



# PANIC AT THE DISCOURSE

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Happy Accidents: An Introduction

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# Happy Accidents: An Introduction

*Ky Pearce and Michelle MacQueen*

UnDisciplined is an annual conference organized by graduate students in the Cultural Studies program at Queen's University in Katarokwi (Kingston, Ontario). This conference is a space for sharing scholarly, artistic, and activist work that theorizes or reveals forces that shape human experience. We aim to bring together researchers focused on areas and fields that intersect the humanities, social sciences, sciences, activism, and the arts. UnDisciplined is especially dedicated to work that challenges and dismantles disciplinary boundaries, as well as the divisions between art, activism, and the academy. For these reasons, it is difficult to identify a shared theme within this special issue, as the works contained within come from an event that prides itself on intellectual diversity. Thus, this issue represents some of the critical and exciting projects that have come together as a series of Happy Accidents.<sup>1</sup>

When organizing the call for participation for the conference, we only had one stipulation: work that is “undisciplined.” Undisciplined, for us, means work that seeks to break down barriers and productively disrupt the academy. Often, it is work that is interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary which is why we tried not to limit who could apply. Following the tradition of past iterations of UnDisciplined, we included a quote from a thinker we admire to act as guidance for applicants. For UnDisciplined 2019, we chose a selection from Sarah Ahmed’s *Living a Feminist Life* as its guiding statement. Ahmed’s words read: “When you expose a problem you pose a problem. It might then be assumed that the problem would go away if you would just stop talking about it or if you went away.”<sup>2</sup> Ahmed’s quote demonstrates UnDisciplined’s core principles of social justice and disrupting boundaries—principles that were echoed throughout the conference. Problems were exposed around representation, mental health, and community-based work, in the panels “Art and Community” and “Social Media.” Problems were posed by panelists about “Queer Things,” “The Animal,” “Affect and the Archive,” and “Politics and Performance.” Throughout a panel on “History, Nationalism, and Activism,” we learned that problems do not go away when the mainstream stops talking about them. We had valuable discussions about the dynamic roles that individuals, communities, and societies all play in exposing and posing problems in the panel “Activism, Resistance, and Resilience.”

The contributions in this special issue come from scholars, activists and artists from vastly different backgrounds, fields, and traditions. Having such a diverse collection of presentations, workshops, film screenings, and poetry readings created valuable academic space; however, the immense diversity also made spaces difficult to navigate. In these difficult spaces, most of us found ourselves having challenging conversations, making tough decisions, and managing a great deal of anxious energy. From our experience, we found that these difficult spaces are often where we are pressing against one another’s scholarly boundaries. It is *exactly* in these difficult spaces that we facilitated incredible dialogue, interesting ideas, and innovative developments. Even though these spaces are fraught and challenging, the outcomes are worth it. We like to consider all the conversations, decisions, and conflicts that emerge from UnDisciplined’s difficult spaces as Happy Accidents.

The success of UnDisciplined is premised on its ability to create and harness Happy Accidents. We do this in the planning stages, when we leave our call for participation as broad as possible—the Happy Accidents that occur along the way—are unparalleled. For example, because of a small scheduling hiccup, one presenter’s video piece was left running while another presenter was using the space for a poetry reading. The filmmaker, Mona Hedayati (who is also a contributor to this issue), describes the juxtaposition between her film and the poetry reading as “this strange concoction” that “opened up new possibilities for future collaboration and challenged my views on curating.” In creating spaces where

there are blurred lines between research, art, and activism, we are encouraging our participants to see collaboration and alliances where connections might otherwise be invisible. We feel that *Happy Accidents* represents the way that many scholars enter into *undisciplined* forms of academic, activist, and artistic work; it certainly represents the way that *UnDisciplined*'s organizers, and even this special issue, have come together.

The selections within this special issue cover an incredibly broad range of topics, including gender and sexuality, art, politics, storytelling, museum studies, selfcare, racial experiences of neoliberalism, sound studies, and posthumanist understandings of animals. All of the selections challenge the disciplinary boundaries that contain their respective fields, asking questions of methodology, medium, theory, and the place of politics and self in academic work.

In "Undoing as Activism," **Jill Price** demonstrates the hidden potential in waste, by showing the importance of caring, collecting, and researching as acts of undoing. She highlights how these acts bring attention to an infinite chain of materials typically invisible in globalized and extractive neoliberal networks. Price poses important questions about our ways of thinking about waste, asking "Does everything need undoing or do we need to realize that nothing can be undone?"

