work.

### The role of the body in feminist performance and feminist circus

Like space, the body can be viewed as an unfixed entity, which I will explore further in this section. The body is often considered a key element in performance and is also a 'site of women's subversive practices and struggles for self-determination and empowerment' (K. Davis, 1997, p. 7). Schiebinger

(2000) articulates a historical perspective of the body rather adroitly. She reveals how:

The mind/body dualism that has long underpinned Western culture made males the guardians of culture and things of the mind, while it associated females with the frailties and contingencies of the mortal body. Females, subject to unruly humours, unpredictable hormones, and other forces, have been identified so closely with nature that nature itself is often called 'Mother Nature'. (p. 1)

According to Schiebinger, this dualism can be traced back to nineteenth-century male scholars, who considered topics such as female menstruation 'too vulgar, trivial, or risqué to merit serious scholarly attention' (p. 1). Fawcett (2000) aligns this dualism with modernist thought, explaining how it sets up binaries that commonly 'favour[s] one aspect at the expense of the devalued other' (p. 116). Embracing this undeniably problematic Cartesian dualism further thrusts the female body into the realm of the other, and in doing so, suggests that 'the female body represent[s] all that needed to be tamed and controlled by the (dis)embodied, objective, male scientist' (see K. Davis, 1997, p. 5). Davis (1997) further extends how subordinating the body as other actually imprisons it, thereby allowing 'privileged groups' to 'take on a god's eye view as disembodied subjects' (p. 10). Understanding this dualism is necessary in the discussion of how (female and/or disabled) bodies are cultural and political rather than essentialist constructs.

The focus on the body in feminist and women's circus is especially significant in challenging such essentialist constructs. Richards (2003) for instance identifies how feminist performance scholarship has raised questions of 'representation, ideology and embodiment from a feminist perspective' (p. 231); Tait (1994b) offers how training in physical forms of theatre (in particular circus skills) 'contradicts socially designated divisions between masculine and feminine bodies,' claiming that the body is 'redefined in muscular proportions which interrupt and mock inscriptions of femininity on the body' (p. 105). In her argument, Tait cites Butler (1990):

If the body is not a 'being', but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what

language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its 'interior' signification on its surface? (p. 139, cited also in Tait, 1994b, p. 107)

Tait (1994b) draws on Butler's (1990) argument that forces of culture affect both the appearances and physical behaviours of the body, on which gender is coded externally. Tait explains that physical theatre 'offers a theatrical language for investigating the signification of gender' (p. 108), especially when women performers—especially aerialists and acrobats—'reshape the socially "docile body" identified by Foucault' (p. 106). Tait (2005) also identifies how female performers in Circus Oz (see Introduction for a discussion about the company's feminist contributions to new circus) worked with a feminist agenda that 'resisted conventional portrayals of gender identity, especially in aerial acts that are susceptible to feminine stereotypes' (p. 133).

Although my research does not look primarily into the representation of the female body, these ideas are nonetheless essential in order to frame Vulcana's work as a feminist circus company. It is important to understand how the body can be a 'key site of political struggle' (Thomas & Ahmed, 2004, p. 4), and that, in Foucauldian fashion, the body is the 'primary site for the operation of modern forms of power ... subtle, elusive and productive' (K. Davis, 1997, p. 3). These concepts become part of the conversation as I engage in disability and disability performance literature in the next section, where the body becomes 'central to how dominant cultures designate certain groups as Other'; these groups are indeed 'defined by their bodies' (K. Davis, 1997, p. 10).

## **Disability and disability performance**

In the previous section, I examined relevant literature surrounding feminist theatre and the women's circus. I begin this section by presenting overarching notions and models of disability. It is necessary to consider some of the key arguments in this field especially since an understanding of disability not only affects my methodological approach, as detailed in the next chapter, but also helps position and politicise Vulcana's work in Stronghold. Following the outlining of these models, I offer a discussion of disability arts and political disability performance, including an overview of the freak show as a disempowering/empowering site of disability.

### Overarching notions and models of disability

I would first like to acknowledge that my use of such terms as 'disabled' and 'normal' is based on concepts that have arisen from prior academic research by disability scholars. As an academic discipline, disability studies have become recognised in their own right since theoretical developments in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Roulstone, Thomas, & Watson, 2012). Conroy (2009) however warns that '[w]hen subjected to the estranging scrutiny of an academic discipline, disability is a contested term' (p. 1). Some of the reasons for the problematic framing of the concept of disability arise from the very issues of how to define the term accurately, as well as negative connotations often associated with the term. Roulstone et al. (2012) for instance attempt to frame disability according to three key concepts:

First was the idea that disabled people are a marginalized and disadvantaged constituency; second was the idea that disabled people constitute a minority group; and third, and perhaps key, was the idea that disability be reconstructed as a social rather than medical problem. (p. 3)

The last point raised by Roulstone et al. (2012) calls for attention to the two main models of disability: the medical model and the social model. In the medical model, disability is often premised on the concept of deficit, something that the biological body is lacking. L. Davis (1995), a Deaf and disability scholar, claims that an understanding of disability based on the medical model is viewed in relation to its binary opposite—'normalcy.' He claims that often, disability is considered by 'normal people' through two distinct modalities: function and appearance (p. 11). Davis explains further:

In the functional modality, disability is conceived of as inability to do something – walk, talk, hear, see, manipulate, and so on. This aspect of disability is of course part of a continuum of the many things that people can or cannot do ... [A]pppearance is the second major modality by which disability is constructed. The person with disabilities is visualized, brought into a field of vision, and seen as a disabled person ... The body of the disabled person is seen as marked by the disability. The missing limb, blind gaze, use of sign language, wheelchair or prosthesis is seen by the 'normal' observer. (pp. 11 – 12)

Although this definition appears rather simplistic, it is useful in gaining an understanding of how a hegemonic society views and relates to people 'with a sensory or mental impairment' (L. Davis, 1995, p. 1). Disability, then, according to Liachowitz (cited in L. Davis, 1995), is always considered in relation to how 'the able-bodied population imposes on the behaviour of physically impaired people' (p. 10). In light of this dichotomy between the 'disabled' and 'normal' people, Davis makes another astute observation: 'most constructions of disability assume that the person with disabilities is in some sense *damaged* [emphasis added] while the observer is undamaged' (p. 14). This idea is central to my own investigation into the creative work with participants in the study, which seeks to further examine the complexities of non-disabled facilitators creating performance work with people with disabilities. An understanding of the medical model invites further interrogation into how and if the work of Stronghold confronts such medical models of disability (discussed in more detail in the section 'Moving away from therapy').

The second model of disability, the social model, came about in the 1960s and 1970s 'as a result of disabled people wishing to take control of their own lives by shifting the focus onto social, rather than biological factors in understanding disability' (G. Taylor, 1999, p. 375). It views disability as 'a political and socially constructed problem with a focus on the disabling *barriers* [emphasis added] faced by people with an impairment' (Roulstone et al., 2012, p. 3). Like Roulstone et al., L. Davis (1995) argues that disability 'is the end result of a series of complex cultural, social and political processes and obfuscations' (p. 158). Other scholars hold similar viewpoints: Reagan (2002) reiterates the view that "disability" is a social construct grounded in political, ideological, and economic assumptions and biases' (p. 45). According to the social model, then, the barriers are what separate the disabled from the abled, the abnormal from the normal, and the margins from the centre, all of which create feelings of exclusion and isolation. These feelings of exclusion and isolation in turn can affect the formation of a disability identity, one that is articulated by the 'political *experience* of oppression' (Scully, 2012, p. 110, emphasis in original). In addition, Koppers (2014), who discusses the models of disability through a focus on discourses, notes how in the social model, 'disability appears in the interaction between the impaired person and the social environment' (p. 27).

Hadley (2015) highlights however that both the medical and social models of disability have come under scrutiny because ‘they fail to acknowledge disability—pain, paralysis, amputation, alternative physicality, and the alternative perspectives they bring—as an experience, or as a mode of embodiment...’ (p. 161). Hadley, drawing on Shildrick’s arguments, also raises the difficulty of discussing people with disabilities as a group because the term ‘bundles together a large variety of disabling conditions into a single category that runs the risk of erasing the specificity of ... different disabilities’ (cited p. 155).

Beyond the two models of disability often discussed, Kuppers (2009, 2011) proposes a rhizomatic model that engages with Deleuzoguattarian thought. She (2011) critiques how the ‘somewhat fixed generic form’ of models of disability is ‘one of the central struggles in disability studies’ (p. 94). Kuppers (2011) suggests that the rhizomatic model is not new and not a ‘fixed state,’ but one that ‘flex[es] its membranes to touch words ... experiences ... and other concrete objects in the world’ (p. 95). Kuppers (2009) does, however, express the difficulty in defining such concepts and terms. She proposes that they are ‘not fixed items or categories, but ways of thinking,’ and it is ‘their vibrational power that makes them useful to the philosopher (Deleuze) and the psychoanalyst (Guattari)’ (p. 222).

Other scholars writing in the field of disability also employ Deleuzoguattarian and rhizomatic principles. Mercieca and Mercieca (2010) for instance explain how the rhizome is ‘more on engagement and connections than on interpreting and eliciting reality [of disability] out there’ (p. 88). In her doctoral thesis, Hickey-Moody (2005) engages with the rhizome in order to ‘uproot some of the presumptions that the dominant discourses of intellectual disability, dance performance and academic research are based on’ (p. 40). B. Hughes (2009), citing scholars such as Goodley and Braidotti, accounts for the ‘recent proponents of the “rhizomatic” potential of people with learning disabilities.’ He argues that the rhizomatic principle of disability allows the body to be seen not as a limit, but one that is ‘bursting with possibilities and capabilities’ (p. 402). The context of a rhizomatic notion of disability informed by Deleuzoguattarian thought offers a way for me to consider the Stronghold project, and in later parts of the thesis, I engage with some of these principles more specifically.

## The (problematic) context of disability arts

To work in disability arts, or in arts for disabled people, is to experiment with one's own positioning and to struggle with meanings that arise at the point where practitioner (disabled or non-disabled) meets work. (Conroy, 2009, p. 5)

I have drawn on Conroy's (2009) claim in order to discover one way that I may position the work of Stronghold within the debates surrounding disability arts and disability performance. As I have highlighted earlier, disability is a contested term, and Calvert (2013) stresses also how there is 'the anxious perception that discussing disability is to enter a highly sensitive field in which the dangers outweigh the benefits' (p. 417).

In a government-commissioned report in Victoria, Australia (Cultural Development Network, 2008), disability arts are defined as 'art being created by disabled people as part of a minority identity understanding [and] are informed by an aesthetic of disability' (p. 120). Conroy (2009) identifies this complex terrain by presenting a chronological overview of disability and theatre in the UK. She acknowledges that the three areas she covers in this overview—drama for disabled people, theatre by disabled people and political disability arts—'co-existed without much conversation.' She does however suggest that this could be 'the subject of future conversations' (p. 5). Rather than discuss each of these areas in detail, I wish to focus more on Conroy's outline of disability arts in the UK, where she argues that 'disability arts are intrinsically political' (p. 11). Her sentiments echo those of Koppers (2014), who states that 'any definition of disability is already a political statement' (p. 9).

Koppers' (2014) recent addition to the field of scholarship on disability arts and culture, rather than providing any clear definition of disability arts, instead is framed as a study guide that draws together many key thinkers in the field, such as Garland-Thomson and L. Davis, whose work I also discuss briefly in this review. Importantly, Koppers frames theoretical concepts within disability arts as well as discussing various themes and art forms like freak shows and disabled dance. While not completely a scholarly text in the traditional sense, Koppers' study guide presents a useful synthesis of disability theory (as well as queer studies, feminist studies, and anthropology, among others) with the

practical work of disability arts and disabled artists, including Back to Back Theatre, a prominent disability theatre group in Australia.

### Moving away from therapy

In briefly outlining issues around disability arts, I wish to note the important aspect of disability art being separate from therapy. Lige (2011), in her thesis, identifies how disability scholars have often disassociated themselves from art therapy/art as therapy (p. 47). Sandahl and Auslander (2005), in tracing a 'brief genealogy' of disability studies in relation to performance studies, observe that in the early developments of disability studies, the arts were often viewed 'askance' as a majority of arts involving disabled people were carried out by 'nondisabled interested in applying the arts as therapy' (p. 6).

Nash (2002), who writes about UK-based arts company Entelechy, emphasises that their work explicitly rejects this notion of therapy, and instead finds opportunities 'where the dominant ways of treating people with learning disabilities (i.e., social services and medical models of disability) could be questioned and challenged' (p. 24). Leighton (2009) reflects on her own encounter with performances 'directed by non-disabled theatre practitioners for a learning disabled cast,' as well as subject matter often being 'fairy stories, myths (leftovers from therapy models), and religious or secular parables of acceptance which constituted learning-disabled adults as "children", "patients" and "others", respectively' (p. 102). In examining the work of BluYesBlu, a practice-as-research-in-performance project involving people with learning disabilities, Leighton sheds light on the reactions of audience members who associated the performance with therapy, as well as one who 'watched the performers with a "diagnostic gaze"' (p. 109). Likewise, Hargrave (2009) articulates how 'work involving learning-disabled performers has always been placed in quotes of one kind or another: that of "therapy" or "development" or "enabling"' (p. 52).

It is with this commentary on the dissonance between disability art/performance and art (as) therapy that I move to the next section, which resumes the discussion on (political) disability performance. Sandahl and Auslander (2005) posit that disability performance can 'rehabilitate' medical models of disability, even though they are quick to add that they do not desire to 'demonize doctors'; their intention rather is to critique 'prevalent ideologies that

delimit the lives of disabled people to the “patient” role.’ Instead, they argue how ‘the stage provides a platform for exposing the otherwise covert dynamics of the diagnostic gaze’ (pp. 129-130).

In line with the arguments made by Sandahl and Auslander (2005), Kuppers (2004) elaborates on the idea of the gaze in disability performance by claiming that it:

signals a historical moment where a culture is examining its bodies, sorts and counts its differences, allocates new quarters, and reinvents itself. Performance is a place where cultural uncertainties can find expression – the unknown is framed by the conventions of the stage or the gazing scenario. (p. 3)

Garland-Thomson (1997, 2005a, 2006, 2009), whose writings on the concept of staring have been largely referenced in disability performance scholarship (see for example Conroy, 2012; Hadley, 2014, 2015; Kuppers, 2004; Kuppers & Marcus, 2009; Sandahl, 1999), puts forth that staring is a ‘more emphatic form of looking’; it ‘is an urgent effort to explain the unexpected, to make sense of the unexpected and inexplicable visual experience’; it ‘starkly registers the perception of strangeness and endows it with meaning’ (2005, p. 30). To draw a comparison between the patriarchal gaze and the normalising stare, Garland-Thomson (2005a) posits that:

gazing is the dominant controlling and defining visual relation between male spectators and female objects of their gazes, staring is the visual practice that materializes the disabled in social relations. The male gaze produces female subjects; the normative stare constructs the disabled. (p. 32)

Garland-Thompson (1997) uses her term ‘normate’ to signify the ‘constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them’ (p. 8). Garland-Thompson (2005a) does, however, attest to the work of disabled performers such as Cheryl Marie Wade, Mary Duffy, and Carrie Sandahl who in their performance work ‘manipulate the staring dynamic’ and ‘boldly invit[e] the stare in their performances’ (p. 32). Likewise, Sandahl (1999) articulates how ‘no longer compliant objects of the stare, people with disabilities are staring back, claiming the body as a legitimate part of identity, a

body whose metaphors and physicality belong to [them]’ (p. 13). If, as playwright and wheelchair user John Belluso (cited in Sandahl & Auslander, 2005) claims, persons with disability are often ‘subject to the gaze of the hegemony’ in everyday life (p. 3), then theatrical/staged performances can actively make the disability consciously visible; in a way, it allows disabled performers to subvert/revert the gaze of the audience.

The link between disability/disabled bodies, staring, and space is made by Sandahl and Auslander (2005) who state that ‘people with visible impairments almost always seem to “cause a commotion” in public spaces’ (p. 2). They articulate the importance of understanding disability and space further:

The question of disability is a question of the deployment of bodies in space, the question of which deployments are normative and which are not, together with the articulation and enforcement of norms. At another level, because of their unique cultural and somatic experiences, disabled bodies relate to and define space differently than normative bodies. Performance provides a valuable conceptual model for the consideration of disability because it, too, is fundamentally about the deployment of bodies in space. (p. 9)

The authors’ (2005) arguments above are a critical way to frame how I consider Stronghold, where both disabled and non-disabled bodies share space to create performance together. They also raise other important questions in regard to disability and disability performance that invite further engagement; in particular, they ask how work can ‘confront medical, charity, and freak-show models of disability’ and contribute to ‘communication between disabled and nondisabled people’ (p. 1).

Kuppers (2001) asserts that disabled performers have the potential to ‘usurp the stage with their own stagings of bodies, identities and visions of culture’ (p. 1); in a later text, Kuppers (2004) reinforces how ‘[d]isabled performers indeed need to recapture their bodies and re-mobilize their meanings in new forms and performance encounters’ (p. 10). Garland-Thomson (2000) explains that the ‘disabled body demands a narrative, requires an apology that accounts for its difference from unexceptional bodies’ (p. 334). Importantly, performance frames these bodies. It frames the female body, the disabled body, the deviant body, the other body. It simultaneously invites and challenges the gaze. These arguments pave the way for my own research into

how the circus, as a particular performance medium, frames the bodies of the participants/performers. In what ways do their bodies become a site for re/presentation and restorying? Is there, as Koppers (2001, 2004) proclaims, a usurpation of the stage and a recapturing of bodies? These are questions which I seek to answer in my study.

In their text on disability and performance, Sandahl and Auslander (2005) celebrate the work as the 'first collection to explore disability as performance across a wide range of meanings—disability as performance of everyday life, as a metaphor in dramatic literature, and as the work of disabled performing artists' (p. 1). The collection of essays in the book is positioned as reflecting 'both the range of performances to which a disability perspective may be applied and the wide variety of approaches and methods that contribute to disability perspectives themselves' (p. 10). I am subsequently interested in their inclusion of performances not engaged explicitly with disability politics and representation, but 'interpreted afresh to bring out their connections to disability' (p. 10).

In a similar vein to the bridging of gaps in disability performance research, Koppers (2001) refers to the special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* 11 (3 & 4) as 'one of the first of its kind' in the 'intervention into the silence surrounding disability and illness' (p. 2); she argues for ongoing exploration into the field, as 'little work has been disseminated about the status of disability and the disabled body in performance' (p. 2). In a more recent text (Koppers, 2014), she acknowledges how the discipline of disability studies and arts is 'new, and in process' (p. xvi). From the outset, it becomes apparent that this field is still a nascent one, and that it holds many possibilities for continued research and ongoing dialogue. Further, I wish to extend this area of inquiry by considering it within the frame of feminist circus and applied performance, and how this may further problematize issues of power relations and ethics, but also offer possibilities of enriching the field.

### The freak show and disability

Examining disability performance almost always necessitates a closer look into the freak show. As I have indicated earlier, Koppers' (2014) scholarship into disability arts and culture notes how freak shows are an integral part of the discussion about disability, dis/empowerment, and performance. Koppers

explains that the freak show, or sideshow, 'was the first sustained and organized dramatic institution for disabled people', and that 'their reverberations on contemporary disability performance are important themes in disability arts criticism and beyond' (p. 96). As Hadley (2008) observes, circuses and freak shows have contributed to the 'continuing cultural labour to define, categorise and control the human body' (p. 1). Here I wish to draw attention to the intersection between circus and disability, where bodies are offered up for an aesthetic gaze and inspection.

In the nineteenth century, 'human oddities were [commonly featured as] part of a [circus] sideshow' (Adams, 2012, p. 421). This disempowering aspect of the freak show is made obvious as people with perceived disabilities were 'cruelly exploited by circus managers and showmen' (Adams, 2012, p. 420). Adams notes however that the concept of the freak in these historical freak shows extended beyond disabled people to include 'women in pants, as well as non-Western people' (p. 421). Adams proceeds to comment on how many freaks were abandoned by their agents once they were no longer popular. She even cites the example of Julia Pastrana, the bearded lady, whose showman-husband mummified her body and continued to display it in a glass case for profit. Bogdan (1996) asserts the idea of freaks as a social construction. While many sideshow freaks did have 'physical, mental, and behavioural anomalies', they were more often than not misrepresented by their showmen who invented their backgrounds, circumstances, and conditions in order to make them more appealing and marketable. While they would be viewed as offensive today, Bogdan explains that they were 'once an accepted, popular, and lucrative practice' (p. 23), and even 'heralded as morally uplifting and educational, not merely as frivolous amusement' (p. 27).

Recent scholarship in the fields of disability, cultural, and performance studies has however begun to 'reconsider the freakshow as a site for contesting some cultural logics it enacts' (Hadley, 2008, p. 2). For instance, Hadley traces Bogdan's argument that the early freak shows offered people with disabilities a level of freedom and independence they would not have otherwise attained. Similarly, Adams (2012) points out that freak shows were not only able to provide people with disabilities with a livelihood, but a source of community as well. Extending the debate further, Conroy (2012) mentions also the increasing examination into freakery not just as a form of victimisation of disabled people,

but as a 'liberating form for performance art' (p. 178). Here it is worthwhile to note that the liberating notion of freakery was adopted by new circus as well. Tait (2005) outlines how the beginnings of new circus 'coincided with a social movement of mostly young people in 1970s Europe, North America and Australia who co-opted the term "freak" to indicate rebellious political choices and social protest' (p. 139).

Returning to the area of disability, contemporary disabled performers have been able to appropriate the freak show, or as Hadley (2008) articulates in the title of her article, to 'mobilis[e] the monster'. Stephens (2006) notes for example how performers of the Coney Island Circus Sideshow, which opened in 1982, have recognised and exploited the potential for the freak show as a site 'in which norms about the body, its limits and capabilities are theatricalized and transformed into spectacle, but in which, for this very reason, they can also be effectively contested' (p. 486). By reproducing culturally oppressive narratives about physical differences, these disabled performers also find ways to challenge such images and narratives. In doing so, they 'forc[e] the audience to acknowledge the disparity between the theatricalized, and thus constructed, figure of the freak and the person temporarily playing that role' (Stephens, 2006, p. 487). Koppers (2014) reiterates this idea by arguing that an ableist society tends not to view the disabled person as having agency in performing an act. Instead, freak show discourse frames disabled performers as simply being themselves, thus justifying the non-human statuses with which they are accorded. Koppers offers an analysis of how Mat Fraser, a performer involved in the Coney Island Circus Sideshow, manipulates the boundary of 'acting/being a static object of observation'. Fraser thereby 'challenges his audiences to see this seam in their reception of disability on stage' (p. 97). On a similar note, Back to Back Theatre employs the freak show analogy in a more confrontational manner, telling the audience: 'you have come to this show because you want to see a bit of freak porn' (cited Eckersall and Grehan, 2013, p. 15). This approach not only challenges the normative reception of disability, but actively 'disturbs the act of spectatorship' (Eckersall and Grehan, 2013, p. 17).

Conroy (2012) recognises the powerful potential of freakery. She asserts:

Disabled people are ordinary, and that is the point of social model perspectives. The disabled person who is interested in freaks—or interested in being a freak—has

become fascinated with the power of their own presence in the visual field. But 'freak' is not straightforwardly a political identity. Freaks may be the distorted shadows of the effects of the stare, but they are not a solution or a negotiation of a new form of political existence. Instead, they offer a chance to disturb the categories that disable, and to disturb disability itself. (p. 179)

Conroy (2012) draws on Chemers' argument that '[a]lthough not every disabled body in performance is freakery, every disabled body in performance ... enters into some kind of dialogue with the perceived history of the freak show' (cited p. 178). Conroy stresses however the importance of the interpellative acts between freak (performer) and audience. This statement, I believe, finds echoes in Garland-Thomson's (2002b) work on the visual rhetoric of disability, where for example the bodily differences of freaks were capitalised for their ability to 'elicit amazement and admiration' (p. 59). Drawing on Grosz, Conroy (2012) further emphasises that employing the term freak is 'an act of defiance' (p. 180), shifting the spectatorial frame so that it not only is able to elicit amazement, but 'fascinate[s] and appal[s] us simultaneously' (Conroy, 2012, p. 182). It is through this manipulation of the spectatorial frame and the unfixity of cultural norms that freak shows have an 'ongoing relevance as a cultural form and ... theatrical practice' in the field of disability and disability performance (Stephens, 2006, p. 495).

While freak shows are an essential part of the discussion about disability and disability performance, I note here that many of the contemporary appropriations of the freak show have been performed by professional performers who have actively sought to deconstruct and shift the spectatorial frames of the freak. However the Stronghold participants were not professional performers who did not necessarily employ a deconstructive lens to the freak show. I discuss this issue, specifically in relation to the notion of agency, in more detail in Chapter 5.

#### A few words about Deaf performance

In drawing together the relevant literature from the field of disability and disability performance, I considered the necessity of including a section on Deafness. As noted earlier in the thesis, I draw on my observations from the Wizard of Auslan project to help inform my understanding and examination of Stronghold; Wizard of Auslan is thus not the core focus of my thesis. Having

addressed that, I do not wish to completely negate the presence of the Deaf women who appear in my study by ignoring the writings about Deafness and Deaf performance. As such, I discuss some of the literature very briefly here; a lengthier discussion of Wizard of Auslan can be found in Lazaroo (2014), where I draw on Deaf literature to assist in my examination of how the performance translated Deaf experience.

In my review of disability literature, I outlined how disabled bodies are often subject to the normative stare. Even though L. Davis (1995) identifies the use of sign language as a marker of the disabled body, deafness is often considered an invisible disability (Becker & Jauregui, 1981; Daisy, 2008; Kochhar-Lindgren, 2006). Kochhar-Lindgren maintains that both disability and Deaf performance practices aim to 'create a synthesis between activism and aesthetics, particularly in order to use performance as a site of resistance to normative cultural representational and perceptual paradigms regarding the extraordinary body' (p. 420). She also contends that, like disability performance, Deaf performance offers 'particularly potent sites of transformation as [it] builds on aesthetics of the real, rather than the idealized body' (p. 420).

### **Conclusion: Re-tracing the meeting points**

Thus far, I have presented key arguments from the fields of applied performance, feminist theatre (practice), and disability performance separately, each receiving its own section within the larger chapter. As a way to conclude this chapter, I wish to locate and (re)trace some of the meeting points in an attempt to connect these fields more closely. As I have already signalled, these meeting points are never neat. They intersect at various junctures, oftentimes requiring numerous revisits. I acknowledge however that at times, these fields may come up in tension against one another, thus making the suturing process difficult. I therefore have to contend with messiness again, acknowledging places where the seams appear unsightly.

The notions of political and affective labour emerge strongly in all three fields. The political positioning of the work is inescapable as applied performance practitioners, feminist theatre makers, and disability artists seek to cause ruptures, to challenge, to disrupt. As Kupperts (2011) asserts, her collaborative work is situated 'within political labor, changing ourselves *and* our

world' (p. 72, emphasis in original). At the same time, she affirms the 'flow of love' (p. 4) that emerges in disability culture work, thus finding a sense of kinship with the affective and joyful encounters articulated in applied performance scholarship. This sense of joy is likewise emphasised in Richards' (1998) examination of the work of the Women's Circus, where she highlights how the 'joyful display of strength is spontaneously brought up by participants as a major reason for joining and a major incentive to continue' (p. 200); Richards also notes, however, how a trainer in the Melbourne Women's Circus 'had to learn to respect women's feelings' (p. 248), thus suggesting that the process of creating performance within the community is a journey of learning and an opportunity for self-reflection for practitioners.

The connection between space and the body becomes another meeting point between the fields. As McAuley (1999) argues, space is 'not an empty [or neutral] container but an active agent; it shapes what goes on within it, emits signals about it to the community at large and is itself affected' (p. 41). Thus, when bodies move in spaces, they become shaped by and simultaneously re-shape the politics of those spaces. As Nicholson (2005) articulates, the body holds inscriptions of places and stories, drawing on 'our physical experiences of being in the world' (p. 98). By drawing on the thoughts of Boal, Nicholson considers the political view of 'how experience has been etched on the body' (p. 99), but notes how Boal's notion that 'the body is marked by signs of oppression (rather than experience) does assume that life has been a rather negative experience' (p. 99). In reaction to this view, Nicholson proposes the idea of the body as an archive, signalling its potential as 'a mediating presence between past experience and future lives' and being 'a part of a dynamic of lived experience' (p. 105). By considering the body this way, Nicholson argues that the living body 'has indeterminate horizons and boundaries [and is] a space of possibilities' (p. 106). Earlier in this review, I problematised the notions of transformation and empowerment in applied performance, suggesting the need to reframe this concept within the context of Stronghold. Drawing on these contentions that the body is a space of possibilities, I argue that it will be worthwhile to consider how bodies can be re-storied through Vulcana's work.

The indeterminacy of the body—the idea that it is always in the process of becoming—figures prominently in both feminist and disability performance. But the connections between these fields go further. As I explicated in the

section on feminist theatre, feminist theory has exposed how the female body is othered; likewise the disabled body can also become othered by what Wendell (1996) considers a dual process:

When we make people 'Other', we group them together as the objects of our experience instead of regarding them as subjects of experience with whom we might identify, and we see them primarily as symbolic of something else—usually, but not always, something we reject and fear and project onto them. To the non-disabled people, people with disabilities [...] symbolize, among other things, imperfection, failure to control the body, and everyone's vulnerability to weakness, pain, and death. (p. 60)

The disabled body can often be positioned as the rejected, deviant body, one onto which 'we project rejected aspects of ourselves' (Wendell, 1996, p. 60). Just as the body is framed in feminist performance and feminist circus, 'disability is likewise a framing device—it frames bodies and people' (Conroy, 2009, p. 11). Garland-Thomson (1997) states how:

Many parallels exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies. Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess the natural physical superiority. Indeed, the discursive equation of femaleness with disability is common, sometimes to denigrate women and sometimes to defend them. (p. 19)

Sandahl (1999), who references Garland-Thomson's (1997) argument, raises the all too pertinent problem of feminism and disability politics being at odds, especially when 'other marginalized groups use disability metaphors to signify their own "otherness" without an accompanying consideration of actual people with disabilities' (p. 15). In a play of words that draws on the terms 'rescript' and 'Crip culture' (a slang term denoting disability culture), Fox and Lipkin (2002) propose a 'res(crip)ting' feminist theatre through disability theatre. Like Sandahl, they too acknowledge the points raised by Garland-Thomson regarding feminist theatre's 'curiously ambiguous position with regard to disability' (p. 78), but argue that a useful engagement of both helps 'not only to challenge traditional forms of spectatorship, but all the elements of theatrical creation and

presentation' (p. 80). Importantly, the authors question the implications for the feminist theatre practitioner who works to create disability theatre.

While Fox and Lipkin (2002) are concerned with how feminist theatre practice can be 'expand[ed] and interrogat[ed]' by a disability aesthetic (p. 80), the points they raise in their article are useful in assisting my examination of Vulcana's work; they respond to Garland-Thomson's (1997) suggestion for 'feminism and disability studies to productively inform one another' (p. 82), and my research into the Stronghold project extends this discussion further by looking at the work of a feminist circus company. This conversation can be further extended when we consider Conroy's (2009) contention that '[t]here is no recognisable field of disability in applied drama ... the two fields of applied and community drama and political disability arts have no coherent meeting place in discourse' (p. 11). She does, however, offer a suggestion:

I would like to suggest that the meeting of applied theatre and disability offers a productive area of discursive practice ... The work of disabled scholars and scholars of disability, disabled practitioners and makers of theatre with and for disabled people needs a creative space to articulate and explore the tensions between us all. (p. 12)

I thus take these gaps to be both a welcome and a challenge to investigate Vulcana's Stronghold project in the context of these three fields.

The complexities of creating applied performance work are implicit in any project, and I have outlined some of the challenges raised in the literature. Before I embark on the next chapter, which outlines my methodological approach, Kuppers and Robertson's (2007) words serve as a strong reminder:

To keep their practice attentive to the hydraulics of power, community performance artists often work through intense self-reflexive processes ... The choreographer/director/leader/facilitator/initiator and her or his political consciousness are still very much in evidence. [Is] this blending of creative process into the potentially political concerns of community contradictory? Or does it constitute a necessary re-definition of notions of empowerment, individuality, society, and even of art? These are the kinds of questions that scholars of community performance need to address as the field develops. (Kuppers & Robertson, 2007, p. 2)

The push to continue questioning community and applied performance practice signals an invitation to continue researching into this area. In my doctoral work, I draw on the self-reflexivity of the researcher as well, as one who develops an intimacy with the practice of the Vulcana facilitators. The scholarship on the relationship between the body and space significantly informs my discoveries in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I revisit key arguments regarding power relationships and representation in applied performance, how these notions come into conversation with feminist and disability scholarship, and how they revealed themselves in the work of Stronghold. The penultimate chapter of this thesis considers primarily the spaces of joy that emerge, and how the literature on affective labour can deepen an understanding of these spaces. The literature provided in this chapter has helped contextualise Vulcana's work within the fields of applied performance, feminist theatre (practice), and disability performance. As I proceed with my analysis of the Stronghold project in the following chapters, I continue to engage with not only the literature presented here but also with other theoretical perspectives that offer ways by which to make sense of the work. In doing so, I discover how these stands of thought weave and converge to produce more meeting points.

## **CHAPTER 3: MEETING POINTS 2—THE FEMINIST RESEARCHER, APPLIED PERFORMANCE, AND (RESEARCHING) DISABILITY**

In this chapter, I examine my methodological framework and discuss the meeting of different fields including ethnographic research, applied performance practice, and disability. The idea of a meeting point also suggests a compromise, of ‘meeting someone halfway,’ of giving and taking. As such, this chapter is also a reflective examination of my own journey as a researcher in Vulcana’s projects, and how I sought to find various meeting points throughout the work. These meeting points help to chart my changing relationship with my role as researcher, which is crucial to how the work is understood.

In this chapter, I first frame my position as a feminist researcher, offering some perspectives on the complexities surrounding feminist research and knowledge. I then focus on key arguments in the field of qualitative research and ethnography, before outlining briefly some of the discussions about research in the field of applied performance. Next, I engage with the literature on researching in the field of disability, drawing together further discussions on ethics and power in these contexts. I offer insight into the ways that I conducted my research and the challenges I faced along the way. In doing so, I reflect on the issues surrounding relationship building between the researcher and her collaborators.

### **Being a feminist researcher**

As discussed briefly in the introductory chapter of the thesis, my primary aim when I first set out on my research journey was to better understand how providing a space for the training of circus skills and the collaborative process towards performance could help empower marginalised women. As a researcher, I wanted to observe first-hand how the women responded to the workshops, and how they articulated issues of marginalisation and oppression. The section in the Introduction which establishes my background as researcher sets up my researcher stance and the ideologies I brought into the work. I aligned myself with Vulcana’s feminist ideologies of empowering women and communities that were othered.

Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) state that:

Feminist knowledge is grounded in experiences of gendered social life, but is also dependent on judgements about the justice of social relationships, on theories of power and on the morality of social investigation. Feminist researchers are not necessarily in agreement on the meanings and consequences of experience, justice, power, relationships, differences and morality but, despite this divergence, they can potentially negotiate common moral and political positions. (p. 3)

Throughout the course of my research with Vulcana, I was constantly informed by the sort of feminist knowledge articulated above. Even though the focus of the research shifted, I could not divorce this knowledge from how I was making sense of the work.

In my previous chapter, I discussed the issues associated with trying to define the term 'feminism,' and here too the notion of a feminist methodology is put under scrutiny. Cook and Fonow (2007), for instance, outline what they have gathered as five principles of feminist methodology, even though they state that they 'have not formulated a universal definition or set of necessary and sufficient criteria' (p. 5). In addition, the authors emphasise that one should 'avoid equating the *number* of epistemological concerns addressed [in a study] with the *degree* of feminism of its methodology' (p. 14, emphasis in original). I consider here three of the principles that resonate most strongly with my research methodology.

One of the principles outlined by Cook and Fonow (2007) pertains to the rejection of the subject/object separation, which aims to counter the 'rigid dichotomy between the researcher and the researched' (p. 9). The authors refer to this dichotomy as a 'fallacy' that does not necessarily produce 'more valid legitimate knowledge' (p. 11). They highlight how in order to avoid such separations, some feminist researchers emphasise the 'dialectic between researcher and researched throughout the entire research process' (p. 9).

Cook and Fonow (2007) also highlight the ethical concerns that come about when feminists are involved in the research process, arguing that a feminist methodology necessarily examines these issues. The authors refer to work in sociology that exposes language as a means of perpetuating women's subordination, for instance when using masculine pronouns or offensive

adjectives to describe women's experiences (p. 11). This point is a reminder to consider how language is also framed in my research (and in the creative workshops) with disabled people.

Because a feminist methodology emphasises empowerment and transformation, Cook and Fonow (2007) articulate the feminist objective of using knowledge to transform patriarchy, not only by engaging the participants as active agents in this transformation, but also by considering how this knowledge is shared with a wider audience. Knowledge thus 'must be elicited and analysed in a way that can be used by women to alter oppressive and exploitative conditions in their society' (p. 13).

Ramazanoglu (1992) argues that the feminist researcher 'be explicit about the politics of their research, as it is more logical to accept our subjectivity, our emotions and our socially grounded positions than to assume that some of us can rise above them' (p. 211). As a feminist researcher, I thus sought a methodological framework that would be more embracing of the researcher's subjectivity, tying in also with what Case (1988) argues in relation to the subjective authorial voice in feminist writing. In her work, she considers how the subjective voice 'expose[s] the layers of personal experience [and is] a liberation from the impersonal, omniscient and seemingly objective voice patriarchal culture has used for centuries to render certain experiences invisible and to gain power through the printed word' (p. 3). As such, I was drawn to aspects of qualitative research that would acknowledge the insights of the researcher. Crang and Cook (2007) perhaps argue this case most strongly by stating, 'you [the researcher] brought your own interests, issues, positionality and, let us not forget, talents to bear in doing the project' (p. 147). I elaborate on these elements of subjectivity later in this chapter, but first, I outline some of the key discussions surrounding qualitative research and more specifically an ethnographic approach in the following section.

### **Qualitative research**

Qualitative research is not for the faint-hearted, but it can be exhilarating and can provide unique and valuable insights. (Barbour, 2008, p. 9)

The admonition given by Barbour (2008) points immediately to the complexities, challenges, and rigorous demands of qualitative research; yet, at the same time, it promises a very rich reward. Yin (2011) suggests that qualitative research allows one to be able to 'represent the meanings ... by the people who live them, not the values, preconceptions, or meanings held by the researchers' (p. 8). The issue I hold with Yin's definition is that it seems to erase the researcher's viewpoint and subjectivity; I sought not only to privilege the perspectives and stories of the participants, but also to acknowledge the insights of the researcher. As highlighted earlier, I was drawn to the explanation by Crang and Cook (2007) about the importance of the researcher's subjectivity. The authors propose an '*intersubjective* understanding between researcher and researched' (p. 38, emphasis in original), where objective and subjective perspectives can help inform and enhance the other.

#### By way of ethnography

In order to observe and gain insight into the work of Vulcana, an ethnographic approach offered the most value. According to Fetterman (2010), ethnography is about 'telling a credible, rigorous, and authentic story' (p. 1), and ethnographic research offers a way to capture the lived experiences of those present; it effectively 'speaks to a unique group of people at a specific moment in time' (Crang & Cook, 2007, p. 146).

Ethnography, although appealing to my research, is not without its frequent criticisms, and I acknowledge some of the problems ethnography poses. For one, it is difficult to narrow ethnography down to a single definition, and Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) identify this conflicting nature of ethnography. They claim that:

[the] definition of the term ethnography has been subject to controversy. For some it refers to a philosophical paradigm to which one makes a total commitment, for others it designates a method that one uses as and when is appropriate. (p. 248)

The same authors, in a later text (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), caution that 'the label [ethnography] is not used in an entirely standard fashion; its meaning can vary' (p.1). How far is it possible to then situate one's position within this (seemingly forgiving) spectrum? From Atkinson and Hammersley's argument,

ethnography appears to offer a considerable allowance for adoption and adaptation; one can appropriate the 'level of immersion' depending on one's needs and intentions.

Apart from finding a concrete definition, the length of time spent on fieldwork is another contentious issue. Beach (2005) mentions the existing idea that one to two years is considered 'reasonable' (p. 2), but, borrowing from the ideas of Jeffrey and Troman, Beach acknowledges that 'understandings of the concept of ethnographic time as well as ideas about how *concrete* time should be *concretely spent* have varied considerably' (p. 2, emphasis in original). Such understandings inevitably impact how I approach my research by way of ethnography. By positioning myself as an ethnographer of Vulcana's work, I had to assess how much time I would be allowed to have in the field with Vulcana and their community project participants, and how I could effectively make use of that time. Furthermore I had to acknowledge the conditions under which Vulcana's community programs operate, such as the amount of funding received in order to carry out such projects.

Adding to the conflicting attitudes surrounding ethnography, Beach (2005) highlights the lack of consensus regarding '*the concept of fieldwork*' (p. 1, emphasis in original); likewise, Delamont (2004) notes the often interchangeable use of the terms 'ethnography, fieldwork, [and] participant observation' in much of the literature (p. 218), although she is quick to distinguish her own use of the terms, specifically, that 'ethnography [is] the most inclusive term, with participant observation and fieldwork being useful descriptions of the data-collection technique and the location of data collection' (p. 218).

Crapanzano (cited in J. Davis, 2000) identifies how many ethnographers previously claimed to be 'neutral observers in order to preserve their authority' (p. 193); however, it is important for an ethnographer currently to:

examine, throughout fieldwork, his/her own subjectivities as the basis from which to understand other people's cultures. This expectation has resulted in calls on researchers to explain the research roles they adopt and to reflexively analyse their role in actually producing research findings. (J. Davis, 2000, p. 193)

In the previous chapter, I expressed my struggles with trying to label Vulcana's work as applied theatre; here, I similarly faced conflicting thoughts about using the term ethnography. In Quinlan's (2009) doctoral study of an inclusive dance company, she uses the term 'ethnographically-inspired,' maintaining that because of the length of time spent in the field, the use of the term ethnography to describe her work may be contested by some ethnographers (p. 75). Forsey (2010), referencing Hockey, observes a similar trend:

Many a postgraduate student in a variety of all disciplines are reluctant to name their rich qualitative research as ethnographic lest their methods be judged inadequate ... when measured against the apparent power of the term. This power arises from the emphasis given to observation made through extended and intensive engagement with a particular group of people. (p. 69)

I will admit that I have—following Quinlan (2009)—used the term ethnographically-inspired numerous times to describe my work to colleagues and at conferences. Forsey's (2010) observation, however, assures me of my right to call my work ethnographic, and I borrow from useful and appropriate aspects of ethnography that will enhance and support the research. I contend that such a qualitative research design allows me to acquire first-hand experience within the working process of Vulcana's projects, as well as the interactions between the participants during the lived moments of the process. Further, with the blurring of boundaries across various disciplines, ethnographic research has become a 'developing trend' (Thomas & Ahmed, 2004, p. 6), thus escaping the stronghold of anthropology (see also Forsey, 2010).

