

**Together in Spirit:  
Collaborative Art-Making Across Time and Space**  
*Emily Bridge, Cathee Porter and Shea Wilson*

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## ABSTRACT

In the fall of 2021 and spring of 2022, Walls to Bridges (W2B) held a series of online symposiums to commemorate the organization's 10th anniversary featuring presentations from people who have been involved in the program. The W2B BC Collective created a collaborative art piece that incorporated original artwork, poetry, music, and dance created by our members to be shown during one of the 10th anniversary symposium presentations. Our article describes the process of creating that video from the perspectives of the BC collective members and describes the experience of creating art collaboratively.

## INTRODUCTION

As part of the Walls to Bridges 10th anniversary, the Walls to Bridges (W2B) British Columbia (BC) Collective created a collaborative art piece that incorporated the talents of many of our members. The initial idea of creating art together was first suggested before the Collective even formed during the first W2B class in British Columbia (BC) in the fall of 2019. At the end of every W2B class, the students collaborate on a project as the final assignment for the course. The nature of the project is decided by the students collectively. While our class was discussing the form our project would take, we had several ideas for artistic projects, including an idea for a musical theater production that gained considerable traction. Ultimately, we did not choose an art piece for our final project, but the idea of an art piece stayed with us through our days as a new Collective and was brought up by members at various points in our Collective's infancy. When we were asked in 2021 if we wished to participate in the 10th anniversary events, CoCo, one of our Collective members who was incarcerated at the time, re-introduced the idea, which we developed over the next half of the year into a four-minute video incorporating CoCo's visual art (see *Figure 1*), Cathee and Dani's spoken word poetry, Shea's music, and Emily's dance.

During the roughly two months we spent creating the project from December 2020 to February 2021, circumstances made it difficult, if not



**Figure 1:** Art Piece by CoCo

impossible to collaborate directly. Some of our members were contributing from out of province, two of us had to contend with parole conditions, and we were unable to contact one of our members who was incarcerated. Because of this, our process consisted of each member creating their contribution mostly on their own and passing it off to the next member, who took inspiration from what was already made to add their own contribution. We decided not to have a predetermined overarching theme for the project as a whole. Instead, each member had complete creative control over their own contribution. This method necessitated a great deal of trust between members, with each of us handing off a piece of art that we poured our heart into with the faith that the next person would create something beautiful to accompany it. Ultimately, that is exactly what happened. The final product was a piece that represented each of our own unique perspectives and skills, while still feeling unified and representing the group as a whole.

Unfortunately, due to a variety of reasons, many of the people involved in the project were not able to contribute to this article, but their contributions to our art were beautiful, and we could not have created it without them. We have done our best to communicate our process, and what it is like to create art collaboratively across time and space. Each of us has written our own section detailing our contribution to the project, in the order that we created our sections of the project. Cathee has written a section on writing the poetry, Shea has written a section on writing the music, and Emily has written a section on choreographing and performing the dance.

## **CATHEE ON POETRY**

I started writing my piece with the energy of a visualized audience. I imagined my Collective members there with me, encouraging me, supporting me, and having faith in my abilities. They were there in spirit.

When I write, I put pen to paper first. I don't know what I'm going to say at all, I just write. The words come from my diaphragm. I can feel them and they emote what I'm feeling. Of course, this is just the mist, the beginning of the piece. I must feel it first. It's the only way.

When I was inside, the pen and paper were all that was available most of the time so the words flowed, swayed and created themselves. It really has very little to do with me. Now that I'm out, I use the keyboard as well, and now my writing has evolved with the times and technology.

Doing my piece was the first creative writing project I had done since I got out and I felt the words a bit further away and slightly scratchy due to the medium I was using. I changed the process. Now, I write and type, and the flow is back.

I also used my collective mates' energy and essence to polish the crunchy words and help me know what to say. The message came from us all.

My speaking piece, which was inspired by CoCo's art, is kind of raw... sharp. My poem is as follows:

Education, evaluation and saturation  
To the community underground  
Hidden and present

To nurture to know  
Gone for good  
Where are the highest peaks?  
Are they cut off at the knees?  
Blood being roots to discover later  
Pain is strength for a time;  
Until it makes no sense.

