

Conviviality and Contamination Editorial

Lucy Cathcart Frödén & Oscar Hemer

This collaborative project, with “conviviality” and “contamination” as inspirational but not delimiting concepts, has been carried out by an international group of twelve artists and academics, writers and researchers, who came together in the autumn of 2022 to generate the body of work presented here. Before introducing their individual contributions, the co-editors briefly discuss the project’s themes and process.

Oscar Hemer: *Conviviality* has come of age. It has been over eighteen years since British cultural sociologist Paul Gilroy situated the concept as a replacement for *cosmopolitanism*, which in his view had been hijacked by Western “supposedly benign imperialism” in the aftermath of 9/11 and the war on terror.^[1] Gilroy’s target, however, was not the cosmopolitan idea as such, but rather its opposite: the rising ethnic, racial and religious identity politics in post-imperial Britain. In his interpretation, conviviality expressed an ability to be *at ease* in contexts of diversity—in other words, convivial indifference.

Conviviality as a tool to think with had already been identified by Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich in 1973.^[2] His vision of a post-industrial *convivial society* of “autonomous individuals and primary groups”, which resembles recent manifestations of “convivialism”, was based on the Spanish concept *convivencia*, that is, the notion of pluri-cultural and pluri-confessional “living together” in medieval Spain (*al-Andalus*).^[3] “Convivencia” had been evoked by Spanish intellectuals as an ideal to counter the waning Franco dictatorship. Translated to more contemporary terms, it could be considered a form of *multiculturalism*.

As for our current planetary convivial predicament, two immediate tentative observations can be made.^[4] First, conviviality is still a concept that is mostly applied to the Northern and Western world and tensions associated with immigration from the global South. In 2017, a Conviviality at the Crossroads research network was formed by scholars from Malmö University and Bard College Berlin in response to the so-called “refugee crisis”. Although the focus of the eponymous open-source anthology that followed is mainly on Northern Europe,^[5] we opened the scope to the Global South and this special issue of *PARSE Journal*, which is a continuation of the Malmö-Berlin collaboration, further emphasises this planetary approach.

Second, an inherent conflict in the understanding of conviviality remains. Whereas we regard it as closely associated with “vernacular cosmopolitanism” as outlined by Gilroy and Indian-British philosopher Homi K. Bhabha,^[6] or “cosmopolitanism from below” as defined by Indian-American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai,^[7] it can also be interpreted as a pretext for identitarian preservation of cultural differences—as a form of “multiculturalism” that in its less benign form spells “apartheid”, that is, institutionalised racial /ethnic segregation. Therefore, conviviality needs a supplementary concept, where *contamination* is arguably not only a supplement but a *recipe* for conviviality.

There isn’t yet a “contamination debate” to refer to, so we are venturing into unexplored territory here. There are, however, two key references that we hereby bring into dialogue. The first is British-Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah’s outline of a literary tradition that goes back to the Roman playwright Terence—a former slave from Africa—whose mode of combining

tragedy and comedy was known as *contamination*.^[8] Salman Rushdie would, according to Appiah, be the most articulate contemporary proponent of this tradition. Appiah's use of the term contamination is largely synonymous with other scholars' employment of "creolisation" as defined by Martinican poet-philosopher Édouard Glissant and Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz,^[9] Bhabha's notion of "hybridity",^[10] or Dutch sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse's idea of "cultural melange",^[11] but it has the advantage of not being tied to a specific region or historical period and its connotation of the transgression of literary genres makes it specifically apt for our purposes here. In our reinterpretation, contamination is primarily a method for the combination and fusion of creative and discursive practices at the crossroads of art and science.

The second, more recent reference is Chinese American anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, who makes a fascinating ethnographic enquiry into the global economy of the matsutake mushroom, growing in ruined forests around the post-industrial world and largely picked for the Japanese market by South Asian foragers in the US.^[12] To Tsing, contamination is a metaphor for the diverse and conflicting social interactions that make up the contemporary world and should be understood as *transformation through encounter*. Contaminated diversity is everywhere, but we tend not to see it and/or we don't make use of these stories in our understanding of the world.