### **Ethnography in/and applied performance practice**

In applied performance, the process of making work is often as important (and in some projects might be the most important element) as the artistic artefact. Brecht may have repeatedly said that the proof of the pudding is in the eating (1964), but in applied performance, proof is measured rather differently and the process of making the pudding can be as important or more important than its consumption. How can this process be measured and what are the implications for the evaluations of applied performance? (Shaughnessy, 2012, p. 34)

In examining my methodological framework, this section draws together the meeting point(s) between ethnography and applied performance practice. My thinking about my methodology has been shaped partly by other scholars such as Donelan (2005) and Mullen (2014) who have adopted an ethnographic approach in their research into applied performance. Donelan's thesis is an ethnographic study of an intercultural performance project in an Australian high school, while Mullen draws on ethnographic principles to examine how 'companies that apply theatre experience manage their funding relationships' (p. 34), and I discuss some of their specific concerns in relation to mine. In addition, while McAuley (1998, 2008, 2012) looks more specifically at rehearsal processes of professional theatre companies, I found her insights into the ethnography of rehearsal useful. She credits the interest in observing and analysing rehearsals to the 'shift in interest from the reified art object to the dynamic processes involved in its production' (1998, p. 75). In this way, both the ethnography of rehearsals and the work of applied performance projects (see Shaughnessy, 2012, in extract above), share this common desire.

Because my work calls for me to be immersed in the field and to focus on process, it is here that I draw the connection to Thompson's (2009) work on performance affects, where he argues for the 'vital affective register of participatory arts' (p. 116; see also Chapter 2). Thompson cautions against the sort of outcomes-based reports often required from community/applied arts projects and how they 'can be in danger of bleaching accounts of the substance and complexity of the work. People become clients, theatre workshops inputs and performances are outcomes' (p. 118). He further suggests that 'the intimacy of [the] hidden moment,' which he links to an ethics and politics of applied theatre, tends to become shrouded by 'the eagerness to apply performance at the service of the various institutional, social and discursive regimes that surround and contain the communities in which the practice takes place' (pp. 160-161).

In a similar vein, as J. Hughes, Kidd, and McNamara (2011) have discovered, 'applied theatre researchers are challenged by direct engagements with practice' and 'these challenges provide a site from which to conceptualise a research method that privileges notions of *practice*' (pp. 187-188, emphasis in original). The authors also acknowledge how funders often expect 'measurable findings about the impact of applied theatre practice' (p. 188). Leighton (2009)

adds that arts workers have little opportunity 'to formally consider their practice' (p. 98). These words bear further impact on my need to reinstate the role of the ethnographer in applied performance work, a position that I feel is best situated to carefully negotiate the subjective-objective continuum, to ask the difficult but essential questions of the work (see also Snyder-Young, 2013; Thompson, 2005; Chapter 5 of this thesis), and to make these hidden moments become more visible (see also Chapter 6 of this thesis).

### **Non-disabled researcher meets the field of disability**

Researchers and practitioners involved in 'applied theatre' ... are responsive to invitations to research and practice in complex, diverse and unpredictable contexts ... In addition, commitments to mobilising an emancipatory politics of practice often means that participants of projects are integrated into the research in applied theatre. This participatory ethos challenges practitioners and researchers to implement reflexive and critical research methods as part of addressing wider issues of social justice and equity. (J. Hughes et al., 2011, p. 186)

I have introduced this section with an epigraph from J. Hughes et al. (2011), which comments on the emancipatory politics of applied performance practice and the integration of participants in such projects. The reminder issued by the authors about the complex relationship between researcher, practitioners, and project participants necessitates the consideration of the debates surrounding research into disability.

Earlier, I considered some of the criticisms of ethnographic research. Ethnography is put into more scrutiny within the field of disability. In the previous chapter, I outlined the debates pertaining to the different models of disability (medical, social, rhizomatic), arguing that it was necessary to consider them in my research because of the ways they impact on how society views people with disability. Stone and Priestley (1996) caution, however, that participants may not even subscribe to theories, regardless of the model of disability, and this disjuncture bears implications for the researcher. It is important then, as J. Davis (2000) argues, that the researcher 'reflexively challenge[s]' these models as opposed to hang[ing] on to sacred cows' (p. 193).

### Power in contexts of researching disability

Other scholars writing and researching in the field of disability write about the ethics of power present in such contexts. In her doctoral research into the experience of people with learning disabilities within the arts, Nash (2002) acknowledges how the participants in her study 'were not able to give what conventionally would be understood to be "informed consent"' (p. 26); she elaborates on the strategies she employed to reduce ethical tensions, such as attempting to explain her research objectives as well as relying on carers to be 'consent givers' (p. 26). While Nash's research focuses largely on the experience of the participants with learning disabilities, I found her strategies and her experience relevant to my own research. In addition to gaining official ethical clearance<sup>6</sup> from the university, I engaged with staff from the PO, who introduced me and my project, and I sought consent from the participants in the presence of support workers, Vulcana facilitators, and the PO. Key staff members from the community hall were also informed of my research, and one of the women there looked disappointed when I explained that my research focus was primarily on Vulcana's work.

### Emancipatory disability studies

There are contentions surrounding disability studies and the 'parasitic' researcher (see Hunt, 1981; Stone & Priestley, 1996). Leighton (2009), whose research examines the dilemmas of non-disabled performance researchers and practitioners working with learning-disabled people, acknowledges how 'non-disabled "experts" feel compelled to "give an account" of the ethics of their research in response to critics who perceive the non-disabled expert as exploitative ... by perpetuating the individual model of disability' (p. 97). Leighton highlights disability scholar and activist Oliver's stance that disabled people have largely been 'passive objects for interviews and observations' (cited p. 97). Conroy (2009) raises her own concerns, identifying her split subjectivity both as a disabled person and an academic 'working within the mainstream' (p. 4). The questions she asks are pertinent to how I approached the work of Stronghold: 'Who is included, and who is excluded? How does one know if one is a part of this field of activity?' (p. 4).

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<sup>6</sup> Griffith University Human Research Protocol Number: EDN/B7/12/HREC

To combat this notion of passivity of those being researched, Oliver (1992) advocated the emancipatory disability research framework, where the issue was:

not how to empower people but, once people have decided to empower themselves, precisely what research can then do to facilitate this process ...; researchers have to learn how to put their knowledge and skills at the *disposal* of their research subjects, for *them* to use in whatever ways *they* choose. (p. 111, emphasis added)

But when reflecting on his earlier work, even Oliver (1997) acknowledges the difficulties of an emancipatory research paradigm; he himself is hesitant to assess his own work as emancipatory, but is determined that ‘one day they [disabled people] surely will [have emancipated themselves],’ and hopes that his work would have made a small contribution to that emancipation (p. 29). Other scholars like Barton (2005) and Barnes (2003) similarly question the viability of this paradigm. Barnes even admits that despite being supportive of the underlying principles of the emancipatory research paradigm, he ultimately casts doubts on its precarious future. Returning to Leighton’s (2009) work, she also argues that Oliver does not take into account that ‘some disabled people may not self-identify as disabled, wish to, or be able to, conduct research’ (p. 98).

### Researching disability arts

As articulated in the previous chapter, there has been much debate surrounding the notion of disability arts. Perring (2005) elaborates on this contention in relation to reflexivity and representation:

While the disability arts movement has carried its activity forward, much artistic work by people with learning disabilities continues to be facilitated by people without learning disabilities. The extent and nature of this involvement varies, and in my cases work continues in arts-and-disability projects run by arts practitioners and workers who are not disabled people. As a consequence, an interaction takes place that is not so apparent in the disability arts scene ... it is vital to acknowledge and explore the interests of the nondisabled artist who often works with and facilitates the learning-disabled performer. Where such a reflexive approach is overlooked, the presentation of the learning-disabled “body” or subjectivity

may be unconsciously determined and represented by a nondisabled cultural interest and perspective. However, if it is encouraged, it might offer the chance to work toward a creative collaboration that permits the full expression of individual subjectivity and experience for all involved. (p. 177)

Leighton (2009) draws on Perring's (2005) arguments, and frames them in light of terms such as 'intervention' and 'scrutiny' (p. 99), thus suggesting a rigorous examination of the work of nondisabled artists within a disability arts context. Leighton, however, brings another perspective in regards to ethical concerns, where she states how her readings of Butler:

have made me consider how our attempts at being ethical reinforced various dichotomies ... and came to realise that I could not and indeed should not identify myself as responsible for ethical practice as this would further confirm learning-disabled people as helpless and learning ability as a valid yardstick for measuring human worth. (p. 99)

This is not to say that Leighton's (2009) research shunned any kind of ethical practice. Rather, her reflections on Butler's concept of agency prompted her to be 'open to continuous re-examination of "ethical" issues' (p. 111), specifically in the context of having to 'give an account of the ethics of research' (p. 97). In examining her methodological issues, she discovered that the practice of doing so 'was fraught with the normalising/other tension' (p. 111).

In my own research, I was constantly aware of the notion of otherness. Gallagher (2007) issues a word of caution about researching 'others,' explaining that '[t]he temptation, then, as researcher, to make "them" "heard" is a potentially dangerous and myopic position of power that demands diligent attention throughout any research activity' (p. 8). Like Leighton (2009), Gallagher (2007) too calls for constant reflexivity, what she describes as diligent attention. Similarly, Fine (1994) proposes that in order to work the self-other hyphen, researchers need to 'probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations' (p. 72). Fine describes the self-other relationship:

Self and Other are knottily entangled. This relationship, as lived between researcher and informants, is typically obscured in social science texts, protecting privilege,

securing distance, and laminating contradictions. Despite denials, qualitative researchers are always implicated at the hyphen. When we opt, as has been the tradition, simply to write *about* those who have been Othered, we deny the hyphen. Slipping into a contradictory discourse of individualism, personalogic theorizing, and decontextualization, we inscribe the Other, strain to white out Self, and refuse to engage the contradictions that litter our texts. (p. 72, emphasis in original)

Within the context of Stronghold, it became even more imperative to ‘work the hyphen’ of this self-other encounter. Conroy’s (2009) words continued to echo throughout the research process: ‘Who is included, and who is excluded?’ (p. 4).

Kuppers (2011) also addresses some of these issues surrounding exclusion and inclusion:

Disability culture: there is a fine line here, between exclusionary essentialism on the one hand, and, on the other, the desire to mark the differences that disability-focused environments (which can include both non-disabled and disabled people) offer to mainstream ways of acknowledging bodies and their needs. I do not think that disability culture is something that comes ‘naturally’ to people identified or identifying as disabled. And I do not think that disability culture is closed to non-disabled allies, or allies who do not wish to identify as either disabled or not. (p. 4)

Kuppers’ (2011) words serve as encouragement for the non-disabled researcher, marking my attempt to draw together the meeting points between ethnography, applied performance practice, and disability.

In the sections that follow, I discuss the process of doing an ethnographic study and detail how I conducted my research, reflecting on some of the benefits and challenges of the approaches that I used. Through this discussion, I also articulate a metaphor for understanding my research design and account for the importance of how relationships in the field are established and negotiated.

## Conducting the research

### Entering the field

Because ethnography involves the researcher being immersed in the lives of the people observed in order to 'explore the meanings ... from the inside' (Brewer, 2000, p. 27), gaining access to the site is often considered a challenge. Gobo (2008) states that '[g]aining access to the field is the most difficult phase in the entire process of ethnographic research [and it] requires a very much greater amount of co-operation from the participants' (p. 118). Bernard (2011) attests to this difficulty, and even prescribes a set of rules for the ethnographer to follow, for instance, selecting the site 'that promises to provide easiest access to data,' and entering the field 'with plenty of written documentation about yourself and your project' (pp. 267-268).

Hesse-Biber (2012) however stresses that feminist researchers 'use multiple tools to gain access to and understanding of the world around them' (p. 20). I found that the 'getting in' phase of the ethnography was relatively easy during the process of my research. In 2011, when I first met with Ronnie, who was Artistic Director of Vulcana at the time, she was receptive to my proposed research project. Admittedly, I had expected a greater compromise to be made between us: 'Yes, you may research Vulcana's work *if ...*'. After explaining that as a researcher I would have to take a critical stance, Ronnie was welcoming of the prospect, acknowledging that a critical examination of the work would in fact be beneficial to the company. In July that same year, I was invited by Ronnie and Bec to come into the Vulcana space to observe a skills training workshop that Vulcana was organising with women from the Deaf community in Brisbane, some of whom I would meet again a year later when I became involved in the Wizard of Auslan project in 2012.

I accepted the invitation to attend the skills training workshop because I wanted to establish a sense of familiarity with the women involved. I wanted them to know who I was and why I was there. McNamara (2009) outlines the particular challenges of researching women:

Engaging women in research of any kind seems to present special challenges. Women, it seems, want to know [sic] the researcher is and to understand what has brought her into the field. They need to experience trust

and safety in the participant-researcher relationship. (pp. 165-166)

I wanted them to see me as an interested observer, someone who was passionate about the work of Vulcana and their collaboration with the Deaf community. But even in that first workshop, I was immediately faced with the 'special challenges' described by McNamara (2009) as well as those presented in Cassell's (cited in Gobo, 2008, p. 119) 'getting on' phase in ethnography, which is considered the achieving of social access, as opposed to solely physical access. Because I was not officially enrolled in the doctoral program when I was invited to observe the workshop, I entered the field by setting myself up as a *potential* researcher interested in Vulcana's work. I explained—with the help of an Auslan interpreter—why I was there, and gave a general overview of my planned research. One or two participants appeared interested, but I sensed some wariness, or possibly indifference, towards me, and I credited this feeling to the fact that I had no knowledge of Auslan. During those sessions, I tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible; I joined in the physical warm-ups and games, and did not write down any notes while the sessions were in place. This skills-based workshop progressed over a period of 16 weeks, and I was not present at all sessions.

A year later, in 2012, I once again entered the field after officially enrolling into the doctoral program and gaining an expedited approval from the university's ethics committee to conduct my research.<sup>7</sup> This time, the Wizard of Auslan project was part of a 3-month creative development period culminating in an October performance in the Vulcana studio space. A few of the women who were involved in the workshops the year before remembered me. By then, I had been involved in Vulcana's training program for about a year, and had also picked up some simple signs in Auslan and was more confident at finger spelling. The ability to sign one's name in Auslan, I observed, was a small step in achieving some form of social access.

#### What ethnographers do: means of material gathering

In terms of data collection, ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what

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<sup>7</sup> Griffith University Human Research Protocol Number: EDN/68/12/HREC

happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts—in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3)

Here I feel it necessary to explain my use of certain terms. Throughout my thesis, I have intentionally avoided words such as ‘data,’ ‘data collection,’ and ‘data collection tools’ while referring to my work, unless quoting directly from primary sources. Denzin (2003), commenting on the critical performance ethnographer, maintains that ‘[t]his ethnographer does not use words like *data*, or *abduction*, or *objectivity*. These words carry the traces of science, objectivism, and knowledge produced for the disciplines, not everyday people’ (pp. 236-237, emphasis in original). O’Connor and Anderson (2015), in their book on research in applied theatre, acknowledge Denzin’s claim as a challenge, but admit that they ‘have struggled to find other words to replace them that don’t have the same taint’ (pp. 39-40). While the terms I use in my research are possibly tainted in some way, I make a choice to use terms such as ‘material gathering’ (data collection), ‘making sense of the material’ (data analysis), and ‘presenting the material’ (reporting the data) whenever I describe my own process.

#### *Part 1: Means of material gathering in Wizard of Auslan*

As part of my fieldwork, I kept a notebook with me during the creative development period, jotting in it discussions that emerged, such as the stories of enforced oral communication on Deaf children and how some of the women felt that society looked at Deaf people as diseased. Other times, I documented the theatre exercises used to creatively engage with the stories that were shared. To deepen my understanding of my observations and to get a more informed perspective of their journey in the creative process, I tried to organise interviews with the Wizard participants. I conducted brief initial interviews with four of the Deaf women on the day of the performance, but wanted to have lengthier conversations with them as follow ups.

Holstein and Gubrium (2003) explain interviewing as offering:

a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives. In this respect,

interviews are special conversations. While these conversations vary from highly structured, standardized, survey interviews, to semiformal guided conversations, to free-flowing informational exchanges, all interviews are interactional. The narratives that emerge may be as truncated as forced-choice survey responses or as elaborate as oral life histories, but they're all considered in situ, as a product of talk between interview participants. (p. 67)

Earlier, I considered McNamara's (2009) advice that engaging women in research has its special challenges, reflecting on how I dealt with issues of social access by positioning myself as an interested observer and a part of the Vulcana community. When trying to establish interviews with the women, I once again encountered obstacles in the research process. As raised in the literature, there are challenges for women conducting interviews with women. Riessman (1987) and Cotterill (1992), for instance, both claim that appealing to gender and the common experience as women is unwise (see, for example, arguments in Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981). Cotterill (1992) is especially critical of earlier arguments made by Oakley (1981), who fails to take into account how factors such as age, class, and status can impact how an interview takes place. Tang (2002) similarly finds fault with Oakley's notion that women interviewing women immediately establishes a 'non-hierarchical relationship' (p. 704). Likewise, Michaels (cited in Riessman, 1987) emphasises how a 'lack of shared cultural norms for telling a story, making a point, giving an explanation and so forth can create barriers to understanding' (p. 173). 'Sisterhood,' Cotterill (1992, p. 600) explains, does not necessarily overcome other differences (the term Cotterill uses is 'inequalities').

I experienced considerable challenges trying to establish interviews with some of the women from Wizard of Auslan after the project; two of the women I e-mailed did not reply, one said she was too busy for an interview but wished me a lovely year ahead, and another expressed that it was lovely that I wanted to interview her but that she did not have time to meet up; this last woman did, however, write some brief responses to my questions, but when I tried to follow up on some of her responses, she apologised that she could not answer my questions further.

Despite these obstacles, I conducted six in-depth interviews with the women involved in Wizard of Auslan: two Deaf women, three hearing women

(one who had a Deaf child), and Celia. The interviews took place at various locations: at the Brisbane Powerhouse, a café, one participant's office, another's home, and a university meeting room. Most of the interviews were on average an hour in length, and prior to our conversation, I sent each woman a series of questions but advised them that these questions were only a guide. I transcribed the interviews and e-mailed a transcript to the participants, inviting them to edit and respond to the transcripts if they wished. Of those who responded to the transcripts, only one participant highlighted that her intentions had not been accurately captured by the Auslan interpreter, and made her own edits accordingly.

Throughout Wizard of Auslan, I often grappled with a heightened awareness of my role as researcher. Although I participated mainly in warm-ups and check-outs, I often found myself observing and note-taking on the margins of the work unfolding. I questioned many times during my involvement in Wizard whether my feelings of 'outsider-ness' stemmed from my relatively early involvement in Vulcana's work, or whether it was mainly because I was not part of the Deaf community. I spoke to Roz, a hearing woman who was involved in Wizard of Auslan as one of the aerialists, about whether she had felt that she was negotiating between two 'worlds' and if she had questioned whether she belonged in that space.

It was kind of interesting being put into that sort of situation where you were a little bit marginalised, and I'm sure there was no deliberate attempt to be excluded ... I don't want to give the wrong impression because everyone was really good about it and really inclusive, but I think it was a subconscious thing ... but yeah, it's an interesting situation to be in, to be that outsider ... I did feel self-conscious about being part of the project, the fact that it's not my story. I didn't wanna feel as though I'm coming in over the top of things, which I never did, but that was a bit of a concern. I did feel like I was coming into the show as an outsider. (Roz, 28/2/2013)

When I asked Lynda, one of the Deaf women, how she felt having a hearing person like me in a space that was mainly for Deaf women, she told me:

Good, good, good. I feel good about it. It just broadens the horizons. (Lynda, 20/10/2012)

There were similar sentiments expressed by another Deaf woman, Julie; after our conversation about her experience of being part of the project, I told her that I had picked up a few words in Auslan. Her response was:

Good! That's great! I'm really pleased that you were involved, and you were able to learn from the project, and it can help you in future, perhaps lead you into more research, and you'll have a better understanding of Deaf people or whatever. (Julie, 20/10/2012)

Despite the affirmations expressed by both Lynda and Julie, I was still uncertain about the level of openness with which my role as researcher was received. I had hoped, at the beginning of my ethnographic journey, that my involvement with Vulcana and being seen as a member of the larger Vulcana community, would help build a greater sense of trust among the other women in the community projects, but as I discovered in *Wizard of Auslan*, appealing to the common experience as women may not always achieve this relationship.

There were other moments in that process where I experienced a strong outsider status in *Wizard*—I learnt that I had been left out of the group e-mail list; I was informed about extra rehearsals only as an afterthought, along with disclaimers that I did not have to come if I was busy or if I did not want to. I do not believe that this was done with the intention to purposefully exclude me from participating; rather, I concluded that the immersion of the researcher—critical for ethnographic work—was not fully understood by or made clear to the Vulcana women. Reflecting on my position as researcher in this phase of Vulcana's work, I was determined to establish a stronger relationship with the company in the hopes that it could allow me better access to and understanding of the work created.

### *Part 2: Means of material gathering in Stronghold*

The second stage of material gathering occurred a year after *Wizard of Auslan*, when Vulcana worked in collaboration with the PO to run the Stronghold project for people with disabilities. I met with Bec at the Vulcana office in May of 2013, where she offered a brief outline of Stronghold, which was scheduled to begin in July that year. She also informed Shirley from the PO about my involvement as a researcher on the project, ensuring that they were made aware of my role,

and that they did not object to my being present at the sessions. I also emphasised that the focus of my research was on Vulcana's practice.

In the course of Stronghold, I was present at every workshop session. I would arrive early and help set up the space for the workshop. During the sessions, I made jottings in my notebook about what I was observing, including what people said and how they were responding. Very often, however, I found that it was impossible to simply be sitting down and writing; the nature of the fieldwork meant that I became actively involved in creating work with the participants and helping out wherever I was needed. For instance, I would help a participant refill their water bottle, or hand out biscuits during tea breaks.

After each session, I wrote up lengthier field notes from my initial jottings. These were supplemented by the audio and video recordings made during the sessions. Photos that were taken during the sessions served as a visual recall strategy; some photos were e-mailed to the PO upon request for their own publications and archives. Writing up from my jottings resulted in more than 500 pages of field notes, but the narrative of these field notes was still in a relatively 'raw' form. As I read over the field notes, I would occasionally write asides in the margins of the documents. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2001) describe asides as 'brief, reflective bits of analytic writing that succinctly clarify, explain, interpret, or raise questions about some specific happening or process described in a fieldnote' (p. 362). Writing asides allowed me to begin viewing the field notes with a more critical eye, and to start making sense of the work that was unfolding. As part of this process, I wrote personal reflections, which Crang and Cook (2007) explain are actually 'a considerable amount of field noting' in itself (p. 56). I did not write my reflections in a separate book; rather, they ran alongside or at the end of the jottings. I often found it difficult to separate my reflections from purely descriptive observations while I was writing in the field, signalling once again the idea of mess that was raised in Chapter 2.

The raw field notes and reflections were then reconsidered and carefully selected to illuminate significant aspects of practice that contributed to the research story. Embedded within the larger research story therefore are various narrative vignettes that seek to capture specific moments within the Stronghold (and Wizard of Auslan) process. Vignettes can be thought of as 'narrative investigations that carry within them an interpretation of the person, experience, or situation that the writer describes. [They] are composites that encapsulate

what the researcher finds through the fieldwork' (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 70). To present the material, I drew on narrative approaches that allowed for the recounting of the ethnographic experience, using words and images that fit the story and thus offering sufficient description for the reader (Mitchell & Charmaz, 1996, p. 157). Mitchell and Charmaz argue that writing needs to provide 'the shape, color, tone, order, and form of their stories; they do not need to provide the entire experience. Instead, they stress some events, minimize others, and ignore still others' (pp. 157-158). In this sense, I was also drawing on what Humphreys and Watson (2009) describe as the enhanced typography of ethnographic writing, which relies on the 'presentational techniques of the novelist' (p. 43). While I drew mainly on vignettes as a way of presenting the research material, I discovered the need for a different form in one section of Chapter 6, and I found this through poetry. This form not only allowed me to condense the articulations of the facilitators over a 4-month period, but helped capture the 'essence' of the theme explored (see Ely et al., 1997, p. 135).

In writing these ethnographic stories and presenting them as narratives within the thesis, I once again had to create new languages. Earlier I discussed the challenge of qualitative researchers avoiding terms such as data. While writing the stories, I sought to find different ways—new languages—to describe my observations. For instance, instead of 'Celia pushes Mavis's wheelchair to the entrance,' I have written along the lines of, 'Celia moves with Mavis'; in trying to capture how the Stronghold participants communicated in non-speaking ways, I have used the word 'expresses'. Again, I acknowledge that these terms may be tainted in one way or another, but these are the terms that serve the narratives best.

Reflective discussions, which I recorded and transcribed, were a significant aspect of the material gathering in Stronghold. I shared with the Vulcana facilitators my emerging observations and thoughts about the work, both in person and through e-mail, inviting them into a process of collaborative reflection. The facilitators and I spent time after the workshops discussing issues that arose during the course of the session, as well as creative ideas that were developing. There were also three separate meetings where we discussed significant issues and observations from the workshops: one in August, another in September, and the third, a post-performance debrief in December 2013.

Through this process, I became aware of the shifting status of my role as an ethnographer, and found myself teetering on the edge of being a reflective practitioner (see Schön, 1983). I began to feel a sense of responsibility for the facilitation of the workshops and our interactions in the space. I found myself reflecting in action, reframing my language and actions, thinking on my feet. I began to see myself as another Vulcana facilitator, and this sense of identification was fuelled largely by the collaborative reflective process throughout the project and the developing researcher relationship that I was forging within the work.

One of the challenges faced in the material gathering process of Stronghold was the use of interviews. Because the participants had entered the project through different organisations, access to them beyond the workshops was limited. Their responses to the development of work were garnered from conversations that took place within the immediate frame of the project, as well as through my own observations of how they were responding to the process. I explore these limitations further in the section ‘Writing and knowing: the return of the body,’ which appears later in this chapter.

The presentation of the material in the thesis takes on the following referencing style:

**Table 1. Presentation of the Material**

	<b>Referencing example</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Field notes</b>	FN 11, 17/10/2013	Field notes from Day 11 of Stronghold, 17 October 2013
<b>Personal reflections/Reflective journal</b>	PR 2, 25/7/2013	Personal reflections from Day 2 of Stronghold, 25 July 2013
<b>Workshop discussion (after a Stronghold session)</b>	WD 15, 14/11/2013	Excerpt from workshop discussion following Day 15 of Stronghold, 14 November 2013
<b>Workshop discussion (stand-alone)</b>	WD 12/9/2013	Excerpt from one of three stand-alone meetings (in this case, 12 September 2013) to discuss our observations of the Stronghold project

<b>Pre-Stronghold meeting</b>	PO, 17/6/2013	Meeting with the PO before the commencement of Stronghold
<b>Interviews</b>	Celia, 7/4/2015	Celia's interview, 7 April 2015
<b>E-mails</b>	personal communication, 27/5/2014	Excerpt from e-mail exchanges between the Vulcana facilitators and researcher, 27 May 2014
<b>Field notes, Wizard of Auslan</b>	Wiz, 10/9/2012	Narrative written up from field note jottings during Wizard of Auslan, 10 September 2012
<b>Field notes, Small Change</b>	Small Change, 14/9/2014	Narrative written up from field note jottings during Small Change, 14 September 2014. I have only drawn on one instance from Small Change as a reflection point.

### **My research design is like ...**

Following my involvement with Vulcan's Wizard of Auslan project with Deaf women in 2012, which occurred in the very early stages of my study, I presented some of my work at a support group run by an academic from the university. As I discussed my preliminary observations about the workshop and performance project with Deaf women, I began to field questions from other doctoral students about the medical and social models of disability, and words such as 'benefit' and 'help' began to surface. It seemed to me at the time that others were (mis)understanding my research as solely focussing on hearing impairment and the therapeutic benefits of the arts. I then realised that I needed to better frame what my research was about, and thus offered the analogy of a house. I described the physical structure of the house as being similar to the Stores Building where the Vulcana projects take place, and highlighted how each house is governed by its own philosophies and principles that make it a home. For Vulcana, this concept was in relation to their underlying feminist philosophies. I then alluded to the Vulcana facilitators being like a host family, and their community project participants the guests who come to visit.

This became an analogy that remained throughout my study, one that I usefully returned to whenever I needed any clarification about the direction the work was taking. In the early stages of my research journey, I often viewed my position as the 'inquisitive little cousin' visiting over the summer holidays, one who was constantly watching, observing, and asking questions. The way I have articulated my research design analogy also speaks strongly to Coffey's (1999) interpersonal field and the inter-related (and sometimes problematic) concept of 'fictive kin,' which Coffey claims is a common aspect of social anthropological fieldwork' (p. 46).

As Mullen (2014) argues, 'contexts and relationships are constantly in flux and require ongoing negotiation' (p. 34). Earlier, I described my methodological approach as teetering on the edge of reflective practice. This realisation, I believe, was the turning point in my ethnographic journey, marking the shift from sitting largely on the margins of Vulcana's work (as was the case with Wizard of Auslan) to becoming more actively involved in collaborative reflection, critique, and facilitation. If I were to remain with the analogy of the inquisitive little cousin, then this enhanced status signalled being invited to sit at the grown-ups' table. As Coffey (1999) acknowledges, 'Good ethnographic practice, data collection and analyses rely upon genuine empathy, trust and participation. It is inevitable that prolonged fieldwork will promote emotional ties and personal attachments that go beyond the parameters of the field' (p. 47). The lessons that I learnt as an ethnographer in Wizard of Auslan meant that before entering Stronghold, I ensured that I developed sufficiently the relationships that would allow for good ethnographic practice, to find myself as researcher in 'a relationship of some intimacy' (McNamara, 2009, p. 174), to create a 'reciprocal quest for understanding' (Stacey, cited in Skeggs, 2001, p. 436).

### **Relationships in the field**

Much ethnographic work requires building a relationship with those in the 'field,' which Coffey (1999) defines as 'a site peopled by social actors and, implicitly, by the social researcher [and] that fieldwork is dependent upon and guided by the relationships that are built and established over time' (p. 39). Through my ongoing collaboration with the Vulcana facilitators, I discovered how my

engagement with the work strengthened, thereby achieving a 'relational work of a unique and intense kind' (Coffey, 1999, p. 39). In establishing this kind of relationship with Vulcana, I was also aware of the emotional journey sometimes attached to fieldwork:

Friends, acquaintances, antagonists, loves, enemies can all be made, maintained and lost during the course of fieldwork. Time, space and emotions are all invested in ethnographic fieldwork—connecting the personal, the political and the professional. It is impossible to differentiate the subjective, embodied self from the socio-political and the researcher-professional. (Coffey, 1999, p. 57)

I am reminded of Thompson's (2005) explication of the responsibility of guest-hood:

If I am invited as a practitioner into a certain setting, if I am welcomed into a fellow-practitioner's house, there are various expectations of behaviour ... Guests might return home and speak critically of their hosts, but I struggle to do this. This blunts my capacity for critique as a researcher—but perhaps blunting the arrogance of the international researcher is a small price to pay for giving those people that invite me into their houses an assurance that they will not come to feel that their hospitality has been betrayed. (p. 9)

I shared in a similar struggle to speak critically of the work created in Stronghold. Unlike Thompson (2005), however, I do not see myself as an 'international researcher,' but as part of the Vulcana community, albeit still a guest. I have written my role as part of the fictive family—the cousin—and this positionality brings with it other challenges. Thompson writes of guests returning home—to where do I return? I did not want my relationship with Vulcana to end once the research project ended.

Mullen's (2014) research into the work of 'theatre companies that apply theatre' (p. 34) provides intriguing insight into the relationship between researcher and participants, using the term 'entanglement' as a metaphor. For Mullen, the role of the researcher is to acknowledge the struggles and discover how to work 'within ethical and methodological tensions' (p. 34). On a similar note, Donelan (2005) discusses her collaborative relationship with the theatre artist she worked with, identifying how she 'struggled with the differences

between each other' (p. 65). During my research, I found that much of that tension, especially in the early stages of the research relationship, was about negotiating these issues of power. *How much of my observations would be appreciated? Would it seem that I was overstepping boundaries?*

These challenges relate to what McAuley (1998) refers to as the 'balance between empathic involvement and disciplined detachment' as well as acknowledging that 'the relationship between observer and observed involved complex and subtle issues of power and presence' (p. 77). She further notes the tenuous relationship an academic can have with theatre artists:

The academy—place of critical, analytical, and theoretical discourse—has traditionally been regarded with suspicion if not hostility by theatre artists, and ... the academic observer is likely to be positioned more or less overtly by the practitioners, may be given a part to play within the process, may be more or less excluded from certain aspects of the work, may even be asked to leave the room on occasion. (p. 80)

But the position of criticality that an ethnographer brings into the work can be welcomed by practitioners. During the course of Stronghold, Lara, Celia, and Bec each commented on the importance of having a critical observer:

Thanks Natalie. It's been invaluable having you part of the workshop, and all the stuff you've been sending. It's been great food for thought. (Lara, WD 8, 5/09/2013)

You've been involved in a learning process with all of us, but you've had a critical eye on the process and what we're trying to do with ... this group of people, and what our aims are, and trying to keep us focused on what the bigger aim of the project—not just a show—but what are we aiming to do with these people in the space and why. (Celia, WD 4/12/2013)

And catching all those little bits that we, you know, for whatever reasons, we're on a thing and not noticing those details, like how people are working together, or a little comment that someone's made to you on the side ... Yeah, so that's really valuable. (Bec, WD, 4/12/2013)

Snyder-Young (2013) highlights the importance of collaborative meaning-making, stating:

In my analysis of all community-based and interactive theatre projects, I send a draft of my critique to at least one representative of the project for feedback, context, and response, both as a form of 'participant check' and to use critique as a springboard for dialogue rather than arrogant insult. (p. 13)

Like Snyder-Young's (2013) approach, I wanted there to be reciprocity in the research relationship; my invitation to sit at the grown-ups' table meant that I could gain deeper insight into the work that Vulcana was creating with the Stronghold group, but this also necessitated bringing my own offerings to the table. I sought to establish a greater sense of reciprocity in the research relationship, drawing on how Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1983) consider the woman as researcher and woman as researched being in a 'mutually informing' relationship, one where the 'research process becomes a dialogue' (p. 427). As detailed earlier, during the course of my fieldwork in Stronghold, I wrote up detailed field notes from my jottings after every session, as well as personal reflections. I also recorded and transcribed all the discussions we had. I sent through my reflections to the Stronghold facilitators, sharing with them questions that were arising from my observations, and inviting them to share their thoughts with me as well.

In April 2015, I sat with Celia as we pored over drafts of my chapters, seeking clarification and her response to what I had written; this approach thus aligns itself with the 'call for critics of community-based theatre to acknowledge and engage with artists' goals' (Snyder-Young, 2013, p. 61). In this process of engaging Celia as a co-researcher, I sought to achieve a sense of 'collaborative story-making' (see Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2009, p. 92), thereby highlighting the interconnectedness—the knotty entanglement—between myself as researcher and those I came to interact with and write about.

### **Writing and knowing: the return of the body**

In what he describes as the 'return of the body,' Conquergood (1991) argues that participant-observation fieldwork 'privileges the body as a site of knowing'. The body is immersed in the field. It contributes to ethnography's 'intensely sensuous way of knowing' (p. 180). As such, it is rather impossible to erase the researcher's body from the ethnographic text since, and as Sklar (2000)

asserts, “subjective” bodily engagement is tacit in the process of trying to make sense of another’s somatic knowledge. There is no other way to approach the felt dimensions of movement experience than through the researcher’s own body’ (p. 71, cited also in Kuppers, 2011, p. 3).

Sklar (2000) continues by stating that ‘[o]ne’s body can be transformed by the experience’ (p. 71); as much as this thesis is an examination of Vulcana’s Stronghold project with their participants, it is also an investigative journey into my ethnographic experience, of being in and of the work created. I have continually inserted my own bodily experiences into the research story, using them as points of reflection and questioning.

Even so, these arguments do not always alleviate the anxiety that researchers can feel. As Kuppers (2011) writes:

After many attempts, I feel unable to write about [these rituals created by the group], although I could write beautifully about my experiences on the site ... I tried to write about the empowering function of ritual and performance, and about the problems of working in an environment where informed consent cannot be assumed, and where issues of privacy, unknowability, and dignity pressure my work as a public artist. But my writing stopped each time ... There are so many problems: How can I ethically share the work we did together, me as a foreigner working with people, many non-verbal, mainly in their sixties and seventies, many of whom were revisiting the site of their incarceration for the first time? (Kuppers, 2011, p. 67)

In many ways, I shared Kuppers’ (2011) sentiments throughout my journey in Stronghold. *Who am I*, I constantly asked, *who am I to come in here and write about what you are experiencing?* And while informed consent was sought for me to share the space, and to write about the unfolding of the creative process, I was acutely aware that what was presented through the narratives embedded in this thesis was seen through my eyes, heard through my ears. Like Kuppers, I too grappled with the act of representation.

With further regard to the representation of people with learning disabilities, Leighton (2009), whose arguments about giving an account of ethics I discussed earlier, opposes Barnes’ (1992) criticisms of ‘non-disabled representations of disabled people,’ articulating her hopes to ‘give a positive representation of learning-disabled people, one which endorsed and included

different skills, bodies, and subjectivities' (p. 100). Like Leighton, I also sought to account for the different subjectivities in the shared space, yet I find myself grappling with the term 'positive'. This is not to say that I did not represent the participants in Stronghold in ways that I deemed were respectful; rather, I acknowledge—as I do throughout the thesis—the limitations I faced. I tried to present honest accounts of my observations, and even though I took into consideration the different subjectivities, I was all too aware that I was 'mak[ing] sense of another's somatic knowledge ... through [my] own body' (Sklar, 2000, p. 71). In this respect, I once again find myself nodding with recognition over Kupperts' (2011) words: 'But I am projecting desires and knowledges onto this woman, and it is only my own mind I have access to: in the end, I have to come back to my own sensation, my own dance' (p. 3).

### **Concluding thoughts: Dancing with uncertainty**

In this chapter, I discussed my methodological framework in terms of meeting points, paying attention to perspectives on ethnography, applied performance practice, and disability. By offering an account of my ethnographic journey, I aimed to tear off the 'veil of neutrality or objectivity' (Fine, 1994, p. 73) that has often obscured the researcher, exposing myself and my vulnerabilities within the work.

J. Hughes et al. (2011) discuss the praxis of applied performance in terms of 'mess'. They argue how '[s]ituations of practice are inherently unstable, messy, interconnected, conflictual, uncertain, [and] complex' (p. 193). I propose that by conducting ethnographic research into applied performance practice, I experienced a double-mess, often struggling to make sense of what I was observing in the work of someone else. And while I have offered a look into particular points of my ethnographic journey in this chapter, it does not stop here. Throughout the remainder of this thesis, the reader will encounter ongoing reflections that chart my shifting researcher position through Stronghold, drawing on moments in Wizard of Auslan as points of contact. As I discussed in Chapter 2, making sense of the mess can be rewarding as it offers richer insight into the work. In dancing with uncertainty throughout the process, I became aware that I was in fact, as Kincheloe (2005) describes of the researcher's process, 'chasing complexity' (p. 326).

Before I embark on the next three chapters, which detail what might be traditionally referred to as my analysis and findings, I want to address a particular absence: that among this tangled mess, one may notice certain silences and gaps. As much as I sought to achieve collaborative story-making, I yet again must acknowledge the limited access I had to the Stronghold participants. Whenever their words appear in the research story, they have been drawn from in-the-field observations and recordings. The nature of the organisational partnership meant that I could not contact the participants outside the immediate space of the workshops, and here I find Koppers and Overboe's (2009) reflections resounding:

In a Deleuzoguattarian mode, we wish to offer their absence not (only) as a lack, but as an opportunity to read against and in the interstices of texts assembled here. What is missing can become a machine that drives knowledge production, see lacunae as opportunities and spaces of de- and re-territorialization ... We invite the reader to question how the absences and presences of voice in this collection function as a microcosm of our shared critical landscape. Who finds voice, whose voices might be shrouded by the institutional practices we repeat and perform? Who speaks for whom, and why? (p. 218)

These issues and questions will continue to be echoed in the following chapters, which examine Stronghold within the theoretical frameworks of feminist theatre practice, applied performance, and disability. While a Deleuzoguattarian mode of thinking does not primarily inform my thesis, I am intrigued by glimpses into their philosophy and writing, and of the work of scholars who have used them (see also Chapter 2). As such, traces of their thoughts can be located at various points in the chapters. I am interested as well in the possibilities of rhizomatic thought that 'gives space to what is not measurable, to what is left out, to what is considered as nonsense'. I connect with the idea that 'learning to live with nonsense provides spaces for engagement—the researcher herself becomes through her rhizomatic orientation towards research' (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2010, p. 88).

Feminist. Ethnographer. Parasite. Inquisitive little cousin. Ally. Throughout my research into Stronghold, I contend with numerous subjectivities and consciously attempt to work the hyphen(s) in my reconstructions of the

research story. I try to deal with the rhizomatic, the mess, the nonsense, and dance with uncertainty in my journey.

## CHAPTER 4: BODIES IN(HABITING) SPACES

### Great-aunt Nita

My paternal grandmother, Flo, used to live with her three sisters, Tissy, Margie, and Nita, in a little house with a huge front yard. Under the heat of the tropical sun, my cousins and I would play games of catch. As we ran barefoot on the prickly grass, the *lalang*<sup>8</sup> seeds would hook onto our shorts like little stowaways our mothers would have to laboriously pick off afterwards. The outside was a place of fun, but I didn't like going into the house as much. It was often dark, and the stone floor, rather than providing respite from the humidity outdoors, was cold and uninviting.

It was not just the bleakness of the house that stirred up such feelings. Inside was also where Great-aunt Nita was. Out of all the sisters, Great-aunt Nita was the one who drew my attention the most. She had only one leg, the other a mere stump that she would occasionally twitch as she sat staring into space, or when she cast glances at us.

Nita had her own little bench in the dining area where she would sit, sipping on her tea, or munching on Danish cookies. Sometimes, she would pat the seat next to her, beckoning us children to come over and have a chat. I was always a little afraid of Nita. I wasn't sure what stories she would want to tell me, but I would sit obediently, although with slight hesitation, next to her, whenever she called me over.

Every time Nita had to get from one room to another, she would reach out to her pair of crutches and pull herself up. As she moved, her rubber slipper would drag across the stone floor, *swish, swish, swish*. I would stare as the amputated leg flapped with each step Nita took.

My intense curiosity propelled me to ask my father why Great-aunt Nita only had one leg.

'When Great-aunt Nita was young, she was a nurse, and very beautiful. One day, she discovered a sore on her leg, and instead of getting it treated medically, she started to rub soy sauce into it, worsening the wound. Eventually, the infection spread across her whole leg, and she had to

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<sup>8</sup> Lalang is the Malay term used to refer to the coarse, weedy grass that grows abundantly in fields and gardens.

get it cut off.’ My father’s voice lowered to a conspiratorial tone, as if he were sharing a dark secret.

‘She was a nurse?’ the 8-year-old me wondered in surprise, ‘Why didn’t she use medicine instead?’

‘Because when the man she was in love with left her, Nita went a little mad, and never took proper care of herself. That’s why she’s always talking to herself.’

Great-aunt Nita was my first personal encounter with someone with a disability. For my cousin, Avril, Great-aunt Nita was positioned as an example for important lessons to be learnt. Even though Avril’s parents offered the medicalised version of the story (‘Great-aunt Nita had diabetes and her leg turned gangrenous. She also had dementia.’), Nita became cast as an object of consequence (‘This is what will happen to you if you eat too many sweets!’).

The narrative I have shared highlights the often problematic views of people with disability; it demonstrates how the ‘extraordinary bodies’ of people with disability often exist as freak shows that draw curious stares, and incite responses of horror and dread; as I have articulated in Chapter 2, the disabled body is often othered—the rejected, deviant body, one onto which ‘we project rejected aspects of ourselves’ (Wendell, 1996, p. 60). Conroy (2009) states that ‘[d]isability is a framing device—a way of framing bodies and people’ (p. 11), and her words are a constant reminder to reflect on how I frame my representations of the project and those involved in it.