Do the mountain peaks hate?  
Of course they do... I know without knowing.  
Mostly deep down now  
Chilling with the serotonin nor-epinephrine reuptake inhibitors.  
Yeah... there  
Why can't I hear my heart?

It's absorbing anything and everything new.  
There's very little to choose from.  
To be offered the expanse of horizons  
to overshadow shadows makes me... Not yet. We'll see. Disbelief.

Grey matter mocks and oozes  
And kills the ideas of new  
Fills my stomach fearfully backwards in crushes  
And turns the ooze to spatter

Collect the bits and blobs... try again... claw  
From underneath where everyone groans and cries  
Inside, under  
No top of the world... yet

A pinhole of light. No grand gesture. Think.  
Think in a way of difference. The grey doesn't know eternally.  
Doesn't it? No. Are you sure?  
No.  
I want to look, see, observe the massive task  
Ripping a hole in the diaphragm.  
Fear holding the knife.

Or. Maybe. Not  
Light knows its way  
It makes it into my soul  
Into the small corner  
Where hope stays too.

So do it.  
Make it happen.  
This is  
On top, below, underneath, inside  
And it is inside  
Coming to the pinhole  
It's coming to the light  
And it's coming to the love.

Who knew?  
I did not.

Dani's speaking piece has a beautiful, ethereal, soft flowing sadness to it, while mine is abrupt and more scattered. This is how we are in life. Our pieces reflect our personalities. When combined with Shea and Emily's music and dance, a powerful result shone through.

In her poem, Dani wrote:

Stripped of the things I used  
To hide behind  
A little voice says...  
“Will you survive?”

I dig deep  
Deeper than I ever have  
The only limitations  
The ones I give myself  
I am the only one  
stopping me from doing the thing  
The thing that seems so out of reach

It’s the little voice again  
But why is it always mocking  
And judging  
When did this sabotage start?  
I reach back in terror  
It’s been so long I can’t remember  
There is fire and passion there  
Envy and anger too

I hear that tiresome  
A dominating character  
“Choose!”  
The effects of such constraint  
Accusing, devoted  
The mirror  
Exacting horrible precision

Plans go wrong  
A faint idea  
I will not sit down and listen  
I’m not well. I’m in pieces.

Something is wrong with these 4 walls.  
Sometimes I choose to forget  
These shortcomings  
I pretend  
My work is enough

It is what it is.  
That hateful crack  
Slowly we edge forward  
Regardless of unpaid debt  
Tired of weighing these acts  
Is there some prescription  
One can write to build the perfect life?

I know we were supposed to write about my own process in writing this piece, but I didn't feel I wrote it alone. I did it with my group of artists and supporters, and my contribution was emotion in prose.

### **SHEA ON MUSIC**

When I write music to someone else's text, my intention is to create something that emphasizes the emotional throughline of the writing. Usually, I must spend a lot of time studying and analyzing my text to tease out an interpretation that I can use when I'm composing. When I sat down to write my part for this project though, it was almost as if Dani and Cathee's text was speaking directly into my brain. As I read Dani and Cathee's poetry, I found ideas forming faster than I could write them down. It felt almost like an activity we would've done in class where someone in the circle does a motion and the next person has to do a different motion in response. I ended up with a piece of music that I felt really encapsulated what our journey as a Collective had been like. It started with uncertainty and touches of fear, it went through moments of dread and a couple points of near hopelessness, but it ended on a note of hope. I don't expect that what I wrote fits one to one with what Dani and Cathee were thinking while writing their poetry, but that's part of the beauty of this piece: each part is uniquely one of ours, but the pieces combine to be something that's beautifully all of ours. The music can be heard in the video linked at the bottom of the article.

## EMILY ON DANCE

While I did my best to support everyone else as they finalized their contributions, my portion naturally came last as I used CoCo's art, Shea's music, and Dani and Cathee's words and voices to facilitate the movement, and then edit the pieces together. Honestly, I did very little to prepare except to listen to the musical track once or twice before setting up my camera and then listening with my body, allowing the sounds of my friend's voices to tell me where to go. I did do several takes; over time I began to hear particular moments in the piece I knew I wanted to emphasize through movement (or through a lack of movement), but generating something that was primarily improvised felt important. I wanted to respond to the contributions of the other Collective members, of my friends, because I could feel them so clearly as I stood there in my living room (see *Figure 2*). Their presence filled the space as I imagined them all, in their homes or wherever they were, making their own contributions and keeping me in mind too. In a way this process reminded me of our circle pedagogy from our first W2B class. I listened to what the others had to say, and perhaps I waited a moment, I mulled it over and let it sit with me for a beat, and then it was my turn to add to what had already been shared: to respond, to question, to twist, and turn. It was about acknowledging their contributions and honouring my own, for what they are, as they are.