One reason is that contaminated diversity is complicated, often ugly, and humbling. Contaminated diversity implicates survivors in histories of greed, violence and environmental destruction [...] The survivors of war remind us of the bodies they climbed over—or shot—to get to us. We don't know whether to love or hate these survivors. Simple moral judgments don't come to hand.

Worse yet, Contaminated diversity is recalcitrant to the kind of "summing up" that has become the hallmark of modern knowledge. Contaminated diversity is not only particular and historical, ever changing, but also relational. It has no self-contained units; its units are encounter-based collaborations.^[13]

Tsing's interrogation challenges not only conventional conceptions but also those that may have been cherished as radical or imaginative. Collaboration, she says, means working across difference, which inevitably leads to contamination. Without collaboration we all die. In other words, without contamination we all die.

In this project, more than half of the participants have a South African connection, either by birth or special interest. South Africa, a planetary microcosm that is particularly apt as a case for our interrogation, also happened to be "guest of honour" at the 2022 Book Fair in Gothenburg. We seized the opportunity to link the fair's seminar programme to our own schedule of literary events and workshops. Our collaboration took the physical form of a two-week tour, by bus, boat and train, from Gothenburg to Berlin via Malmö and Kåseberga, with a mixture of public events and private workshops. Berlin has been a key node, not only as the location for the final part of the programme, hosted and coordinated by Kerry Bystrom and Bard College, but also as a symbolic reference in a Europe at war, haunted again by its atrocious past.

For Ivan Vladislavić, the Berlin leg was an incentive to revisit his impressions from a previous journey to Germany (see below).

Lucy Cathcart Frödén: Tsing’s mushroom metaphor has been a companion in this collaboration, helping us feel our way across unfamiliar spaces and expand this thematic conversation outwards from the theoretical and historical realms through collective and individual creative practices. Like the spread of mycelium, this has been a slow process of irregular unfurling, as the contributors to this issue have set out to better understand conviviality and contamination through their respective crafts.

Gathering in various constellations, in digital and physical spaces, we have explored conviviality while doing things with our bodies—eating, listening, walking—with concrete or grass underfoot and with sea spray or urban pollutants in our lungs. Theoretical discourse notwithstanding, the body is central to how conviviality is generated and navigated, through attention to the spaces between us. Often, we found ourselves tentatively moving through uneven relational textures, by turns encountering resonance and connection, by turns dissonance and discomfort.

These textures have revealed that a movement towards conviviality is not only an outwards orientation but an inwards one too: towards critical reflection and greater awareness of our differing histories, positionalities and social realities, not to mention our complicated entanglements with structures rooted in colonial power. In the words of writer and activist Adrienne Maree Brown, “there is work above ground and work below ground” and both these orientations are needed.^[14] In the reflective work “below ground”, the spread of mycelium is also a metaphor that encourages recognition of some uncomfortable truths about how established academic and cultural networks can reproduce spaces of privilege and unequal representation.

But mycelial roots are also stubbornly unfinished and can always be contaminated anew, welcoming other hybrid forms. In this sense, artistic research has been a generative mode, giving us ways to attend to process, to get dirt under our fingernails and to see this as an open-ended endeavour. The pieces presented here each practise their own small form of contamination, of challenging discourses of boundaries and separation and purity and hierarchy. They do not speak in unison, but collectively map out sites where we have sought to resist the compulsion towards quick resolution and “stay with the trouble” through “unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles.”^[15]

Introducing the Contributions

This project began with transversal forms of writing as its main focus, with the original cohort of contributors all active at the interface of literary and academic writing. However, as the process developed and more of us were drawn into the project, sound emerged as a secondary focus and an alternative angle from which to approach the themes of conviviality and contamination. Overall, these contributions perhaps represent our own “hot compost pile” of voices, art forms and perspectives.