This chapter examines the work of Stronghold through a focus on bodies and spaces. In a way, it also captures a particular meeting point—the first time the facilitators and researcher meet the participants and vice versa. It is also the first time we meet the community hall space in which we will work for the first half of the project. I make sense of the material gathered in Stronghold by questioning the particular cultural narratives we create about the (disabled) body. Garland-Thomson (2005b) highlights that commonly received cultural narratives of disability include viewing the disabled body as flawed, thereby demanding normalisation (see also Chapter 2). She emphasises the need to instead view disability as ‘an integral part of one’s embodiment [...] and way of relating to the world’ (p. 1568). She also contends that revising cultural narratives of disability requires a consideration of the ‘inevitable transformation of the body that results from encounters with the environment’ (p. 1568). I thus

foreground the importance of the spaces we work in, spaces that are politically and ideologically informed. I seek to explore how spaces impact the bodies that inhabit them and vice versa. Are we able to achieve what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) call deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation?

### **Encounters between the self and ‘other’: First moments in the Stronghold workshop space**

Painted on the canvas in primitive colors was a life-size portrait of the Elephant Man. This very crude production depicted a frightful creature that could only have been possible in a nightmare ... This fact—that it was still human—was the most repellent attribute of the creature. There was nothing about it of the pitiableness of the misshapened or the deformed, nothing of the grotesqueness of the freak, but merely the loathing insinuation of a man being changed into an animal. (Montagu, 2001, pp. 17-18)

The above epigraph recounts the initial feelings of Sir Frederick Treves, surgeon, and future benefactor of John Merrick who was also known as the Elephant Man. Erevelles (2000) reflects on the description in Montagu’s work,<sup>9</sup> arguing how such ‘discursive representations ... serve to mediate in invisible ways almost all our interactions with the “disabled” Other’ (p. 36). Erevelles further notes how the film version begins with ‘surreal scenes of a woman’s rape by an elephant in the jungles of “bad,” “dark,” “Other,” Africa’’, thus offering a ‘mythical explanation’ (p. 36) for Merrick’s birth. This mythicisation reflects once again the narrative (my father and) I created about my Great-aunt Nita, that her condition was in fact a fabrication, a love story with a tragic ending. Likewise, the ‘monster’ has long been a recurring trope in relation to people with disabilities; disability scholars often write about how this figure exists as a dangerous threat to the social imaginary (see Garland-Thomson, 1997, 2002a; Hadley, 2008; B. Hughes, 2009), and whose image incites fear and dread.

Bearing in mind Conroy’s (2009) notion of disability as a framing device, I am mindful of how I have framed the following narrative, which has been crafted from my ethnographic field notes; it intends to establish the setting of the workshops and capture my first encounter with the participants in Stronghold. I am cautious about describing them as ‘other,’ as it is not my intention to impose

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<sup>9</sup> Erevelles (2000) draws on the 1979 edition of Montagu’s book.

such terms on them from a position of 'privilege' as a researcher and person without a disability. However, I feel it necessary to acknowledge, as raised in earlier arguments, that the disabled body *is* often marked as an other, while remaining acutely aware not to perpetuate the trope of the monster.

### Stepping into unfamiliar territory

Coming from the main road, I'm not sure if I've found the right place. Standing under the midday sun, I stare at the building in front of me. It looks like an old church from the front, a large cross still visible on the side facing the road. I glance around and notice the sign on an old letterbox—I have the right address. Another sign displays an arrow pointing in a general direction towards the back, with the word 'Enter'. I obey. I follow the stone path, which leads me further into the grounds. There is a table and some chairs in the yard, where the grass has all turned greyish-brown. A couple—a man and a woman—are standing around, chatting. I approach them, nervously introducing myself. I've worn my bright pink Vulcana t-shirt, in the hopes of sealing a sense of insider-ness with the company. The heavy-set lady wearing red completes my sentence for me before I can tell her that I'm with the circus.

'Just up in there,' she says brusquely, pointing at the building. She doesn't stay to chat, but ambles up the ramp, into the old church hall, and disappears through the doorway. The man stays behind.

Feeling rather Alice-in-Wonderland-esque, I wonder if I should follow her inside. Instead, I remain in the yard and walk a few paces, trying to peek through the doorway of the raised building. As I strain my neck and eyes, I spot a couch through the doorway. Someone's sitting on it. I squint, and realise that the figure is Lara, with her head down, scribbling into a notebook. I take it as a sign, and bound up the ramp, making my way into the building.

I've entered a modestly-sized community hall. Its brown floorboards are old and familiar, and they creak slightly under my weight, bringing back memories of my primary school days. There is a stage at one end of the space, on which some tree-like installations stand. The space is eclectically decorated. The pillars in the hall are covered with a mishmash of cloths and ornamental objects like plastic butterflies and flowers. In one corner, ribbons of salmon pink sari cloth hang from the ceiling to the floor. Printed photographs are pasted on one wall, forming a

large mural. Two people in wheelchairs are listening to an audio recording, while a young woman in a grey t-shirt stands near them. I notice that the space is divided into two main sections: the hall in which I'm standing, and a kitchen-dining-activity area from which a delicious smell (my nose identifies it as stew) is now wafting.

I approach Lara and she looks up from her notebook. I take a seat on the old khaki-coloured couch next to Lara and we start chatting about my recent conference in Adelaide, where I presented a paper on Vulcana's previous project, the Wizard of Auslan. Celia, Bec, and Shirley from the PO soon arrive, and niceties are exchanged. Lara suggests that we'd better get the space ready, and we all help with the setting up of three tables into a rough L-shape, placing another table near the doorway. A woman I've not met before arrives and says hello to Shirley, panting slightly. Shirley introduces her to us as Liza, the support worker, who'll be with us throughout the whole workshop process. In a gravelly voice, Liza greets each of us. Shirley pauses to think, then tells us that it might be best if she gives us a brief summary of each of the participants. I pull out my notebook, eagerly writing down as much as I can. Celia does the same.

Shirley goes through the participants one by one, until all 11 participants have been named. I stare at my notebook, uncertain about how I'm feeling, but Celia, Lara, and Bec all express enthusiasm that the participants seem to really enjoy music and movement. Lara goes through with us her idea for the structure of the workshop, telling us that she plans to give an overview of different kinds of puppets, and then try to elicit from the group ideas on the kinds of characters one might meet at the circus.

As we're milling around the table listening to Lara, I hear a loud laugh coming from outside. I feel my muscles tense up, a tight smile plastered on my face. I'm uncertain as to what to expect, and how to respond. A tall man with dark hair appears at the door. He sports a dark, rough beard that matches the hair on his head. He's wearing a long-sleeved blue and white shirt, and khaki-coloured trousers. His left wrist is adorned by a gold and silver watch. I recognise his face. I've seen his photograph in one of Vulcana's old newsletters. This is Mark. He's accompanied by his carer for the day, a slim-built woman with short blond hair, which she's styled in such a way that it's spiked up on her head. She introduces herself as Leslie, and as she's being introduced to the rest of us, she gives a little cock of her head and an occasional 'hey'.

Mark seems excited to see new faces, and straightaway, he starts to compare his height against the women in the room. To demonstrate how tall he is, he puts his hand to his forehead and then starts bringing it down to reach Lara's. He does the same to Celia and Shirley. He turns his back to them and taps his shoulder with his finger, as if to say, *Stand against my back and let's compare heights!*

Everyone laughs along with Mark as the remarkable height difference is confirmed. Then Celia says, 'What about Nat? Compare with her!' I give a little start upon hearing my name. I realise that I've been standing a little farther off, observing, but not partaking in the exchange. I see five pairs of eyes turn towards me, and I nervously (although I try to hide it) step forward. I stand with my back against Mark's, and feel the heat from his back transfer onto mine. He stands still, and I use the side of my hand to mark off where my head reaches—just under his shoulder blades. I move my back away from Mark's, with my hand still in place. Mark blinks, points at me, throws his head back, and laughs. I imagine how I must appear to his eyes—a small, strange, brown-skinned woman. I manage a weak chuckle.

Two more participants arrive soon after. Shirley calls out their names as they walk through the doorway: Winnie and Tina. I try to say hello to them, and I get a tight smile from Tina in return. Winnie doesn't seem to acknowledge me. I feel embarrassed, mainly because my greetings have gone unreciprocated. I feel myself pulling away more, content to fade into the background.

A fourth participant arrives, this time, through the other section of the community hall. As she's being wheeled in, she exclaims, 'Good afternoon, everyone!' Her voice is loud and clear, her accent reflecting a deep Australian drawl.

Shirley tells us, 'This is Mavis, everyone.' Mavis is greeted in return by a comparatively quiet echo of 'Hello,' mainly from the Vulcana facilitators and myself. Mavis calls out her greeting again, and this time, we reply more loudly.

Mavis notices Mark and reaches out to him. A grin is splashed across her face, and she sticks her tongue out between her teeth. 'Hi Mark!' Mavis cries out teasingly. Mark makes a noise like a whimper and tries to hide behind Leslie, grabbing onto the crook of her elbow.

'Don't try to hide behind me!' Leslie says good-naturedly to Mark. She leans over to Celia and me, whispering, 'Mark's not really shy. He just pretends to be.' Celia and I chuckle.

Mavis stops teasing Mark, who goes over to sit quietly next to Leslie, and launches into a story about getting a Michael Jackson DVD from the library. My ears perk up on hearing 'Michael Jackson,' and I feel the urge to engage Mavis in conversation. For some strange reason, I find myself holding back, and instead, I just listen and observe in silence. As Mavis continues her story, a young woman named Gwen arrives with a support worker, and silently, she wheels herself in next to Mavis. Gwen's thick, dark hair is tied loosely in a ponytail, which contrasts with the light grey sweater she's wearing. Shirley mentions to the group that Bryce won't be coming today, at which point Mavis adds, 'Bryce sends his apologies that he couldn't come!'

Next, a woman with short, light brown hair comes in and I find out from Shirley that she's Bev. I make a cursory glance at my notes, and see that I've quoted Shirley's description of Bev as a 'soft, sweet darling'. Bev is wheeled in, and as she takes her place in the circle that's being formed by the group, she looks over at me, her head cocked slightly. I smile at her, and she blinks slowly back at me, a dimple forming in her cheek as she smiles.

My attention is suddenly drawn away from Bev as I hear a loud voice say, 'Come here, pretty one!' I look towards the sound of the voice, and see that Mavis is reaching out to Gwen, trying to grab a hold of her. Gwen gives a gurgling laugh and leans over to Liza and clings onto her, trying to avoid Mavis's cheeky advances. Eventually, however, Gwen succumbs and grabs Mavis's hand, kissing it.

'Let me give one back to you!' Mavis says, and returns the gesture.

The last person to arrive, just before 12.30pm, comes in from the other section of the hall. Gillian squeezes herself between Mavis and Bev, calling out her greetings as she does so. Gillian strikes me as an interesting character—her red-and-white striped top complements the olive green cardigan that she's worn over it. Around her neck, Gillian wears a string of alternating dark and light green beads, which matches her metallic green earrings. Her blue and red plastic glasses finish off her eclectic ensemble.

A circle of blue plastic chairs and metal wheelchairs has formed in the space. I scan the room, taking in each new face. Every now and again, I glance down at my notebook, skimming through the very brief details of each of the participants that Shirley has shared with us, trying to absorb every particular detail and idiosyncrasy of the people present.

Then Lara takes a deep breath in, preparing to speak. We are about to partake in the very first check-in of the Stronghold project. (FN 1, 18/7/2013)

I have tried, in this vignette, to orientate the reader to the community hall space and the participants of Stronghold. Four people are missing in this vignette, however: Ricky, who arrived late to the first workshop, and Eva, Bryce, and Howie, who joined the group only in the second week. The three men are wheelchair users while Eva is not, and I weave them into the research story throughout the course of this thesis. My first encounter with the participants of Stronghold, as evident in my interaction with Mark, was characterised by a high level of uncertainty. And while I have recounted the sense of anxiety I felt meeting the participants for the first time, it is not one of fear of the 'monster'; rather, I became acutely aware of my own lack of knowledge, and often questioned, throughout the course of the day's workshop, what the boundaries were, and whether there were any 'correct' approaches to interacting with the participants. Thoughts that kept running through my mind were questions such as, 'Would they respond to me? Would they understand what I was saying to them?' Celia echoed similar feelings about her first encounter with the group:

I think in any of those situations where you meet something that's unknown, there's a certain amount of nervousness about how we are going to interact with this group of people. How are we going to be able to understand each other? Our plans, suddenly they all have to change. And that process of ... how do we engage? How are we going to keep them interested? (Celia, 7/4/2015)

On reflecting on my attitudes during the first workshop, it became apparent that I was afraid of exposing my own ignorance and vulnerability, and my limited knowledge interacting with bodies remarkably different from mine. While my female, non-white body is marked as an other in a white male hegemony, my status as researcher and 'non-disabled' weighed down on me. Kupperts (2011)

addresses such anxieties, articulating how being in disability cultural environments 'is a lot of work, trying to think without victimization and exclusion ... and being aware of the many different forces of privilege and power that mark how we got here' (p. 4). The challenges of working in disability environments that Koppers raises certainly presented themselves in this very first workshop; it was as though I tried to overcompensate for my position of privilege by avoiding interaction where possible. Even though I did interact with Mark at the start, it was mainly because Celia had drawn attention to my presence. I realised too that my holding back from interaction and wanting to mainly listen and observe was in part my way of negotiating my role as a researcher in Stronghold.

While the interactions between the Vulcana facilitators (including myself) and the participants appeared tentative at the beginning of the workshop, it became apparent that the participants themselves had already forged a relationship and familiarity prior to Stronghold. I noticed, also, that some of their photographs formed part of the mural on the wall. My observation of the interactions between the participants, and the level of familiarity they shared not only among themselves, but with the space, intensified the level of anxiety I felt as an ethnographic researcher coming into the project. I was aware that this was their space, not mine. Even though I have reconstructed the community hall and its surroundings to capture its homely atmosphere—a stark contrast from the dark and mythical landscape marking the Elephant Man's birth, and the uninviting environment of Great-aunt Nita's house—I knew that I would need to become attuned to the politics governing this particular space.

### **Bodies in commotion/co-motion**

Fine (1994) describes the relationship between researcher and informants as being 'knottily entangled' (p. 72; see also Chapter 3 of this thesis); such knotty entanglements continue to weave their way into discussions on how (different) bodies occupy/move in/fill space. In their text, which explores 'disability as performance across a wide range of meanings' (p. 1), editors Sandahl and Auslander (2005) explain how their use of the term 'commotion' in the book's title holds two meanings: the first—commotion—they argue, implies 'disturbance' and 'unruliness'. The second—co-motion—signifies 'moving

together' (p. 10). I have borrowed this concept in this section, and seek to explore how the work of Stronghold challenged cultural narratives of the disabled body, as well as how stories of 'moving together' emerged through the work. Like vines that entwine each other, they at times seem disruptive and unruly as they pull and strain against each other, causing a commotion; at other times, they can appear to be moving together fluidly, like dancers with different rhythms performing to the same musical score. I examine these stories—these knotty entanglements—by drawing on theories on space, disability and the body.

### Can Your Body Do This?

'We speak of consciousness and its decrees, of the will and of its effects, of the thousand ways of moving the body, of dominating the body and the passions—but we do not even know what a body can do' (Deleuze, 1988, p. 17, on the work of Spinoza)

It is the second week of Stronghold. We start the session by gathering in a circle. Lara introduces the 'check-in' by telling the group, 'Puppeteers need to warm-up their bodies,' and asks that everyone say their name, and perform a little movement. At the word 'movement,' I give an involuntary start. *Would all the participants be able to achieve this*, I wonder. I am a bit sceptical, thinking that Lara might have chosen too difficult—dare I say, *impossible*—a task for the group.

Lara adds, 'It could be anything, like, kick your legs, wiggle your fingers ...' Lara trails off, and turns expectantly towards the circle. I nervously twist my fingers, almost anticipating a lack of response from the group.

One by one, the participants check into the circle. And while not everyone says their name, everyone does indeed perform a movement. To my right, Bryce lifts his hand. Three seats to my left, Winnie decides to clap her feet together, ignoring Robyn's (Winnie's support worker) suggestion to wave her hands.

For a brief period, Mavis doesn't do anything, and I start to think that either she isn't aware that it's her turn, or that she hasn't quite understood the task. We wait, and inside, I'm praying hard, hoping for an offer. Mavis proves my initial doubts wrong. She starts dramatically shaking her head from side to side, explaining to the group that it's

what her friend does 'to get her hair down'. Mark bursts out laughing and Mavis retorts in jest, 'No, no! That's a no-no Marky, you funny old man!'

The check-in is complete. I realise—and am ashamed by—the falsity of my expectations. (FN 2, 25/7/2013)

This incident demonstrates the ways in which people create narratives, not about our own, but about other people's bodies. My reaction to Lara's suggestion for the group to 'do a little movement' in some way parallels Kuppers' (2011) response to a piece of instruction she received at a physically accessible dance workshop: 'Find a strange, twisted shape' (p. 1). In her text (2011), she reflects on her thoughts as the instruction is given: 'On the ground around me are plenty of people who live in twisted bodies, to whom the twist is not strange, but a deeply familiar way of experiencing their bodies' everyday frontality, location, or elevation while standing or sitting' (p. 1). Kuppers contemplates this instruction through the dissociation between the terms 'strange' and 'twisted'; the instruction is jarring for Kuppers because she notes that for many of the dancers in the workshop, their 'twisted' forms are only 'strange' through 'normate-informed eyes' (p. 3; see also Chapter 2). In my case, however, I became jarred by Lara's suggestion because I had been projecting my own knowledge(s) and narratives onto the bodies of the workshop participants, thereby creating—imposing—stories of 'inability'.

My view of bodies through 'normate-informed eyes' arose on another occasion: during a chat with Ricky, he shared how much he loved performing. When I asked him if he was enjoying the workshops as well, Ricky held three fingers up, signalling that he thought they were great. I mirrored his actions, holding my own three fingers up in response. As I held up my fingers, I noticed how crooked they were, and remembered how they had often been the brunt of jokes and a source of amusement among my friends (whom I would suggest also viewed the world with normate-informed eyes). I drew Ricky's attention to their crookedness, expecting the same kind of amused response from him, but he only stared back silently, a slightly confused expression on his face. Kuppers' (2011) reflection on finding a strange and twisted shape found its way suddenly into my consciousness, and I meekly put my hand down: my crooked fingers were not 'strange' in this space. In the space I was in, surrounded by different bodies, not only were other fingers crooked and twisted, but feet and

spines as well—they were a part of the participants' daily lives. I could not tell for certain if Ricky's response was a result of him not finding the crookedness of my fingers strange; his silence, however, forced me to reconsider how I viewed the concept of 'normalcy,' even towards my own body.

The evening after the second workshop, I shared with the Vulcana facilitators my initial reaction to Lara's suggestion of offering a movement, admitting that I was sceptical as to whether or not the participants would be able to contribute. Lara shared her own reflection a few weeks later, which revealed once more the anxieties of creating participatory work with people with disabilities; she acknowledged her limited experience working in this area, and how she was 'taken aback that first week' and expressed a similar concern about some of the activities that she had been offering, particularly where she invited the participants to move their legs. Both Lara's and my own anxieties about the limitations of participants/performers with disabilities reflect the imposition of hegemonic narratives about particular bodies—*Is your body capable of doing this?* Was the language we were using slipping into a medical model of viewing disability? How could our work challenge perceptions about the body when we ourselves faced these insecurities?

As I reflected in the moment following Lara's sharing of her worries with Celia and me, I began to think about my own experience of psychophysical actor training and about placing the consciousness of movement in various parts of my body. I raised this idea with Lara and Celia, wondering if it would be possible to ask the participants to *think* about movement, even if the movement were not visible to the outside eye. Both Lara and Celia pondered over this suggestion, giving non-committal hums in response. Later in the workshop, however, Lara told the group, 'If you can't actually do the warm-up, just imagine that part of your body. So, *I'm thinking about my fingers*, or *I'm thinking about my wrists*, whichever body part you're working on' (FN 7, 29/8/2013). Weeks after this session, Mavis, who would often lament how she wished she could do the movements the facilitators suggested, proclaimed: 'I'm doing it!' Her words were a response to Helen's question if Mavis could move her feet during our warm-up. As I stared at Mavis' toes, it was almost as though I could spy just a fraction of movement. Perhaps the framing of the internal, imaginary movement finally had connected with Mavis (FN 15, 14/11/2013).

This reframing of the language in relation to how we used or moved our bodies became a repeated part of the process, as the work sought to re-examine and challenge perceptions about the body. In her work on dance theatre and intellectual disability, Hickey-Moody (2009a) writes:

[Integrated dance theatre] shifts the understandings of viewing bodies by staging new relationships between dancers and audience members. Dance theatre sources and extends the limits of “what a body can do”, through evaluating the positive and/or negative affects created by movement. (p. 61)

Even though Hickey-Moody examines the idea of extending the limits of what a body can do in relation to dance theatre, I contend that it nonetheless has significance in the field of physical theatre and circus as well, where the body and the somatic impulse is often given privilege. Taking Hickey-Moody's arguments into consideration, it is worthwhile exploring how the work of Stronghold similarly sought to extend the body's limits. In a participatory workshop space, how did/could the process allow these possibilities to emerge?

As the work progressed, I tried to be aware (while simultaneously negotiating my different roles as researcher-ethnographer-co-facilitator) of how I could reframe the language used in the workshop so that the work transgressed the notion of art as therapy, and focused instead on the body as a process of becoming. In one particular exchange with Ricky, I wanted to encourage thinking about a more embodied performance practice. We were in the community hall space and he had just finished announcing a short puppet act; he came up to me after to ask if I thought it had gone alright. When he was making his announcement, Ricky had held the announcer's hoop in front of him, forming a frame around his torso and wheelchair. I noticed how he had remained almost static as he brought the hoop up to his face and proceeded to say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I would like to announce ... the clowns!' It was as though the hoop as a frame imposed some added notion of immobility.

'Do you remember what you said in the announcement?' I ask Ricky, as he wheels himself towards me and looks expectantly at me.

'Oh-oh!' Ricky grins sheepishly, signalling that it's already slipped from his memory.

I pause, considering my response. I don't want to harp on the fact that he can't remember what he said, but rather, on what he did well. 'But it was loud and clear, so that's good,' I say instead. The image of Ricky staying still behind the hoop, however, continues to nag at me, and I add, 'Next time, when you do the announcement, you can use your body a bit more. You can use your hands, not just your voice.' I gesticulate dramatically to demonstrate what I mean.

Ricky continues to look at me, a small smile playing on his lips. He looks half-amused, and half as though he's processing my suggestion. I remember something that he did in the Vulcana space a few weeks earlier, and I draw on that moment. 'You can even do a little spin in your chair, and *then* announce.'

Ricky lights up. 'Hey! That's an idea!'

I'm encouraged by Ricky's enthusiasm and I push a little further. 'When you perform, you have to think about not just using one part of your body, like your voice, but you can use your chair, and your hands, *and* your voice. So, you can do little jumps.' I grab the bottom of my seat and try to make the blue plastic chair bounce up and down with me sitting in it. 'The last time, you did a little jump in your chair, didn't you?'

'Yeah,' Ricky agrees.

'You can use that in your announcement as well. Do a little spin, and then announce the show,' I propose.

Ricky shifts his gaze away from me and ponders quietly.  
(FN 8, 5/9/2013)

In attempting to explore the potential for thinking about—and rethinking—(disabled) bodies, it became necessary to see the body beyond a medical model and knowledge of disability, that is, one that has been merely defined in terms of 'embodied *limits* that differ from a "majoritarian norm"' (Hickey-Moody, 2009a, p. 51, emphasis in original). What were the ways in which the work, to draw once again on Hickey-Moody (2009a), 'imagine[d] fleshy bodies positively' (p. 62)? In trying to get Ricky to think about different ways of moving his body,

to challenge normative narratives of disabled bodies as immobile, stagnant, and incapable, I wanted him to draw on his own personal ways of moving—what I describe as ‘bodily aesthetic’; I also wanted Ricky to find other ways of moving his body, ways which go beyond pedestrian, daily movements.

In order to ‘imagine fleshy bodies positively,’ there was a need to question what the work of Stronghold was attempting to achieve in terms of how it impacted the way(s) in which these bodies were viewed. I acknowledge, here and throughout the thesis, that it was challenging to discuss these concepts with the participants themselves. How could I engage with them in conversations about normative bodies and the potential of transgressing those boundaries? Again, Koppers’ (2011) reflections struck a chord with me; when wondering about the internal thoughts of a collaborator in the Axis Dance workshop, she writes, ‘But I am projecting desires and knowledges onto this woman, and it is only my own mind I have access to: in the end, I have to come back to my own sensation, my own dance’ (p. 3).

The questions that I ask about Stronghold had to be reflexive, explored through my observations of the work, and in discussion with the Vulcana facilitators. In the following narrative extract, which I have reconstructed from Day 7 of the project, I seek to capture moments of how the work inspired playful bodies, and how these playful bodies came into conversation with possibilities of destabilising hegemonic constructions of the disabled body.

### Hula hooping in chairs

I keep staring at the clock as the hands click into place, telling me that it’s already 12:30. It’s time to start and yet most of the participants—with the exception of Winnie and Tina—are still nowhere to be seen. Every time a van or a maxi cab pulls up outside, I peer through the open shutters eagerly, thinking that our participants have finally made it to the Stores Building. Each vehicle that comes and goes makes my heart sink a little further. *When will they get here?* I grit my teeth impatiently, thinking of the time that’s being wasted.

Finally, they arrive. I watch from inside the studio as one by one they make their way into the space. Some—like Bryce—are moving on their own, while others are wheeled in by support workers. As Gillian comes in, Lara tells her that she looks rather summery today. Gillian’s wearing a sleeveless blouse with a string of pearls around her neck,

and a pair of matching earrings. Only her winter UGG boots betray the feeling that summer seems to have arrived early this year. Again, I recall the first time meeting Gillian, and how her eclectic sense of style left an impression on me.

As the space begins to fill with more people, Celia and Lara start handing out hula hoops to the participants. Bryce gets a big black-and-white striped hoop, and he holds it in his hands. I feel the urge to take a photograph of Bryce in this moment. As I walk over to him, Bryce lifts the hoop up and rests it around his neck. I ask if I can take a picture of him performing his hooping trick. He looks up at me and smiles, holding his position as I capture the image with my camera. I press the button on my camera so that it switches to the playback function, and smile to myself as the image comes up on the screen. I show the photograph to Bryce. With tiny movements of his head, Bryce looks at the photograph then back up at me. His eyes light up and he smiles, nodding back at me.

I realise all of a sudden that I could spend the entire session just focused on Bryce, and almost unwillingly, I force myself to turn my attention to the other performers in the room. Next to Bryce, Gwen holds onto a sparkly blue hoop. Although it has been becoming more and more frequent, this is one of those moments where Gwen is smiling and laughing, engaging in play with the objects. With both hands, she begins lifting and lowering the hoop. I quickly snap a picture of her. I move closer to Gwen, turning the screen of my camera so that she can see the picture. She turns her head away sharply, as if refusing to look at it. I recall a 'strategy' I've witnessed before: 'Come on, Gwen, don't pretend to be shy,' I coax teasingly.

I tilt my head to look at Gwen's partially-hidden face, and catch a glimpse of a smile starting to form. Celia comes over, and playfully tries to get Gwen to lift her hoop higher and move it around. 'Can you turn it all the way to the front for me?' Celia invites Gwen into the play. Gwen immediately accepts the invitation, and moves the hoop around. 'Yes! That's great!' Celia calls out. 'And the other side?'

'Noooooooooooo!' Gwen groans, but her cheeky grin betrays her verbal protest. With both hands, she grasps the bottom of the hoop, lifts it above her head, and brings it across her body.

'Ye-es! Ye-es!' Celia drags out her words. She puts her hands close to Gwen's hoop, and a mock-grimace takes

over Celia's face, as though she's assisting Gwen with this heavy task. 'Yes!' Celia calls out again. 'Can you reach Bryce? Bryce, reach it!'

Gwen brings her hoop a fraction closer in Bryce's direction. With small, jerky movements, Bryce reaches out, and his fingertips make a connection with Gwen's hoop.

Bryce brings the focus back to his own hoop. With his right hand, he lifts the hoop to the side of his body. He jiggles it up and down, then brings it closer to him. Bryce lifts the hula hoop horizontally above his head, and then rather swiftly, brings it down so that it comes to rest on his table.

I notice that Bryce's moment of playing seems to ignite a kinaesthetic response in Gillian. She's been resting the hoop on her lap, but now, as she looks over at Bryce, lifts it with her right hand, and holds it up in the air.

For two to three short seconds, both Gillian and Bryce form an aesthetic image of synchronicity and a mirroring of each other's movements. (FN 7, 29/8/2013)

I often questioned why I was drawn to images of participants performing certain actions, such as Bryce raising his arms during a warm-up session, or Bev moving a large polystyrene ball from side to side, or Gillian holding up a hula hoop with one hand. As I reflected on my thoughts, I also had to pay attention to how my stare was constructing the disabled body. Through my normate-informed eyes, as I have found myself guilty of possessing, was I now seeing the disabled body as something wondrous?

I draw upon Barba's (1985) notion of the extra-daily body of the performer in order to help illuminate and explain the power that these images had on those viewing them, and to confront my anxiety of a normative stare. Barba distinguishes between 'one's ordinary physical body and "self," and one's extra-daily body and "self" on the stage' (Zarrilli, 1988, p. 100). According to Barba:

[a]ll actors' extra-daily techniques correspond, from the audience's point of view, to a primary need: the waiting for that moment in which the veil of daily life is torn and the unexpected breaks through. Something known is suddenly revealed as new. (p. 376)

If we were to think of the Stronghold participants as performers engaged in a performance creation process, then my role in the space would often shift to that of being a spectator at times—a witness to the events unfolding. The ‘veil of daily life’ worn by these participants—the *performers* in the space—became torn off when they accepted the invitation(s) to move their bodies in ways they would not normally move them.

The language of ‘what a body can do’ continued to play throughout the process of Stronghold. Following one of the workshops where the participants were engaged in finding movements with hula hoops, large white balloons, and smaller polystyrene balls, the Vulcana facilitators and I reflected on the day’s events, and discussed some key tensions and possibilities about how the work was challenging perceptions about the body and (dis)ability.

Lara: With [some of the participants], it’s not possible [to use the big balloons] because of coordination; with [the] small balls they can ... [but it’s a] different kind of focus exercise.

Celia: It’s just about them holding onto an object, which is okay. They look beautiful.

...

Lara: It was kinda good with the hoops. I decided I’d just do something so that people aren’t just sitting here, just to see ... you know, not everyone can do anything with the hoop [but] you can do something. It’s not all [about] doing something great. It’s about holding it. [Bryce] was just holding it above his head, and [the others] were just holding [it] in different ways. And Gillian! She did this thing where she got [the hula hoop], and she flicked it—it was with one hand—and she flicked it behind her, and it was stuck on her ear, and she was bringing it forward, and it flicked back down. It was like contact juggling, and I was like, aw, that’s just really interesting to watch. If an able-bodied person [had done that], you’d go, yeah whatever, but it was the concentration of her keeping going with what she was doing. Purpose.

Celia: And I think also, it’s just that those kind of activities open up the possibilities for themselves, about how they might ... you know, like, this is normal, this is the status quo (referring to the participants sitting quietly in their wheelchairs), and unless someone challenges them, it just stays there. And you know, you have to really kind of go,

Why *don't* you lift your hands over your head? *Oh! Well ... I would never do this otherwise, but why don't I?*

Lara: Exactly!

Celia: And so then, surely it has repercussions back to when they go to ... You know, the range of movement that ...

Lara: And hopefully it goes into their everyday life: *Why don't I do that thing? Why don't I challenge myself to do that thing?* Whatever 'that thing' is. (WD 7, 29/8/2013)

When I considered how 'commotion' could occur within the context of Stronghold, what emerged was the notion of embodiment, and how embodiment, in turn, could challenge the expectations held of the participants. Whenever the work opened up spaces to challenge the 'status quo'—as Celia suggested—through embodiment, a commotion happened.

#### Day 10: Warming up

We are all seated in our ritual circle. Lara has already begun the warm-ups. I tune out momentarily and look over at the clock by the door. It's already past one o'clock, and only four of the participants are here. *Is this going to be a repeat of last week?* I fret inwardly, remembering how, due to some miscommunication, most of the participants didn't turn up.

'Can you swing your knees, Ricky?' Celia is saying, as my awareness tunes back in to the group. 'Can you get your knees to go from side to side?'

I glance furtively over at Ricky. *Swing your knees?* In my head, I start to doubt Celia's request.

'Yeah. I can do that,' Ricky replies, without hesitation.

'Can ya?' The tone in Celia's voice hints at an element of surprise.

'Mm-hmm,' Ricky responds with an air of nonchalance.

I watch as Ricky pries his knees apart with his hands. I'm captured by the slow, deliberate act of the two knees

moving away from each other, led by the force of the two hands upon them. (FN 10, 10/10/2013)

Comotions can take us by surprise, make us question our own assumptions, inflict upon us—as it had done to me—flashes of embarrassment and guilt. Why was I still being surprised by the participants' ability to perform certain movements? Perhaps I had tried to bury my feelings of self-abnegation, especially after becoming conscious of how I had imposed my narratives on these bodies in the space. Even as I have tried to unwind these knotty entanglements—quickly becoming a recurring motif—they occasionally continue to become ensnarled. Reflecting now on my initial impressions in the workshop, I realise that they carried traces of the medical model of disability, where I was assuming that Ricky's body was in one way 'damaged' and therefore unable to perform a movement I could execute without much effort. As Garland-Thomson (1997) asserts, the disabled body is often viewed 'in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess the natural physical superiority' (p. 19).

When I asked Celia about her own assumptions that she had to work through, she shared:

The big one for me was being able to see past the body that's presented to you, and finding who the person was behind that, and having the time [referring to the first meeting] to learn who these people are. You walk into a room and you think, *Oh my god, how am I going to engage with them, what are we going to do?* To actually discovering who they are, as individuals, what their capacities are to contribute to the process, and what their thoughts might be about this, and how they wanna articulate these thoughts. (Celia, 7/4/2015)

These entanglements we encounter serve as a reminder that the project seeks to constantly challenge assumptions, to find ways to question how one views certain bodies, and to yank these tangles from the ground when they begin to become too embedded and unseen.

### **My space, your space, our space**

Performance is a spatial art form. It is not only durational—specific to its temporal interval, the meeting of spectator and performer—but also specific to its location, and in its use of that location, its meanings, stories, maps,

and networks. This space of performance is not neutral: not only does performance imbue a space with new meanings and create new contracts, but performance also works within the existing contracts that govern any given space prior to its colonization by the performer ... Performance spaces carry meaning not only in their architectural physicality, but, like galleries and museums, also carry meaning in the practices associated with their everyday maintenance, such as their position in the city/rural environment, the network of streets, of corridors, of restroom arrangements, of bus stops and parking facilities. (Kuppers, 2011, p. 36)

Similar to the notion of the body as an unfixed entity, space too is constantly in the 'active state of becoming' (Palmer, 2011, p. 54). As highlighted earlier in the thesis, the Stronghold project evolved in two main spaces: the first phase of the project occurred primarily in the community hall (with the exception of two sessions), while the second took place in the Stores Building of the Brisbane Powerhouse—the 'Vulcana space'. At the beginning of this chapter, I intimated that as an ethnographer entering the community hall space for the first time, I would need to become acquainted with the politics that govern the space. I have thus far discussed the work in relation to how entering the Stronghold space (both physically and metaphorically) invited us to challenge our assumptions about the disabled bodies and the narratives written about them. Here, I probe deeper into the importance of space in feminist theatre, applied performance and disability work, paying attention to how bodies can change and challenge the spaces that they inhabit.

Tait (1994b) argues how '[s]patial location is crucial to the formulation of a performative identity because society orchestrates and structures space to control, contain, exclude and imprison' (p. 132). Both the community hall and the Vulcana space can be viewed as marginal spaces. In a sense, both spaces are on the periphery: the community hall is an old church space, while the Stores Building is secondary to the main Brisbane Powerhouse. Likewise, both the community hall and the Vulcana studio contain 'deviant' bodies: the former, disabled bodies, and the latter, female bodies.

Kuppers (2011) writes about challenging certain spaces. In her work with The Olimpias performance projects, she discusses how the group attempted to 'colonize/habituate ourselves to a place,' through work that 'inserted disabled bodies in spaces not designed for them' (p. 29). I reflect now on the events that

occurred on the second occasion that Stronghold took place in the Vulcana studio (Day 7). We had planned to enter the Visy theatre at the Brisbane Powerhouse where the performance was going to be held, so that the Stronghold participants could explore the space prior to the show. An unfortunate miscommunication, however, meant that we could not access the Visy theatre that day, but we decided nonetheless to visit the Powerhouse, where there was an exhibition titled ‘Spare Parts,’ along with another, ‘Strangely Familiar’. Both dealt with artistic representations of disability; the former ‘[brought] together a diverse range of artists all using pre-loved prosthetics as their canvas,’ while the latter was ‘a photographic investigation of the “unseen” side of the differently-abled story’.<sup>10</sup> My narrative unfolds as a reflection on ‘going out into the space,’ partly in response to Koppers’ notion of colonialising and habituating spaces.

### Our trip to the Powerhouse

One by one, we start moving out of the narrow studio door. I go up behind Howie’s chair, grasp onto the handles, and pop my head next to his.

‘Hi Howie. I’m gonna push you out of the room, okay?’

He turns his head a fraction towards me, and gives a tiny nod of acknowledgement. I find my conversations with him, the brief comments I make, rather stilted. I wonder why I always approach Howie from behind—do I find our face-to-face encounters too confronting? I’ve made these encounters with Bev, Bryce, Gillian, and Mavis—why not with Howie? I quickly brush this thought away. ‘We’ll follow behind Bev,’ I mutter, almost as if to myself, the ends of my sentence trailing off to something barely intelligible.

Howie and I are the last to leave the space. As I walk with him to the service lift around the side of the Stores Building, I feel the muscles in my hands and arms tensing as I struggle to push Howie’s chair along the bumpy ground. Part of my imagination starts to become wild, as I picture a disastrous image of me losing control over Howie’s wheelchair, sending him careening down the path. I grip the handles of the chair even more tightly,

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<sup>10</sup> These descriptions were featured on the postcards used to promote the exhibition. Spare Parts and Strangely Familiar were featured at the Brisbane Powerhouse from 20 August to 15 September 2013.

noticing my brown knuckles turn a muted yellow. I move even more slowly.

'It might be a bit bumpy, Howie,' I caution. 'Are you okay, you alright?' I feel compelled to warn him of every possibility of a change in the path's surface, worried that any sudden movement might cause him anxiety. I breathe a sigh of relief when we finally reach the service lift.

Celia, Bev, Gillian, Cathy, and Carl, an arts worker from the community hall, are already waiting for the lift. It seems to be taking forever. When it finally gets to the ground floor, Cathy, Gillian, and Bryce get in first and make their way to the floor above. When the lift comes back down again, I get in first with Howie, and my attempt is embarrassingly disastrous. I misjudge my turning radius and awkwardly push Howie in at too wide an angle, not leaving enough space for the others to enter. I realise that I'm holding up the lift, but I continue to struggle with the wheelchair. I'm almost afraid to look over at Howie, in case I'm causing him some kind of grief. It's taking me a good half a minute, and finally, Carl notices my failing attempt, and asks if I'd like some help.

'Yes please,' I sigh, grateful for the offer. I throw in a self-deprecating joke, 'I'm not a good driver.'

Celia laughs. 'It's a juggling act,' she says, 'this is its own special juggling act. This is a circus act!'

Carl takes over from me, and expertly manoeuvres Howie into the lift, leaving enough space for everybody/everybody to enter.

Lifts are strange spaces. Perhaps it's the containment or proximity between people, but it feels like one must either choose to remain awkwardly silent, or force some semblance of a conversation.

Carl drums a rhythm on the lift wall, and Celia moans, 'So slow, this!'

The door finally opens, and Carl starts to move out with Bev. I hold the lift for him as he comes back for Howie. Inwardly, I'm relieved that Carl's walking with Howie, and I silently walk with the group as we make our way to the Powerhouse. Cathy, Bryce, and Gillian are a few paces ahead of us, and as the automatic doors to the Powerhouse open, loud music greets us.

I catch up with Bryce and walk alongside him as he drives his motorised wheelchair. His eyes are drawn upwards to the high ceiling, and immediately, I recall how he similarly responded on his first trip to the Vulcana studio.

Just as Bryce and I reach the exhibition space, a large group of teenaged girls in their school uniforms enters. I watch for a reaction from the girls towards Bryce. I'm anticipating curious stares, ready to feel indignation on Bryce's behalf. The girls glance at Bryce, the way they might glance at anyone going past. No curious stares, no hushed whispers, no pointing at 'the man in the wheelchair'. Strangely enough, it's Bryce who holds his stare at the group.

Bryce eventually breaks his gaze and turns left towards the exhibition. I follow behind. The space is long and narrow, with framed photographs along the wall, and sculptures of prosthetic legs on short podiums down the centre. It's not a friendly space for wheelchairs.

As Bryce is trying to navigate his way through the space, he narrowly misses one of the podiums. There's a slight moment of panic as I visualise the art pieces crashing down onto the floor.

'Be careful, Bryce! The art piece is behind!' I warn, the nervousness in my voice clear. Bryce turns his head to make sure that the way is clear, and then backs his chair expertly into an empty space.

One of the photographs catches my eye. It consists of four frames, placed side by side. In the first frame, a woman sits in a wheelchair, with her feet on the footrests. She's looking straight into the camera, her expression almost flat. In the second frame, only the wheelchair remains. The third frame features a wooden, four-legged chair, in the same position as its wheeled counterpart. In the final frame, the same woman sits in the wooden chair, her left leg crossed over her right. She has a slight smile on her face.

'I think that picture's quite interesting. Do you wanna have a look at that one?' I ask Bryce, pointing at the photograph.

'Yes,' Bryce replies, and wheels over. I watch him looking at the picture, unsure what he's thinking. Before we can have a look at the other photographs, Lara calls out for everyone to head back to the studio, and once again, the

flow of bodies moves out of this space and back into the other one. (FN 7, 29/8/2013)

As I reviewed my narrative, I observed how I deliberately chose to write in my expectations of Bryce being stared at, and my surprise when it was he who held his stare instead. I was conscious of the writings within disability and disability performance theory, and how 'people with visible impairments almost always seem to "cause a commotion" in public spaces. An encounter with disability elicits surprise, attracting the attention of curious passersby' (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005, p. 2).

Here I reflect again on Kupperts' (2011) concern for inserting disabled bodies into spaces not designed or meant for them, how this first trip to the Powerhouse and how our bodies moving together in shared spaces offered some insight into concepts of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. Livesey (2010) explains these Deleuzoguattarian notions as 'forces that unmake [deterritorialise] and make [reterritorialize] territories' (p. 18). For instance, the path from the Stores Building to the Powerhouse is one that I have walked numerous times before, but on this occasion, moving together with Howie forced me to reconsider each step, to acknowledge more strongly how the architecture of the spaces we were moving in signified, in some ways, exclusionary tactics. The exhibition at the Powerhouse, although intending to challenge perceptions of disability through the art work, had, in its spatial construct, (im)posed challenges for bodies in wheelchairs to navigate easily. The insertion of seven wheelchairs into the space at once created a 'commotion' in the sense that it required careful acts of negotiation as bodies had to make way for other bodies, taking time away from experiencing the whole exhibition, directed in some way by Lara's instruction for everyone to head back to the Vulcana space. According to Bayliss (2009), 'Deleuze and Guattari exhort us to escape, to deterritorialize' (p. 291). I wondered too, what would have happened if Bryce had indeed knocked over the exhibit, whether that would have been a moment of deterritorialisation of what I considered an ordered striated space, a space that has been 'parcel[led] out' (see Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 420). I wondered if it would have been a way for Bryce to claim this space in his own terms by inserting his body into a space clearly not designed (well) for him.