Dance for me comes directly from my soul, to try and translate what it meant, to explain the movement in response to what stimulus I was given, did not seem interesting or helpful, to myself, our Collective, or those watching. I remember feeling excited, feeling grateful, and feeling an incredible sense of connection to my fellow Collective members, both those that were still involved and working on this project, and those that were elsewhere across time and space. I hold them all in my heart, for wherever they are now, they left such an incredible impression on me and on our work.

## CONCLUSION

The most important part of our Collective is its people and the passion with which we approach our dreams. We have a unique group of individuals who recognize not only our own strengths and talents, but those amazing gifts among our fellow Collective members as well. Through the depth of





**Figure 2: Video Still of Emily’s Dance and Movement**

our W2B experience, we were afforded the privilege to know each other on a level of extreme familiarity, even through the coldness of COVID-19. We could feel each other’s essence while creating our individual pieces, allowing us to be able to create with abandon, with a suspension from the harshness of the world.

The process was beautiful, the individual efforts mirrored our collective vibe, and the freedom in the creation of our piece ended with a journey through multiple disciplines that embodied us all. Our contributions were personal, natural, connective, collective, and filled with the tenderness and intensity that only the creative process can invoke.

Some of our Collective members were still incarcerated at the beginning of our work. Pictures of Collective activities that the group was participating in was one way for those inside to play a part in the meetings. Folks sent meeting minutes and we wrote to each other in group letters. The Collective was able to have the prison agree to allow books to come in. We read our books and corresponded regarding what we felt and saw in the book. The Collective was very creative with trying to maintain contact in the times of

COVID-19 struggle. Eventually, we all got to communicate on conference calls. It was a gargantuan task. Our Collective is small but mighty!

When offered the opportunity to create a piece for the W2B's 10th Anniversary conference, artistic creativeness flowed. Each of us handed out individual projects to the next person, to integrate into one piece. It was an exercise in complete trust and collection of talents. The final piece, that none of us witnessed until Emily had compiled the art, felt like magic. These were pieces of our W2B Collective, both in person and figuratively, that tied together the fear of the experience (in the beginning) and the beautiful relationships developed by the spirit of the course. The conglomeration of the pedagogy, the learning, the personalities, and the willingness to be vulnerable, afforded us the opportunity to showcase our Collective devotion to each other and the W2B Program.

Most of us are out now. We have one participant who is still suffering inside the prison walls. They created the art that was the original inspiration for our piece. Without their contribution, there would not have been an accurate rendition of how the Walls to Bridges experience changed us all, transformed us all. CoCo is a physically absent (unwillingly) piece of an amazing Collective. One day, we'll be complete, outside the extreme barriers of the system. You can find the piece in its entirety here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3\\_H4cvAYHOk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_H4cvAYHOk). We hope you enjoy.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

*Emily Bridge* (she/her) is a white, femme settler living on the shared territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. She recently finished her undergraduate degree where she first became involved with Walls to Bridges in 2019, and is now starting her graduate degree in library and information sciences. Emily is a passionate community member who likes to lend her time where she can, but otherwise can be found climbing, spending time outdoors, or connecting with loved ones.

*Cathee Porter* is the BC Coordinator for the Walls to Bridges Collective. She is also a junior researcher in a Walls to Bridges impact evaluation study, which is to be completed in 2023. Cathee has decades of lived experience as a formerly incarcerated person and, while learning to navigate the new world in which she has earned release, is learning priceless working

education through the Walls to Bridges community. She is a grateful and enthusiastic advocate of all that Walls to Bridges has to offer.

*Shea Wilson* (they/them) is a white settler living on the shared territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. They have been involved with Walls to Bridges since 2019, when they were a student in BC's first Walls to Bridges class. Shea is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in gender studies and sociology, and in their time off can usually be found singing, composing music, or doing prep work for their two Dungeons and Dragons games.