Following Price in a critique of neoliberalism's effects on our personal lives, **Renee Whittaker** invokes the work of Black feminists to consider a form of critical selfcare. She opens her contribution, "Untitled," by describing yet another Happy Accident. She recalls being initially surprised to see her presentation listed as "Untitled," only to realize that she had accidentally forgotten to send us her title due to "the large number of items that continue to remain pending on [her] to-do list." As it turns out, this happens to wonderfully exemplify Whittaker's point: the pressures she (and we) face under neoliberal capitalism are increasing insurmountably; and yet the consumerist "selfcare" methods emerging from this economic system (such as a massage or spa day) do nothing to actually care for individuals. Overall, Whittaker's work represents a valuable Black feminist critique of women's lives under neoliberal capitalism.

**Hannah Barrie's** essay discusses performance's relation to empathy and identity. Like Whittaker, Barrie privileges autobiographical and storytelling elements in her Academic work. Barrie argues that the autobiographical allows for empathetic connections. Similarly, she argues that performance presents opportunities for intimacy and vulnerability, as well as personal and political transformation. Barrie engages with Muñoz's theoretical work from *Cruising Utopia*, saying that artistic works by queer, trans, and gender non-conforming artists often embody intimacy and vulnerability, thus creating what Muñoz calls liberatory potentiality. While Barrie acknowledges the limitations of empathy as an agent of change, she focuses on its propensity for community-building, personal growth, and political change.

**Luba Kozak's** contribution to this collection also examines storytelling through art. She addresses the challenges of categorizing Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of *Henry Scott, Third Duke of Buccleuch*. In particular, the modes of expression used by Gainsborough to portray the intimate relationship between Henry Scott and his dog. Kozak engages with post-humanist theory and early modern philosophy to demonstrate how the dog is treated as a near-equal in the painting, unlike any other painting of the era.

In a more futurist and sci-fi contribution, **Schyler Palm's** contribution also broaches the subject of the human. Palm's discussion of artificial intelligence's power serves as a type of mirror to humanity—highlighting both our favourable and unfavourable qualities. Palm uses webcomics to work with Haraway's leaky distinctions and Muñoz's queer utopian hermeneutics to engage with the question of queer utopia. Palm's essay emphasizes that transgressiveness and multiplicity are critical elements of

queerness that must be considered in queer media, and that popular representations of artificial intelligence have been sorely lacking queerness.

From his position as an artist-researcher, **Angus Tarnawsky** provides an analysis of his sound installation *Variable Frequencies*. Connecting to Palm's discussion of technologic futures, Tarnawsky describes how this project builds on the technology of radio in order to explore sonic, social and political implications of transmission. Detailing his artistic practice, he asks how the presence of a listener alters the surrounding environment. Through his discussion, Tarnawsky brings attention to the complexities between affect and effect, process and interaction, and invisibility and unpredictability.

Another artist-researcher, **Mona Hedayati**, discusses her video-recorded performance "Death to..." (2018), which explores activism through wall writing. She situates and contextualizes this piece in the geopolitics of Iran. When usual forms of democratic protest are unavailable, she argues that political dissent can appear as anti-authoritative messages transcribed on public walls. In conversation with her artistic practice, Hedayati describes the "Death to" rhetoric in Persian culture, various manipulations of narrative, and the materiality of language. Hedayati's reflection foregrounds political wall writing as a precarious emancipatory practice.

**Simge Erdogan** continues to thread together art, politics, and nationalism by bringing them into conversation with museums and curation. She explores how museums are discursive spaces of representation, display, and knowledge. Looking at multiple museum representations of Iznik ceramics and their heritage, she provides an in-depth analysis of differences in display elements. While she focuses on objects, her argument broadens to the story of the people, empires, and nations that created them. Through a comparative approach, Erdogan brings attention to the power of museums' curatorial approaches, and how they shape—and sometimes manipulate—our experiences of artistic heritage, material culture, and nationalist paradigms.

All selections in this Special Issue speak to Ahmed's words and have grown stronger in response to the Happy Accidents that occurred along the way. The projects expose problems that exist in our societies and in doing so, they pose problems about how we should move forward. Through scholarship, they question the ways we live and imagine possibilities for better futures. These problem-exposers and problem-posers do not stop talking about problems, and they do not go away. They have been challenged, juxtaposed, connected, and questioned by Happy Accidents and they have emerged more resilient and resistant.

Whether intentionally or inadvertently, UnDisciplined thrives because of Happy Accidents. UnDisciplined holds a space for academics, activists, and artists to pose problems and persistently challenge structures that discourage inventive and creative work. By forcing ourselves to work in an environment that seems disjointed and unrelated, we are empowered to forge connections, build stronger dialogues, and produce productive criticism by engaging with diverse viewpoints. By creating and harnessing these Happy Accidents, we are able to understand and better collaborate in the shared intellectual projects that span across our work.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> The authors of this introduction recognize that the phrase "happy accidents" has a connection to the pop-culture icon Bob Ross, however, would like to note that their use of the phrase popped up as its own unrelated happy accident when reflecting on the conference and collection of works submitted for publication.

<sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 36.