The relationship between bodies and space(s) is thus an essential aspect of considering the work; where we place ourselves and our work forces us to consider how space impacts bodies and vice versa. The space of the women's circus—not just Vulcana in particular—has often been a site 'established by the movement of the performers' physical bodies as they define their own space inspired by feminist ideas rather than conformity to a fixed identity' (Tait, 1994b, p. 130). The contemporary women's circus space, like that of feminist theatre, has often contested normalisations of the female body and subjectivity, focusing instead on 'the possibility of producing all manner of different representations of female subjectivity' (Tait, 1994b, p. 68). Shands (1999) argues that '[r]est and passivity have traditionally been linked to femininity' (p. 4), and I argue that the physicality of the bodies inhabiting the circus space can disrupt these notions.

But since space is an unfixed identity, it can be transformed when we 'write' on it (see Schechner, 2003, p. 174). Previously, I discussed our journey to the Powerhouse and how we had to negotiate our way in this public sphere. What happens then, when the bodies of people with disabilities enter the circus space of Vulcana? The Stronghold workshops that were run in the Vulcana studio took place immediately after Vulcana's Open Access, a time set aside by the company for both women and men to use the space for independent circus training. During Open Access, the space is populated by 'able' bodies, fit bodies, muscular bodies, bodies that leap, and climb, and hang upside down and balance on one another; the space is populated by 'normative' bodies.

I have been in the Vulcana space many times. I have observed how my body has changed, and taken up the space differently each time. It has been small and inarticulate when I struggled with a particularly difficult routine. It has expanded and filled the space when I carried the full weight of another woman on my shoulders. On the third day of Stronghold, I observed the strong, muscular, able bodies of the Open Access users exit the space, and watched as the space became written upon by Mark.

### Mark becomes airborne

The mats that have been laid on the floor to cushion the impact felt by the Open Access users get rolled up and pushed out of the way. Lara, Bec, Celia, and Helen set up

the space for Stronghold, lowering the aerial apparatus and hanging up a line of hula hoops.

Mark enters the space and stands in the middle. He's keen on the time. It's already 12:30, and no one else has arrived. Mark's early—as usual. He reaches out to Celia and taps her on the shoulder. Celia turns around and Mark points at his wrist, and makes a motion as if to say, 'Where is everyone?'

A few feet away hangs the trapeze. Celia asks Mark if he'd like to have a go on the trapeze swing. Mark looks over at his support worker, Mario, and grabs on to him, as though afraid. Mario holds onto Mark gently, coaxing him closer to the trapeze. Mark starts digging his heels into the floor, but eventually makes his way to the thick crashmat. The thick, black safety mat is something I have never taken for granted, having it save me after a nasty backward fall off the trapeze. But Mark is nervous as he steps onto it. Slowly, cautiously, he puts one foot on at a time. He turns towards Lara and Celia, and taps his shoulders, as if to say, 'Put your hands here'. The women offer a hand each. Mark grabs onto the ropes, and very slowly lowers himself down onto the bar of the trapeze.

Celia and Lara take their hands off, but Mark quickly gestures for them to put them back on. Mark perches nervously on the edge of the bar. 'Can you sit farther back, Mark?' Celia asks. Immediately, he lifts himself up and slides back a little further, getting into a more secured position on the trapeze.

'Can you lift your feet off the mat, Mark?' Celia wonders.

Very slowly, Mark lifts his feet off the mat. He is 'airborne'. Gently, Celia gives Mark a little push and he is off swinging. A loud laugh escapes Mark's throat and he high-fives Mario. (FN 3, 1/8/2013)

When the facilitators and I collaboratively reflected on this moment in the workshop, we considered how the act of Mark getting on the trapeze was one of him 'owning' the moment and his body (Celia, WD 7/8/2013); reflecting on this moment two years after Stronghold, Celia also described it as 'a release' (Celia, 7/4/2015). As Thompson (2009) maintains, such acts are 'no small thing[s],' and these 'must be acknowledged as a "kind of triumph"' (p. 128). It was also critical to consider how Mark's navigation of the space, and his approaching and

mounting of the trapeze, became, in a way, a reterritorialisation of the Vulcana space.

Furthering this argument on the centrality of space in relation to thinking about disability, Sandahl and Auslander (2005) assert that:

At one level, the question of disability is a question of the deployment of bodies in space, the question of which deployments are normative and which are not, together with the articulation and enforcement of norms. At another level, because of their unique cultural and somatic experiences, disabled bodies relate to and define space differently than normative bodies. (p. 9)

It became essential to question how the space—both architectural and metaphorical—impacted the different bodies occupying it. How did Mark's negotiation of the space at that moment, for example, challenge the way we usually think of spaces? How did he 'colonize/habituate [himself] to a place' (Kuppers, 2011, p. 29)? Observing Mark forced me to consider my own assumptions about how different bodies inhabit the space, just as I had been forced to consider my assumptions about the body.

This next vignette is intended to capture the moments that immediately follow Mark's first mounting of the trapeze, to carve out how other bodies moving in and around the space continued to change it. Particularly, I am conscious of Sandahl and Auslander's (2005) idea of the 'unique cultural and somatic experiences' of disabled bodies, and how space thus becomes (re)defined.

After Mark's first go on the trapeze, someone suggests that he puts on a hat on his second round. Mark chooses a glittery silver one and balances it atop his head. He appears more confident on the trapeze swing, and this time around, he keeps insisting that everyone comes over to look at him. I try to quietly make my way over to where I've left my notebook and sit on the floor, eager to write down my observations.

But it's not long before Mark's observant eye spots me.

'Hey!' Mark calls out to me, beckoning with his hand for me to go over and have a look at the photos that Mario has taken of him. With a grin, I jump up off the floor and

jog over to Mark, where I'm enlisted to take more photos of him.

It's almost one o'clock—half an hour since Mark arrived. Lara suggests that Mark take a break, and he and Mario head over to the circle of chairs and sit down. I join them. There is a sliver of natural daylight coming through the space, where one of the back doors has been propped open with a chair.

At five minutes past one, a white van pulls up into the parking lot. The rest have arrived—finally. Mark goes to the side door to have a look. He stands there for a while, but doesn't wait for everyone to exit the van—it's taking a while. Mark comes back to the circle of chairs to sit with Mario and me. He gestures at his wrist again, a sign that he's still concerned about the time.

From my seat, I strain my eyes to see through the grilled windows on the other end of the space, and spy Bryce making his way along the outside. I spring up from my chair and make my way outside, meeting Bryce just as he reaches the main doors of the Stores Building. He expertly makes his way through the doorway, the wheel of his chair narrowly scraping past the edge of the frame.

'Hi Bryce!' I greet, and he looks up at me with a smile. I follow, slightly behind Bryce, as he moves along the short corridor and into the studio. I keep my eyes on Bryce the entire time, and notice how his eyes are immediately drawn towards the ceiling. Bryce drives his chair forwards, and stops just next to the lyra.

'Bryce,' I say, and he jerks his head in my direction. 'Remember last week, when we had the hula hoop, and you got your puppets dancing on it?'

Bryce looks at me and nods.

I pull on the large aerial hoop, feeling the coolness of the metal on my fingertips. 'This is the real thing. It's called a *lyra*.'

Bryce nods again. As Bryce and I sit/stand in the space, more of the participants enter, and Lara calls for everyone to form our check-in circle. It's quickly become our ritual, opening the session with our names, and creating a movement.

Once the check-in is complete, Lara wonders if she should bring the puppets over so that the group can start having a feel of them.

'I might put some music on, and everybody could go around and just take a look around the space,' Helen interjects, and Celia agrees. Then, Helen says loudly to the whole group, 'If we're thinking, maybe we put some music on, and everybody could just go for a bit of a walk around the space, have a look, and touch everything.'

Mavis cuts in. 'I need someone behind me!'

'Yeah, that's alright, I'll make sure that happens,' Helen assures her. 'Anybody else that needs a hand, just let us know. Feel free, as you're moving around, to have a little dance as well, 'cause that's part of our warm-up, we love to do a little bit of dancing in circus!'

Mark's shrill laughter breaks through the space, and he shimmies his shoulders, as though in response to Helen's invitation to dance. Celia turns the music player on, and a loud disco track reverberates through the studio. Almost instantly, the space transforms into one of complete activity. There is a combination of people walking, wheeling, and being wheeled. A distance from me, Bec is moving with Bev, and I see a huge smile on Bev's face as she waves her hands in the air. *I've never seen Bev this engaged in the work, I think. She's dancing.*

Bryce is moving through the space, looking, but not touching anything. I feel this inexplicable urge to connect with him, to get him to connect with the apparatus in the space. 'Bryce, do you want to have a touch of the lyra?' I draw the hoop a bit closer to him. Bryce reaches out with his left hand and holds onto it. I gently release my grip. Almost at the same time, Gillian comes along with Celia, and she reaches out to the lyra as well.

For a brief moment, both Gillian and Bryce simultaneously grasp the hoop with a hand each. From where I'm standing the hoop seems to frame Celia. I hold my camera up and capture the moment.

As I'm reviewing the photo, Eva comes over and has a peek at my camera.

'Are you recording it? Eva asks.

'No just ...' For some strange reason, I find myself struggling to find the words.

'Photos?' Eva completes my sentence.

'Mmm. Do you want me to take one of you doing something?' I ask.

'Um,' Eva thinks. 'Sitting on the seat.' Eva heads over to the chairs by the door and sits down. Her response takes me by surprise, but I take a photo of her nonetheless.

I offer a suggestion. 'Do you want to have a go at sitting on that or something?' I point over at the trapeze.

'Yes!' Eva pipes up, seemingly enthused.

I glance over at the trapeze again, only to realise that the crashmat has been removed. As Eva leaps up off her seat, I quickly say, 'But if you're sitting on that, we need to put a mat under.'

She pauses, and the look on her face signals slight concern. 'It's for all weights, is it?'

I detect the worry in Eva's voice, and I suddenly feel like I've said something wrong, as though I've given Eva the impression that the trapeze wouldn't be able to hold her weight. 'Yeah, yeah, yeah!' I try to sound reassuring. 'Mark went on it just now.'

Eva eyes the trapeze silently, and heads over to it. I take her silence as her way of accepting my explanation. As we walk towards the trapeze, Ricky, wearing a black ringmaster hat, comes alongside me with a bright smile on his face. 'How are ya?' he asks me.

'Good! Are you excited to be in this space?'

Ricky breaks into a wide grin, and lets out a little squeal of excitement. 'Yes I am! I was dreaming about this last night!'

'What were you dreaming about?'

'All of the space!'

'Do you want to hold onto that?' I ask, pointing at the trapeze bar.

'Yes!' Ricky replies with an excited laugh. He reaches out to the trapeze and holds onto it with both hands. I raise my camera to take a photograph, and Ricky offers me a toothy smile.

'Rest your head on it,' I direct, and Ricky pulls the trapeze closer to him, resting his chin on the bar. I snap a picture.

Lara comes by, moving together with Howie. She asks me if I can grab a hat for Howie to put on. I leave Ricky for a moment, going over to the bag of hats, and select one with a piece of red felt trim. I bring the hat over to Howie and Lara. 'Do you like this hat, Howie?' I ask, holding the hat up.

Howie *expresses*, and I struggle to fully understand him. I pause momentarily, then make the decision to place the hat on top of his head. He flinches, and I immediately withdraw. Lara and I exchange a look. She takes the hat from my hands, and places it on Howie's tray table.

'I'll leave it here,' Lara says to Howie, 'and I'm just gonna show you around.'

They move away from me. I spin on my heels and see that Eva still hasn't had a chance to go on the trapeze. 'Celia,' I call out, as she makes her way near me. 'I was wondering if I could pull the mat so that Eva could sit on it.'

'Yeah, yeah, absolutely!' Celia agrees.

I grab the crashmat and drag it under the trapeze. As Eva steps up on it, it becomes clear that the apparatus is too high, and Helen starts to lower it. The moment Eva connects with the trapeze, she gives herself a little kick-off and, like a pendulum, begins swinging back and forth. (FN 3, 1/8/2013)

'Bodies *move*: they walk, crawl, gesture, run, stumble, reach, fall and embrace' (McCormack, 2008, p. 1823, italics in original). Some of the bodies in Stronghold did not—could not—run, or walk, or crawl. They flicked, nodded, grasped, jerked, but, as McCormack states, they *moved*, and in doing so, they 'contribute[d] to the qualities of the spaces in which [they] move[d]' (p. 1823). Helen's call to 'go for a bit of a walk around the space'—to have a *wander*—

effectively transformed the space into one of wonderment. During the session, Liza observed how it was ‘very exciting for them ... touching [the things in the space]’ (FN 3, 1/8/2013).

As bodies move, they generate potential space, recreating the architecture as they navigate through it (see McCormack, 2008, p. 1830). Although McCormack writes within the field of Geography, his ideas on bodies, space, and the politics governing them are useful in thinking about moving bodies in the work of Stronghold. I draw on his discussion of tangoing, and how this dance, born out of Argentina in the late 19th century, has unstable ‘cultural meaning and imagined geographies’ (p. 1826). I think now of Bev, how I witnessed her dancing in the space on the third day of the Stronghold project, and how her body and other dancing/moving bodies in that space on that day have implored me to consider the instability of the circus itself as an imagined geography, where the traditional circus has had a long and complex history with disability (see Adams, 2012; Bogdan, Elks, & Knoll, 2012; Garland-Thomson, 1996). In contemporary performance, however, disabled performers have attempted to disrupt this cultural meaning of the circus by manipulating the frame of the carnival/circus freak show (see Hadley, 2008; also explored in more detail in Chapter 5). Earlier in the chapter, I drew attention to the women’s circus, and how this in turn, too, renegotiated the space of the female body through circus arts. Like the tango explored in McCormack’s (2008) writing, the circus is likewise a ‘migratory and temporary space’ (Tait, 1996, p. 31), constantly shifting and finding itself located in different ‘imagined geographies’.

Returning to the work of Stronghold, the moving bodies occupying the Vulcana circus space on Day 3 opened up further questions about the perception of space created by the images of the bodies in them. The trapeze hanging from the ceiling was approached and engaged with differently by different bodies. Tait (1994b) describes her observations of the solo trapeze and woman aerialist, how she ‘transforms the feminine into a vernacular language of strength with the toes pointed, thighs together, arms evenly positioned, hugging the ropes, fingers closed’ (p. 84).<sup>11</sup> I cannot help but recall the images I witnessed in the room: Mark’s nervous approach of the trapeze and the cautious lifting of his feet off the mat; Eva’s sense of abandonment

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Celia was one of the aerialists in the performance that Tait writes about in this article.

once she discovered the trapeze could indeed hold her weight; Ricky's chin resting on the trapeze bar, a smile forming on his lips; Gillian and Bryce's simultaneous grasping of the lyra. For Celia, the image that has remained with her was that of Bev reaching out to the lyra:

That absolute delight—the delight that she felt when she held on to the lyra. That gave her something, that meant something to her that was beyond expectations about what that space meant to her ... There was something different that happened in that space for her. Was it the feel of it [the lyra]? Was it the ... I don't know what it was, but it was something extraordinary. (Celia, 7/4/2015)

These images remind us how bodies moving together in a 'relational time space ... affords the opportunity for modes of corporeal inventiveness,' and how not just physical transformation occurs, but how the *imaginative* quality of the space becomes changed as well (McCormack 2008, pp. 1823 & 1827). We continue to imagine—though never fully knowing—what a body can do.

Considering the impact of space became essential in the work of Stronghold, and led to an understanding of how space created (or inhibited) possibilities for the participants. The Vulcana facilitators and I met a week after Day 3 to reflect on the Stronghold process so far, and shared our observations on the relationship between space and the work happening in it.

Celia: I was thinking about that thing, of just the difference between being in the [Vulcana] studio space versus being at the community hall space ... and in the community hall space, they do a lot of ... looks like they do art and craft work, which is very stationary. [They] sit in the same space every day, which means, *I move this much and then I come back and wait some more* ... And we've been stuck in that pattern in the community hall. You know, they're coming in, starts in a circle, and stays that way for the whole thing ... it's such a small space ...

...

Bec: I thought it was quite interesting watching Bryce, and Gillian, and they were turning [their chairs around in circles], and then Ricky came in and did something as well.

Celia: And that was the one thing I wanted to see, out of last week, to see if that ... what could happen in the space ... and what it would look like if they could turn their chairs, which was great.

...

Natalie: How do we make the community hall space like the circus space?

Celia: Well, I don't think we have to worry too much because it's there for a particular purpose. And then, we stop at the community hall space, and we move to the [Vulcana] studio.

Lara: I think so too ... I personally think the community hall space is a very good, controlled, contained space. The focus is down like this [channels both hands in a parallel lines]. Whereas, the other one, everyone looks up, and it's like, *woah*. So it's a very different feeling to what you want when you're making, or when you're devising small stuff. (WD 7/8/2013)

My desire to 'make the community hall space like the circus space' stemmed from my observations of how the different bodies became 'alive' in the Vulcana studio. I had been moved by the energies in the space, by visuals of suspended bodies on the trapeze, by Ricky's leaping in his wheelchair, and the imagined construction of Bryce and Gillian's accidental/incidental wheelchair dance, something I had not witnessed myself, but that was relayed by Bec. I wondered how this similar energy and vitality could be translated to the community hall space, but Celia's and Lara's comments pointed towards the specific function of the community hall space. Even though they did acknowledge how the Vulcana space opened up possibilities for more embodiment, it seemed that there was a necessary difference between the two spaces in order to achieve certain purposes of the work at various stages.

After the first session in the Vulcana space in the third week, Stronghold moved back into the community hall space in the fourth. This concept of 'difference' emerged strongly, which in turn led to tensions being revealed. In the following narrative, I reflect on the politics of space, and how this revelation affected personal feelings of belonging and a 'right' to being there.

## Balloons are not welcome here

I arrive at the community hall at 11:45am, three quarters of an hour early for the workshop. I consider sitting on the couch and reflecting on the notes I've written, but as I pass the doorway, I see that the hall is rather full; loud music is blasting through the space, and the people in it seem to be engaged in some kind of activity. I spot Gwen near the couch, and for a split second, I think that she looks at me as I'm passing the doorway. I can't say for sure. She's never really acknowledged me in the previous sessions. I walk over to the flight of steps where Eva and I sat two weeks earlier. She had brought me there to chat, as she smoked her cigarette, telling me that she likes sitting by the flowers. I realise that I hadn't noticed the flowers before Eva told me about them.

The sun is beating down on me, so I move to another spot. I come across another flight of steps, this time in the shade. I move to sit down, but I am overwhelmed by a sudden feeling that I shouldn't be here. *This isn't my space*, I tell myself. I feel like an outsider, so I move yet again, taking myself out of the grounds and go to sit by the main road, on a low, stone wall.

Just a little past midday, Lara strolls along, making her way up the path into the grounds. She sees me and gives a little wave. I wave back, pause for a bit, then pick up my things and trail after her. I catch up with her as she's standing at the doorway of the community hall, and she tells me that she might go inside and ask if she can start setting up the space. I watch her as she disappears into the kitchen/dining/activity area, still standing obediently by the doorway, as if afraid to go inside uninvited.

As Lara emerges from the kitchen/dining/activity area, she signals to me, saying that she's going to inflate the balloons she's brought on the stage. I traipse after her, dumping my bag on the floor, near a stack of chairs. We settle on the right-hand side of the stage, and Lara pulls out a small blue box-like machine with little funnels. Deftly, Lara pulls a shiny white balloon from the packet, and places the mouth over one of the funnels. In less than five seconds, the balloon inflates to a decent size. I give it a try, but find that I'm not as adept as Lara. We sit, silently inflating the balloons and securing them with tiny plastic clips. Some of the balloons start floating away, and I run over to stop one from going backstage. As I'm trying to usher the runaway balloon back to where Lara is, it brushes against the backdrop and explodes with a loud

bang, with the rubber snapping at my fingers. I flinch slightly, feeling the sting of rubber against flesh.

We throw the inflated balloons down from the stage onto the floor, and they make little bounces as they come in contact with the wood. Liza arrives, greeting Gwen cheerfully as she comes into the hall. Gwen has been sitting near the kitchen door, watching—eyeing—Lara and I as we were blowing up the balloons. Now, she greets Liza in return, a grin splashed across her face, her body rocking forwards and backwards in what I read to be excitement.

Lara and I make our way off the stage and go over to Liza. Celia arrives shortly after and laments that she's forgotten to bring the ABBA music. It dawns on me that I volunteered to bring along some tunes, and that I've forgotten them as well. As we're bemoaning the forgotten music, a support walker comes in from the kitchen area with Bev. Bev catches my eye, smiles and wiggles her fingers in hello. I smile back, feeling a warmth in my face.

A loud explosion suddenly interrupts this moment between Bev and me. Bev's eyes widen and her smile twists into a look of shock. One of the balloons has just burst. Liza asks Bev if she's alright, adding in a gentle voice, 'The sound's given you a little fright?'

Celia quickly goes over to the sea of balloons and starts undoing the clips to let some of the air out. As she's doing so, a woman—the same one who finished my sentence for me on the first day—walks brusquely out of the kitchen area, and speaks rather sternly to us. She informs us that the sound of balloons bursting can set some of the participants off because they have epilepsy. Another man whom I've not seen before comes out as well, and offers some advice about moving the balloons away from the sunlit areas on the wooden floor.

Still kneeling, Celia explains that she's trying to let some of the air out of the balloons so that they wouldn't be as large, but the woman is adamant that *any* balloon bursting can potentially cause harm.

'Do any of *our* participants have epilepsy?' Lara asks.

The woman tells Lara that it doesn't matter because the others in the kitchen area will still be able to hear the noise. Liza wonders if it would be possible to have the

doors closed, but the woman remains firm. Lara and Celia relent, agreeing that it's best to do away with the balloons.

I stand there, silently watching this interplay of power. As Lara and Celia accede to the established rules of this space, I join them in deflating the balloons one by one. We huddle on the floor, our heads bowed, untying each balloon and watching it deflate. With a sigh, Lara says quietly to us, 'That's the whole workshop then.' (FN 4, 8/8/2013)

The epigraph citing Koppers (2011) at the beginning of this section draws attention to the importance of 'contracts' within a particular space. The incident involving the balloons in the community hall signified how existing contracts in this particular space were non-negotiable. It also highlighted the kinds of tensions that can occur when an 'other' enters the space: how do 'outsiders,' such as Lara, Celia, and I, learn about these often implicit contracts? In this instance, it was realised through trial and error, and thankfully our 'errors' had caused minimal damage. We had tried to establish new contracts in the space, that is, to negotiate creating separate spaces for the participants in Stronghold in order for them to experience the aesthetic process of working with the balloons; this did, however, reveal the political implications of working in somebody else's space. As Wilkie (2002) writes in her categorisation of rules relating to space, there are 'explicit rules stated by the controllers of the site' as well as 'borrowed codes that are brought to bear on particular types of place' (p. 248). It became obvious that this meant that we had to respect the decisions of the staff, and prioritise the well-being of *all* the members of the community hall.

The original idea to use balloons in the workshop sprang from a post-workshop discussion after Day 3, when Helen suggested having the participants try to keep balloons up in the air as a warm-up activity, and also from Lara's idea of introducing the character of a balloon seller as part of the performance. As Lara, Celia, and I discussed at the end of the Day 4 workshop possible alternatives to balloons, the conversation unearthed, once again, this sense of vulnerability in a different—a foreign—space:

'I might just call Shirley and ask her about the balloon business. If not, we'll just have to go somewhere else,' Lara's voice trails on in a sigh.

Celia's tone sounds slightly more hopeful. 'Well, we could see if we can find some kind of balls that are just not ... in the habit of bursting or whatever—just to have a play with a big object.'

'Well, I'll see what I can find. Like, the latex ones are a stronger material—they're much more expensive than the little ones that I've got, but, we just have to wait and see. Anyway, it's a learning lesson,' Lara punctuates the end with a laugh.

...

'And the fact that we don't know much about the different people, we don't know what their issues are,' Celia adds. (WD 4, 8/8/2013).

When Celia and I recalled this incident, Celia revealed how at that time, she was glad that we were going to have time to work in the Vulcana studio, and that she felt 'like we were being tolerated [in the community hall space] or something'. She mentioned that we were 'guest artists to that space' (Celia, 7/4/2015), echoing Thompson's (2008) reminder that 'we are only ever invited by the prison governor, the development agency or the refugee group into their setting' (p. 20). In the case of Stronghold, we had been invited by the PO and the staff of the community hall.

### **The Ethnographer's Body in Space**

As the vulnerability—the admittance of not knowing—of the Vulcana facilitators became exposed through the politics of space, I began to question further the concept of 'right'. Earlier in this chapter, I pointed to Tait's (1994b) argument about how spaces are socially constructed in order to exert dominance; I also wove in Koppers' (2011) reflection on her own work, how it sought to '*insert* [emphasis added] disabled bodies in spaces not designed for them' (p. 29).

Insert. Inhabit. Intrude. Again, these terms play on one another, forcing me to consider the notion of outsider-insider, a continuum where 'there is a good bit of slippage and fluidity between [the] two states' (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 405). As I read my vignette 'Balloons are not welcome here' once again, it strikes me how my sense of feeling unwelcome as I sat on the steps turned into a kind of premonition of what was to come, that is, the tension caused by the

balloons. Who are the insiders and outsiders in different spaces, and how do they navigate and negotiate their roles and status? My role as an ethnographer in Vulcana's work complicated these feelings even further, and I often contended with experiencing multiple levels of 'outsiderness'. Here, I recall the first night when I arrived at the Wizard of Auslan workshop:

### Entering the Deaf space

The night air is cool and crisp as I arrive at the Stores Building just before 6 o'clock, the time when the workshops have been scheduled to start. My conscience chastises me for not arriving earlier, especially it being Day 1 of the workshop, but I've been made privy to the concept of 'Deaf time,' when I briefly sat in for the circus workshops for Deaf women a year ago. I start to feel a twang of guilt—not so much for not arriving earlier, but rather for the *reason* why I've chosen to do so: I'm hesitant about trying to communicate with some of the Deaf women. I'm embarrassed that I don't know enough Auslan to hold a proper conversation or account for my presence. 'I research Vulcana ... P-H-D' is all I can sign by way of explanation. Doesn't make for much interesting conversation.

As I enter the main door, I see a few women already waiting in the corridor. I know that there's a Circus Essentials<sup>12</sup> class starting tonight as well, so it wouldn't be wrong for me to assume that these women are here for that. But as I scan their faces, I recognise Belinda, who took part in the workshops last August. Belinda is a mother to a Deaf child. I remember her clearly, her tall frame exuding an air of confidence and assertion I find hard to forget. I'm somewhat relieved—glad even—to see her. Even though Belinda intimidates me a little, she is still a familiar face, and her being a hearing woman means that, hopefully, she could be a bridge between the two cultures.

Belinda is signing with the others. *Okay, I think, so they are all likely to be part of Wizard of Auslan rather than the Circus Essentials class.* I approach the group tentatively. I feel the corners of my mouth, which has formed into what I hope looks like a pleasant smile, twitching. My nerves seem to be kicking in. 'Hi,' I both sign and voice.

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<sup>12</sup> The Circus Essentials class was where I had my very first circus experience, as written in the Introduction to this thesis.

One of the women, with short, salt-and-pepper hair, signs and voices back, 'I think I've seen you before.'

*Shit. How do I sign, 'No I don't think so'?*

Then, as I'm floundering, Belinda comes to my rescue. 'She came to some of the workshops last year,' Belinda signs and voices. The other woman, whose name I would later find out to be Lynda, replies that she wasn't involved last year, and a look crosses her face, as if she's still trying to figure out where she might have met me.

I just smile politely. Then, the door to the larger studio opens and I see Ronnie. I go over, eager to let her know I'm here, and to find some comfort in another familiar face. As I enter the studio, I see two young women with Ronnie, and she introduces me to them, explaining that I'm doing my PhD research. 'Oh, that's good,' the woman with the short, boyishly-cut hair voices.

Ronnie tells me that we'll be using the smaller studio for the Wizard of Auslan workshop and asks if I can help with the setting up of the space. I begin to roll one of the smaller mats out the door and towards the other studio, the mild musky scent of the mat tickling my nose as it drags along the floor. I get to the other door and push the mat through. There is a table set up against the wall to the left of the doorway, with bowls of chips and a plate of cut fruit resting on top. I feel my mouth water slightly at the sight of the food, but I keep myself busy, helping to roll out and adjust the mats, and when that is done, rummage aimlessly in my bag—anything to appear occupied. I realise and acknowledge how uncomfortable I'm feeling, a complete stranger in this space.

As more women enter the space, I watch from the corner as they greet each other enthusiastically in Auslan, and exchange warm hugs. *It really is a community*, I think to myself, my thoughts laced with a strange feeling of envy, *this is a sisterhood to which I have no access.* (Wiz, 9/7/2012)

Throughout my involvement in the Wizard of Auslan project, I became aware of how my body—my non-signing, hearing body—occupied the space differently, and how that meant that I was often excluded, especially from the intimate spaces of conversations. As we gathered around the snack table during breaks, I would stand, a part of and apart from the group of Deaf women, as they chatted in Auslan. I lingered, silently, my hands inarticulate, a polite smile

plastered on my face, as I pretended to be part of the conversation. Being a hearing researcher in a primarily Deaf space exposed the 'strangeness' of my body, and this feeling is effectively captured by Gobo (2008), who describes the process of 'knowing' in ethnography as such:

To know things we use our five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. But these senses do not acquire knowledge separately, each on its own account. Rather, during the knowledge-gathering process, they constantly interact with each other. In this interaction, however, it may happen that one sense acts as the pivot for the others, rather like the playmaker in a basketball team. Indeed, we can imagine the five senses as five basketball players who alternate in the role of pivot but always need the co-operation of all the others when they occupy that role. (p. 4)

For Gobo (2008), 'knowing' in ethnographic research is something that emerges from the interplay of the five senses, where one mode—mainly 'observation'—is dominant. But *my* body often felt deficient in ways, my desire to gather knowledge hampered by the limitations imposed on my non-signing body. In the context of Wizard of Auslan, I struggled to gain a heightened awareness of my body, to find a more attuned way of making sense of the interactions in this space. Thomas and Ahmed (2004) usefully argue that in ethnography, 'the researcher's body is immersed in the field and is simultaneously outside the research (by means of its strangeness and lack of knowledge) and in the research (by means of its physical presence)' (p. 3). This line of reasoning held great relevance to how I negotiated my role as a hearing researcher in a primarily Deaf space. The strangeness of my body was amplified, and I had to understand the limitations of my sense of sight/observation as the 'pivotal cognitive mode' (Gobo, 2008, p. 4). As much as I could witness the happenings in the field, observe the patterns of grouping, and the embodied responses during certain activities, I lacked access into the depth of communication between the participants because I was not versed in Auslan. Further, previous literature has asserted that 'ethnography is more about listening than observing' (Cohen & Rapport, cited in Forsey, 2010, p. 67). In this respect, my ability to 'listen actively' was also hindered. For what I could hear I relied mainly on the Auslan interpreters present at the workshops and

rehearsals, and certainly, not all conversations (especially the private ones) were interpreted.

Even though there were four other hearing women involved in the project—two of whom had little knowledge of Auslan—my observations were that they were still able to gain a greater sense of ‘insiderness,’ although not always completely. The two women who had very little Auslan, Roz and Shannon, were skilled aerialists who had volunteered to be a part of the performance project, and thus worked closely with the Deaf women in creating and rehearsing for the show. The vulnerability I experienced as a (hearing) researcher in the space became heightened when I was asked, for example, not to participate in one of the exercises so that the group could have a better sense of working together, or when I was excluded, albeit unintentionally, from e-mails sent to the group. Working as an ethnographer, especially in the early stages of my research into Vulcana’s work, required a constant negotiation of my position in the overall frame of the project.

Now I stand, back again, in the space of Stronghold. My involvement in the Wizard of Auslan provided me with crucial learning points about developing a sense of trust and confidence among the women at Vulcana. And while my position as ethnographer in Vulcana’s work has shifted closer to the ‘insider’ pole of the continuum, the feelings of vulnerability associated with feelings of ‘outsiderness’ continue to linger in other ways. Insert. Inhabit. Intrude. These three words echo hauntingly throughout the work; they pertain not only to the work of applied performance practitioners or to my role as ethnographer, but to disability culture as a whole. Koppers’ (2011) desire for her group to insert themselves into normative spaces, for example, seems to speak to the need to reclaim spaces denied them, but what does ‘insertion’ mean for us, who come from an assumed position of ‘power’? What does it mean for non-disabled theatre facilitators to create work in a space of disability? These questions will be further explored in the next chapter, where I consider and discuss concepts of power, ethics, and representation in the work of Stronghold.

## Chapter 5: ARTICULATIONS OF ETHICS, POWER, AND REPRESENTATION—TENSIONS IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS

'All community performance practitioners have to find answers to questions about agency, impact, collaboration, access and engagement' (Kuppers & Robertson, 2007, p. 12).

### The time I was misunderstood ...

Jo, the guest artist, gathers the women and signs/speaks. 'Face your partner. Tell her a story about being misunderstood—just a very small story. I want you to focus on the feeling. Also, it's important for the listener to just listen and accept the story.'

The women begin to pair up. I desperately want to understand the stories of the Deaf women, especially Sally and Julie, who seem to be engaged in a passionate exchange of anecdotes. I linger on the periphery, hesitant to penetrate what has already become a sacred space between the couples. I catch snippets of Roz's story. Hers is the only voice loud enough for me to hear.

After a few minutes, Jo calls for everyone to stop. I sit, obediently, on the edge of the mat, a place where I'm often locating myself in this process. I watch the scene unfold before me, almost like observing warriors in training. The women form a line at the far end of the mat. They face me, preparing to march forward. There is a quivering tension in the air, as the women try to sense one another, waiting for the right moment to begin. All of a sudden, the focus is broken. Sally has just stumbled ahead of the others. The others burst into laughter, and Sally signs, 'It's so slow waiting.'

Jo reminds the group of the complicité that she had been working on earlier with them, and brings them back into focus. She adds, 'Alright. I'll assign each one of you with a number. I will hold up a number with my fingers, and if that's your number, you will start telling your story. Repeat your story when you finish. Just tell your story from the line here, without walking forward.'

The women begin again. One by one—as Jo holds a number up—they retell their stories, until it becomes a symphony of Auslan and spoken English. But I sense a hesitation within the group. Some are unsure if they

should continue repeating their story, or whether to stop once they are done. The bodies are hesitant, meek, inward looking. *They are withholding potential power*, I think to myself. I realise now that my body is inching forward, silently willing the women to assume that power.

Jo wants them to perform the exercise again. She picks up four chairs and places them along the sides of the mat. 'These chairs are here to mark increasing tension points and speeds. Build your energy. At the last chair, I want you to hit the peak and stop.' She then demonstrates. Jo stands at the head of the mat, tall and commanding. Even though Jo is Deaf, she explains to the group that she feels more confident being oral, and so will vocalise her story. In my mind, I immediately begin to wonder how that's received by the other Deaf women. I scan their faces. No tell-tale sign of betrayal escapes. Is it even betrayal to these women, or am I purely imposing my own beliefs, my own narrative? *Isn't it Jo's right to decide how she wishes to use her own body, her own voice?*

'The time I was misunderstood ...' Jo channels her voice through the space. She strides towards me, her voice growing louder with each approaching step, until I can't decipher word from phrase, phrase from sentence. But the message of her story comes crashing through. The intensity Jo holds in her voice, and the tremors that punctuate her body, reveal a story of frustration, of the barriers to understanding between the worlds of the Deaf and the hearing.

Jo signals to the women to stand ready in a line, to begin once more. On the other side of the mat, Ronnie and Celia, like me, are silent observers to the scene unfolding. As the women begin, my attention is immediately drawn to the five Deaf women. Their bodies seem to grow larger with each step, their arms and hands sign with more and more immediacy. I shift my attention towards the three hearing women, tuning my ears to try to take in their stories. Their voices have faded into the background. I look at their faces—there is a sense of discomfort in them, almost like an acute sense of self-consciousness of being exposed. Their moving bodies are stiff, their voices almost disembodied. Their arms hang limply at their side, a stark contrast to the powerful movements of the Deaf women. (Wiz, 10/9/2012)

I constructed this narrative after one of the Wizard of Auslan creative development sessions, recalling how affected I was by the line of women moving towards me. As I have mentioned previously, moments from Wizard of

Auslan find their way into the research story, opening up points for my reflection on Stronghold; they filter in and bear weight in this chapter even more strongly because I often found myself comparing what I was observing in Stronghold to the questions regarding power and ownership raised in Wizard of Auslan. In the preceding vignette—although I was unaware of it at the time I had originally written it—I find flickers of thoughts, observations, moments, significant to my discussion on ethics, power, and representation in relation to the Stronghold project. Jo is a Deaf artist/performer whom Vulcana had invited to facilitate a couple of the Wizard of Auslan workshops, and I was struck by her ease and energy running the session with a group of women she had just met for the first time. Months after the Wizard of Auslan performance, I spoke to Celia, and she reflected:

Jo was able to lead them places and they would automatically follow whatever she said, because she was Deaf, which was really fabulous to witness—the importance of having Deaf facilitators ... They were very happy to follow whatever abstract ideas that she suggested. Yeah, it was insightful. (Celia, 6/3/2013)

When in conversation with some of the women (both Deaf and hearing) after the Wizard of Auslan project, I felt that there were mixed feelings about ownership over the work. Racheal said she believed that the Deaf participants gained a sense of ownership and that Vulcana encouraged the women to develop the story (Racheal, 1/3/2013); Roz shared how the strongest aspect was the way in which Vulcana worked, 'let[ting] stuff come to the fore' as opposed to imposing ideas (Roz, 28/2/2013).

Bee's reflection on ownership took a different perspective. She said:

I think the concepts were really driven by the ideas of the participants. Ownership though? I don't think 'ownership' would really fit in there. Because ... the reason I say that, is because I don't think the people who were involved knew enough to take ownership. They weren't skilled, or knowledgeable enough around how to do what needed to be done. (Bee, 14/3/2013)

Bee did add a caveat:

Yup, it was [directed], but there was a very good level of engagement though, with participants. (Bee, 14/3/2013)

Some of Lynda's thoughts paralleled Bee's:

I think at times, they [Vulcana] were trying to ... 'Come on, take the lead' a bit more than we had, especially initially. I think we were a bit like, inexperienced, not knowing what to expect, because we'd never actually been like, performers before. We were just there to learn how to do skills. Now we're being asked to help put together a performance. (Lynda, 22/1/2013)

As Lynda shared this with me, I realised that she equated 'ownership' with the idea of 'know-how'—knowing how to cohesively put a performance together. I probed further, asking her about Vulcana's approach of devising work based on stories and experiences particular to the Deaf women and community. Lynda replied:

It was hard for them, I think, to lead, because they didn't know what we had experienced, what we could contribute. And they put out a few suggestions, perhaps like what negative experiences ... I think sometimes we have to be careful not to be *too* negative; we need to reinsure that we do enable positive things ... Maybe for that [an idea that emerged during the process] to work better in the future, get someone like Sally to be the facilitator, rather than a hearing person—even though Bec and the others were really good in what they were trying to do. But perhaps to foster—like what you were referring to—a sense of ownership and being brave enough to put forward ... having a facilitator like Sally would be helpful. (Lynda, 22/1/2013)

One of the moments I remember most strongly from the post-show debrief with the women involved in Wizard of Auslan was when Sally shared openly that she felt the performance was 'half-owned' (Wiz, 5/11/2012). The women's reflections on ownership of the work—and thereby the relation to power and ethics—continued to resound throughout Stronghold. There were many moments where I felt doubtful and anxious, questioning whether ownership could really occur, and if it did, how to identify it. Did these tensions have an adverse impact on the power relations in the space?

This chapter focuses on the challenges and tensions that emerged in the Stronghold process. Snyder-Young (2013) writes how:

institutional agendas have a great deal of impact on the work artists do. When artists cannot explain their work to those institutional authorities, there is the danger of losing the resources required to make the work. As a result, artists are often reluctant to ask hard questions to which they, their participants, and their funders may not like the answers. (p. 6)

These sentiments echo Thompson's (2005); although his concerns are situated within the context of applied performance and communities affected by war, he nonetheless makes a valuable statement about the need to ask 'tough questions,' especially about the ethics of practice (p. 40). As Snyder-Young (2013, p. 11) has argued, I am not trying to be cynical of the work. Rather, I write this chapter to ask these difficult but necessary questions (see also Chapter 3), not only about the way in which the work was created, but also as a means to reflect on my own shifting roles as ethnographer and co-creator.

In exploring the tensions in the creative process of Stronghold, I draw on the 'moments of encounter' (Thompson, 2005, p. 4) that forced me to step back from the work and assume a more critical position. I rely also on the many conversations between the Vulcana women and myself in order to reflect the shared (and sometimes differing) experiences and attitudes of the facilitators as we engaged in a project in which we constantly felt doubtful. Like Thompson (2005), I too 'give no guidelines' (p. 40); inspired by his notion of the 'stammering moment' (2009, p. 133), I similarly consider these moments of tension as acts of 'stammering,' believing that it is only when we acknowledge our own anxieties and uncertainties that we can, as Kuppers (2011) says, 'forgiv[e] others and oneself when it is not yet working well' (p. 4).

I frame this chapter by drawing on some key questions Preston (2009b) poses in her introduction to the ethics of representation in applied performance, using them as points of departure:

- How appropriate is our preferred aesthetic for engaging with the politics of speaking *with*, *for* or *about* communities?
- How do we deal with our moral and/or political tensions at the heart of the stories and texts that are created?

- How can we work sensitively, and create a genuine climate of dialogue and reciprocity?
- How are issues of voice, authority and ownership reconciled in the process of constructing narratives and representations that result?
- How will representations that have been created impact in diverse, unpredictable and political contexts? (p. 68, emphasis in original)

These questions are not completely discrete from one another; often, they overlap and feed into each other. I admit that tackling the work in light of these questions is a mammoth task, one worthy of an entire thesis in itself, which goes beyond the scope of what I have set out to do. In this respect I can only offer glimpses into Stronghold, offering merely a sample of the work. It is also necessary for me to negotiate some of these questions in order to comment specifically on my observations of the process of creating Stronghold. For each of these questions, I examine particular segments of Stronghold and conversations with facilitators that revealed the tensions. To inform my understanding and analysis of the events unfolding in the Stronghold project, I draw mainly on critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 1988, 1992) and feminist scholarship (Alcoff, 1991-1992; hooks, 1989), as well as disability studies (Conroy, 2009; Gabel, 2002; Hadley, 2008). In doing so, I am interested in examining where the convergences and divergences between these fields lie.

### **Puppetry, physical theatre, and circus—a promising or problematic aesthetic?**

In her article on the use of playback theatre with refugee and asylum seekers in Australia, Dennis (2007) questions the appropriateness of using playback theatre as way to ‘create an experience embodying the principles of multiculturalism so that refugee participants might feel welcomed’ (p. 358). Much of her concern has to do with the ‘certain conditions that guide the telling of the personal story’ in playback theatre, and how this creates a conflict within a refugee context, which is ‘structured around the repeated requirement to tell within a culture of institutional disbelief’ (pp. 360-361).