In “Cast in Stone”, **Ivan Vladislavić** experiments with the contaminating potentials of textual materials across temporal and spatial boundaries. Drawing on notebooks kept during a stay in

Germany over twenty years ago, this hybrid essay visits a range of memorial sites, asking how victims of war and genocide are memorialised, and to what extent public art or architecture are adequate to the task. These visits are set off against commentary on other artworks and observations of the everyday. The essay is a kind of excavation, bringing notes made in 1999 into dialogue with the present, and raising questions about what constitutes a “finished product”. Ivan’s piece is complemented by an interactive artwork by photographer **Abrie Fourie**, which invites us to inhabit and excavate liminal spaces and to experience “the quiet tension between absence and presence”.

Salomé Voegelin’s contribution is a talk-as-essay, titled “Transversal Sound Studies: Sonic Contagions and How We Breathe. Together.” As part of our workshop series in Berlin, Salomé led us in an engaging sonic exploration, and both her workshop and this essay form part of an ever-evolving body of work in which she encourages us “to collectively generate a new thinking and sensing from sound” as a situated and relational response to the multiple global challenges of our time. She explores sonic conviviality as a relational practice of *being with*, an active sounding and listening through which the human and the more-than-human experience the world *together*, in a sonic entanglement that may give rise to new collective solutions.

In “Nguni”, **Bronwyn Law-Viljoen** presents two parallel texts that reflect obliquely on the various and contested histories of Nguni cattle in the Eastern Cape in South Africa. These histories are exemplified in the story of the Cattle Killing of 1856–57, in which the Xhosa, reeling from several wars with the British, heed the prophecy of the girl Nongqawuse and kill their cattle so that the British might be “driven back into the sea”. The juxtaposed texts gesture not only at contamination as historical, political, genetic and metaphorical, but also at the different ways in which “history” is constructed.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen experiments in “Naturecultural Permutations” with the crossover genre of ethnographic fiction to open a discussion of the relationship between bio- and cultural diversity, at a time when both are threatened by global processes that diminish diversity and variation. His main character, Norwegian anthropologist Tommy, is a fellow at the Institute where he is forging a theory on the similarity between losses in the two domains. He is challenged by Serenity, a Swedish postcolonial literary scholar who has embarked on a process of reinventing herself as a woman of colour.

In *Native Life in the Third Millennium*, **Masande Ntshanga’s** third book after *The Reactive* (2014) and *Triangulum* (2019), a poet, philosopher and programmer wrestle with systemic oppression and themselves, navigating anomie, alienation and flashes of abundance in millennial Africa. This excerpt, shared with the kind permission of Model See Media, is the opening long-form poem that gives the book its title. Layers of observations and memories combine the banal with the gut-wrenching to paint an unflinching and darkly humorous portrait of survival in “the supremacist lattice”.

Lucy Cathcart Frödén reflects in her audio essay “Cranial Nerve Number Eight” on how attention to sound may open up new perspectives on conviviality, and on the complex

background noise of state violence against which conviviality emerges, against the odds. Weaving together voices and reflections with sounds gathered in a series of public spaces, the essay is an invitation towards convivial listening, a practice developed by Caitlin Shepherd. Sonic contamination emerges here as a possible mode of resistance to the proliferation of borders and mechanisms of containment in multicultural cities.

“Farewell to the Rainbow Nation?” is an edited transcript of a seminar at the 2022 Gothenburg Book Fair. The wide-ranging discussion between moderator **Oscar Hemer** and South African authors **Bronwyn Law-Viljoen**, **Masande Ntshanga** and **Ivan Vladislavić** explores literary representations of complex postapartheid South Africa. The authors reflect on the ways in which questions of race are present in their work, and on what it means for them to write from differing histories and social realities. The image that emerges of a South Africa still in transition is one in which hope for the future sits uncomfortably alongside the trauma of the past and the inequality of the present.

In **Cheryl Stobie’s** “Storying in Four Colours”, some personal fragments of memoir frame an analysis of two recent memoirs about transgender life in South Africa. Through an approach of storying and reparative reading, the essay proposes that the process of narrative empathy in reading memoirs can forge an imaginative experience of conviviality that can imbue contamination with positive energy and build bridges between perceptions of difference.