Like Dennis (2007), I too wondered about the specific aesthetic frame in which the work was done. I returned to my reflections during the Wizard of Auslan project, questioning whether the physical nature of the circus supported

effectively the storytelling of the Deaf women. Were the visual and physical languages of the circus necessarily the best 'fit'? I had assumed that would be the case, considering the 'inherent theatricality' and visual-spatial quality of sign language (see Rose, 1997, p. 339). But Celia recounted to me the challenge of presenting abstract ideas to the Deaf women, and the tensions that emerged from the way that Vulcana usually creates work:

The only connections they [the Deaf community] had to an organisation that might be able to support them, was Vulcana. For Vulcana, because of the kind of style of the work, and because it's circus ... have a particular style that we work in. And also because Sally was interested in incorporating circus in it, which already means that it's kinda slightly abstracted ... So there's sometimes a disconnect, between the need for absolute storytelling, and the circus abstraction. And it took a while to arrive there. (Celia, 6/3/2013)

Negotiations had to be made between the aesthetic frame of Vulcana's work and the needs put forth by the Deaf women. One of the meeting points was that the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, was used as a frame for exploring Deaf issues and experiences. In our conversation, Celia mentioned how there was a 'contract' with Sally—'this is what everybody came to do: learn circus, do Wizard of Auslan, talk about Deafness' (Celia, 6/3/2013).

Finding these meeting points in Wizard of Auslan seemed to me a relatively smooth process, considering Vulcana's long history of working with Deaf women in Brisbane. But in Stronghold, these relations were only in their infancy—what did working in Vulcana's 'preferred aesthetic' mean for people with disabilities, and specifically, *our* participants with disabilities? To return to Preston's (2009b) question, how appropriate is the aesthetic in speaking with communities? Further, the consideration of the aesthetic frame within disability and disability arts adds another layer of significance. Conroy (2009) stresses that 'Disability arts are intrinsically political, but also aesthetically challenging. Aesthetics is founded upon the assumption that we all experience the world through the senses—and the body acts as a conceptual glue here—in broadly the same way' (p. 11).

We return to the importance of the body once more. In my last chapter, I examined how bodies change the spaces they inhabit and vice versa, identifying the juxtaposition between the able, fit, normative bodies of Vulcana's

Open Access users and the extraordinary bodies of Stronghold participants. In discussing aesthetics in relation to Stronghold, I first examine it by borrowing from Stoddart's (2000) idea of the circus aesthetics as equivalent to 'circus energy,' especially a sense of danger and 'explor[ing] the limitations of the human body' (p. 4). The idea of exploring the limitations of the human body holds significance within the field of disability; drawing on her examination of the Paralympic Opening Ceremony in 2012, Carter (2013) argues how the 'introduction of disabled people into aerial arts can ... challenge a uniform corporeality' (p. 85).

At the beginning of the Stronghold project, I anticipated that the project would incorporate some form of aerial work with the participants. Some of the participants had been involved in a smaller-scale circus project with Vulcana the year before, and during our initial meeting with the PO, Shirley told us that they had 'loved getting airborne' (PO, 17/6/2013). Those participants, however, did not use wheelchairs, and Celia wondered if it would be possible for our participants who *were* wheelchair users to be able to be airborne as well. There was no definite answer to Celia's question at the meeting, except that Bec stressed the importance of ensuring that the participants have a 'really good experience' (PO, 17/6/2013). But Celia's question immediately planted in my mind images of different bodies in flight, what Carter (2013) describes as 'multiple corporealities' which challenge 'corporeal exclusivity' (p. 83). Even before I met the participants, I grew excited thinking about this prospect, imagining how Stronghold would contribute to the disruption of the able-bodied domain of aerial arts.

Perhaps that is the danger of anticipation, that it creates certain expectations that cannot be fulfilled in reality. One of the key observations that was detailed in the previous chapter was how the participants engaged in their own way(s) with the different aerial apparatus. After one of the workshops, Liza told me how initially many of the participants who used wheelchairs did not want to participate in the circus workshops because 'they were thinking they were going to be doing trapezes and just [be] up in the air,' and that 'Ricky was absolutely adamant he wasn't going to come' (WD 15, 14/11/2013).

The images from our third workshop remain vivid: Mark's and Eva's beautiful images of flight and abandonment on the trapeze; Ricky's face lighting up when he grasped the bar of the trapeze and rested his face on it; Gillian and

Bryce's synchronised reaching for the lyra. I do not want to undermine the power in those moments, for they were palpable and real, but I do need to address how the facilitators saw this as a potential tension.

Lara: So, it's like, what's the point of having the aerial apparatus if it's only for able-bodied people, or if it's only ...

Bec: Only gonna contrast that as well. If it's gonna highlight that, rather.

Cathy: And the thought of the swing, was that ...

Celia: That was the idea, and that's what we were using the trapeze as, the idea of a swing. That's what Lara was talking about—is there actually any point in having that circus equipment? What's great is what it does to them in the space, and how they all want to hold that thing [the apparatus]. (WD 12/9/2013)

What emerged from that discussion was that even though the images of some of the (more able-bodied) participants in flight were powerful, the Vulcana facilitators felt that using the aerial apparatus in the performance would only serve to amplify disability and exclude some of the participants. In a later conversation about this decision, Celia expressed how part of the tension involved what the aerial apparatus would represent in the actual performance:

I can see now, what would be the point? Like, what is [the aerial apparatus] representing in the story we're telling? We couldn't find what the meaning of that was. The aerial capacity, the experience of that, [for them] personally, is one thing, but in a performance context, how the hell did it fit into what we found ourselves arriving at? (Celia, 7/4/2015)

Earlier I mentioned how many of the participants were uncertain about being involved in circus; Liza elaborated that what 'worked so well' was that the Stronghold project was structured as a puppetry workshop in its first phase, leading then into the circus elements (WD 15, 14/11/2013). At our post-performance meeting, Bec confirmed that this structure was given consideration before the implementation of the project, noting that the participants had 'really enjoyed' previous puppetry workshops they had done, and that 'there was a lot

of engagement and enthusiasm there' (WD 4/12/2013). The use of puppetry was a way in which the play could be framed for the participants, and it was important for the Stronghold project that puppetry was included in the first phase of the project because it connected strongly with the participants' past experiences.

Even so, Shirley advised us at our initial meeting that some of the feedback she received regarding the previous puppetry workshop with the participants was too 'Sesame Street-ish'—they were 'not age-appropriate,' as Shirley had phrased it. Lara, who had earlier in the meeting considered creating what she referred to as a 'traditional' circus through the use of sock puppets, agreed that it was important to reframe the way puppetry was used so that it was seen out of the frame of 'child's play,' and moved instead into an 'adult' realm. Celia reflected after the meeting that Shirley's reminder about the stereotype attached to puppets and children was similar to that of people with disabilities.

Throughout the work, this concern became a kind of stammering that played constantly. After the first workshop, when Lara had brought in the materials to create the rod puppets, and I had seen the beginnings of what was being formed, I wrote in my reflective notes:

In relation to the creation of the clown puppets, how can Lara (and Celia and Bec) ensure that the puppets don't end up looking Sesame Street-ish? That was the issue raised at the pre-workshop meeting. It'll be interesting to see further how the participants continue to engage with their puppets. (PR 1, 18/7/2013)

Reflecting now on my preliminary thoughts, admittedly I was apprehensive about the aesthetics of the puppets. Created with thin wooden rods for bodies, the puppets' heads were white polystyrene balls, with goggly eyes pasted on. I was afraid we were perpetuating the stereotype. How different would *these* puppets be from the former Sesame Street-type puppets that had been criticised, and which Lara and Celia were consciously trying to steer away from? I did not share these feelings with the Vulcana facilitators and it was not until a couple of years after the workshop that I felt comfortable doing so. When I told Celia about my initial scepticism, she clarified that Shirley's advice was in

response to the earlier performance being a retelling of a ‘children’s story’ (Celia, 7/4/2015).

Notwithstanding, I felt, at that point in time, that my role should not involve my commenting on Lara’s expertise as a puppeteer, and that her choice of materials for the puppets and their aesthetic construction was not for me to critique. In addition, I had not seen the ‘Sesame Street-ish’ puppets in question, and thus had no basis for comparison. *Perhaps these puppets were much better*, I thought, clinging on to some kind of hope that they were.

At that same (first) workshop, Lara had also brought along pictures of circuses and clowns; during the break, she circulated a book about puppets around the world. As Lara showed the book around to the participants, she commented, ‘It’s my daughter’s book, so it’s a bit for children, but I just brought it because it’s got nice photos of puppets in there’ (FN 1, 18/7/2013). I picked up on Lara’s caveat, writing in my field note aside how I felt that Lara was being conscious not to patronise the participants.

It appeared that Lara harboured the same concerns as I did. At one of our discussions, she shared:

[I] took on board that meeting we had right at the beginning, where someone ... had apparently said the last session [before Stronghold] had been a bit too Sesame Street, and it was just always right there in my thoughts, like, *Am I being too childish with this?* (Lara, WD 12/9/2013)

Here, my examination of aesthetics begins to reflect what Prendergast and Saxton (2009) refer to as the artistry of the work (p. 191). When I initially considered the notion of aesthetics in relation to Stronghold, I was slightly uneasy about the ‘simpleness’ (not so much simplicity) of the puppets, that the aesthetic *qualities* of the puppets created would perpetuate rather than challenge the status quo. Further, Bass (1999) contemplates how a puppet ‘is a reflection of the human state of being, a bizarre mirror, an “other”’ (p. 35). It is fitting that in my attempt to write about performance work with a group of people often considered an ‘other’ that I am questioning an aesthetic form that has the idea of ‘manipulation’ at its core—Bass wonders if some theorists mean that actors lose their ‘freedom of choice [and] will’ when they (the theorists) ‘talk

about using the actor as a puppet' (p. 36). This tension is echoed in Lara's comment during our post-performance meeting:

I didn't wanna say it, but I felt ... not to be derogatory, but as a puppeteer, a puppeteer gives their direction to the puppet, which then makes the audience look at the puppet. So I felt like my job was to look at Gwen, and if anyone looked at me, then they'd use the direction of [my] eyes [to divert their attention to Gwen]. So I used that theory of puppetry. (WD 4/12/2013)

Bass' (1999) however argues that 'the puppet is a creation of the human hand, so we look for the context for which it was made' (p. 36). The tensions and stammering that I encountered with regard to how I initially perceived the puppets need to be reconsidered in light of the context of Stronghold. Our participants had created these puppets. They had chosen the rods which they would hold on to; they had selected the material with which to dress their puppets; Eva had christened her puppet George. These moments should not be dismissed in spite of the disquiet we may feel when we question whether or not we are making the right choices in our work. Here, I weave in Lara's words again, continuing from where I quoted her on her concerns about the 'childishness' of what she was offering to the participants:

*Am I being too childish with this?* And then I just kept having to say, No, to act is to do. And it's all about play, and this is about *creating* ... Adults can have free play; it's not about being childish. (WD 12/9/2013)

### **Dealing with moral and political tensions—acknowledging competing objectives**

In one way, Lara's stammering about 'being childish' can be understood as dealing with a moral obligation to not present the participants in a way that would demean them, especially since this piece of advice was flagged by the PO. For Preston (2009b), the moral and political tensions relate to dealing with the stories that emerge during the applied performance work; in examining Stronghold, I posit that they need to also address the (competing) objectives of the participants, facilitators, and, in many cases, the funding bodies. Snyder-

Young (2013) reminds us of 'the impact of institutional agendas on applied theatre work' and how they 'do not come without strings' (p. 38). She states that

[w]hile NGOs and funders of applied theatre programs may use discourses of "empowerment" and "agency", participants and facilitators must work within the (explicit or implicit) parameters of funding institutions' agendas. The privilege of the powerful trumps the agency of the participants. (pp. 36-37)

What were the 'contracts'—the strings—that existed in Stronghold? One significant 'condition' of the contract, for example, was that there would be a performance outcome at the end of the 4 months of workshops. Less than halfway through the entire process, both Liza and Lara expressed the importance of the process of creating work together:

Liza: For them, [the important thing is] their individual growth, I suppose, you could say. Just those things in itself, not the end product or anything. They're all part of ... the process.

Lara: Part of me, I just go, I don't really care about an end product. It's what they're doing on the way. (WD 6, 22/8/2013)

But the agreement of a performance hung heavily, a reminder that there was another expectation to fulfil. McKean (2006), who writes within the context of theatre in prisons, rightfully acknowledges how '[t]he tension between process-based work and theatre production is not always easy to reconcile' (p. 315). Ricky and Eva's constant questions about the performance cemented our obligations, and in what may seem like a contradictory statement, Liza later reinforced that 'performing ... is what the whole workshops are about. The whole series is about performance' (WD 11, 17/10/2013).

When I began my research on Vulcana's work, I was driven by the desire to investigate how Vulcana could empower the communities they worked with (see Introduction). As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, many of the women from the Wizard of Auslan project whom I had spoken to (both Deaf and hearing) communicated to me feelings of empowerment that they experienced through the process, even though the ways in which they defined empowerment differed. I was thus keen to discover how this concept of empowerment could

be explored and negotiated with people with disabilities in Stronghold. One of the statements of Vulcana's community work is to 'provide tools for social change' (Vulcana Women's Circus, 2011) and Celia reinforced the position that 'ultimately everything we do is about making change' (WD 7/8/2013).

But it started becoming evident during Stronghold that perhaps we were not always speaking the same language. Liza asked me after one of the earlier workshops whether, through my research, I was noticing any 'benefits' in the participants. In the previous chapter, I raised the question whether the language we were using at times unintentionally framed the work within a medical discourse of disability. Liza's question unnerved me slightly, and I spoke to her about it the following week. I told her that I had struggled with trying to quantify 'benefits' the way she had seemed to mean them, and that her asking me that question forced me to better articulate what my own objectives were. Part of our conversation happened as follows:

Natalie: It was interesting, your question that you asked me last week about seeing benefits ... I'm actually looking at how the facilitators create the work ...

Liza: Yes!

Natalie: Rather than sort of a health ...

Liza: Yes, rather than the participants, you're looking at it more from a ...

Natalie: An interactive, collaborative approach.

Liza: A reflection on process.

Natalie: And the challenges the facilitators themselves go through, so, [it's about] the journey of the facilitators creating the work with different participants. (WD 6, 22/8/2013)

Even though I had outlined in my project information sheet that I wanted to understand the processes of creating work in communities, it seemed that it was being misunderstood. Perhaps this is not uncommon in participatory work with people with disabilities, that the perception of research involving them is necessarily focused on health and well-being, that 'benefits' to the participants

is often framed as therapeutic. Lev-Aladgem (2010) too writes about this conflicting relationship between empowerment and welfare. She acknowledges how:

the empowering process interfaces theatre with welfare—two different ‘fields’ involved in theatre in co-communities which approach the theatre project from two different ideological perspectives. The welfare bodies initiate and finance the project from a liberal, ‘good-will’ perspective that represents the dominant world-view, and the social workers in most cases assume that the aim of the project is to integrate, rehabilitate, educate and cultivate the co-community. Theatre practitioners, on the other hand, generally approach the project from a more radical, left-wing point of view that encourages the co-community to engage with theatre as a consciousness-raiser and symbolic weapon with which to stimulate social change. (p. 12)

This argument almost sets up a binary between these two perspectives. The question is, however, whether the facilitators—theatre practitioners—always come from this ‘radical’ position. From past conversations with Celia, I knew of her involvement in political street theatre in Australia in the late 1970s. She had also spoken to me about Party Line, a company that she had started with a group of other women in the 1990s, which explored feminist ideas—specifically the French feminists—to create physical theatre. We had not talked about any sort of political agenda before Stronghold commenced, but I was confident that Celia would be entering the project with her own political, feminist ideologies. After the first session, however, I was left feeling concerned about the work, and I wrote in my reflective journal that ‘I think I wasn’t fully prepared to understand the depth and complexity of working with people with disabilities ... This further adds to the challenge, not just for the facilitators, but for myself as ethnographer’ (PR 1, 18/7/2013). I sent an email to the Vulcana facilitators a few days after our first session, and one of the biggest questions I posed was:

Can our work be more than just a ‘leisurely activity’? Do we have a larger social/political agenda? And what is it? (personal communication, 22/7/2013)

This question was fuelled very much by Koppers’ (2011) writing about the ‘painfulness of community performance’ (p. 6) as well as her reflection on how

'our work is not located within art therapy, changing ourselves, but within political labor, changing ourselves *and* our world' (p. 72, italics in original).

The concept of political labour continued to resound, and in Day 3 of my reflective notes, I wrote,

What is our political labour? What are we trying to achieve, politically, with this work? What message are we trying to get across? Is there one that is guiding the work? Even if we might not necessarily be doing "disability activism", I don't believe any work is politically neutral. (PR 3, 1/8/2013)

Again, I decided to share my thoughts with the Vulcana facilitators, and in a follow-up email, I wrote:

What are we trying to achieve, politically, with this work? What message (about bodies, disability, etc.) are we trying to get across, even if no one sees it? Is there one that's informing the work that we do? Is it implicit?

This question, for me, ties in with Vulcana's own ideologies and philosophies, and its feminist roots—how are we challenging cultural constructs of certain types of bodies? ... Does the work go beyond accommodation and enter instead into artful engagement? (personal communication, 2/8/2013)

When the Vulcana women and I met to discuss the issues we were dealing with in Stronghold, we pondered over the question that I had put forth:

Celia: Yes, I think that question of yours [Natalie] is critical, like, what do we think we're doing ...what do we want to achieve out of it, but what do we think they [the participants] want to achieve out of it ...

Lara: I think we can overthink it though. I think that most of them are familiar with the PO, and they are open enough to say, *I really like creative experiences and I'm gonna do this. I don't necessarily know what journey I'm gonna go in there, but I'm trusting the organisations that are gonna take me there ...*

Celia: Yeah, except we're hoping to do something different to what we saw the last time. I'm aware that I have this drive to produce something that's slightly more embodied than what we saw previously ... so this idea that it *will* be

more embodied, and that they *will* have slightly more control over it, but I don't know if that's really real, or whether they will be led through a process that [only] *looks* that that ... So I mean, we *can* overthink it, but it's also important to keep a grip on, for me ... and we're forcing ourselves to view them [the participants] differently, that's the process that we're going through.(WD 7/8/2013)

Celia's desire to facilitate a more embodied performance was in response to the previous puppet show in which she had seen some of the Stronghold performers involved. I found the contrasting responses between Lara and Celia in this instance significant, because they conveyed how facilitators working on the same project can sometimes have different motivations. The notion of 'trust' is a complex one; in what circumstances does trust mean relinquishing one's autonomy in favour of the 'authority of art-form expertise [of the artistic facilitators]' (Sinclair, 2004, p. 33)?

In one of our e-mail exchanges months after the close of the Stronghold project, Celia shared with me how her 'primary aim was to have the workshop participants acknowledged as owners of their own work'. She then stated that:

I think we all come into whatever we are doing with our ideologies in place ... I don't assume that the participants share my ideologies but they come into a space that has been shaped by those ideologies and in that shape certain things get expressed and enacted and can be questioned and my personal hope is that change can be effected. (personal communication, 27/5/2014)

Celia's comment on not assuming that the participants shared her ideologies was an echo of an earlier thought she shared, that for some of the participants, Stronghold may just 'be something to do on a Thursday' (WD 7/8/2013). When I spoke to Celia more than a year after the Stronghold project, she stressed how she has always 'resist[ed] the idea of therapy, because we're dealing with making art' (Celia, 7/4/2015).

Much applied performance work deals with larger objectives of disrupting hegemonic narratives (see Nicholson, 2005, p. 63). Earlier, I highlighted how institutional agendas can often come into conflict with the beliefs of the theatre facilitators. However, what can be said of conflicting/competing objectives of facilitators and workshop participants? In McKean's (2006) work on devising performance in a women's prison, she discusses how their project 'sought to

explore ... issues that participants felt were relevant to themselves' (p. 314). I thought back again on Wizard of Auslan, remembering how the Deaf women expressed their desire to create a performance that would explore the experiences of being Deaf in a mainstream hearing world [especially the sense of isolation] and their feelings of being lost and invisible' (Lazaroo, 2014, p. 246). Again, I was afflicted by my doubts in Stronghold. The participants were not explicitly 'exploring issues'; they were not, as Boal (1979) would proclaim, engaging in a 'rehearsal for revolution' (p. 122). Did this realisation cause further ruptures in the process? Could Stronghold still be political if participants and facilitators do not share the same [politically-driven] ideologies? I do not purport to have the answers. Yet, I am aware that this bears weight on how facilitators create work, and the struggle that exists for facilitators to not lose sight of their fundamental (political) principles. Celia's words echoed my sentiments:

That (not sharing the same political ideologies) doesn't change how I come into the process, because I am a facilitator. So I have to engage with the politics of how I engage. I can only do it according to the rules that we decide together. If they just wanna have fun, that's their prerogative—to just have fun through that process. But how I engage with them is where the political labour is. (Celia, 7/4/2015)

### **Creating dialogue and reciprocity; working sensitively**

Since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having taken on responsibilities in his regard ... Responsibility is the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity ... Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. (Levinas, 1985, p. 96)

I concluded the previous section by raising a question to which I could provide no answers. Here, I begin with Levinas' (1985) quotation about responsibility, specifically with regard to 'the other'. Is it our (applied performance facilitators') responsibility to imbue the work created with a political undertone? Does it matter that this intention is not always communicated or discussed with the participants? While I am confident that the Vulcana facilitators in no way enforced their political ideologies on the Stronghold participants, this act of

stammering continued to haunt me. I posed this question when I presented at the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) conference in 2014, eliciting the views of other applied performance and disability performance scholars/practitioners. One of the responses was that it is crucial to examine what happens in the preparatory stages of the applied performance work, and what the hopes of both facilitators and participants may be. In light of this response, it pointed once again to the tensions of structural power—who decides what is best for the project?

Unpacking the conflict between competing objectives relates to the important notion of dialogue, and links strongly to the following question posted by Sandahl and Auslander (2005): ‘What collaborative strategies have disabled and nondisabled artists used to bridge the gap between their experiences?’ (p. 2). Very early in the Stronghold project, I asked the facilitators: ‘How can we as facilitators, work in a dialogic process of creating work?’ (personal communication, 22/7/2013). I was grappling with trying to understand and witness how collaboration was occurring in the first Stronghold workshop. Even after the second session, I expressed my concerns: ‘In creating this work, can it be more collaborative?’ (personal communication, 29/7/2013).

Celia’s reflection on her initial ideas on how to proceed with the work demonstrates the tensions between wanting to foster a ‘genuine climate of dialogue and reciprocity’ (Preston, 2009b, p. 68) and finding obstacles in that process:

I came into the project with the inspiration of Back to Back [theatre company]. But that is a different beast as it is a professional ensemble and they do work in partnership with non-disabled performers. But the relationship between performers has equal weight, equal story telling power and time ... I wanted to see how we could achieve this ... But I didn’t account for the level of disability in the group and the level of limited movement, limited speech and limited expectation of their capacity to participate. But all through the process and striving to understand how we could achieve this, I don’t think it was necessarily very different from other processes except that the power relationship between the non-disabled bodies and the disabled bodies was so stark. (personal communication, 27/5/2014)

Earlier in the thesis, I discussed the politics of disability and the contentions about who has the right to research and write about disability. Celia was very aware of the power relationships that existed in the Stronghold space. In considering Preston's (2009b) question about fostering a climate of dialogue and reciprocity, I felt that it was important to also examine further Vulcana's working methodologies in light of how certain ideas were framed, and how these at times created tensions regarding authority.

### Move like a snake, Eva

Michael Jackson's voice blasts over the speakers, filling the space. Eva arrives just as we're following Ricky's lead in moving through the space. Ricky seems to be taking great pleasure in taking the group on a wild ride. With Winnie, Celia, Tina, and I in a line behind him, Ricky leads the movement by holding a large red hula hoop and 'steering' it like the steering wheel of a bus. Lara is directly behind Ricky and moving with him; he makes us go forwards and backwards, turn corners, go fast, and slow down.

As the rhythm changes, we all end up bumping into the stack of crash mats at the back of the Vulcana studio. This change indicates that maybe a new leader is needed, and Celia calls out, 'Eva, wanna lead?'

'Okay!' Eva replies without hesitation. She moves to the front of the line and holds her hoop straight out in front of her. Eva marches through the space and a succession of stamping feet follows in sync behind her. Ricky, too, follows in his wheelchair.

'What else can you do with the hoop?' Celia asks, while we're marching. Eva moves her hoop up and down, keeping her stamping rhythm going. With Eva in the lead, we march in a circle and Lara tries to get Eva to break the floor pattern that she's created.

'Let's do more than a circle,' Lara suggests. 'Make a big wiggly snake, Eva!'

We still go around in a circle.

Celia tries, 'Take us in a snake shape!'

'Big wiggly snake,' adds Lara.

The circle continues.

Celia tries again to clarify the idea. 'So we're not following circles. Where else does a snake go? It wiggles all over the place!'

Eva wiggles her hoop. 'Like this?'

'But with your body,' Celia explains. 'Make a big pattern on the floor with your walking. So maybe you take us into that corner,' Celia points. 'That corner.'

'So I move like a snake?' Eva checks. I hint some confusion in Eva's voice.

'Yeah!' says Celia.

'Alright,' Eva says, and holds her hoop up. 'And hold this as well?'

'Can you do both?' Celia asks, and I get the impression that Celia wants to make sure that Eva's not being overwhelmed by what's just been asked of her.

'Yes.' Eva's voice emerges, but softly. She takes a step forward, then freezes. 'I can't do it. No.' Her voice this time is strong, a definite expression of inability.

'Yes, you can!' Celia insists.

Within seconds, Eva swerves and moves off the circle path that she's been leading us on. 'Like that?'

Simultaneous, Celia and I cry out, 'Yeah!'

Eva stops and turns, as if to assure herself that she's done it 'correctly'. Now that Eva has got the idea, Celia tries to layer more suggestions on how to move like a snake along the ground. 'What pattern does a snake make across the floor? It goes like this, doesn't it?' Celia moves her arm in a wave-like motion, mimicking a snake gliding.

'Yes,' Eva agrees.

'So do you wanna do that across the floor?'

'Yes.'

'With your feet, imagine you can see a wiggly line, all the way down the room.' Celia stands next to Eva, and with her arm, projects an imaginary snake's path to the far wall. 'How would your feet follow it?' As if to emphasise that it's the floor pattern that Celia is after, she says, 'So you don't have to be a snake. Imagine the snake is going through the sand. It's gone through the sand, and you're gonna follow its tracks. Yeah?'

Eva gazes out the far end of the studio. As I look at her, I imagine her imagining a snake slithering across the floor. Eva leads us off again. Holding the hoop in front of her, she takes us across the room. 'It feels like I'm driving a bus!' Eva exclaims.

'Where else is the snake going?' Celia calls out, perhaps for good measure. 'Follow the snake tracks!'

'Snakes go like this!' Eva wiggles. All of a sudden, she swerves to the left and cuts through the space between Winnie and Tina, who've been following behind. Ironically, Eva's moving through the space like a snake throws Tina off, and the 'snake' gets tangled in itself. (FN 10, 10/10/2013)

At the time, it seemed like an eternity for Eva to comprehend Celia and Lara's idea of 'moving through the space like a snake,' when in actuality, it took about two minutes. This tension does make us question how we construct knowledge, and how we impose our knowledge(s) onto others. When we reflected on this moment after the session, Celia remarked how she found this tension 'fascinating':

Celia: Some of the things we think are interesting, it'll just go totally over their heads ... Oh, and just always, the difference, who gets abstraction, and who doesn't. And how concrete does it have to be? What was fascinating—the metaphor, 'travel like a snake'. That was so fantastic, that was so fantastic.

(Celia recites what is perhaps her projection of Eva's frame of mind.) *What do you mean travel like a snake? Okay, travel on the path of a snake. What? On? The snake? Where is the snake? On the snake?*

Wow, trying to get that. Oh, it was fascinating. She could not understand what the hell I was asking her.

Lara: That's right. And the circle was getting smaller and smaller and really constricted, and ...

Natalie: And that moment where she [Eva] cut through Tina and went that way (I gesture with my arm)! And then Tina got lost trying to figure out which way ...

Celia: Yeah! But I thought that was really ... an insight into how to actually ...

Natalie: Frame ...

Celia: Frame ... you know, get them to break out of this [pattern]. How do you get them to do that? (WD 10, 10/10/2013)

The tensions we encountered through this process parallel Nellhaus and Haedicke's (2001) arguments that:

[i]nherent in the interaction between these groups [such as facilitators and participants] is a dynamic of authority based on knowledge and/or expertise ... [which demands] that the stance, assumptions, motivations of those involved, the discourse surrounding the event, and the relationships between groups and between language and issues of knowledge and power must be constantly interrogated. (p. 15)

There seemed to be a sense of 'dynamic of authority' between Eva and the Vulcana facilitators. The perceptions of what it meant to 'move like a snake' differed from one 'group' to another, yet both contained elements of 'truth' and 'expertise'. On the other hand, it could be said that the dynamic of authority was shifted in a way that it fulfilled what was intended by the facilitators.

Perry (2011) considers the parallel between devised theatre and critical pedagogy, where she describes devised theatre as a 'plurality of processes of experimentation and sets of creative strategies' (p. 64). While I would not necessarily define the work of Stronghold as 'devised theatre,' I find the notion of experimentation and creative strategy useful. The strategies employed by the Vulcana facilitators to engage the performers/participants in reciprocal and creative exploration relate back to how knowledge is constructed, and as such, the Stronghold workshops can be considered to be pedagogical. Freire (1996) states that '[k]nowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention,

through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world and with each other' (p. 53). We had assumed our 'knowledge' was the same as Eva's, and yet, through this incident we came to learn that it was not. Freire warns that '[i]nstead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits' (p. 53); the students are merely passive vessels. How much of our 'instruction' to the Stronghold participants could be described by Freire as a 'depositing' of knowledge? Even though some of the instructions were framed as an exploration (*What pattern* does a snake make? *Where else* is the snake going?), there was a clear idea in facilitators' minds that they wanted Eva to perform. But Eva's different kind of knowing afforded us the opportunity to reflect on and 're-invent'—as Freire suggests—our own knowledge.

Throughout Stronghold, however, it was sometimes easy to slip into that act of 'depositing' rather than promoting a mutual exchange. The following segments occurred chronologically on Days 13, 15, and 16 of the project. I recount moments between Bryce, Bev, and me, which raise questions not only about fostering dialogue and reciprocity in the *work created*, but also serve as a reflection on how we interact with one another in the shared space.

#### Day 13: Natalie's litany

'So can you make your puppets look at each other?

Can your puppets nod?

Maybe our puppets are sleeping!

So when the music comes on, your puppets can wake up from sleep.

Who does your puppet look at? Maybe your puppets can look at each other first?

Can your puppets then look up?'

I only pause when I realise how much I've been trying to lead the play. I change my tactic, saying instead, 'What next? Bryce, do you want to show me where your puppet looks next?' (FN 13, 31/10/2013)

I realised that when I began adopting a co-facilitator role, the language I used was very directorial and almost unwavering in my delivery. When I was writing up my field notes, I became embarrassed when I reviewed what seemed to be a torrent of instructions for Bryce and Bev in our scene together, masked as helpful suggestions and attempts at elicitation. I had hoped that through my 'suggestions,' Bryce and Bev would respond to my offers in a more playful and engaged manner.

What later added to my moment of realisation was when Ricky approached me after the session and told me, 'You were fantastic out there.' My initial response to Ricky's praise was a heartfelt, 'thank you,' after which followed a twang of guilt because I had not intended to be the focus in the piece. Early in the process, I had asked Lara and Celia how we could ensure that there was a more dialogic process in creating work, and yet, I found myself constantly slipping. As I moved in and out of reflexive states, I grappled with feelings of frustration and helplessness.

#### Day 15: More directing

It is two weeks until the performance. Lara calls for the group to move into our places on stage. The first 'scene' is the four puppet acts. Bev isn't here today, so it's just Bryce and I who perform together with our Anything Puppets. I walk over to my position and look over at Bryce, who's in the middle of the space.

'Bryce,' I call over, and he gives a little jerk, turning to look at me. 'We're over here.' I tap the ground with my toe. As Bryce begins to move, I call out again, 'Bryce, can you come over here? We're performing here.' I rest my hand on my hip as I wait for him to move into position. He looks at me, smiles, and moves the lever on the control box of his wheelchair. His chair moves forward, but then he stops midway.

I admit that I'm confused as to why Bryce has stopped. I feel a bit lost and helpless, standing and staring at Bryce with a frozen smile. The looks that Bryce is giving me—his knowing smile and bright eyes—suggest to me that he's fully aware of my asking him to move to where I'm standing.

I walk over to Bryce and touch his arm. 'Bryce, can I get you to move your chair there, where you'll perform?' To

my ears, my voice sounds gentle, reassuring. I move back to our designated position. 'This will be your spot here,' I reiterate.

Again, Bryce begins to move towards me. Then he goes backwards and forwards, making little turns. 'You have to move your chair to where I'm standing, Bryce.' My voice breaks into a slight laugh at the end. An uncomfortable laugh. Bryce smiles back as if to say, *I know where you want me to go. I'm getting there.*

Finally Bryce makes his way to our spot. Now I just need him to move a little more to the edge, and turn to face the audience at an angle. 'Just a little more,' I encourage. I resist the urge to grab onto the handles of Bryce's wheelchair and turn him myself. Instead, I almost micro-manage Bryce's moving of his wheelchair.

'A little bit more.

Forward, just a little bit.

A little bit more.

Forward.

And a little bit more forward.

Perfect.'

I look up and see Robyn smiling at me. I wonder what she's thinking, having witnessed me trying to direct Bryce. I brush this thought quickly away and kneel beside Bryce so that we can get started on our puppet act. (FN 15, 14/11/2013)

In an aside that I wrote in my field notes after the session, I wondered if I had been 'badgering' Bryce with my constant calling out of directions for him to take his place on stage. When we discussed this moment after the workshop, Lara mentioned that she too had noticed that Bryce was taking longer than usual to move into position. She said:

I was trying to work out, was Bryce not getting the directive? And I think maybe ... we just have to really talk to him before we go for it. (WD 15, 14/11/2013)

Looking over my field notes and reflections, what I found about this exchange between Lara and me was that nothing was mentioned about the way I had been directing Bryce's movement. In our desire to create and rehearse for a performance, I had not responded sensitively to Bryce's embodied ways of knowing in the world.

The following week would reveal further stammerings in my interactions with the participants. Bev had returned to the workshop and she, Bryce, and I were getting ready to do a run of our puppet piece.

### Day 16

Everyone is in position. Bec is standing near the stereo, about to play the opening piece of music. From the middle of the space, Lara calls out, 'Now remember, when someone's doing their puppet show, we look at them!'

The first piece of music starts to play and to my right, Tina springs into action, dancing her puppet along the tightrope held on either end by Howie and Mavis. Both Bryce and Bev turn to look at the scene unfolding. The music builds and Tina puts even more energy into her dancing with the puppet, swaying it from side to side, bouncing it along the rope. Bec begins to bring the music down and Tina finishes with a bow.

'Okay, it's our turn,' I say quietly to Bryce and Bev.

'The Man on the Flying Trapeze'—our song—begins to play, its slower melody a marked difference from the high energy of the first piece. I waggle my Anything Puppet at Bev. 'Say hi to Bryce's puppet?' I propose. Bev *expresses*, and she looks at me. 'Look at Bryce's puppet,' I direct, and waggle my puppet again in Bryce's direction. 'Look at the audience.' I swing my puppet around, while Bryce and Bev follow slowly. Next to theirs, my puppet appears frantic, desperate for them to notice me, desperate for them to respond and act in the same manner.

Bryce holds his hand up, his puppet facing mine and Bev's. He makes slow circles with his hand, the puppet's eyes following accordingly. Bev's puppet gives short, slow nods, while mine is furiously nodding up and down. My puppet continues to shake from side to side as the music dies down, and I finally come to stillness. (FN 16, 21/11/2013)

As the facilitators and I engaged in our reflections after the day's session, Lara offered me some feedback about the piece I had performed with Bryce and Bev.

Lara: There was one thing I thought when I was watching [you]; can you slow down your hand puppet as well? Because they are so slow, it really is a big contrast with your fast movement. And if yours is slow and kind of a sustained feeling, then theirs is a similar kind of feeling with it. (WD 16, 21/11/2013)

My initial response to Lara's suggestion was in relation to the visual quality of the piece, of the unsettling juxtaposition between fast and slow movements. After I gave the issue more thought, I recognised that it was more than the outward manifestation of the piece. If I had listened more sensitively with my body to Bryce and Bev, I would have been able to better witness their offers of stillness and slowness. At the post-performance reflection session, I shared this personal learning moment with the facilitators:

Lara, you helped to remind me about that little puppet show with Bryce and Bev, and that I was sort of trying to get them to move a bit more, and then not realising that even *not moving* is still an issue of presence, and it's their offering to the audience. (WD 4/12/2013)

My attempts at eliciting more movement from Bryce and Bev emerged, in one sense, from my need to perform for an audience. I was aware of that added responsibility and as such, took on the role of author and director of the work by trying to lead the movements.

Bayliss (2009) writes that '[r]egimes of truth established through forms of expression have designated the disabled body as something static, not amenable to change without changing the corporeality of the disabled individual' (p. 283). In explicating the philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari, Bayliss considers 'narratives of the broken body' as well as the Deleuze-Guattarian concept of interpretosis—the 'drive to control unruly bodies' (p. 283). In reflecting once again on my work with Bryce and Bev within these arguments, perhaps I was caught in what I interpreted as a rift between the notions of stasis/dynamism and interpretosis. I was consciously aware of Celia's desire to 'produce something that is slightly more embodied than what we saw previously' (WD 7/8/2013). For me, affording the performers with a higher level

of embodiment was likely confused with the idea of visible movement. I was trying to fight against the 'static' disabled body, not realising that I had inadvertently fallen into the trap of interpretosis by trying to control Bryce's and Bev's bodies—their 'unruly' (read: slow-moving) bodies.

The realisation of this moment can also be related to the interstice between the disabled performer and the non-disabled audience. Conroy (2009) considers the arguments of Richard Tomlinson, cofounder of Graeae Theatre Company, in relation to this meeting point, especially in performance: 'The very act of controlling the particular medium for a certain time in front of a largely passive, captive crowd, actually does allow for the possibility of clearing away much of the mythology that has been created about disability' (cited p. 7). Conroy (2009) extends on this assertion, articulating that the 'enforced passivity of theatre offers a reversal of the usual habits of looking at disabled people. The individual performer is empowered and accorded status because of his [sic] presence on stage as performer ... as object of the audience's attention' (p. 7).

Bec's response to my reflection indicated her agreement with the idea of stillness as a powerful form of presence, and also echoes what Conroy (2009) writes about becoming/being the object of the audience's attention:

Watching it, that moment when you were lit up, it was like, you know what? Bryce could just sit there with that puppet and I could still watch it. I'd still watch it. (WD 4/12/2013)

What we had encountered, although unfamiliar to me at the time, was being drawn into what I believe was the participants' experience of 'crip time'. I am aware that as someone who does not identify as disabled, my use of the term may be met with scepticism and distrust (see Peters, 2000, p. 590). I was introduced to the notion of crip time during the conversations exchanged as part of the Disability and Performance group at the IFTR; for this, I am indebted, and thus I write this term with both caution and respect. Reflections on crip time are captured poetically by McDonald (n.d.), who writes:

I live by a different time to you ... I live life in slow motion. The world I live in is one where my thoughts are as quick as anyone's, my movements are weak and erratic, and my talk is slower than a snail in quicksand ... A slow world would be my heaven. I am forced to live in your world, a fast hard one. If slow rays flew from me I would be able to

live in this world. I need to speed up, or you need to slow down. (n.p.)

Perhaps the dialogue that Bryce and Bev were trying to set up with me was to tell me to slow down; I had just been so caught up in my own sense of 'normate time' that I had failed to be receptive to their rhythms.

### **Negotiating ownership, authority, and voice**

The narrative of Bryce, Bev, and me, and the experience of being drawn into crip time, in a way ties in to the question, *who's got the power?* By asking this, I make the connection between my wanting to exert control over time and space and the larger issues of voice, authority, and ownership that pervade so much applied performance work.

In his introduction to intervention in applied theatre, Prentki (2009) asserts that '[t]he very idea of intervention is implicated in the issues of power and the right to speak on behalf of others' (p. 181). Other implications have been outlined by Alcoff (1991-1992), who writes:

As a type of discursive practice, speaking on behalf of others has come under increasing criticism, and in some communities it is being rejected. There is a strong, albeit contested, current within feminism which holds that speaking for others is arrogant, vain, unethical and politically illegitimate. (p. 6)

Alcoff's (1991-1992) comment on the feminist view of arrogance and political illegitimacy is resounding, and casts more doubt with regard to my earlier question about Vulcana's work in Stronghold being political if the participants did not necessarily share similar ideologies and objectives. I must reiterate, however, that I am sure that as a theatre group underpinned by feminist principles, the Vulcana facilitators have/had no intention to come across as arrogant, vain, or unethical. On the contrary, they often demonstrated what Conroy (2009) describes as a sense of 'self-abnegation' (p. 5); Celia, for instance, expressed how one of her primary aims at the beginning of the project was to create work in a way that the participants are 'not spoken for' (personal communication, 27/5/2014). Lara also admitted to her own stammering: 'I was just thinking, *oh this is just not working*, and thinking in my mind, *oh shit, what*

*am I doing here?* (WD 12/9/2013). These acts of decentring from supremacy (see Thompson, 2009, p. 165) and questioning one's own expertise (see Boon & Plastow, 2004, pp. 3-4) reflect Freire's (1996) idea of humility, where theatre facilitators (educators, in the Freirean sense) 'perceive their own [ignorance]' (p. 71).

One of the challenges that the Vulcana facilitators faced with regards to ownership of the work created was *how* to discern it—what did/could ownership look like in Stronghold? I draw on one moment in the first phase of the workshop where we struggled with trying to pass the ownership of the creation of play to Mavis, Eva, and Ricky.

### Movies and dancing – can we hold the conversation?

'What do you wanna talk about?' Celia probes the group. She's met with silence from the three. Celia turns to Mavis and asks, 'What do you want your goggly-eyed puppet to make an announcement about?'

'Something funny,' Mavis suggests softly.

'Something funny? You've got something funny to say?' Celia asks, her voice rising slightly.

'Oh boy!' Ricky's voice is laced with amusement and he chuckles.

'Should we practise?' Celia wonders. She looks at Ricky, who's still chuckling. 'And what's your puppet gonna say?'

Ricky doesn't respond to Celia's question, so Celia begins to offer more suggestions. 'Okay, now, I want Liza the puppet to say something to us.' Celia steps aside and waits, leaving the space for something to happen.

I look over at Mavis. Her head is slightly tilted back, and I'm not sure if she's engaging in the play. The goggly-eyed hand puppet is fitted on her hand, but it's hidden behind her pink water bottle which she's holding on to dearly.

Celia stands next to Mavis, crouching slightly. She looks intently at the group, as if willing something to happen. Then Celia cuts in, 'Ask that puppet a question.'

'Did you go to the movies?' Ricky is the first to say something.

Eva is quick to respond. 'I don't usually go to the movies.'

'Why?'

'But I like long movies,' Eva continues. 'Hour and a half ones, I like, not two hours. What about you? You never watch a movie on TV?'

The conversation seems stilted, forced. As Eva and Ricky rattle off 'lines,' their puppets remain frozen in their hands, unmoving. Celia notices Ricky struggling to respond to Eva's offer, and Mavis has yet to participate.

'That's alright,' Celia assures them. She suggests that the two of them continue creating a conversation between their puppets while she moves Mavis around so that she can listen to them.

'Okay,' Celia says, 'I want your two clowns to speak to each other. You ready? Mavis's gonna look from the outside. You ready?'

Ricky perks up, and immediately goes, 'Yup!'

'Hello!' Eva begins, giving her puppet a little waggle.

Celia starts moving with Mavis around the other two puppeteers, and it's almost as if this distracts them. Ricky and Eva stop talking and stare, seemingly unsure of what to do next, now that they've been given the freedom to play with their puppets.

'Get your clowns talking,' I encourage them.

Ricky makes the first offer this time. 'How are ya?' His puppet does a little bounce.

Eva doesn't seem to hear him. She's turned towards Celia and Mavis, who are moving past her and says something to them, which I can't hear. But then, almost as if she's realised that Ricky has said something, she sharply turns her head around, and says, without missing a beat, 'I haven't been to the movies for a long time.' Her green-hatted puppet is turned to face Ricky, as if expecting a response.

Ricky scrunches his face up in a smile, a kind of uncomfortable, caught-off-guard type of smile. 'How are ya?' he repeats.

Eva drives on. 'I enjoy the movies. Only an hour and a half movies, not longer ones.'

Silence again. Eva and Ricky keep holding their puppets upright, but no more offers are made. Then Eva notices that Mavis doesn't have a rod puppet like she and Ricky do.

'Doesn't Mavis have a puppet?' Eva asks, sounding concerned.

'She's got a goggly-eyed puppet,' Celia responds, referring to the little puppet that's resting on Mavis's hand. Celia wonders to Eva and Ricky if they'd be alright with letting Mavis have a go at the conversation.

'Mavis,' Celia asks, 'who do you wanna have a conversation with? There's Eva or there's Ricky here.'

'Yeah. The ol' boy,' Mavis drawls, referring to Ricky.

'Chat with the ol' boy?' Celia repeats, then tells Mavis that Ricky's puppet is named Liza. Celia is conscious of Eva's presence, and doesn't want Eva to feel excluded just because she's not part of the conversation. 'Do you wanna have a listen to this conversation, Eva, and see what you wanna do. See what their response is.'

'Alright,' Eva agrees. There is no sign of disappointment in her voice.

Celia turns back to Mavis, directing her to face her puppet towards Ricky's, and cuing them to begin a conversation.

'Hello, Liza!' Mavis speaks first, a hint of teasing in her voice.

'Hello.' Ricky responds in a lazy tone.

'How's your day been?'

'Good.'

'Whatcha been doing?'

'Nothing much.'

Moment of silence.

Celia jumps in with an offer to move the play along. 'Would Liza like to dance?'

Mavis picks up on the idea, and says, 'Wanna go dancing?'

'Yeah!'

Moment of silence again. Celia makes another suggestion. 'I reckon there should be a third puppet coming in – *Did I hear dancing?*'

Eva realises that Celia was referring to her puppet as the third puppet. 'Can we do it again? Can we do it again?' Eva requests.

'Yeah, do it again, do it again!' Celia chirps. 'Say, *hello.*'

Mavis starts the conversation again and is joined by Ricky. The back and forth conversation sounds choppy, and doesn't seem to be going anywhere. Again, another moment of silence erupts.

Celia attempts another suggestion. 'I reckon, why don't you try this? I think you're dancing on your own,' she nods at Eva. 'Eva's puppet is dancing in the corner, and then you are gonna ask Liza if you wanna go dancing, and Liza goes, *Yeah I do!*'

And you go, *Look! There's someone dancing! Let's join them!* You wanna try that? Mavis, say *hello* to Liza.'

'Ah!' Mavis coughs. 'Sorry, love.'

'That's alright,' Celia replies patiently.

Mavis recovers from her inattention. 'Good afternoon, Liza!'

'Good afternoon,' Ricky replies.

'Do you wish to go dancing?'

'Yeah, I do.'

'Let's go then.'

Celia suggests to the group to get their puppets dancing, and all three puppeteers begin to bounce their puppets up and down. Then, Celia comes up with another idea, for the group to dance in a conga line. No one knows what a conga line is, and Celia explains what it is. The five of us—Celia, Ricky, Mavis, Eva, and I—proceed in a very slow-moving conga line, with me moving together with Ricky, and Celia with Mavis.

'Beautiful,' Celia praises, after we come to a stop. 'We're gonna show everybody this, what we just did. What do you reckon?'

Celia's question is met with an enthusiastic response from the group.

When it comes to our group's turn to perform in front of the others, we move in to our designated space, and I stand behind Ricky. I see Eva and Celia whispering to each other, but I can't quite catch what they say. I gather that Eva is unsure whether or not she should start. Celia whispers back to Eva, seemingly to assure her.

It is Mavis who starts. 'Good day.' Then she pauses, as though unhappy with her opening. She tries again. 'Good afternoon.' She stops again. She gives it a third go. 'Good morning, old man.'

'Good morning,' Ricky replies. 'Good afternoon.'

'How's your day been?'

'Good.'

'And what have you got planned for today?'

'Nothing much.'

Even though Mavis has been leading the play, I see that she keeps glancing back at Celia, as if needing prompting and reassurance. Behind Mavis and Ricky, Eva is dancing her puppet up and down, its striped cloak flapping with each movement.

'I'd like to ask you,' Mavis adds, 'would you like to come out for a date?'

*Oh, this is spontaneous,* I think, secretly pleased.

'Would you like to come out for lunch?' Mavis keeps extending the play beyond what was rehearsed.

'Yeah I would,' Ricky replies, accepting Mavis's offer.

Celia quietly tries to remind Mavis to ask about dancing.

'What do you wanna do after lunch?' Mavis asks. 'You wanna do dancing?'

'Yeah!' Ricky agrees.

Celia quickly cuts in again, this time a bit louder so that Ricky can hear. 'Okay, dancing? Go! Go Liza!' Celia tries to prompt Ricky to lead the conga.

I take that as my cue to start moving with Ricky to lead the conga line. Ricky sits still in his chair, and I whisper to him to make his puppet dance. He starts to shake his puppet up and down.

Once we do a small circle, Celia cues for us to end. We take our bows to the appreciative applause of our audience. (FN 15, 15/8/2013)

The narrative that I have presented raises a number of issues with regard to how the work was giving participants a sense ownership in the playmaking process. What does it mean for 'authorship' and 'ownership' when the facilitator constantly makes offers, which are then picked up by participants? Does ownership then skew towards the facilitator, who drives the narrative and action along? In this regard, there is a significant parallel between this moment and the observation I made on how I was trying to exert control over the time and space with Bev and Bryce. As I observed Celia during this particular scene-building, I could tell that she was trying to provide as much space for Eva, Ricky, and Mavis to create something on their own. I watched her looking at the participants intently, always with an encouraging smile. It was mainly during those moments of silence—an uncomfortable silence—that Celia would make offers: *I reckon we should ... what do you think ...*

At one of our reflection sessions, Bec wondered about the 'boundaries and control over what people [were] doing' (WD 12/9/2013). She noted how the Vulcana facilitators struggled with having to constantly remind participants about ideas and to repeat what they had previously come up with. Lara expressed how she had not thought too much about it as she figured that there was still time for exploring and playing 'before we start to set it'. She reflected also on her own processes of devising work with different groups:

With able-bodied people, I would say, 'There's the thing, let's have 10 minutes, work out a scenario, repeat it, repeat it, repeat it, then you show.' So with this group, you give them the puppets, and the apparatus, and you say, 'This is what we've got to work with.' And they *play* for that time, and then when they go to do it in front of the audience, they've forgotten everything they've done in the play.

Celia added her own thoughts to the issue:

And you know, earlier on, when we were improvising, and you [Lara] or I would be in the improvisation, and we would lead the improvisation, very different things happened as a result of that. I think it's valid ... it's not necessarily what you want to have in a performance. Like, this is a situation that leaders and facilitators of processes do anyway, to encourage anybody to, you know ... when you get a chance to improvise with someone who knows what they're doing, it's *great* fun to be led in that process. It's not always about [the fact that] it has to be your own work all on your own.

...

I mean, our ultimate aim with the performance is to present this group of people as autonomous performers on stage in some kind of way ... We want the audience to see them as the deliverers of this work. We need to find images that they're happy to be doing, and I don't think ... this doesn't mean that they can't be prompted through that process ... So I think it's a fine balance to find that, but I don't think it doesn't mean that ... there can't be facilitators prompting, that there can't be facilitators assisting with improvisation. (WD 12/9/2013)

For the Vulcana women, the notion of authorship and ownership in such work remained a slippery one, whose boundaries were difficult to define. They

seemed confident in the validity of the facilitators guiding the process, where prompting was a legitimate technique to move the play along. Lara's reflection on the participants forgetting once they were in front of an audience was a reminder that the facilitators were under pressure to turn the moments of play and devising into a performance, and that there was another level of responsibility towards the participants and further expectations from the participants.

The difficulties encountered in trying to get Eva, Ricky, and Mavis to create an 'interesting' puppet performance relates once again to the idea of stammering experienced by both the participants and the facilitator(s). Outside the creation of the work, all three participants were extremely chatty; Lara once mentioned how Mavis was 'a real talker' (WD 7/8/2013). Similarly, Celia observed how Ricky can 'talk and talk and talk' (WD 10, 10/10/2013).

The encounter that I have selected to present draws the discussion back to voice—Eva, Ricky, and Mavis are all 'verbal' in the normate sense of the word. Here, I would like to continue the discussion on how the notion of voice is often constructed and explored in applied performance literature, and how this comes into tension with the issues that emerged in Stronghold.

From a feminist standpoint, bell hooks (1989) has argued that 'coming to voice' is a way of

moving from silence into speech as a revolutionary gesture ... Only as subjects can we speak. As objects we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others. ... Awareness of the need to speak, to give voice to the varied dimension of our lives is one way [to] begin the process of education for critical consciousness. (pp. 12-13)

hooks' (1989) argument pertains specifically to women within oppressed groups, such as women of colour. Still, it applies to all communities who exist on the margins. Building on hooks' argument, Giroux (1992) suggests that educators (facilitators) consider voice as a way to analyse *how* students (participants) have been silenced, or silence themselves, and hence create spaces for 'different narratives [to be made] available' (p. 170).

Like the arguments stated above, much of Freire's and other critical pedagogues' concept(s) of liberatory pedagogy relate to the notion of finding one's voice. In the Freirean sense, language (voice) and power are closely

linked and offer a critical avenue for human agency (see Giroux, 1988). Such concepts of voice, however, come into scrutiny in Gabel's (2002) writing. She criticises how critical pedagogy 'assumes that pedagogical subjects have voices that are recognized and understood by others' (p. 189). She acknowledges how people with disability have often been excluded in critical pedagogy and that it does not usually account for people who 'exercise voice differently' (p. 190).

Just as Gabel (2002) outlined, some of the Stronghold participants spoke in ways different from the normate. Accounting for the variety of 'voices' in the work meant that facilitators need to be attuned to these differences—what happens when some voices (of participants), by their relative clarity and volume, dominate others? Early in the work of Stronghold, I began to notice that those participants who were more 'verbal' and 'articulate' often had first priority in making decisions. I wondered how power relations began to play in the space, between participants who were more 'vocal' than others:

On Day 4, the participants finish making their Anything Puppets and Lara suggests that the participants create little scenarios with their puppets. She begins clearing the instruments off the small round table that's been set up in the centre of the room. Before Lara can finish her sentence, 'Who would like to volun—', Eva immediately jumps up and moves towards the table. Following shortly after, Ricky moves his wheelchair forward. Liza laughs loudly at the eagerness of Eva and Ricky. (FN 4, 8/8/2013)

Earlier in the section I presented Alcoff's (1991-1992) arguments against speaking on behalf of others, but is there any exception where a literal speaking on someone else's behalf can be legitimated?

Eva and Ricky end their puppet scene. Lara comments to the group, 'So we can see that they can have a little interaction, even just dancing together. Now, would anyone else like to have a turn?' Lara goes off to the other side of the circle.

Gillian is in front of me and I ask her if she'd like to have a go. She says something quietly, and I'm not too sure if she means yes, but I've since noticed how Gillian is always game to try things, so I attempt to get Lara's attention, to let her know that Gillian may want to have a turn. Lara doesn't seem to hear me. She's asking around on the other side if someone would like to create a puppet act. I check with Gillian again, and this time, I hear a distinct

'Yeah'. As Lara says, 'What about Bryce and Mark,' I feel this overwhelming urge to speak for Gillian and so I say loudly, 'Gillian wants a turn!'

This time Lara hears me. But then I begin to realise that Bev, who's sitting next to Gillian, is *expressing*. I feel torn. I want to tell Lara that Bev wants to participate, but for some reason, I feel like I've already committed to Gillian.

'Gillian wants a go?' Lara responds, turning in our direction. At this, Bev *expresses* more loudly and Lara picks up on it. 'You two want to go together?' Lara asks, looking at Gillian and Bev. They both agree in their own way. (FN 4, 8/8/2013)

I felt relieved, in a way, that Lara had responded to Bev's *expressing*, and as facilitator, made the decision to include both Gillian and Bev in the puppet piece. Reflecting on this moment brings me back to the discussion on authority and voice. The first time I decided to speak on Gillian's behalf, I did so under the assumption that she had indicated an interest in being part of the puppet act; it was only after I had asked her the second time that she confirmed her intention with me.

There were numerous times in the process where I struggled with wanting to speak for the participants. Thinking now about the decisions I made, was it because I took it upon myself to be their mouthpiece? Was I doing it because I thought it was the only way they could get heard? I tried resisting this impulse. For example, on Day 8, Ricky tells me that he would like to be the announcer for the upcoming puppet act. I resist the urge to pass the message on to Lara, telling Ricky instead that he should let Lara know. When she does not hear him because of the noise in the room, again, I simply state the obvious to Ricky—'she can't hear you'. Yet again, Lara manages to pick up on this energy, and passes the announcer's hoop to Ricky, who takes it from her excitedly (FN 8, 5/9/2013).

Cohen-Cruz (2010) cautions that '[t]heatre reproduces the same hierarchies that plague the world at large, the same assumptions of who can speak, who must listen, and who is not even invited into the conversation' (p. 5). In the process of creating work for theatre/performance, the same condition applies. How do we deal sensitively with our feelings of accountability? How do we negotiate the concept of articulation/inarticulation where articulation is so

politically framed, symbolising a resistance to the process of silencing commonly experienced by marginalised groups (see Lev-Aladgem, 2010)? In Stronghold, the notion of articulation was a slippery one, and Celia identified this tension in one of our conversations:

How do [the participants] wanna articulate [their] thoughts? And some people have got more thought to contribute that I can communicate with. And how we all dealt with that range of ideas that might come into the space ... And they all had different things to contribute. And you know, like, Howie was a really particular challenge for all of us, and his communication was the hardest for us to manage ... there was a mode of communication that I felt I never learnt, but there was a mode of communication. (Celia, 7/4/2015)

It was important that as facilitators, we listened attentively to *all* forms of articulation, not just the voices that fit more closely with our understanding of the normate voice. Paying attention to these tensions from a disability perspective therefore adds another layer of complexity to the important questions often asked about authority and voice in applied performance literature.

### **Considering representation, considering disability**

In an earlier chapter, I shared my anxieties about how I was framing the narrative of my first encounter with the Stronghold participants, paying particular attention that I was not inadvertently (re)creating the misused tropes of the monster (see Chapter 4). The act of representation in itself is political, and here I draw on Preston's (2009b) argument that '[a]nalyzing the politics of representation requires consideration of how and why identities are depicted, and naming the influence of dominant ideologies against social and political landscapes' (p. 65).

Preston (2009b) elaborates further on the issue of representation, contending that:

we have a responsibility towards ensuring that the representations that are made are produced through a climate of sensitivity, dialogue, respect and willingness for reciprocity. Ethical practice however cannot be separated

from awareness that representations, however sensitively and carefully handled, will carry their own political significance and resonance in the broader socio-political sphere and will be constantly vulnerable to appropriation and redefinition. (p. 65)

The arguments and reflections made in this section return to some of the issues raised in the first section: as I have mentioned earlier, the sections feed into one another; they project forward and look back.

### Remembering the first day

Lara stands in front of the Stronghold participants as they are about to make their puppets. Suddenly, a thought occurs to her.

'Can we just hold on to the puppets first? I wanna ask you about circus. So, when you think about characters, what characters or things do you think of when you think about circus?'

Her question is met with silence. At this point, Ricky arrives. Lara goes up to him, shakes his hand, and introduces herself. She then turns back to the group and tries again to elicit a response.

'So when I think about circus, I think about the popcorn seller as a good character. Anybody else got other ideas? Anyone ever been to a circus?'

'Yeah once.' The voice belongs to the newest arrival to the group, Ricky.

'Yeah?' Lara's voice perks up. 'What kinds of things did you see at the circus?'

'We're not doing it no more,' Ricky replies.

'You're not doing it anymore, but when you did go, what were some things that you did see?'

The few seconds of silence that pass seem like an eternity. Then, Ricky chimes in again, 'Um ... clowns!'

I hear the relief in Lara's voice as she answers, 'Clowns, great.' (FN 1, 18/7/2013)

Before the start of the workshop on the first day of Stronghold, Lara shared that she hoped someone in the group would mention 'clowns' as she had brought with her various images of circus clowns. For Lara, trying to evoke the word 'clown' was a moment of stammering:

It was like that very first week that I came with all these scraps of paper, and we were going to brainstorm, and [when I said], 'When you think of circus what do you think?' And there was this silence, and I was like, Fuck! They don't know about circus (laughs). Okay! And then finally Ricky said, 'Clowns!' and I was like, *Thank God*. (WD 12/9/2013)

Even though the first workshop focused on creating clown *puppets*, one of Lara's earlier ideas was to have an army of clowns in the performance. As Lara passed around the pictures of clowns that she had brought with her, she explained how:

They're making fun of authority, they're making fun of the bosses, you know? The clown's a really important character because they always challenge the rules, you know? They don't wanna be doing the right thing all the time. (FN 1, 18/7/2013)

I was excited by Lara's words, excited by the idea that this army of clowns would offer a Bakhtinian/carnavalesque (1968, 1973) take on the work created. I hoped that having an army of clowns would cause a rupture, fulfilling an ideology of turning the world on its head, challenging the hegemonic, normative view of society.

Viewing this idea from a different perspective, however, revealed some tensions. In considering the implications of having the Stronghold participants become clowns, I draw again on disability literature, examining specifically what has been written about disability and the freak show. The circus has had a long and complex history with disability; Adams (2012), for instance, notes that:

[f]reaks were defined by bodily features spectacular enough to make audiences want to stare, however the sideshows always contained an element of performance. Costumes, props, and the showcasing of unique abilities and talents, and extensive advertising turned people with disabilities into freaks. (p. 421)

Contemporary disabled performers, on the other hand, have often manipulated the frame of the freak show, thereby subverting the trope of the carnival monster. Stephens (2006) notes, for example, how performers like Jennifer Miller of Circus Amok (a queer performance group in New York) have worked to 'challenge and confront the legacy of the nineteenth-century freak shows by which contemporary ideas of bodily non-normativity are still so deeply informed' (p. 486). Drawing further on Stephens' writing, Hadley (2008) acknowledges the points Stephens makes about how the freak spectacle is able to 'disrupt the modes of subjection ... and precipitate a crises in prescribed categories of meaning' (cited p. 3).

Hadley (2008) thus makes a pressing statement about agency. She writes:

Th[e] question of agency extends to the discussion of whether disabled performers ... can, by consciously appropriating the figures, symbols and scenography of the freakshow, start to deconstruct the mechanisms by which this contested sphere of cultural practice has historically defined them, confronting spectators with their own complicity in the construction of the freak. (p. 2)

In light of these critical views on the representation of people with disability, I was concerned as to how this was operating in Stronghold. Problematizing the notion of agency further was that the theme of the circus and the idea to have the performers put on red noses were put forth by the Vulcana women, as opposed to the participants actively working to reinvent the frame of the circus. Celia was acutely aware of the political impact of this choice of representation, expressing:

The first time that I (breaks off mid-sentence) ... the suggestion of putting the clown nose on people who are ... have severe disability is like (gasps), you know, is that ... what are we saying with that? What does that mean? And what do people think when they watch that? (WD 12/9/2013)

Celia reflected how it 'felt dangerous turning them into clowns' (Celia, 7/4/2015), as if the Vulcana facilitators were actively disempowering the participants by exhibiting them as freaks.

The use of the red noses (and thus presenting the performers as clowns/freaks) was not the only tension point in terms of our aesthetic choices. It was not until 3 months into the Stronghold process that the Vulcana facilitators began to cement the ideas for the costumes for the show. After Day 11 of the workshop, Celia raised an issue about what would work best in terms of costumes:

We had a question about getting them changed [for the show] ... that they can all put a shirt on, or do we create something [that goes] over the top ... we don't necessarily want to create a smock kind of thing if they don't need it. (WD 11, 17/10/2013)

At the next session (Day 12), Bec starts off by chatting with the group about costume ideas. She shares her ideas of sticking ruffles, braces, and other pieces of fabric on the front of the costumes, checking with the participants if they would feel comfortable having to put their arms through the sleeves. Ricky is quick to pipe up:

'Yeah, that's okay!'

Lara and Celia check with the different participants if they're agreeable.

'Howie, are you happy to put sleeves [on]?' Celia asks. Howie gives a little nod.

'I was thinking,' Mavis chips in, 'what about scarves that go around ya?'

'Well, that's a good idea,' Bec replies. 'I was thinking the same, that we could have them as part of the shirt, that we could have attached to it.' (FN 12, 24/10/2013)

The discussion about the costumes that followed the workshop captured our anxiety of representation:

Lara: Do you really want them to put on a backward shirt?

Celia: No. I think that ... I thought Bec was thinking it would be front [facing], but you can take the back out of it.

Lara: Oh, okay. I don't want them to look like they are from a psych ward.

Celia: That's why I was really concerned about the smock thing. (WD 12, 24/10/2013)

Here, another element of aesthetics creeps in. I propose that both the stammering over having the performers don red noses and the choice of costumes be read in light of what Quayson (2007) calls 'aesthetic nervousness'. In Quayson's construction of the concept, he writes that:

Aesthetic nervousness is seen when the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short circuited in relation to disability. The primary level in which it may be discerned is in the interaction between a disabled and nondisabled character, where a variety of tensions may be identified. (p. 15)

Hickey-Moody (2009b) clarifies that '[a]esthetic nervousness is what happens when the meaning created by disabled bodies exceeds dominant aesthetic and signifying systems' (p. 204). Quayson (2007) continues to explain that much aesthetic nervousness extends beyond this primary level (between characters), and includes areas such as the 'overall narrative or dramatic perspective' (p. 15). He also offers insight into the aesthetic nervousness that can exist between reader and text, where 'aesthetic nervousness overlaps social attitudes to disability that themselves often remain unexamined in their prejudices and biases' (p. 15).

Quayson's (2007) examination of aesthetic nervousness centres largely on literary texts, yet his ideas are highly useful for considering within the context of Stronghold. By borrowing and adapting Quayson's theories, I offer a way of looking at this moment of Stronghold through the lens of aesthetic nervousness. I propose that the Vulcana facilitators be compared to the authors of literary texts, whose choice of accessories and costumes create the characters of the text, that is, the Stronghold participants. The audience watching the Stronghold performance then are a parallel to the readers implied by Quayson. The sense of aesthetic nervousness thus arose among the Vulcana facilitators, who became conscious of how their choices would, in Quayson's terms, cause a 'short circuit' (p. 15), thereby passing on the aesthetic nervousness to an audience.

Yet another tension emerged when the Vulcana facilitators and I discussed the idea of an opening scene for the performance. In my last chapter, I wrote about Mark's moment on the trapeze, and how he had claimed the space and his body. At the beginning of that narrative vignette, I wrote, 'Mark points at his wrist, and makes a motion as if to say, "Where is everyone?"' (see Chapter 4). Mark's keen awareness of the time had struck me, and perhaps even now I need to further question why that had made such an impact on me. Would I have reacted the same way had it been a person without an intellectual disability? Still, I commented on my observation of Mark at one of the Stronghold discussions, telling Celia:

Last week, [Mark] kept telling you, *It's time, where is everyone?* (Celia laughs) He's always the first person there, and he looked at the clock and he saw that it was 12.30, and he was like (I tap my wrist) ...

Bec jumps in with an idea:

Maybe he can come on stage at the beginning, and just be like (she mimes checking her watch and tapping it), you know ...

Celia interrupts:

And this is the interesting question, this is the interesting question. Can he come on stage and do that? We don't know. In actual fact, he did it once, and this is (breaks off mid-sentence) yeah, so ...

Lara then picks up on something Celia has said, adding:

I think if we had a year long, we could make a 20-minute show ... But then you'd need the repetition of doing it ... (WD 7/8/2013)

There is something in our discussion that is inherently problematic, although it had not occurred to me then. Celia wondered if Mark would be able to repeat the action of checking his watch should it be included in the performance, and even Lara's comment following Celia's was about repeating and rehearsing. Even though Bec's suggestion to frame Mark's gesture as the opening to the performance was not used in the end, there is something in what both Celia and

Lara said that makes me wonder: *if* we had the luxury of time, and *if* Mark had been able to repeat the gesture that he had performed that day, would we have used it in the show, and if so, how would that have been read? Would Stronghold then be—by focusing on Mark’s performative behaviour—reinforcing the act of voyeurism, and thus complicating the issue of power relations in the space, not only between facilitators and participants, but also between the audience and the performers?

Drawing from freak show literature, Conroy (2012) makes an important point that ‘the boundary between being and performing is eroded. The anomalous body provides the occasion for the performance’ (p. 170). Conroy’s statement calls to mind an argument made by Schechner (1990) in his writing about performance and reflexivity:

The main question one asks is whether a performance generates its own frame, that is, reflexive (self-conscious, conscious of its audience, the audience conscious of the performer being conscious of being a performance, etc.); or whether the frame is imposed from the outside. (p. 28)

Nash’s (2005) reflection on creating performance with people with profound and multiple disabilities draws on Schechner’s argument, and she asks critically if a performance involving ‘profoundly disabled people’ can still be considered a performance if the performers themselves may not be aware that they are performing (p. 192). She then considers an example provided by Schechner, a performance in the 1970s that involved Christopher Knowles, a man with a learning disability who simply ‘performed’ by ‘being himself’ (p. 192). Nash argues that such performances reinforce the act of voyeurism, where ‘the disabled person was on display’ (p. 192). Celia expressed to me a different perspective, however:

Part of our thing was to make them visible as who they are, not as something covered with a cloth, and holding a puppet above the cloth [referring to the previous performance they had been in], but having the cloth [removed] and there they are, presenting themselves. So I think that’s part of our political contract, to put those people on stage and go, This stage deserves to have these people looking like they do and behaving like they do. (Celia, 7/4/2015)

Perring (2005) argues that while ‘arts-and-disability work’ can provide nondisabled culture ways to ‘reconstruct its own view of impairment,’ it needs to be careful in how it ‘presents difference’ (p. 186). Once again, the relationship between ethics and representation cannot be separated. As Quayson (2007) articulates, ‘[d]isability returns the aesthetic domain to an active ethical core that serves to disrupt the surface of representation’ (p. 19); this notion indeed echoes Preston’s (2009b) call for ethical practice, which I outlined at the beginning of this section. An awareness of this reading of aesthetic nervousness—yet another form of ‘stammering’—experienced by the Vulcana facilitators thus makes visible the ‘elements of power’ that are often not disclosed in the interactions between people with and without disabilities (see Quayson, 2007, pp. 16-17).

### **The Ethnographer’s Stammerings**

This chapter serves to acknowledge the numerous stammerings that occurred throughout the Stronghold process. As mentioned earlier, it does not seek to provide any answers—perhaps it may be too presumptuous to claim to do so. In effect, this chapter has also revealed my own stammerings as an ethnographer/researcher in the project.

Kuppers (2014) advises us to ‘own discomfort, to live with uncertainty’ (p. 11), and here, I own mine. Perhaps my stammerings can be traced back further than just this chapter alone. I struggle, moving between a consciousness of being other (woman/non-white/of ethnic minority), and not-other (middle-class/educated/etc.). My anxiety in representing the participants and their work in the project stems in part from my identifying as non-disabled/not identifying as disabled; this anxiety can be attributed to the sense of ‘ethical quandary’ I faced in trying to negotiate how to present the richness of the work that unfolded (see McKelvey, 2013), yet retain the anonymity of the participants. Other factors found their way into these stammerings as well. I was constantly aware of the many positions I have held within Vulcana’s work—student, participant, performer, volunteer, researcher, facilitator—and thus the need to address my genuine desire to highlight and discuss elements of practice that were worthwhile, and the commitment to academic integrity, to have enough objectivity to ask the difficult questions.

Stammerings do not start and end with this chapter. One will continue to encounter these stammerings in the next. My focus in this chapter, however, was to frame the tensions I observed in the project based on the five interrelated questions posed by Preston (2009b), and I hope that I have done just that. I would suggest also that this expression of hope be read as another form of stammering.

## Chapter 6: Apologies, Joy, and Intimate Spaces

The artistic space in drama's pedagogy is a space of many chances, many possible directions, many aborted plans, many reconsidered choices. Pragmatically speaking, it is a space where co-ownership of artistic projects requires second, third, and fourth chances. The dogmatism of 'getting it right', and even the sometimes repressive political correctness of some progressive classrooms, can be replaced with a flexibility and an openness that remain focused on the experimentation and creation of the work. (Gallagher, 2007, p. 23)

In the last chapter, I discussed the anxieties that we as facilitators/I as researcher felt throughout Stronghold, describing these feelings as moments of stammering. Celia, for instance, admitted that there is a genuine feeling of fear about 'making mistakes' (Celia, 7/4/2015). Gallagher's (2007) concept of many chances, I feel, parallels Koppers' (2011) notion of forgiving ourselves when things are not yet working well. In some ways, my discussions in this chapter respond to the tensions raised in the chapter before, although in many other ways, they do not. Again, whenever I raise more tensions, I do not necessarily seek to resolve them. Rather, I invite an engagement with these tensions, in the hope that it will continue to force us (as practitioners and scholars) to critically consider applied performance work, not just in the field of disability, but in a wider context.

I first begin this chapter with the idea of 'apology,' which stems from what I believe to be closely related to the receiving of second (and third and fourth) chances and forgiveness. Tracing back to what I wrote in Chapter 3, I point again to Conroy's (2009) question, 'Who is included, and who is excluded [from disability culture]? How does one know if one is a part of this field of activity?' (p. 4). In Stronghold, we were conscious of these possible exclusions, sometimes becoming hyper-aware of our actions and interactions:

Lara: Whenever I pushed a [wheel]chair, I was like (embodied response), *Who am I to take them somewhere?*

Bec: It's interesting, because when I [participated in this other workshop], the facilitator [who has a disability] would say, 'Right! This is what we're going to do!' It wasn't that it wasn't consultative, but she was very confident in going,

'I'm leading you through this process, and this is what we're doing.'

Lara: She's clearly worked with people with disability before, I personally haven't myself ...

Natalie: And I think it's a lot about that anxiety about imposing (Bec: Yup) as non-disabled facilitators ...

Bec: It's a bummer if that's [the uncertainty and lack of confidence in ourselves] gonna hold you back from actually just going, 'Right! We're [the facilitators] gonna go through these ideas, and we're gonna move at a pace that means that you [the participants] will find bits and pieces of material that you can then develop.' (WD 7/8/2013)

Being apologetic can sometimes accompany feelings of guilt; in the discussion extract above, I read Lara's 'guilt' potentially as being reflected in her questioning her right to physically move someone else. At various stages in the process, Lara would reflect on how she had never worked in disability contexts before; mine emerges through the awareness of the historical interplay of power between people with and without disabilities. In an e-mail, Bec shared with me similar sentiments about 'power relationships' and her personal feelings about a facilitator with a disability having more confidence and 'right' to 'explore some of those boundaries with a lot less caution' (personal communication, 7/5/2014).

Does the notion of apology, however, assuage the tensions of power that arise in such applied performance settings, and more so within the context of disability? Roulstone's (2010) reflection on the Disability themed issue of *RiDE*, on which I have drawn significantly, addresses this sense of being apologetic. He writes,

What I crave, however, is more confidence amongst disability drama practitioners and writers to move beyond doubts based on essentialist orthodoxies of disabled versus non-disabled sensibilities and positions. Disabled people can disable others, non-disabled people can and do enable. I welcome notions of reflexive praxis as a *sine qua non* of good theatre (and wider) practice with disabled people; the sense of having to apologise for non-disabled lives and their work with disabled people always strikes me as a little dated. (p. 437)

When does one stop apologising? On Day 13, Lara expressed a concern that the participants had a difficult time remembering the ideas that had been developed. The performance was just four sessions away. She proposed a solution.

Lara: Maybe we do need to have a prompt on stage ... Maybe, someone in black crouching down and with their back to the audience. One per scene, just sitting either cross-legged or whatever, just prompting ...

Celia: I think it's fine for us to be involved. We're present. We're part of the performance. We're pushing the wheelchairs. And, maybe it's not too apologetic? Maybe we do need to own that? That is how it has been. It's a shared thing.

Natalie: If they [the participants] feel like they might produce something else with us there, then they invite us into that space. (WD 13, 31/10/2013)

Celia's suggestion that we stop being overly apologetic, as well as Roulstone's (2010) call for more confidence, did not mean that we stopped acknowledging the need for an ethic of accommodation (see Kuppers, 2014), or that we stopped being mindful of the impact of our choices; the discussion about ownership and the need to create meaningful work continued through the whole process. But I wonder if we never can fully shake off these insecurities. At our post-performance discussion, Celia posed a question to us:

How did people feel ... just from being on stage with them, and having had a relationship with the stage [as performers], and trying to manage the kind of support and guiding? There were moments for me, when I felt like I wasn't clear of how I needed to be on stage, how present or not? (WD 4/12/2013)

Celia's concerns stemmed from feelings of being a 'manipulator,' that she was aware that 'we are also being witnessed as manipulators of this performance' (Celia, 7/4/2015).

But something that Celia had shared with Lara and me on Day 11 made an impact: she told us how Eva had asked her if we (the facilitators) could be there in the performance to remind them what to do. Celia had said to us, 'It [Eva's request] was great. Makes it clear that it's their thing, but one of us can

be there to [support]' (WD 11, 17/10/2013). This exchange with Eva, and Celia's acknowledgment of it, was something that became significant to my growing understanding of the work. In response to Celia's question at the post-performance discussion, I said:

I think, Celia, that issue of *Why are we on stage with them?* has been an issue that's been playing [on my mind]. We had this conversation some time back, about being invited. They invited us to be with them (Celia: Yes they did), and not having to feel apologetic all the time. (WD 4/12/2013)

Kuppers (2011) shares that she 'do[es] not think that disability culture is closed to non-disabled allies' (p. 4); I wish to suggest that as non-disabled allies, what thus became significant for us was the idea of the invitation, once again, a reminder that '[w]e are only ever visitors within the disciplines into which we apply our theatre' (Thompson, 2008, p. 20). After one of the sessions, Liza commented how she liked that the facilitators were asking for 'permission':

I like the fact that you're asking [the participants] for permission ... you know, because that shows a lot of respect, which builds confidence. And then they feel, wow, they've got choices the whole time. (WD 6, 22/8/2013)

The invitation, however, allows us the space in which to (respectfully) share our experiences, embodied knowledges, and differences. We also need to be conscious of the reciprocity of the invitation; the groups we work with invite us into their spaces, and in turn, we invite them to embark on a creative journey together.

Still, we need to be perceptive to these invitations, to attune our awareness to when they are indeed being extended. On one occasion, as I was engaging in a moment of play with Bryce, I noticed Howie looking over at us and smiling. But when I turned to meet him and enter a space of play, he instantly withdrew. He turned his head away and his laughter stopped. I wrote as an aside to my field notes that day:

Perhaps I took it upon myself to read his laughter as an invitation to play. It could have just been him enjoying the moment in his own way without the need to be directly involved in the play. (FN 11, 17/10/2013)

In applied performance work, what spaces do we create for people to sit in this joy, while taking care that our involvement does not interrupt these moments? In the episode with Howie, perhaps I can never know for sure; I can, however, allow the moment to serve as a reminder to listen more attentively and to always work with care. Colman (2010) writes, 'Run away from me: affected are the bodies of spectres when their space is disturbed' (p. 11). Undoubtedly, I had disturbed Howie's space. Our bodies had collided, not literally, but there was a shift in the energies when my presence invaded his space.

Despite these notions of apology, what emerged for the facilitators and myself, was observing the joy created in the space. In the previous chapter, I commented on the choice of presenting the performers as circus clowns, noting Celia's anxiety regarding the tensions that this representation would create. Her words, 'What are we saying with that? And what do people think when they watch that?' were immediately followed by, 'But the joy of those people inhabiting the clown, that's almost what the point is' (WD 12/9/2013).

### **Spaces of joy, and joyful chaos**

That is my mission in this book: to speak seriously of the largely ignored and perhaps incommunicable thrill of the group deliberately united in joy and exaltation. (Ehrenreich, cited in Thompson, 2009, p. 115)

Celia's comment about joy being 'almost what the point is' serves as a point of departure in this section. I will admit that I struggled, especially in the early stages of Stronghold, to make sense of what I was observing. In Chapter 5, for instance, I discussed some of my misgivings about our political labour. My preliminary objectives in researching Vulcana's community projects centred on the narratives that emerged in the workshops, and how dealing with these narratives through performance could be a political act for the communities involved. I came into Stronghold informed by what I had witnessed in the Wizard of Auslan project, of the desire of the Deaf women to tell their stories through performance and gain self-actualisation. One of the women, Julie, shared with me that:

The story really reminded me of back when I was growing up, and having to struggle with education, and sort of almost not being accepted, and constantly finding barriers,

and there was a real inequality. And you know, life progressed, and I survived, but I really wanted to share that kind of story of having to learn speech therapy, and not being able to sign. There was a real background information that we wanted to show hearing people how Deaf people feel, about that every day, like finding those barriers. (see Lazaroo, 2014, p. 255)

But unlike in Wizard of Auslan, there did not seem to be a 'narrative' in the same sense emerging in Stronghold; the work did not focus on the participants' narratives and experiences of living with disability. My early reflections conveyed my own confusion as I sought for ways to understand the work:

I'm thinking that this first session was really to familiarise the facilitators with the space, the participants, and the work as it develops ... How will I define what constitutes a story? There seems to be strong tension points in trying to devise this community performance because I keep questioning how much space is picked up by participants in having their voices heard, ideas used, so that a story is told—but whose story is it? (PR 1, 18/7/2013)

I was so intent on finding stories and narratives, hoping that the telling of these stories would support my claim that the work was political. After the first Stronghold session, one of my questions to the Vulcana women was: 'What are the stories being told in this process? How are stories created? How are bodies storied in and through the creation of the work?' (personal communication, 22/7/2013). It appeared that I was relentless in trying to identify these narratives.

Yet, in that first set of reflections, I found evidence that I was beginning to acknowledge the need for letting go of my preoccupations. I wrote:

I sense a giving of openness to the unfolding of play ... How do we shift the frames in order to analyse the work that's being done? At this point, I think I really need to examine the complexities of the work—what is the rhythm/are the rhythms of the workshop? (PR 1, 18/7/2013)

My observation of an openness to play emerged as I witnessed a moment between Winnie and Celia as they danced their puppets among the leaves of the potted plants in the community hall. But now that I look back upon my

conversation with Lynda, I am reminded of how she had spoken about something other than wanting Deaf stories to be told:

It was a good opportunity to find out what you could do—and have that childlike sense of play. We don't have that. You know, when we lobbed that milk carton around there, just having fun and being giddy? How often do you see grown-ups having fun, and playing like that? Just for fun! (Lynda, 22/1/2013)

Lynda's recount spoke of the joy she felt sharing the playful space with the other women, and this sentiment echoes what Nicholson (2014) writes:

I am regularly struck by the optimism of the researchers, all of whom are finding new opportunities for joyful aesthetic encounters that gently unsettle the habitual rhythms of everyday life, offering new opportunities in which creative potential might be realised. (p. 339)

The unsettling of habitual rhythms are ruptures that are necessary to destabilise the status quo, and the 'power of joy [can be] an agent of transformation' (Boon & Plastow, 2004, p. 11).

In examining the space of joy in Stronghold, I began to encounter what I described as 'joyful chaos'. Nash (2005), writing about UK arts company Entelechy, asserts that their work aims at 'shifting the aesthetics of performance towards unpredictability, chance, chaos, and, perhaps the oxymoron of "controlled anarchy"' (p. 199). The term that I employ—joyful chaos—echoes Nash's 'controlled anarchy'; I had instinctively written 'joyful chaos' as an aside when I was reviewing my field notes from Day 4, a personal response to what I had observed in the workshop.

When I discussed the tension of representation in the previous chapter, I mentioned how I was excited by Lara's idea to have an army of clowns, hoping for a Bakhtinian (1968, 1973) upheaval of the social order. While I was disappointed that this idea did not come into being, a carnivalesque moment did emerge unintentionally. I see this moment as the facilitators employing what de Certeau (1984) calls 'tactics,' referring to how 'dominated groups' 'make do with what they have' (p. 18). Lev-Aladgem (2010) draws on de Certeau's theory, adapting it to discuss how co-communities 'make do' with theatre in order to meet their needs. For instance, she elaborates on how a co-community of

elderly participants appropriated theatre to 'confront the mask of ageing' (p. 15). She describes tactics as the 'art of the weak' (p. 10), contrasting it to strategies employed by those in power. Lev-Aladgem's discussion of tactics is mainly in relation to the disempowered groups she works with, but Snyder-Young (2013) writes how *artists* themselves can also make use of tactics, not just in terms of theatre techniques, but the 'resources of the institutions in which they are embedded for particular purposes' (p. 3).

Like Lev-Aladgem (2010), I also adapt de Certeau's idea of tactics to demonstrate how a carnivalesque moment resulted. In Chapter 4, I included the vignette 'Balloons are not welcome here' to highlight the impact of spatial contracts involved in applied performance, and how the politics of space can result in feelings of vulnerability, making us question the concepts of 'right' and 'belonging,' and of the insider-outsider continuum. The following narrative follows chronologically from 'Balloons' and addresses how the Vulcana facilitators had to 'make do' after being told that the loud noises from bursting balloons would adversely affect the other members in the community hall.

#### Bring in the circus parade

'That's the whole workshop then.' The disappointment in Lara's voice is detectable. She, Celia, and I are huddled on the floor, listening to the air escape from the balloons as we deflate them one by one. With barely 15 minutes to the start of the workshop, Lara and Celia quickly discuss an alternative plan. Lara mentions that she's brought along a bag full of instruments and suggests that the session could focus on creating some music instead.

The participants begin to arrive, and as they do, Lara and Celia offer them a selection of musical instruments. I turn around to see that Bryce has already chosen two small cymbals, and that he's busy clanging away at them. I notice the jerky movements as he brings the metal discs together, producing a distinct *tang tang* noise. Close by, Bev has some handbells with her, which she's shaking ever so slightly.

My attention gets drawn to a figure appearing through the doorway. Eva has arrived. She stands around, looking slightly apprehensive about what's happening around her.

'Hey Eva,' I say, going up to her. 'Would you like to go over to the bag and choose an instrument?'

'Yes, I would.' Eva's tone sounds formal and polite, yet retains its characteristic melody. She picks up a tambourine from Lara's bag, and heads over to sit in one of the chairs that's been set up.

By now most of the participants have arrived, and have formed a circle in the middle of the space. Lara puts on some circus music, which plays on loop in the background. Mark is sitting near me, and has a small drum with him. I watch him drumming his fingers softly over the skin of the drum. Smiling, he bops his head along to the beat. Occasionally, he turns to Lily, the woman who has come with him today, and laughs loudly, nodding emphatically to the music.