During his latest journey to South Africa, in March 2022, **Oscar Hemer** repeatedly comes across the expression “Going to the dogs” as a casual depiction of deterioration and starts reflecting on dogs and other companion species in relation to this research project about conviviality and contamination. When does something go to the dogs? Is there a correlation between *contaminated diversity* and decline? The chronological travel notes are juxtaposed with a parallel text written before and after, with a meta-reflection from a slightly altered perspective on the process and the form of the ongoing project.

Radio producer and media artist **Laura Balboa’s** audio essay opens up the sonic world of Latin American experimental music and sound art from a feminist perspective. Titled “Breaking Free to Improvise: Bulla Radio Conversations on Music, Sound, Free Composition, Experimentation and Gender in Mexico”, the piece delves into a rich archive of almost three years of producing her radio show “Bulla” for Mexican community radio station Radio Nopal. Laura shares reflections on her practice of radical conversation and showcases the work of a series of sound artists who identify as female or non-binary. An accompanying slideshow offers further layers of stories and background material.

“D.I.Y.M.I.A.” explores the personal and artistic journeys of Mathangi Maya Arulpragasam, aka M.I.A. Her journeying, **Anders Høg Hansen** argues, is inspired by a DIY culture of contamination and collage, which builds upon two eras of participatory culture: an early subculture of zines, graffiti, punk and mix tapes, and subsequent digital media practices of posting, mixing and sharing digital content. Traces from Sri Lanka, India, and London—and a vision of a world and sound not yet achieved—offer another view on how contaminated and hybridised creative

processes can generate sonic conviviality.

“Crafting Convivial Cultures” documents a panel discussion that took place at Malmö University between community radio producer and media artist **Laura Balboa** and musician, curator and songwriter **Teta Diana**, moderated by **Lucy Cathcart Frödén**. The conversation explores conviviality and contamination from a practice-based perspective, in the context of creative and collaborative work across cultures. This seems a fitting note on which to end, bringing us full circle from Ivan Vladislavic’s opening essay on memorialisation and contamination across time, and resonating with a broad range of themes that emerge across this collective body of work, including gender, race, voice, audibility, sound, language and memory.

The co-editors wish to thank all the contributors warmly for their generosity in sharing their work with us, and we hope readers and listeners will find their own resonances among this body of work.

Footnotes

1. Gilroy, Paul. *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*. London: Routledge. 2004. ↑
2. Illich, Ivan. *Tools for Conviviality*. New York, NY: Perennial Library. 1973. ↑
3. See, for example, “The Convivialist Manifesto: A Declaration of Interdependence”. Originally published in 2013, updated as “The Second Manifesto: Towards a Post-Neoliberal World”. *Civic Society*. Vol. 1. No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.12721>. ↑
4. Following Gilroy, we use the term “planetary” rather than “global”. ↑
5. Hemer, Oscar, Povrzanovic Frykman, Maja and Ristilammi, Per-Markku. *Conviviality at the Crossroads*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 2019. Available at <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-28979-9> (accessed 2022-02-15). ↑
6. Gilroy, op. cit., p. 20; Bhabha, Homi K. “Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism”. In García Morena, Laura and Pfeifer, Peter C. eds. *Text and Nation*, pp. 191-207. London: Camden House. 1996. ↑
7. Appadurai, Arjun. *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. London: Verso Books. 2013. ↑
8. Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York, NY, and London: W.W. Norton & Co. 2006. ↑
9. Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Eng. Translation by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor; University of Michigan Press. 1997 [1990].; Hannertz, Ulf. “The World in Creolization”. *Africa* 57 (4), pp. 546-559. 1987. ↑
10. Hybridity is a key concept for Bhabha, in for example *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. ↑
11. Nederveen Pieterse, Jan. *Globalization and culture: global mélange*. Third edition Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 2015 ↑
12. Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at The End of The World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2015. ↑
13. Ibid., pp. 33-34. ↑
14. See <https://adriennemareebrown.net/2010/12/15/decentralized-deep-thoughts/> (accessed 2023-02-15). ↑
15. Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University press. 2016. p. 4. ↑