To my left, Celia is bending over to talk to Gillian, and I catch snippets of the conversation, '... next term ... Powerhouse ... Vulcana space ...' I notice that Bev's looking over at Celia and Gillian, as if listening in on the conversation.

The space is abuzz. The circus music runs incessantly, one track leading on to the next. There is talking, laughing, and the clanging, jangling, and thumping of all sorts of instruments being played. Amidst the noise, Ricky arrives.

'Good day, Ricky! How are you?' Lara calls out to him.

'Good!' Ricky chirps back.

'Good? We're thinking about a circus parade and circus parade music today. We're wondering whether, as a group, we can make our own circus parade.'

Ricky looks away silently, and Celia adds, 'And how we can move and play our instruments at the same time.'

Lara turns towards Gillian and wonders, 'So Gillian, we're moving and playing. You need a one-handed instrument so you can move your chair as well as shake your shaker. Do you think it's possible together? Move and shake?'

'I'll give it a go,' Gillian says.

'Give it a go. Great.' Lara looks up from Gillian and sees Gwen sitting against the wall near the kitchen. 'Gwen's taken herself away,' Lara observes aloud, and then repeats, 'Gwen's taken herself away.'

'Do you wanna try something Ricky?' Celia asks, noticing that Ricky's without an instrument.

In his usual eager way, Ricky quips, 'Sure, what have you got?'

Lara digs around in her bag, showing Ricky the remaining instruments. She demonstrates each item as she picks it up. 'We've the bells,' Lara says, giving the set of handbells a quick shake. Then she holds up a quirky object that looks like a set of colourful hands. She shakes it and the plastic hands slap against one another rapidly, making a series of sharp, funny, clacking sounds. Celia laughs heartily in response.

'We've got the triangle,' Lara suggests, hitting it with its accompanying short metal rod. *Ting! Ting!* 'What do you think will be okay for you?'

Ricky pauses for a bit, considering the array of instruments. 'The triangle,' he affirms.

Lara hands the triangle and metal rod over to Ricky, explaining, 'You've got to try and carefully hold the string, and then, metal to metal.'

Ricky gives the triangle a small tap with the metal rod, and it produces a soft, yet distinct sound.

Noise continues to fill the space. Over the top of it, Lara calls out, 'Now can we see if can move around the space?'

As quickly as we can, Liza, Lara, Celia, and I begin to move the plastic chairs out of the way, preparing the space for the circus parade.

'How about you leading the parade?' I overhear Lara asking Eva.

'Okay!' Eva's response is immediate, her tone expressing a delighted eagerness.

'Eva's gonna lead the parade, I think!' Lara announces.

As Lara continues to try to organise the seemingly disorganised group around her, Eva comes up to me with her tambourine. In a quiet voice, she asks me where she should start from.

I pause, silently considering the weight of how I choose to frame my answer. 'Wherever you wanna start. Why don't *you* choose where you want to start?'

Eva looks at me, unblinking. Then, Lara swings by, calling out loudly to the group, 'We're all gonna follow Eva!' Lara points to the other side of the room, to a gap in the circle of bodies. 'Over there,' Lara signals to Eva. Eva immediately moves off in the direction that Lara has pointed her in.

The parade kicks off, I step back, bearing witness to what is unfolding in the room before me. The wooden floorboards creak and squeak under all the movement. A worker from the community hall on the way to the dining area stops in her tracks to behold the parade. I try to work out her expression, and that slight flicker in her eyes. *Amusement? Surprise?*

Mark passes me, holding onto his drum with one hand, and tapping on it with the other. He pauses briefly as he turns towards me. He laughs, and points to his eye, as if to tell me, 'Are you watching me? Take my photograph!' Then he beckons for me to join in, as he continues marching in the circle.

Lara's voice sings over the noise, 'Last week, we were working the chairs and making them do circles! Even within the parade, we might have turning chairs!'

Lara's suggestion seems to ignite something, and both Gillian and Bryce simultaneously start to turn their chairs in small circles. As Bryce spins his chair around in the middle of the wheeling/marching parade, Celia encourages him, 'Whatever you want, Bryce! Keep going!'

'Louder! Louder!' Lara shouts, and suddenly there's a vigorous shaking of instruments. Mark bangs his drum in front of Lily's face and they both burst out laughing. Ricky gives his triangle a couple of hard hits and its high-pitched *ting* echoes through the space. (FN 4, 8/8/2013)

Celia observed how in the Vulcana space, 'the possibilities are so much broader'. She reflected on the community hall, and that 'once we set up the circle, that's it—that's the space, there's no more' (WD 3, 1/8/2013). The difference in the physical size and structure of the two spaces limited what could be done in the community hall. By bringing the circus parade into the community hall, however, it led to a moment of joyful chaos. As I stood on the

perimeter witnessing the circus parade, it felt to me as though the walls of the hall were being pushed back by the vibrations created. Before the Day 4 workshop began, the facilitators' idea to use the balloons had been intercepted; the sudden, startling sound of balloons potentially bursting had thus been prevented. In its place, however, a chaotic, sustained noise was created; it was a cacophonous blend of circus tunes, shouting, whooping, and the *clang-ting-badum* of instruments being played. When I shared this observation with Celia, she elaborated that 'the noise that we did in the parade, was, everybody responsible for their own noise' (Celia, 7/4/2015). Like Lev-Aladgem's (2010) conceptualisation of carnivalesque enactment in her applied performance work, I argue that this moment of becoming a circus parade can be framed as a process of inversion, where joyful chaos allowed the participants to achieve a 'temporary process of turning the world upside-down' (p. 66), of creating a noise and chaos in a structured space.

The emergence of a carnivalesque kind of joyful chaos was a result of the facilitators' initial plans being thwarted, a result of having to use 'tactics' to make-do in the space. Thompson (2009) also stresses that:

*Artists* [emphasis added] know the excitement or sense of fun that exudes from the best work but, in many contexts, they seem to be denied the right to celebrate or elaborate upon the inspiration it provides. At worst, this can lead to a field dominated by practitioners with a great knowledge of the issues to be communicated or awareness of the problems faced by the participants, but with little capacity ... for uniting a group in joy. (p. 118)

But for the Vulcana facilitators working in Stronghold, there was little of this sense of possessing 'great knowledge'. This is not to say, however, that the women had poor facilitation skills; rather, because of the relative newness of working with people with disabilities, there was no notion of the 'self-aggrandisement of the guru' (Conroy, 2009, p. 5). Both Lara and Celia often remarked how it was a learning journey for all of us, admitting their 'stammerings' throughout the whole process. It was, however, through this uncertainty and unknowing, that the facilitators became inspired by their own experiences of fun and joy. On Day 10, Lara decided to try something different with the group's vocal warm-ups by asking the participants to play with the

vowel sounds in their names. As she tries to explain to the group what she wants us to do, she is interrupted by Ricky.

### The beginnings of the vocal orchestra

'I think different with that,' Ricky cuts in, as Lara tries to explain her idea. 'I got a different word to say.'

'A different word? Which one?' Lara asks. I lean forward, intrigued by what Ricky has to offer.

'Hmm,' Ricky starts, then pauses. 'Hang on, let me think.' There is a short span of silence in the room as we wait for Ricky to gather his thoughts.

'Get comfortable,' Reuben's voice rumbles, breaking the quiet. Lara bursts out laughing.

'Wooooooooooooo!' Ricky yells out. His neck strains and his eyes bulge as he produces the loud, reverberating sound.

'That's a great sound!' Celia acknowledges. 'Can we all make that noise?'

'Ooooooooooooooh!' The room bursts into a loud cry. Ricky's encore is in an even higher pitch.

For five slow seconds, the sound echoes through the space. Then, Ricky slices the air in front of him with his fists. The chorus of *oohs* stops. Ricky's moment of playful spontaneity seems to trigger an idea for Celia. 'Maybe we can all make an ee sound,' she suggests. 'Who's gonna conduct us?'

Ricky springs forward in his seat. 'Oh! I can!'

'Okay,' Celia agrees. 'You conduct this one and maybe someone else can conduct the next one. So you have to start us, and you have to finish us.'

'You go first,' Ricky offers.

Celia seems to be inspired by another idea. 'So, maybe we could try something. Actually, this is good fun. If we all start with a sound—I'll be the conductor first.'

Ricky lets out a wheeze-squeal, 'Goh!'

'We're gonna start with *ah*. But when I go like this,' Celia lowers her arms and says in a soft voice, 'we're gonna go quiet.' She swoops her arms up again, 'And when I go like this, we're gonna go really loud!'

'When I go like that,' Celia makes a flourish with her arms and clenches her fists, 'we're gonna finish.'

After Celia does the first round of conducting, Eva takes over the role. There's a fierce look in her eyes. 'Ahhhhhhhhhhh!' Eva sings out, lifting her hands high. Everyone sings. Eva drops her arms down, and immediately, there's silence.

'You can do anything now,' Celia acknowledges, 'what else can you make us do?'

Eva gets back into the business of conducting. 'Okay. While the conductor's doing that,' Eva lifts her hands, 'everyone has to start with an *ah* sound.'

'Okay, great,' Celia comments. 'We'll try it.'

On Eva's cue, the chorus goes *Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh*. I look over at Ricky. His eyes are shut as he's singing the note, and he looks as though he's taking in the pleasure of the moment. There's a smile on his face. Eva cues the chorus to stop. 'Finish!' she announces. (FN 10, 10/10/2013)

In the discussions that followed the day's workshop, Lara questioned her idea to get the group to create vowel sounds with their voices, stating: 'I got overwhelmed, I don't know what to do anymore, where do I go from here?' (WD 10, 10/10/2013)

The spontaneity in which Ricky interrupted Lara's activity was a moment of rupture, as he took over the workshop facilitator role. In fact, Ricky's loud singing led to Celia's tapping into her own past experiences of fun and joy, as she said to Lara: 'Have you ever done the orchestra? The vocal orchestra? It's great fun.' (WD 10, 10/10/2013)

As Lara writes down the idea to include the vocal orchestra in the performance, another thought strikes her:

Lara: They're really quiet generally. I want them to be loud, but why do I want them to be loud?

Celia: So they can be heard, that's why, Lara. So that when Winnie says, 'Winnie' (in a small voice), I think it's about presence. We love it that they announce themselves in a way that they can hear, which makes them claim space ... But even so, it's a way of claiming the space. So, if they're not doing that (making a loud sound), what is that? How big is that? That's why when Winnie does, 'Winnie' (in a small voice), we don't know that she's there. It's a tiny space. And we want, as leaders of a workshop process that's working towards a performance that is empowering for those people, we want them to claim space, to be able to claim space on stage. And that's why, one way to claim space is go, 'Woooooaaaaah! Listen to me!' Because we always do. As soon as one of them goes, 'Woooooaaaaah!' we go 'Wow. That's great. There's someone there.' ... And also, allowing the possibility that it doesn't have to be voice, because someone like Howie can't be a loud-voice person, but what can he do in that space that is his 'loud' thing? (WD 10, 10/10/2013)

I discussed in the previous chapter how voice, in a normative sense, can be problematic in disability contexts. Celia's comment on being loud in the space acknowledged how the participants could use something other than voice to stake their claim. Celia commented how, through the process, 'we discovered the agenda of getting them to identify themselves on stage, that these performers announce *themselves*' (Celia, 7/4/2015). When the Stronghold participants stood in the middle of the space to present themselves, Winnie, whose voice often rose barely above a whisper, became loud as she stuck her arms straight through the hoop. We witnessed how Bev, who *expressed* in sounds, became loud as she slowly brought her hands up to the hoop, turned her head, and exhaled a breath. They presented themselves as performers in their own right in their own loud ways. Here I am reminded of the arguments made by Boon and Plastow (2004) who write that '[e]mpowerment is to do not with the amelioration of oppression and poverty *per se*, but with the liberation of the human mind and spirit,' and becoming 'conscious beings aware of and claiming voices' (p. 7; see also Chapter 2).

The following vignette is crafted from my field notes from Day 11; many of the participants were not present when the vocal orchestra was initiated on Day

10. In this extract, I trace how an idea that emerged from a moment of spontaneity and joy revealed even more political power.

### The vocal orchestra turns into the Noisemakers

'Great!' Lara says, as we finish off a round of musical statues. She tells the group that Celia has come up with an idea to create a vocal orchestra. Then she calls upon Bryce to mark the space, and gets the ensemble to move in around him. I move with Bev in close so that the group forms something of an arc.

'Was that fun, Bev?' I whisper to her, and she *expresses*.

Celia takes her place as conductor in front of the ensemble. 'You are the members of a very important orchestra,' she tells us. Ricky does one of his high-pitched sighs. Celia continues, 'And this is a world-premiere performance that we're doing.' Ricky lets out another loud sigh. 'Ah!' Celia says, picking up on Ricky's response. 'So, we can either, as an orchestra, you can use your voice, you can move your fingers. You can use your voice and your fingers. You can use your whole arm and your voice. *Whatever* you want to use. And I'm gonna be your conductor.'

Celia raises her arms. 'So when I go like this, we're making big noises!'

Immediately, Ricky breaks out into a loud falsetto, and is accompanied by other members of the newly-formed orchestra who make their own loud sounds.

Celia conducts us to go quieter, and there's a pitter-patter of hushed sounds. Celia suggests that we can make sounds on our tables, and she goes over to Bryce's table and taps her fingers gently on it. 'Shake your chair—whatever you want to,' Celia adds. 'So it's up to you, to decide how to interpret what I'm doing.' Celia brings her hands mid-height and starts rolling her tongue, making *r-r-r-r-r* noises. 'What could this be?' she asks.

Ricky jumps in. 'I know!' he exclaims.

'What?' Celia goes.

'The drum!' Ricky offers.

'Yup! It could be the drum—could be anything! So maybe at the beginning, we're just gonna practise by making very small sounds. How can you make small sounds?'

*Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*, a rustle goes through the space.

'Okay, it's getting bigger,' Celia's own voice increases in volume, as she raises her hands higher. The sound builds up in the space. From where I am, I can hear Bryce's voice, a few people over from me. Celia leads us in a series of loud and soft sounds. Next to me, I hear Bev humming.

'Great! Shall we try it again?' Celia calls aloud. 'When I bring my arms up—big sound. When I bring my arms down, make the sound come down, with my arms. Try it again?'

'Yes!' Ricky chirps.

Celia lifts her arms, and the vocal orchestra kicks into gear. Ricky goes into his falsetto, and Bryce lifts his arms as well as his voice. Gwen, with a huge grin on her face, rocks out in her chair. Our voices go up and down, like a vocal rollercoaster.

Celia adds in one more signal. 'When I bring my hands together,' she says, holding her hands close to her body, 'Silence. You ready? You watching me?'

'I'm listening!' Mavis, who doesn't see very well, calls out.

Our voices go up and down again as Celia lifts and lowers her arms. For a brief moment, she hovers in the middle range, and the ensemble produces an even-toned harmony. *Ooooh*, I hear Ricky singing. Celia makes us play more with our voices, leading us in quick volume changes, until it sounds like a faulty track record.

'Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep!' Mavis's loud voice sounds from the far end of the curve. She's picked up on the staccato sounds just before and is now adding her own interpretation of it.

'Perfect! That's great!' Celia praises.

'Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep!' Mavis continues. It sounds like the signal of a car reversing.

'Yes! We're gonna try and do what Mavis's doing,' suggests Celia, 'We're gonna try and make a noise like Mavis's making. To make that, it's gonna be—' Celia trails off. She moves her hands up and down one after the other, as if banging on a large keyboard. 'When I do this, you have to make the kind of noise Mavis's making.'

Instantly, Ricky breaks out in a loud *Woo-oo-oo-oo!*

'Yup! And when I hold it up, you're gonna make one long sound. And when I go like this,' Celia pretends to bang on the big keyboard again, 'You're gonna break the sound up. So shall we try that?'

Celia holds her arms up and the chorus breaks out into one loud sustained sound, a mixture of *Ahs* and *Oohs*. As Celia bangs away at the imaginary keyboard, the sound changes.

*Beep! Beep! Beep! Wup! Wup! Wup!*

The sound changes again, and it evens out into a loud *Ahhhhhhhhhh*. In the middle of the semi-circle, Gwen rocks out in her chair.

Celia brings her arms down and the noise slows down to a stop. Silence. Gwen stops rocking out.

We go on like this, alternating between loud and soft sounds, sustained and staccato sounds, until Celia brings it to a close.

'That was good! It got everybody's voices going, and if not voices, we've got arms going, all kinds of things going. That was great!' Celia praises. 'Okay, that was our first ... we don't have a name for our troupe, do we?'

Ricky snaps his fingers in excitement. 'Oh! I have it! The choir!'

'Which?' Celia asks, not hearing Ricky clearly.

'The choir!' Ricky repeats.

'The choir,' Celia echoes, considering the offer.

Lara reminds us, 'We're more than a choir. We've got circus and puppets.' Lara asks around the semi-circle if anyone has any ideas for a name.

Suddenly, Eva chips in. 'Noisemakers,' she says. Her tone doesn't scream *revelation*. She's said the word so matter-of-factly, that it could've easily passed unheard.

I pick up on the offer immediately. 'Noisemakers! Nice, Eva!'

A murmur rumbles through the group as they take in Eva's offer.

'Noisemakers. I like that,' Celia says. (FN 11, 17/10/2013)

Creating noise (verbal or in some other form) is political. As Tam (2010) acknowledges, bodily responses such as noise and laughter can be considered 'resistant and transgressive acts' (p. 189). Nicholson (2014), drawing on Spinoza, argues too that 'joyful encounters ... challenge the habits of power' (p. 337). We encountered this during Mark's moment on the trapeze, and the noise that emerged from him when his feet left the mat. The spirit of misrule thrives in the space of joy; by celebrating noise, and embracing the joyful chaos, the work can challenge the hegemonic view of many of the Stronghold participants as passive, silent, and on the margins. They become present.

Eva's naming of the group was extremely significant. In my reflections, which I shared with Vulcana, I wrote:

Eva's offer for the name of the group was something that I think has more political power than she probably even realises—the Noisemakers. I think that also ties in to the whole 'political labour' of what I'm examining, and what theatre work like this might seek to achieve. We make noise because we want to be heard, and we desire to be heard. The latent power that this 'noise' has can challenge boundaries, shake expectations, and make people see the world (and these people) differently.

Celia's response to my reflections was:

I think The Noisemakers is a great title. We all are struck by the new sounds made by people who have been silent. But we also need to see the 'noise' as not limited to sound but to movement and the taking up of space. When people

with very little movement raise their arms in the air and wiggle their knees and ankles we notice. (personal communication, 21/10/2013)

### **Space(s) of waiting**

The previous section details how noise is a political statement, one that can emerge when joy is privileged. Noise and noisemaking are ruptures because they threaten the stability of organised structures, of people who often remain silent, or who are expected to be silent. Here, I extend my discussion into another kind of rupture, one which I describe as a space of waiting.

In the last chapter, I wrote about the notion of ‘stammering,’ a concept that I borrowed from Thompson (2009) to articulate our anxieties as facilitators and mine as researcher. Thompson’s idea on stammering builds on Gumbrecht’s call for ‘a pause before we begin to make sense’ (cited in Thompson, 2009, pp. 132-133). Here, I propose that we see these spaces of waiting as pauses; these pauses are ruptures in the sense that they upset the ‘well-planned workshop,’ leaving it open to uncertainty. But these pauses are also liminal spaces that surprise us, inspire us, move us. What possibilities emerge when we yield to these ruptures?

Many revealing and significant moments occurred in these pauses, in these spaces of waiting, when the facilitators were trying to make sense of what to do when things did not go as planned, or when the energies seemed to have lulled, or when we were waiting, uncertain if participants were going to arrive. In Chapter 4, I described how Helen made the suggestion to have a wander around the Vulcana space, which then led to what I witnessed as a transformation of it. In the preceding chapter, I examined the tensions that arose when the facilitators asked Eva to move around the space like a snake, revealing a ‘dynamic of authority’ (Nellhaus & Haedicke, 2001, p. 15). The circus parade, with its frenetic energy of joyful chaos, unsettled the kind of stasis that we observed to be a quality of the community hall space.

But waiting was not always viewed as something that was welcome; at points it appeared to be deemed an undesirable quality, a period of passive inactivity:

Helen: When [something] takes too long to go round, those guys just withdraw more because they aren’t being

stimulated for a long period of time. So I think that closes them down a little bit more. (WD 3, 1/8/2013)

In the conversations that followed, Helen's words continued to resurface.

Celia: We had a bit of a chat after the workshop, and Helen's thing about them [the participants] just sitting, waiting, those people in wheelchairs, they're just sitting, waiting for everybody ...

Lara: To push them.

Celia: You know, they wait. And in the community hall space, they do a lot of ... it looks like they do art and craft work, which is very much stationary. They sit in the same space every day ... and we've been stuck in that pattern at the community hall, you know, they're coming in, [it] starts in a circle, [and] stays that way for the whole thing. (WD 7/8/2013)

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Lara: Helen made this comment, saying, 'These guys are always waiting, waiting for somebody else to do things, so don't make them wait. Don't make them wait anymore.' So I was, like, okay—that was something I try to do, [which] is to keep them stimulated.

...

Bec: That whole theme of waiting is really interesting.

Celia: It's very interesting.

Bec: I'm sure Celia is gonna be on that, if she's not already (laughs). I bet ... you must be thinking about that.

Celia: About the waiting?

Bec: Yeah. It's such a strong theme in their lives, and it's a thing you could potentially play with, you know. (WD 12/9/2013)

I wish to revisit the notion of crip time that I wrote about in Chapter 5, where I discovered the need to destabilise my sense of normative time in order to be more open to the dialogues that were happening in the room. I had to wait in

that liminal space that was blossoming, to listen attentively to the slow rhythms that Bryce and Bev were offering me in their puppet act.

Early in the project, I noted in my personal reflections that Liza had told Lara how she had noticed that participants would 'just switch off' (PR 2, 25/7/2013) in other workshops when the facilitator would go too slowly. Are we able to confidently tell the difference between time that is 'too slow' and crip time? Is there such a thing as time that is too slow? Is (the facilitator) going slowly an act of accommodation or condescension? Perhaps we need to allow crip time and people who live by it to enter into our affective spaces, into our affective labour. As I reviewed our discussions and my reflections, I found traces of an awareness of the need to destabilise normate time:

This creative process has to be taken at a much slower pace. (PR 1, 18/7/2013)

The rhythms [in the workshop] change from slow and relatively quiet, to a whole flurry of activity, interspersed with moments of stillness and waiting. (PR 2, 25/7/2013)

Lara: I just throw a million ideas in there, and I'm like, I don't know what I'm gonna do next! ... And then I go, just slow down. (WD 6, 22/8/2013)

Tensions, however, can arise in applied performance contexts when facilitators need to adhere to specific time frames, especially if funding bodies allocate only a certain number of hours for the workshops/creative process/performance. If a performance outcome is part of the 'contract,' facilitators are even more pressed to make full use of the time to generate material for the performance. But when we are able to slow down and wait, things begin to unfold. Lara reflected after the Day 8 workshop that she realised the importance of waiting:

Lara: I kinda get caught up in the *just keep it moving* thing, and I rarely think about, like before, when Bryce was saying his name, I felt I had to stop [someone else from starting the performance] ...everyone had to stop and let (breaks off mid-sentence). You feel the energy the group is to move on to the next person. Like, everyone just stop and wait. (WD 8, 5/9/2013)

She recalled what happened during our ritual check-in that afternoon when she had asked everyone to call out their names. Howie had been the last person to offer his name, and Lara was unsure how and if he would make an offer. The rest of the group had been engaged in a raucous circle; names were cried out, *yips* were made, Ricky announced his name in a loud mock-yawn. And then the circle became silent when Liza said: 'What about Howie?' A few seconds passed before Howie *expressed*, and when he did, the group echoed, 'Ah,' in support. On one hand, reading this moment within the lens of feminist theatre practice is a reminder of the complexities of silence, especially silence in a feminist space. According to Butterwick and Selman (2003), '[s]ilences can be respectful, oppressive, or a site of power; they can also be experienced as places of fear and a retreat from participation' (p. 18). Lara expressed her uncertainty about Howie's silence:

Certainly I'm not hitting it all the time [getting it 'right'], but I'm quite aware when I see someone struggling. Like, when we were all waiting for Howie to say his name, I was like, *Is he gonna say it, or ... he can't say, No, I'm not gonna say it, stop staring at me.* But then, he came back and he said something. So I was like, we just have to wait. (WD 8, 5/9/2013)

Liza added her thoughts about this space of waiting: 'And those moments are quite precious. The moments of stillness. Because they were all present' (WD 8, 5/9/2013).

Other 'precious moments' revealed themselves in that necessary space of waiting. When Bryce was asked if he could lead the group to move around the space, the slow pace at which he moved his wheelchair set the rhythm for the rest of the group. Celia commented: 'The pace is determined by Bryce. And there was something beautiful about that slow motion'; Liza called it 'a meditation, a moving meditation' (WD 11, 17/10/2013).

Bec had not been present when the 'wheelchair ballet' was first developed. When she joined the group on Day 14, Bec asked Bryce if his motorised wheelchair could move a little faster. But the following week, her reflections showed that she had realised the importance of slowness.

Bec: I liked the fact that last week, with Bryce, he can only move so fast. And I kinda like that, it's like well, this is how

it is for him, you know. If it takes this long, it takes this long. And I think that's not a bad thing for people to experience. (WD 14, 31/10/2013)

At the post-performance discussion, Bec once again stressed upon this space of waiting:

You know what? The audience can wait, because this is how it is for them [the performers]. This is exactly how it is for them. So it's important—we wanna remind the audience that this is how it is.

Celia's comments that followed reflected how pauses and stammerings can yield ineffable moments:

It was one of those rewarding improvisation moments. Because that's what it was—us improvising around Bryce. And you know, sometimes they work, sometimes they don't, depending on what Bryce offers. But he offered this **thing** that we all managed to find. And you go, Oh! We've all found **it!** We've all found the **thing!** Which is a **beautiful** moment when you feel **it**. (WD 4/12/2013)

These expressions of beauty and beautiful moments relate once again to Winston's (2013) arguments. He reminds us that beauty is 'a relational experience' (p. 136), that '[w]e will not *know* it to be beautiful unless we *feel* it to be so' (p. 137, emphasis in original).

### **Intimate spaces**

The theatrical events created ... are generally in the mode of what I call 'theatre in a closed circle'. In such a theatrical event there is no separation between the proto-performance and the performance; rather, it is a single creative process which generates a workshop as performance, based on an actual, immediate and intimate encounter. (Lev-Aladgem, 2010, p. 15)

It needs an ongoing flow of contact, touch, questioning and affirmation, a flow of love. There is juice in disability culture work. (Kuppers, 2011, p. 4)

As I have written previously, my early preoccupations with examining the work centred on how to articulate an overt political objective for Stronghold, to

discern how participants articulated their own narratives for a performance. Once I had learned to listen more attentively to the rhythms in the room, I realised that much of what was feeding the work were the intimate spaces that emerged. Hence, the preceding epigraphs serve as a reminder of my own position as researcher in this work and of the proximity in which I am involved. Because of this proximity, Thompson (2009) argues that 'we are to acknowledge that affective transaction in our engagement and criticism of the work' (p. 133). By inviting the reader(s) into the intimate (affective) space of Stronghold, I echo what Thompson maintains in his work, that is, 'to draw proper attention to those bits of practice that ... are largely ignored' (p. 115), and by my extension, those bits of practice that never make it to an audience (see also Chapter 3 of this thesis).

Returning to Kupper's (2011) notion of 'touch' mentioned above, I look at touch as an element of intimate space, examining the relevance of touch in the fields of physical performance, applied performance, and disability. As a physical performer involved in circus arts, I am accustomed to making physical contact with other performers. The hands of a fellow performer on my hip bones can offer both pain and support. I rely on another's touch as I am physically lifted off the ground, but I am also aware of the pressure those hands make on my body, the sensation of a dull ache as my weight presses into them.

In applied performance settings, however, physical touch can potentially recall unwelcome memories of trauma. Rivers (2013) for instance explains how in his Playback Theatre work in Occupied Palestine, performers hardly made physical contact with one another when representing violent acts. He argues that such stylised representations allow for 'a balance of emotional connection and critical distance' (p. 170). In some of Vulcana's other community projects, physical touch became a sensitive issue as well. In Small Change, another project in which I was involved, the notion of sexual harassment was addressed in the creative process. As we worked on a stylised scene about sexual harassment, some of the women (who were also involved in circus arts and therefore used to physical contact in this context) chose to sit out of the exploration. The scene involved us standing in a line, while one performer moved behind us and placed her hands on our shoulders, arms, and thighs. At the end of the creative piece, one of the women who had volunteered to play

the role of the ‘perpetrator’ apologised to us and said that it made her feel ‘yucky’ (Small Change, 14/9/2014).

A feminist-practice perspective on touch reminds us that:

because women frequently experience violation of their physical boundaries by being touched, activities involving touching cannot be viewed as gender-neutral. Regardless of how safe a given context may seem, women may still bring strong feelings about having their bodies manipulated (Aston, 1999, p. 45).

Price and Shildrick (2002) provide an overview on how ‘touch’ operates in areas of disability, and draw attention to what they call the ‘clinical encounter,’ a ‘power relation between physicians and disabled people’ (p. 70). They state that in these encounters, it is the body of the disabled person (or patient) that is mainly focused upon, but remind us that ‘any encounter [is] an encounter between at least two bodies’ (p. 70). Price and Shildrick articulate that ‘in touching, we become more exposed to each other, immersed in each other’ (p. 71), and thus align with Manning’s (2006) assertion that: ‘The proposition is that touch—every act of reaching toward—enables the creation of worlds. This production is relational. I reach out to touch you in order to invent a relation that will, in turn, invent me’ (p. xv). In *Stronghold*, this concept of touch lent itself to the intimate spaces created, to the ‘creation of worlds’ and the creation of meaning in the work. The sensation of touch, something that often lends itself to an intimate encounter, can also bear political weight. Manning (2006) explains further that:

At its most political, to reach toward is to create a concept for unthinking the individual as a discrete entity. Sensing bodies ... are worlding bodies that are one with the potential of movement. To become is to move toward something that is not yet. (p. xviii)

The following section becomes more reflective as I trace how touch operated in three separate moments, each focussing on a different *Stronghold* participant.

### A touch in three encounters

#### *Encounter one*

Day 11 of Stronghold. My ferry pulls up at the terminal and I disembark, with 10 minutes to spare before the workshop begins. It's been 2 weeks since a miscommunication resulted in more than half of the Stronghold participants not turning up for the workshops. As I reach the Stores Building, the welcome sight of a big white van greets me. I breathe an inward sigh of relief—the van means that our participants have arrived.

I quickly trot into the building, but wait outside the studio for the Open Access users to leave. As I stand in the corridor, Bryce moves past me. 'Hi Bryce!' I call out, feeling especially happy to see him.

'Hey ...' he replies, looking me in the eye.

Bryce makes his way into the studio, and I follow behind him, leaving my bag near the door on the way in. I take notice as Bryce sits in the middle of the space, staring up at the sheer height of the studio. Lara enters and starts handing out hula hoops to those who are already here, as we wait for more to arrive. I grab a large red and yellow hoop for myself, and start spinning it around my waist.

We wait, standing/sitting in a misshapen circle. We explore different ways to move with our hoops. Celia suggests balancing them on our noses and I attempt to do so, only to catch Bryce smiling at my antics. My mind suddenly flashes back to just a few minutes prior, drawing up images of Lara poking her body in and out of the hoop. *What about bodies that can't go in and out of hoops?* The thought crosses my mind.

'Bryce, see if you can reach through the hoop,' I hear myself saying, as I reach through my own large hoop. Bryce looks at me. With his right hand, he holds onto his smaller, blue and gold hoop. He extends his left hand through the hoop, in my direction. Our eyes connect through the space between the hoops.

Another thought crosses my mind and I try to add another layer to the image we've just created. I reach through my hoop towards Bryce's outstretched arm. Our hands touch through the hoops. I feel the cool, fleshiness of Bryce's fingers as they press against my thin, bony ones. (FN 11, 17/10/2013)

As I now look back at my field notes from Day 4, I am conscious of my stammerings in the earlier encounter between our bodies:

I firmly stick each end of the pipe-cleaner into a white polystyrene ball. Turning to Bryce, I say, 'Maybe this will be your puppet, Bryce?' He looks at me, gives a little nod, and smiles.

As I move to fit the newly-created Anything Puppet over Bryce's fingers, I begin to feel a little nervous. *How much can he move his fingers so that I can fit the pipe-cleaner around them? Will I hurt him if I pry his fingers apart just enough for me to get the puppet around them?*

With these thoughts buzzing, I ask, 'Can I use your hand?' I lean over slightly so that I can place the puppet onto Bryce's hand. Slowly and carefully, I try to weave the pipe-cleaner in-between the fingers of Bryce's right hand. As I bring my face closer to his hand, I catch a faint, sweet, milky scent, and I notice a yellowish-brown stain between his fingers. (FN 4, 8/8/2013)

Price and Shildrick (2002) maintain that there is a need for acknowledging 'irreducible difference,' but also caution the need for maintaining the other person's 'feelings of security and ease' (see p. 71). While they write in the context of the relationship between disabled people and carers, I find their words resonating in my role as researcher/co-facilitator. I cannot know how my touch affected Bryce, but I am conscious of my own bodily knowings as our fingers connected. It had taken me more than half the span of the project to allow myself this connection; admittedly, I had been too hesitant, too afraid of a physical encounter. What happens when we allow our (different) bodies to touch and connect in the work? Does it actually say something more about our own (facilitator/non-disabled person) sense of awareness that the 'intimate' space affords us? Does it bring to light possibilities of what can be created when we let go and stop apologising?

### *Encounter two*

Day 12. I decide to sit on the floor. Ricky wheels himself over next to me. I glance outside and see dark clouds looming.

'Oh, I hope it doesn't rain,' I moan.

'Yes it will,' Ricky tells me directly.

'No!' I moan again.

Ricky grins. 'Yes it will.'

I make a face. Ricky suddenly holds his arms out, and I recognise that gesture: he's offering a hug. Either he's offering one, or he's asking me for one. I decide to shift the reading of the gesture.

'High five,' I say, and I reach upwards to give his hand a friendly slap. Instead of the brief hand-to-hand contact I'm expecting, Ricky grabs hold of my hand as it connects with his.

I'm inspired by this moment. 'Pull me up, pull me up,' I say to Ricky. Ricky flexes the muscles in his arms and pulls up against the weight of my body. Holding just enough of my own weight, I allow Ricky to pull me up to a standing position. We do this a few more times, and I begin to think how this repetitive act becomes almost like a dance. (FN 12, 24/10/2013)

Some feminist disabled scholars would 'demand an acknowledgment of the bodyliness associated with disability, of the pain, tiredness and limitations that affect individuals' (Price & Shildrick, 2002, p. 67). In *Stronghold*, we certainly acknowledged and accounted for how different bodies expressed their 'bodyliness'. Ricky's many exclamations of soreness were reminders for Lara and Celia to pause, to encourage the *participants* to pause, and to stretch our/their bodies (FN 10, 10/10/2013). But what if I had allowed my acknowledgement of his bodyliness and 'limitations' (his constant sighs and expressions of tiredness) to prevent us from exploring possibilities in space? The touch, Ricky's grasping of my hand, had led us to spontaneously create this dance.

### *Encounter three*

Day 11. Lara, Celia, and I hand out the rod puppets to the performers. Some of them are reuniting with their puppets after more than a month of not seeing them. Lara suggests that everyone tries to find a voice for their puppets. 'What kind of voice can these guys make?' Lara wonders aloud.

'What kind of voice does your puppet have, Ricky?' I ask.

Ricky clears his throat, leaving me in a moment of suspense. 'Ahhhhhhhhhh!' he sings, in a loud, clear voice.

'It's a singing puppet,' I muse, and Ricky smiles in response.

Over the top of our conversation, Lara tells the group that their puppets may make noises instead of words. I leave Ricky and walk over to Gwen, who is holding her rod puppet close to her chest. Her body is turned away slightly.

'Hi,' I say, using the nasally voice that I've created for Spotty, my puppet. I try to engage Gwen in the play. I try a few times without any reciprocation. I recount the numerous times Gwen has ignored me, and am about to dismiss the possibility of an interaction. But in a moment that takes me by surprise, Gwen breaks into a grin, hugs her puppet even more tightly, and gives it a kiss.

'Oh!' I exclaim, momentarily forgetting my Spotty voice, 'you kissed your puppet!'

Returning to my Spotty voice, I ask Gwen, 'Can you give *me* a kiss?' I bring my puppet close to Gwen.

Gwen leans forward and plants a loud kiss on Spotty's head. She kisses Spotty three more times, then spies Liza nearby. 'Oi!' Gwen calls out to Liza, giggling. (FN 11, 17/10/2013)

Celia commented on Gwen kissing her puppet during our post-session discussion, remarking that she found it 'interesting'. In response, Liza shared with us:

Yes, in other workshops, she's enjoyed it when there was some kind of doll, because she's always loved the nurturing side, you know. It brings out that role in her, that side of her. (WD 11, 17/10/2013)

The touch between Gwen and the puppets revealed an aspect of Gwen that we would likely not have come to know. Again, the intimate space of the workshops afforded us the opportunity to extend our understanding of one another. Here, through this idea of touch, we saw the power of affect, and how such encounters in the work can produce 'new [emphasis added] affective and embodied connections' (Zembylas, 2007, p. 19).

Drawing again on Manning (2006), I believe that touch can allow us into these intimate spaces:

Touch is not ... a bordered practice: we know our bodies to exist always outside of their skins, beyond our-selves, in excess of our three-dimensionality ... In reaching out to touch you, I entice you to become a medium of expression. I ask you to participate. I invite you to experience. As my sensation translates itself to you, you immediately convey to me a response to this touch. (p. 51)

Why were these three encounters of touch (among others not included here) significant in the work? Did it lead to any radical politics being discovered? Perhaps what is more important, is the commitment to the 'act of sharing ... rather than the content of any particular exchange' (see McKelvey, 2013, p. 565).

Kuppers (2014) writes how through dance, the 'wheelchair user ... wheel[s] and swerve[s] together with non-disabled dancers, creating scenes full of energy, beauty, and immediate appeal' (p. 114). Similarly, touch can create new encounters between different bodies, encounters that too have 'energy, beauty, and immediate appeal'. Touch, however, needs to occur safely, and as Manning (2006) explores, 'without violence' (p. 50). I have earlier articulated how touch can reignite painful memories. When we work in applied performance (and disability) contexts, we welcome people into intimate spaces; in doing so, we strive to make these intimate spaces safe.

#### When safe space is not enough

'We'll see how slow we can move,' Lara tells the group. 'We'll make it that the wheelchairs have to go quite slow with the music, and if you're walking, then your body is also moving with the music.'

We leave our ritual check-in circle and begin to move throughout the Vulcana space. Celia moves with Howie, Lara with Gwen, Bec with Bev, and Liza with Mavis. The music is a slow, procession-like tune. I walk alongside Ricky, who grins back at me. During this movement-dance, we trace the paths created by other performers, copy their movements, and weave in and out between one another. As we pass one another, we say Hello, or *express*.

The music changes, and this time, it's more upbeat. Our bodies continue to move through the space. Over on the other side of me, Gwen lets out a loud whoop. Eva, Tina, and Winnie, who are holding a large white ball each, weave in and out of the bodies-in-chairs, like, as Bec describes, small fish avoiding the bigger fish.

The music comes to an end, and Celia calls out, 'Shall we stop for a second?' The ensemble comes in closer, forming a more intimate cluster. I look over at the clock on the wall; it's just before 1.30pm. Celia opens up the discussion to the group: 'What did people like about that? Were there things that people liked?'

Both Eva and Ricky start talking at the same time.

'I liked moving the ball the way I wanted,' Eva says, 'I was going like this.' She holds the ball up with one hand. 'High up, like that, and walking fast.'

'You were doing great,' Lara praises Eva. 'Different levels. I really liked the levels you were working on, it was really good.'

I catch a small smile play over Eva's lips. Celia adds her own praise of Tina's dancing, to which a chorus of '*yeahs*' erupts. 'What about the wheelchairs?' Celia turns her question to the other participants.

Ricky cuts straight in. 'It was good because *you* were following *me*.' A ripple of laughter goes through the group.

Celia turns to Mavis, asking her what felt good for her. Mavis shares that she enjoyed playing with the hoop before the workshop began, and simply lifting it up over herself.

'And in the feeling of being pushed around in the wheelchair,' Celia continues, 'does it feel good to be pushed in a circle?'

'Yeah,' Mavis replies, without any hesitation. Before Celia can finish the next part of her question, Mavis interjects, 'I wish I was able to do it outdoors ...you know what I mean? By myself. But it's hard because I'm frightened, with other wheelchair people around me. Frightened ... I'm frightened that I might bump into them.'

Lara asks, 'And did you feel like you were going to bump into someone else, or did you feel safe?'

There is a short pause while we wait for Mavis's response. 'A little bit frightened ... and safe.'

It seems as if there's a collective exhale by the facilitators. Another brief pause follows, and then Mavis adds, 'Safe with the beautiful one [Liza] behind me.' There's a chorus of laughter, and Ricky gives a little cheer.

'That's good to know that you feel safe,' Lara says, 'because for us, we know that we're just wheeling the wheelchair that you have, so it's not like we're moving you; we're moving the chair to help the chair to make you dance. So we're kinda like taking ... *permission* to help to dance.' (FN 12, 24/10/2013)

Mavis's words, 'A little bit frightened ... and safe' reaffirmed the work. After the workshop, the facilitators talked about that moment as an important one for them:

Lara: It was good, that comment, about Mavis feeling a bit scared, and a bit safe.

Bec: Yeah, it was good that you reiterated that as well, like you clarified [by] saying, 'Well it's good that you feel safe'; because I was a bit like, *Oh, I don't wanna really focus on her feeling a bit scared*. But it's great that she's being honest with that, so it's great that you went, 'Yeah, that's good, because we want everyone to feel safe.'

Lara: I was thinking, does she mean that she never gets to wheel her own chair anywhere? I was thinking, *I wonder if that means ... she feels unsafe sometimes with the chair* ...

Celia: I mean, we all know that exercise where you get led with your eyes closed, and get challenged to run, or to ... trust. And that's her whole life ... she has to do that. (WD 12, 24/10/2013)

The construction of 'safe space' is a familiar refrain in much applied performance work. Hunter (2008) acknowledges the importance of the physical and metaphorical concept of safe space, tracing its ontology to feminist discourse. In Hunter's conceptualisation of safe space, which is based on her

work as an applied theatre practitioner and academic, she provides a 'four-part catalogue' of how safe space functions in performance settings:

- (a) physical considerations to 'protect the human body in that environment';
- (b) a time during which discriminatory activities, expressions, and policies of inequity are excluded;
- (c) making the space comfortable and familiar; and
- (d) encouraging creation and experimentation while dealing with aesthetic risk; there is a need to negotiate the 'tension between known (safe) processes and unknown (risky) outcomes'. (p. 8)

According to Yergeau, Brewer, Kerschbaum, Price, and Salvo (2013, cited also in Koppers, 2014), the idea of a 'safe space' is not always sufficient, specifically in disability contexts. As the authors argue:

no space is ever truly safe for all possible users/participants ... The term *safer* also encourages an attitude of improvement and the idea that creating accessible spaces is a process of evolving attitudes and practices, rather than an unattainable end goal in which a space is fully welcome and accessible to all people at all times. (n.p., emphasis in original)

In Stronghold, a space that was 'safe' one day could be 'unsafe' another. In Chapter 4, I reflected how, on Day 3, Mark commanded and transformed the space, and how his approaching and getting on the trapeze became a reterritorialisation of a circus space that often houses fit, muscular bodies. Here, I track a change in Mark's relationship to the Vulcana space; in the end, Mark pulled out of the project and the performance.

Day 7. I pause in the middle of my hula hooping, and gaze out through the half-open roller shutters. I spot Mark in the car park. He's half inside and half outside a car, and he's shaking his head. His support worker, Mario, is talking to him, and I imagine their conversation: Mario is asking Mark if he'd like to go into the Stores Building, and Mark is refusing.

Mario comes to the studio soon after, and stands in the doorway. I can't quite decipher the look on his face, but it seems half frustrated, half apologetic. He tells us that

Mark's 'not feeling it' today, and that he's sorry. (FN 7, 29/8/2013)

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Day 11. It's 12.40 when Mark enters the space. It's been 2 weeks since I've seen him, the last time being when we had our final session in the community hall. Now he's standing with his support worker for the day, Lily, but he doesn't come over to compare heights, the way he usually does.

'He's feeling a bit shy today,' Lily says, by way of explanation.

'Welcome back, Mark,' says Lara encouragingly as she approaches Mark and Lily. 'Come on in, join us!'

Mark continues to stand in the same spot, his expressions switching between laughter and whimpers. He looks painfully withdrawn. Eventually, he leaves the space with Lily. (FN 11, 17/10/2013)

We tried to understand possible reasons for Mark's withdrawal.

Celia: There's something about the space that's shifted, because he'd such a good time when he came last term ...

Liza: And then last year as well. But last year was very different, because what we were doing was [mainly] circus skills—they were up in the trapeze, they were using hoists, [Helen] was there with the ropes, and there was a lot of one-on-one attention doing all that. Whereas this is very ... the whole scenario's very different: there is a lot more team and interaction, and dynamics between them. I'll put my finger to that.

Lara: Well, the day [Day 3] that he came to the space and not many people [were there yet], and he got to have a go on the trapeze ... he had a great time—until all the [others] came, and they kind of took over the space, and he just withdrew. (WD 11, 17/10/2013)

Kuppers (2011) reflects on a piece of work she was creating with her group, and how 'windy London intruded when we propped open the door to let air in' (p. 40). Through her words I am reminded of other times when the safe

space we had sought to create was 'intruded'. A patch of sun shining through a window at the community hall. The heat coming into contact with the rubbery surface of a balloon. The resulting burst of a balloon that startled Bev. Numerous times, the wind passing through would slam doors shut. Once, the sudden bang caused Gillian to jump in shock, spilling tea on herself.

And now, Mark. Certainly, there could have been other reasons that contributed to this change. Nonetheless, space was a potential factor. The Vulcana facilitators and Liza speculated that a shift in the metaphorical space could have accounted for the change in Mark's participation. As much as a safe space—in Hunter's (2008) terms—was cultivated, it could not be guaranteed that it remained that way. For Mavis, her comment on feeling both frightened and safe responded to the idea that there was an element of 'risk' with the moving bodies in the space, yet it also suggested how she trusted Liza to keep her safe from bumping into other people. How could we have made the space 'safer' for Mark? Bec suggested that perhaps we could let Mark take his puppet with him, as a way that 'connects him to the classes' (FN 7, 29/8/2013). Again, as I have mentioned earlier (see Chapter 5, for example), I do not claim to be able to offer neat resolutions. Rather, I suggest that drawing on a disability perspective can help expand applied performance practitioners' understanding and awareness of safer spaces that are more accessible for those who come to inhabit them.

### **Exorcising hauntings**

Everything in the theatre, the bodies, the materials utilized, the language, the space itself, is now and has always been haunted. (Carlson, 2001, p. 15)

In Carlson's (2001) text *The Haunted Stage*, he refers to the hauntings (or ghostings) in the theatre, where deep and complex 'relationships between theatre and cultural memory' (p. 2) exist. He explains further that '[t]he present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the processes of recycling and recollection' (p. 2). Following from the section before, we can begin to make the parallel between safe(r) spaces and haunted spaces. To

create safe(r) spaces, perhaps we need to locate and exorcise the unwelcome spectres that haunt them.

While the intrusions of the wind and Mark's encounter(s) in the space related to a specific kind of haunting, I also hinted in Chapter 4 at this idea of haunting (ghosting) when I discussed how the Vulcana space was inhabited by fit, muscular bodies prior to the arrival of the Stronghold participants. Even though Carlson's work relates more closely to theatrical works, I wish to draw on this idea of 'haunting' in the work of Stronghold, and how exorcising these hauntings creates opportunities for participants to exercise their power.

Hickey-Moody's (2009a) writings seem to reflect this idea of 'haunting' felt by performers (dancers) with disabilities within the work of Restless Dance Company. She discusses the 'internalised (emotional-psychological) power structures that serve to differentiate between people "with" and people "without" disabilities' (p. 53), and how Restless strives to counter this hierarchy by inviting dancers with intellectual disability to 'explore their own movement styles and dancers without a disability are asked to support this process' (p. 54). Despite this move, Hickey-Moody notes her 'perpetual surprise' during encounters with dancers with disabilities:

As a dancer in Restless, one of the most significant static constructions of self and disability that I experienced, was dancers with intellectual disabilities assuming I was more of an 'expert' than them. I was perpetually surprised when a person from whom I would take cues within a dance piece, would then turn around and look back at me to 'check' they were doing the right thing. (p. 53)

Hickey-Moody (2009a) considers this sort of response from the dancers with disabilities as a result of 'a history of being told to watch people "without disabilities"' (p. 53). I relate this idea of haunting/ghosting to what I observed in Stronghold, drawing on specific exchanges and encounters with Eva.

The first time I met Eva, I remember how she invited me to sit with her by the flowers as she lit up her cigarette. I explained my research to her, watching her eyes light up as we talked about performing in a 'professional venue'. Later that day, we chatted about the puppet she had just made, for which she had chosen purple and red ruffles and a green hat with a red feather. She asked me about the consent forms, wondering if getting someone else to fill it out on her

behalf would be 'a bit immature'. The only answer I felt I could give Eva at that time was an honest, 'I don't know'.

At the end of that particular session, as Lara was suggesting for everyone to show one another their puppets as part of our ritual closing, Eva proposed that we stand in the middle to do so. 'Not everyone can stand,' Lara interjected. 'So I think we can just sit in our seats, and we'll all watch' (FN 2, 25/7/2013). Afterwards, Lara confessed apologetically how she realised that she had shut down Eva's proposal for everyone to stand, but that she had been concerned about ending the session on time, and also that not everyone *could* stand. Liza, who had known Eva for a while, advised the Vulcana group to provide Eva with the freedom to explore more, acknowledging also that she was actively involved in dance. Liza felt that because of Eva's very structured routine outside the circus workshops, she had brought this attitude—this *haunting*—with her to the workshops and rehearsals. As we observed Eva's enthusiasm as part of the group, and along with Liza's advice, we consciously tried to create spaces where Eva could take control of the work. Celia proposed:

There is something that she (Eva) does know, which is dance. And so, when we're in the [Vulcana] space next, it might be like, *Let's make a dance that's just yours, Eva. What is that dance that you'd like to do?* (WD 6, 22/8/2013)

And so we found a space for Eva to create a dance:

The circus space is dark and quiet, matching the weather outside. Gloomy-looking clouds threaten rain, and I'm hoping that the others arrive soon. Just as I begin to wonder if we'll be doing something in the in-between space of waiting, Lara asks if we'd like to play with the hula hoops in the meantime.

Lara starts laying the hoops in a snaky line on the floor, and suggests that we walk along the line of hoops, stepping into and out of each one on our 'tippy toes'. Eva is in front of me, and without thinking, I step into one of the hoops while Eva's still standing in it. She turns and sees me there. 'You have to wait until the person gets out of the hoop,' she explains to me. I nod, and make sure that the next step I take is one when Eva's already exited her hoop.

We continue walking through the hoops in different ways—on our toes, on our heels, on the outsides of our feet. I feel the pressure of floor against bone, feeling the mild sensation of pain in my feet. As we finish the last round, Lara suggests that we try ‘skipping’ with the hoops, a movement that Tina enjoys doing. We form a line against the back wall, each of us holding a hoop in front of our bodies. We start to move forward in a line, taking a step through the hoop, then bringing it up and over our heads, and back again. Eva observes that what we’re doing looks like a dance, and that we should do more dancing in the space.

‘A dance?’ That’s an interesting idea,’ I exclaim, hoping that this would get picked up by Celia or Lara.

It does. Celia adds, ‘Yeah! Maybe Eva can think of ... if we were gonna make a dance, we could do your movement. What do you think it is, for a dance?’

Eva considers this proposition. Then she comes up with the idea to go up and down on our toes, just like what we did through the hula hoops. She adds, sounding tentative, that we could also hold the hoop up around our waists.

‘Oh, that’s nice! We could pretend we got a big skirt on!’ Celia says. ‘Maybe it swings!’ We hold the hoop-skirts around our waists and move through the space, going up and down on our toes. ‘Can we turn in circles?’ Celia adds another layer to our movement.

‘You’re actually a good dancer!’ Lara comments to Eva.

‘Can you show us another move?’ I ask.

Eva proceeds to do a grapevine step. She steps to the right, then expertly crosses her left foot behind her, steps out to her right again before crossing her left foot behind her once more. Her movements are fluid, assured.

‘And then,’ Eva continues, her voice rising, ‘each of us, all at one time, go like that!’ Eva spins the hoop around her waist, letting it fall to the floor.

‘And then our skirts drop,’ I joke.

‘Can we catch it?’ Celia wonders.

‘Yeah,’ Eva agrees.

'Try,' Celia says. 'Put it against you, and catch it before it goes down.'

Eva gives the suggestion a try, but misses the hoop, and it falls to the ground. Celia decides that we should just incorporate the falling hoop into the choreography. 'We're gonna spin it, and let it go down, and then pick it up in the front,' Celia narrates the choreography, as we perform each move. We pick up our hoops from off the floor, and hold the front edge near our foreheads. I wonder what's going to happen next.

'And then we say, hi!' Eva offers spiritedly.

'Hi!' Celia calls out through the hoop.

'Hi!' I join in.

Lara comes over. She's missed the choreography because she's been attending to something else. 'What was the very beginning?'

We begin to dance our ballet-inspired hula hoop dance, going up on demi-pointe, holding the hoops around our waists.

'In a circle?' Eva makes another offer. 'We're holding the hula hoops like part of our body. That's what you're doing, Natalie.'

My eyes flicker in surprise at the level of astuteness with which Eva has just spoken.

'That's right!' I reply, and then try to elicit more ideas from Eva. 'What else, Eva?'

Celia jumps in, 'And then we do your step, Eva. And then we spin the hoop, all the way down.'

In a circle, we do the grapevine, spin the hoops around our waists and let them crash onto the floor. We pick the hoops up, holding them in front of our foreheads.

'Hello!' We all chorus.

We continue with our newly-constructed movement routine as we wait for the rest of the Stronghold participants to fill

the space. We perform our final spin, and I tell Eva, 'That was nice, Eva. Great idea for the dancing.'

'No,' Eva tells me, a hint of embarrassment in her voice. She tilts her chin down slightly, a questioning look flashing across her eyes.

'That was your idea!' I say, hoping to give Eva a sense of affirmation for the work she's just inspired.

'Really?'

'Yeah,' I insist.

'Thank you,' she replies shyly. (FN 12, 24/10/2013)

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The following week, we find ourselves waiting once again for the group to arrive. Eva, Tina and Winnie are here already, and Tina is over by the windows with Lara, playing with the hula hoops. I sit in the circle of chairs, head bowed, scribbling in my notebook. Next to me, Eva says—perhaps to herself—'We'd better do our routine!'

I put my book down, and head over to the centre of the space, where the hula hoops have been laid out. Eva remains behind. I pick two hoops up, measure them against each other, and select the bigger one. Celia goes over to Lara, and they begin talking through the choreographed routine.

'Eva, do you wanna join in the choreography?' Lara calls out to Eva, who's still sitting in the circle of chairs. Eva swings her feet and hops off the chair. She skips over, grabs a hoop, and joins us in our dance. In the background, a courtly tune plays through the speakers.

I hear Eva apologise. She's accidentally hit her hoop against Tina's. I see her say something to Lara and Celia, only managing to catch the tail of end of it: 'That's a bit silly, isn't it?'

'What was your idea, Eva?' I ask, unwilling to let her suggestion end with self-dismissal.

It seems like my question perks Eva up. 'You know how we finish like this?' Eva places the hoop on the floor, and

stands in the middle of it. 'Then we pick it up,' Eva continues to direct us.

We follow on from Eva's choreography, moving and dancing with our hoops, greeting one another with a 'hello' as we dance past other bodies. Eva calls out our cues to spin around. (FN 13, 31/10/2013)

The narrative of Eva's hauntings parallels what Hickey-Moody (2005) observes about the 'histories' of the Restless dancers, a term she uses to refer to the 'subjective level [of] a dancer's very real turning away from their own ideas of what they can or cannot do' (p. 199). By becoming aware of the participants' hauntings and finding ways to exorcise them, it opened up the possibility of dissolving hierarchies of power between facilitators and participants. In the case of Eva, this opportunity emerged through affirming her ability to create dance and witnessing the joy she got out of it. At an earlier Stronghold session, Lara shared with us that Eva had told her how she was not allowed to dance the rumba because somebody had said it was too fast for her; Lara commented that she 'was having feelings about someone else telling [Eva] that' (WD 6, 22/8/2013). Having been told that her body could not keep up with the fast pace of the dance, Eva's hauntings in turn speak back to how her body was 'haunted' by inscriptions of power, 'marked by [her] social and cultural environment' (Thompson, 2006, p. 54).

### **Expressions of longing**

Seven hoops have been laid on the ground, forming a crooked line on the floor. Celia asks us to make a shape with our bodies as we step into the centre of each hoop—narrow shapes, wide shapes, round shapes, square shapes. Eva turns around to me. 'All those ideas **I wish** I could do,' she says. (FN 13, 31/10/2013)

In my journey through Stronghold, I began to become aware of what I describe as 'expressions of longing'. Eva's expression of longing in the epigraph above reflects a stain of haunting, a reminder that even when we find moments to exorcise them, such as affording Eva the space to create dance, some of the hauntings are so embedded that they remain.

As in other parts of this thesis, there are constant refrains of thought, words, ideas that make their way throughout. I began this chapter with an

epigraph taken from Gallagher (2007), focussing on her notion of second chances to articulate the need for and subsequent release from apology. Now, I draw inspiration from the same epigraph from the 'many possible directions, many aborted plans, many reconsidered choices' (p. 23). As I continued to explore this idea of longing, I began to pay attention to the sentiments expressed by the facilitators; these often emerged in the 'intimate' space of reflection and discussion. As I contemplated whether or not to include these expressions of longing in a piece of academic work, I was guided by the following question: *What is 'longing' and what does this mean for applied performance, feminist theatre, and disability performance?* In all three fields, I believe that longing can represent imagining the world differently, envisioning possibilities, and enacting change in some way. I remember how, during a Wizard of Auslan workshop, the women expressed how they imagined waking up to a new world where everything was more visual, where the name of the world was changed from 'earth' to 'eyeth' (Wiz, 9/7/2012). By acknowledging our longings in Stronghold, it speaks to not just the limitations that we faced, but also gives a space for these 'aborted plans' and 'possible directions' to find a shape, even just as words on a page. Perhaps this could be a way for us to find our second, third, and fourth chances.

While contemplating how to present the expressions of longing, I felt drawn towards how these expressions lent themselves to a poetic framework. As such, I have woven together the words of Lara, Bec, Celia, and Cathy from the many discussions that we had.

IF we did it again  
We would need a rehearsal. IN THE THEATRE SPACE.  
We went in there and *Oh my god*  
*Wheelchairs going*  
*Backwards and forwards!*  
*Down the back!*  
*Or entering from there!*  
*And coming out!*  
*And going round!*  
*And disappearing again.*  
Would be unbelievably  
GORGEOUS.

I had this image of the lyra  
But just, it spinning  
And the parade going around

This spinning object  
And then I thought,  
*Oh, wouldn't it be great*  
*To add a disco ball?*  
*Make real magic.*  
And then  
Have f/r/a/c/t/u/r/e/d light  
Through the spaces  
Because it's so joyful.  
And Gillian and Bryce do their  
Spinning with their chairs  
A sort of dance.

We had these ideas  
People going up  
And having pulleys  
The mechanical side of it  
Steampunk!  
Pulling and pushing  
Reveal and conceal

And what about ...

Scenery on your tray table!  
Constructing pieces of a garden  
A Garden! You can build a beautiful image  
Of living things  
And create nature  
And anything can happen  
In nature.  
You can cut it down.  
And build it again.

But if we did it again  
It would be great  
To have it ALL in the Vulcana space instead.  
Imagine  
Working all year.  
The NOISEMAKERS company, you know?  
*How do we do it?*  
*We can try, we can definitely try.*  
*I'd love to.*  
I think  
If we had a year  
We could make  
A TWENTY MINUTE show.

But, ultimately,  
The chance to do it again.  
To test it out again.  
To build on that experience.

## The Ethnographer's Longings

In this chapter, I explored Stronghold by considering the moments of joy created, and how as non-disabled facilitators, we needed to negotiate our feelings of being apologetic. The intimate spaces and the spaces of waiting that emerged in the work became crucial to an understanding of how the work could make political statements, especially when noise was created, and how participants could claim space and power by becoming noisemakers.

I concluded with the idea of longing, drawing on expressions of longing from Eva and the Vulcana facilitators. Because of how embedded my role was in Stronghold, I shared many of the longings expressed by the other facilitators. But I also held on to many images that I encountered in the process, longing that they could have been included in the performance. Even though Celia and I had discussed why the aerial apparatus was not used in the performance, I still longed to revisit the images of flight, of Mark and Eva sitting on the trapeze. I remember how Eva told us that 'I really like to get as high as ... right up to the roof of the trapeze' (FN 9, 3/10/2013), how her eyes once travelled to the high ceiling of the Vulcana studio, and how she mused that we could all try to climb up there (FN 10, 10/10/2013).

One of my greatest longings was that of more time. For Celia and the other facilitators, time was also a factor that they wished they had more of so that they could further develop relationships with the participants and build on ideas that could not take flight. But I longed for more time in the field, for more time as an ethnographer to spend with the Stronghold participants beyond the constraints of 'workshop time,' to account for more voices (non-normate and normate) in the writing of this work. In the Wizard of Auslan project—and Small Change—I was invited into 'intimate' spaces of some of the women's homes and offices to recount and discuss our shared experience of creating work together. I did not have this privilege in Stronghold, where access to the participants post-project was restricted as they had come into the project via different organisations.

Prendergast and Saxton (2009) issue a word of caution: that applied performance makers 'need to be more careful ... how we leave the project sites' (p. 188). Certainly, their concern relates to the ethics of power as facilitators enter sites to 'transform,' and then depart without experiencing the aftermath or

repercussions of that 'transformation'. I am reminded of that sense of finality once the Stronghold project and performance were over. I am reminded of Celia, Bec, Lara, and me standing in front of the automatic doors of the Brisbane Powerhouse, overlooking the carpark as taxis came and transported the participants away.

As I listen now to the recording of the Stronghold performance, paying attention to the rhythms, the sounds, the pauses, I feel my throat catch. I become even more moved when I listen to each one of the performers announcing themselves to the audience, and the reverberating response of cheers that follow. I am able to tell when Gwen, in her own way, identifies herself. I am transported back to that moment, to that pregnant pause, as everyone in the shared space waits for her. I see in my mind's eye Gwen's body rocking back and forth, her way of making noise, of being affected by, and affecting everybody/every body.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION—AFTER THE NOISEMAKING

Circus is performative, making and remaking itself as it happens. Its languages are imaginative, entertaining and inventive, like other art forms, but circus dominated by bodies in action can especially manipulate cultural beliefs about nature, physicality and freedom. (Tait, 2005, p. 6)

In this concluding chapter, I reflect on the discoveries made and insights gained through my ethnographically-inspired research into Stronghold, a community performance project between Vulcana Women's Circus and people with disabilities. I address my three research questions in relation to what I observed unfolding in the work, as well as through the many conversations I had with the Vulcana facilitators.

While the focus of my research has been on the Stronghold project, I have drawn on my participation within Vulcana's Wizard of Auslan and Small Change projects to help shed light on how I was making sense of the work. As discussed at various points in this thesis, this work is not only an investigation into Vulcana's work, but a reflective account of my ethnographic journey as well. I concluded each of Chapters 4 to 6 with a section titled 'The ethnographer's ...,' which served as critical reflection that brought my voice as ethnographer more strongly to the fore. The relationships that I established in the field, I believe, were critical in achieving the trust necessary to engage with Vulcana's work on a deeper level. I articulated research design using the analogy of the house, framing my early researcher position as the inquisitive little cousin. I discovered that through my developing relationship with the Vulcana facilitators, I was able to gain a level of intimacy required for good ethnographic practice (McNamara, 2009), thus elevating my researcher status from inquisitive little cousin to sitting at the grown ups' table.

The deepening relationship between the Vulcana women and I meant that during the Stronghold process, I found myself on the edge of reflective practice (Schön, 1983). Through this concluding chapter, as I have done in previous chapters, I thus use pronouns like 'we,' 'us,' and 'our' to signify how I often considered myself as one of the facilitators in Stronghold, embracing the sense of responsibility that comes with making applied and community performance.

## **Reflecting on the discoveries**

In my research, I sought to examine the complexities and possibilities of creating applied performance work with people with disabilities, focussing on Vulcana's Stronghold project. Drawing on related literature from the fields of applied performance, feminist theatre, and disability performance, I developed three research questions:

- How are bodies re-storied in and through feminist circus and physical theatre?
- What are the political and affective labours of creating performance with people with disabilities?
- In what ways can a theory of disability performance inform applied performance and vice versa?

In this section, I reflect on the discoveries made through this research in relation to my research questions. Drawing on the notion of the bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001, 2005), I concerned myself with examining the work of Stronghold through the 'synergy of multiple perspectives' (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 686). In order to make sense of my observations in the field, I engaged with diverse theoretical lenses depending on which part of the fabric I was focusing on. Doing so provided greater insight into the idiosyncratic moments in the work (Kincheloe, 2005). These idiosyncratic moments also mean that the 'results' of this study are applicable only to those who intimately shared the Stronghold process. While some of the discoveries can indeed help to inform other applied performance practices, I do not wish to make any generalisations about how practitioners work, or how people with disabilities experience collaborative artistic processes. It is also important to acknowledge that I have explored my research questions through the intersections across the different chapters (Chapters 4 to 6), once again returning to the idea of meeting points and entanglements, which has been a metaphor in my thesis. I highlight my discoveries below.

### Re-storying bodies

I know through my own personal experience in Vulcana's circus programs that my body has undergone many changes—it has been re-storied time and time again. But how did Vulcana's work, particularly Stronghold, re-story bodies

different from mine, bodies that experienced the world differently, that had different cultural narratives written on/about them? I explored these questions in Chapter 4, and through my observations and discussions with the Vulcana women, how the space and being in the space impacted the bodies inhabiting them emerged as a significant factor.

One of the most significant observations occurred on Day 3 of Stronghold, when the work moved from the community hall to the Vulcana studio. When Mark had the opportunity to encounter the hanging trapeze, there was a striking difference from his usual bodily aesthetic—arms held close to his body, and the small and unsure steps despite his towering frame. His body became re-storied as he held onto the ropes, creating space between his torso and his arms. His feet dangled in the air as he swung back and forth, a sound of exhilaration escaping his throat as he became ‘airborne’. Celia reflected how this was a moment where Mark ‘owned his body,’ of him experiencing a kind of release. Similar instances of re-storying were also seen in other participants like Eva, who overcame her self-doubt as she put her weight on the trapeze bar and kicked off the mat with complete abandonment.

The energy and vitality that emerged in the Vulcana space effectively resisted that kind of ‘rest and passivity’ that we had observed occurring in the community hall, which almost perpetuated narratives of the disabled body as something ‘static’ (Bayliss, 2009). It became necessary to consider how the work of the feminist circus in re-storying bodies was informed by the space in which the work took place, affirming McAuley’s (1999) argument that space is an ‘active agent [that] shapes what goes on within it’ (p. 41). Importantly, space is informed by particular ideologies, and in the case of Vulcana, it is shaped by the company’s feminist ideologies, which seek to challenge assumptions about the body. I extended my understanding of the relationship between space and the body by drawing on McCormack’s (2008) work in the field of Geography. Doing so helped me shift my view of the feminist circus as an ‘imagined geography,’ very much like Tait’s (1996) description of the feminist circus as a ‘migratory and temporary space’ (p. 31). It is this imagined geography of the feminist circus that affords ‘corporeal inventiveness’ (McCormack, 2008, p. 1827), allowing for possibilities of what could happen to/with bodies in the space. Mark and Eva’s swinging on the trapeze might seem insignificant, but

Thompson (2009) issues a reminder that even these acts need to be recognised as a 'kind of triumph' (p. 128).

Even though my focus was to examine how bodies became re-storied through feminist circus, I came to realise that our bodies in co-motion (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005) occurred in a 'relational time space' (McCormack, 2008, p. 1827). This new understanding meant that I began to observe how the bodies of the Stronghold participants likewise re-storied the spaces they inhabited. I first became aware of this when I observed how the bodies of the women who exited the Vulcana space before the Stronghold workshops began largely reflected what Tait (1994b) describes as the types that 'interrupt and mock inscriptions of femininity on the body' (Tait, 1994b, p. 105). The physicality of those bodies challenged the patriarchal landscape. But as I watched how the Stronghold participants entered and then moved through the same Vulcana studio, they transformed it into one of wonderment, redefining the space through their 'unique cultural and somatic experiences' (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005, p. 9). They engaged with and approached the aerial apparatus in new and different ways, thus transforming the imaginative quality of the space. When the Stronghold participants navigated the Vulcana space, it became an act of reterritorialisation of a space often populated by 'normative' bodies.

#### Political and affective labours

In a sense, the discoveries made about how bodies were re-storied in the space of the circus can also be viewed as a part of the political labour of the work. Celia reflected how through the work of Stronghold, she strove to view the participants differently, to 'be able to see past the body that's presented to you' (Celia, 7/4/2015).

A significant portion of my investigation into the political labour of the work is reflected in Chapter 5, although traces of it are revealed in the other chapters. In Chapter 5, I framed my analysis of Stronghold using five questions posed by Preston (2009b) in her discussion on the ethics of representation in applied performance. I drew on 'moments of encounter' (Thompson, 2005, p. 4), points of tension in the project that raised questions about the political labour of the Vulcana facilitators. By highlighting these moments of encounter, I sought to ask the difficult but necessary questions.

My study revealed the need to acknowledge competing objectives, especially with regard to political tensions. Snyder-Young's (2013) observation that participants and facilitators need to work within the parameters of funding agencies was an important reminder that applied performance facilitators especially need to reflect on how their political ideologies explicitly or implicitly inform the work. The political labour enacted in the work of Stronghold was to create a more embodied performance—a reaction against what Celia has seen in another show in which some of the Stronghold participants had been involved. She shared that a core political objective of the work was the notion of visibility, to 'make [the participants] visible as who they are ... presenting themselves'. Celia asserted that it was 'part of our political contract ... to put [the Stronghold participants] on stage and go, *This stage deserves these people looking like they do and behaving like they do*' (Celia, 7/4/2015).

The aesthetic choices made in Stronghold were a significant factor in the political labour of the facilitators, a reminder that applied performance practitioners need to consider how appropriate their 'preferred aesthetic [is] for engaging with the politics of speaking with, for, or about communities' (Preston, 2009b, p. 68). A key aspect of this aesthetic was the frame of the circus itself, considering the historical relationship between the circus and people with disabilities. Celia acknowledged the political implications of presenting the Stronghold performances as clowns, reflecting how having them put on the red noses felt dangerous.

A significant challenge in our political labour pertained to the notion of ownership. Celia emphasised that her primary aim was to have the Stronghold participants 'acknowledged as owners of their own work,' to 'present [them] as autonomous performers on stage in some kind of way'. Discerning what ownership looked like in Stronghold however proved tricky at times. Throughout the work, I often questioned whether the facilitators constantly making offers meant that ownership became skewed towards the facilitators instead. This notion of ownership remained a slippery one in the work, and as such, I could 'give no guidelines' (Thompson, 2005, p. 40); I could only continue to pose the tough questions, to maintain a critical view on the process, keeping the Vulcana facilitators focussed on 'what [they were] aiming to do with these people in the space and why' (Celia, WD 4/12/2013).

Even though the notion of ownership remained complex in the Stronghold process, the interactions between facilitators, researcher, and participants in a shared space illuminated the importance of interrogating a 'dynamic of authority' (Nellhaus & Haedicke, 2001, p. 15). The types of playful strategies employed by the Vulcana facilitators sought to engage the participants in reciprocal and creative exploration, yet the way that instructions were framed related to how knowledge was constructed. A specific encounter with trying to get Eva to 'move like a snake' (see Chapter 5) revealed how elements of truth and expertise differed from one group (facilitators) to another (participants). Through this process of experimentation, we learnt how the participants' different ways of knowing afforded us the opportunity to re-invent our own knowledge (Freire, 1996).

Throughout my search for the political labour in the work, I realised that acts of stammering are important. These stammerings alluded to moments of anxiety and uncertainty expressed by the Vulcana facilitators and myself as researcher. I argue that part of our political labour is therefore to make visible those 'elements of power' that are often not disclosed in the interactions between people with and without disabilities (see Quayson, 2007, pp. 16-17). My acknowledgement of the importance of stammerings is further bolstered by Kupperts' (2014) advice to 'own discomfort, to live with uncertainty' (p. 11).

Even when trying to own our discomfort and to acknowledge our stammerings, it seemed that our labour as applied performance facilitators and mine as researcher evoked a certain sense of guilt, which was then accompanied by apologies. I questioned if apologies help to relieve feelings of guilt, and a core lesson that I learnt while working through these feelings was the notion of the invitation. The invitation, I believe, speaks back to the idea of guest-hood (Thompson, 2005, 2008) and it allows applied performance facilitators to embark on collaborative creative journeys with their participants. Within Stronghold specifically, we had been invited by Eva to share the performance space with them, and this invitation in one way allowed us to 'be present' in the performance. Still, applied performance facilitators need to remain perceptive to these invitations, to negotiate when and how these invitations are being extended. As I discovered through my interaction with Howie, his expression of joy was not necessarily an invitation for me to disturb

his space, and this became yet another stammering in my journey as researcher and co-facilitator (see Chapter 6).

It became imperative that in the work, we took moments to pause. Connected closely to the idea of stammering, pauses are needed 'before we begin to make sense' (Gumbrecht, cited in Thompson, 2009, pp. 123-133). Often, these pauses arise when there is uncertainty, a rupture in the well-planned workshop. As Lara expressed during a workshop discussion, she often got caught up in trying to move the workshops along; this feeling I believe was fostered due to the allocated time frame of the workshops, as well as the 'contract' of a performance outcome. But I rearticulated the notion of the pause as a space of waiting, a kind of liminal space for possibilities to emerge. Spaces of waiting were critical in the course of our labour because they allowed for the kind of 'relational experience' (Winston, 2013, p. 136) between us, where we could feel beautiful moments emerge (see also Winston, 2013, p. 137).

Through the stammerings and apologies however, the work of Stronghold revealed spaces of joy, which became a critical part of the affective labour. Scholars such as Thompson (2009), Winston (2013), and Nicholson (2014) argue for attention to the affective register of the work, for a consideration of beauty, and for joyful encounters. I found through my ethnography of Stronghold that this search for joyful encounters in applied performance work is indeed ongoing. When trying to make sense of the affective labour in Stronghold, what emerged was the concept of intimate spaces, an idea I propose is an extension of joyful, affective encounters. I observed how touch was an element of these intimate spaces, and I reflected specifically on my own encounters of touch with three of the Stronghold participants, each encounter opening up more questions about how 'new affective and embodied connections' can be produced (Zembylas, 2007, p. 19). More importantly, instead of seeing these encounters as leading to any kind of radical politics being discovered, they made a commitment to the 'act of sharing' (McKelvey, 2013, p. 565). These intimate spaces, where disabled and non-disabled bodies touch and meet, helped to create moments that have 'energy, beauty and immediate appeal' (Kuppers, 2014, p. 114).

As I continued to explore our affective labour in Stronghold, I perceived how in the intimate space of reflective discussions among the Vulcana facilitators, expressions of longing were revealed. These longings were

symbolic of the 'many chances, many possible directions, many aborted plans, [and] many reconsidered choices' that Gallagher (2007, p. 23) describes. These longings offered a way to imagine the world differently. They envisioned possibilities, of what could be, and of what could have been. Acknowledging these longings allowed the struggles of the applied performance worker (in this case) to materialise as main text, rather than becoming 'relegated to the second division, a footnote to the value or purpose of the project' (Balfour, 2009, p. 356).

Another key discovery that emerged through the work was that of joyful chaos, which flowed in and between both political and affective labour. Again, it is important to recognise that political and affective labour are inextricably linked; Thompson (2009) stresses that the '*affective register* of participatory arts ... becomes foundational to the practice and crucially *politics* of applied theatre' (p. 115, emphasis in original). Boon and Plastow's (2004) assertion that the 'power of joy [can be] an agent of transformation' (p. 11) parallels Nicholson's (2014) observation that 'joyful aesthetic encounters ... gently unsettle the habitual rhythms of everyday life' (p. 339). This joyful chaos of the circus parade evolved as a kind of tactic (de Certeau, 1984), where the Vulcana facilitators made do with the 'resources of the institutions in which they are embedded for a particular purpose' (Snyder-Young, 2013, p. 3). Through such joyful chaos, a carnivalesque moment erupted. The group—participants, support workers, facilitators, researcher—were not only united in joy, but also found a way to disrupt and challenge 'habits of power' (see Nicholson, 2014, p. 337). Joyful chaos served as a kind of rupture by unsettling the stasis of a structured space (the community hall). Celia shared that what was important in that act was that the Stronghold participants were responsible for their own noise in the circus parade.

The Stronghold participants thus became the Noisemakers, a name that Eva chose for the group. I reflected on how the name of the group in itself contained political power, articulating how the latent power of noise could challenge boundaries and shake expectations. Celia added the need to consider noise being not only limited to sound, but also to movement and the taking up of space. This aspect of political and affective power was achieved because the work allowed for both the facilitators and participants to 'celebrate

and elaborate upon the inspiration [that fun] provides' (Thompson, 2009, p. 179).

Celia's reflections on her own journey with political and affective labour encapsulated the importance that even if participants in applied performance projects do not enter with politically-charged objectives, facilitators need to ensure that they do not lose sight of their own political ideologies. When I engaged the Vulcana facilitators in questioning what we were trying to achieve politically with Stronghold, Celia acknowledged that it was important for her to 'keep a grip on' the objectives of the work, and to constantly question what the facilitators and participants wanted to achieve out of the work. Her words resonated with the assurance that one's ideologies do not have to necessarily become subsumed by the 'funding institutions' agendas' (Snyder-Young, 2013, pp. 36-37), nor do they have to be enforced upon the participants in the project:

I have to engage with the politics of how I engage. I can only do it according to the rules that we decide together. If they just wanna have fun, that's their prerogative ... But how I engage with them is where the political labour is. (Celia, 7/4/2015; also in Chapter 5)

#### Disability performance and applied performance: a conversation

The impetus to address the convergence between theories of disability performance and applied performance emerged from Conroy (2009), who observed that there is 'no recognisable field of disability in applied drama [and that] the two fields of applied and community drama and political disability arts have no coherent meeting place in discourse' (p. 11). Through this thesis, I have taken up her suggestion that '[t]he work of ... makers of theatre with and for disabled people needs a creative space to articulate and explore the tensions between us all' (p. 12). The work can thus encourage more 'cross-field encounters' (Kuppers, 2014, p. 29).

By examining specific moments of Stronghold through both disability and applied performance perspectives, I discovered that applying a disability perspective expanded an understanding of applied performance. This emerged strongly when I explored the concept of fostering a 'genuine climate of dialogue' (Preston, 2009b), seeking to work sensitively with the participants. In my interactions with the participants, I realised the need to pay attention to their bodily rhythms, and to attune my ears to a sense of 'crip time' (see McDonald,

n.d.). By being aware of the existence of crip time in a space shared by both disabled and non-disabled bodies, normate time could thus be destabilised in order to expand the ways dialogue can be perceived and understood.

In line with the idea of dialogue, understanding the notion of voice within the frame of applied performance was deepened through Gabel's (2002) reminder that people 'exercise voice differently' (p. 190). This argument meant that considering how participants in applied performance contexts engaged in the process of articulation (see Lev-Aladgem, 2010) had to be renegotiated in order to take into account non-normate voices. This discovery was further illuminated by Celia's observation that it was a challenge for her and the other facilitators to engage with how different participants articulated their ideas differently.

A third aspect of how these two perspectives can come into conversation emerged out of trying to make sense of Mark's withdrawal from the Stronghold project. The Vulcana facilitators speculated that a shift in the metaphorical space could have accounted for the change in Mark's participation (Chapter 6). This moment revealed how the need for cultivating safe space, a familiar concept in both applied performance and feminist theatre practice, can sometimes be insufficient. Instead, Yergeau et al. (2013) propose that, particularly in disability contexts, safer spaces are more encouraging as they inspire 'an attitude of improvement and that creating accessible spaces is a process of evolving attitudes and practices' (n.p.). Rethinking safe space as *safer* space helps to better inform applied performance practice and theory, expanding both scholars' and practitioners' understanding of the need for spaces that are more accessible for all those who come to inhabit them.

Representation is a complex issue occurring in the fields of both disability and applied performance. By borrowing and adapting Quayson's (2007) concept of aesthetic nervousness within the field of disability and disability representation, I suggested the possibility of reframing the impact of our aesthetic choices. Bringing an awareness of aesthetic nervousness into any situation where representation is a difficult issue can perhaps offer new ways of thinking about how representations are made. How does aesthetic nervousness reveal itself in other applied performance contexts when representations are made? How will audiences interpret or receive these representations? At what points does the work cause a 'short-circuit'? (Quayson, 2007, p. 15). I believe

that this notion of aesthetic nervousness can begin to inform applied performance theory and practice.

### **Acknowledging the struggles**

Early in this thesis, I acknowledged that I had limited access to the Stronghold participants outside the immediate space of the workshops due to the nature of the collaboration between Vulcana and partnering organisations. Certainly, a key struggle that I faced was not being able to interview the Stronghold participants or their support workers about their experiences of being part of Stronghold. I had to contend with the absences, the gaps, the missing voices in the landscape of this thesis. I often had to 'make sense of another's somatic knowledge ... through [my] own body' (Sklar, 2000, p. 71). Even though the focus of the work centred on Vulcana's practice and on their journey as facilitators (and mine as researcher) in this uncertain process, I envision how the project could have been enriched by more conversations with the Stronghold participants.

Another limitation to this study was the constrictive time frame in which Stronghold took place. Furthermore, Stronghold was a singular project with a short performance outcome. A more extended project, maybe one that spanned a year, could have allowed for a deeper exploration of the processes employed. The relationship between the facilitators and the participants could have become more established, giving the groups more time to discover more about each other. I believe that an extended project would potentially yield richer findings, affording the space to trace the journey on a deeper level.

While my study was an in-depth investigation into the Stronghold project, my research question regarding the political labour of the work was extensive in scope. As such, and as mentioned in Chapter 5, this meant that I could only offer glimpses into these moments of tension in Stronghold, circumscribing them within the parameters of the chapter, and within the frame of the five questions that I adopted from Preston (2009b). By contextualising the struggles in this way, I had to leave out moments of tension that did not seem to fit into this frame, thereby possibly excluding what could have been rather insightful perspectives.

## **Making an impact**

Despite the struggles faced and the limitations of the research, my study reinforces the need for research that extends the discussion of practices in the field of applied performance. As highlighted early in this thesis, the work of community and social circus has often been excluded from applied performance literature. By examining the work of Vulcana Women's Circus through the frame of applied performance, I brought another perspective on understanding applied performance work, shedding light not only on the ongoing challenges faced by applied performance practitioners, but also on the possibilities that the work can create. In addition, my research demonstrated that viewing the work of community and social circus through the lens of applied performance engages practitioners to consider more actively their own political ideologies, how they articulate their ideas of social change, and how this impacts the work they create.

Because the project involved participants with disabilities, this research extended an understanding of applied performance work by bringing it into dialogue with disability performance and disability theory, thereby engaging in a 'productive area of discursive practice' (Conroy, 2009, p. 12). The meeting place between applied performance and disability is relatively nascent and rife with complexities, but through these struggles, what emerged was how an understanding of particular aspects of disability perspectives could deepen the practice and theory of applied performance. In particular, I discovered how time operates differently in different contexts. While in Stronghold this referred to crip time, the concept could be extended to other contexts—how is time reconfigured in prisons, in schools, in war zones? Perhaps we can begin to see new articulations of various versions of time that are relevant to those who experience them.

Not only did this study seek to expand an understanding of applied performance by engaging it in dialogue with disability, it also brought it into a three-way conversation through a look at feminist theatre practice, which is especially relevant considering the dearth of recent research into feminist theatre practice in Australia. The discoveries made through this research suggest that the convergences between these three areas can yield richer understandings of issues such as knowledge, power, and representation.

Taking a three-way perspective expands how scholars and practitioners can look for moments of rupture and noisemaking, and how our work continues to challenge perceptions and push boundaries.

An ethnographic approach actively created the opportunity for arts workers and applied performance practitioners to 'formally consider their practice' (Leighton, 2009, p. 98). The role of the ethnographer allows for an examination of the work from an insider-outsider perspective, offering both 'empathic involvement and disciplined detachment' (McAuley, 1998, p. 77). I emphasised the usefulness of articulating an analogy for the ethnographic research design in order to clarify the direction and focus of the work, and I propose that these analogies can allow ethnographers to chart their various subjectivities in the course of their research, understanding how these positions affect the relationships that are formed in the field.

### **Looking forward**

My research offered a critical examination of Vulcana's work from an applied performance perspective, using the Stronghold project as a core focus. Taking Vulcana as a starting point, I propose that future research could take various directions. As Vulcana prepares to celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2016, one direction of research could offer an account of the historical development of the company's work, framing it more strongly within the larger landscape of community arts and/or feminist theatre in Australia.

Another possibility is a phenomenological investigation into how different women within the Vulcana community express how their involvement in the circus has impacted their lives. When I first set out to conduct my study, I was motivated to discover how Vulcana could empower the women in their work. While my research ended up taking a different direction, I hold on to the possibility that such research could eventuate, and a phenomenological approach could perhaps allow for this opportunity.

In my study, I became aware of how a disability performance perspective could inform and expand an understanding of applied performance, but I acknowledge that more research could uncover how the reverse could occur: how applied performance can productively inform disability performance.

## Concluding thoughts

*'Yee-ha!' Eva cries. 'We know what to do—all of us! We know every bit of it!'*

In this research, I sought to understand the complexities and possibilities of applied performance work with people with disabilities through an ethnographic approach to examining the work of Vulcana Women's Circus. In order to make sense of what I observed in the field, I drew on a bricolage framework (Kincheloe, 2001, 2005) that allowed for multiple perspectives, bringing the areas of applied performance, feminist theatre practice, and disability into conversation.

Throughout the research, I encountered entanglements, mess, and noise, but found the meeting points that helped me to deal with the rhizomatic and dance with uncertainty along the way. I wanted to begin this concluding section with Eva's words as a way of signalling her journey through her own doubts and uncertainties to a point of confidence and joy. But her words also serve as an assurance that despite the many occasions of disquiet that we may feel, we need to embrace the moments where we can filter through the noise, thereby finding—even for a moment—a sense of clarity.

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