



on

Myth-

Making

*by* Alison Cooley & Daniella Sanader

*MONOMYTHS*, a performance series structured around Joseph Campbell's text *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), launched at Toronto's Theatre Centre in February of this year, as the beginning of FADO Performance Art Centre's year-long program. Campbell's concept of the "monomyth" – the so-called universal hero's quest that has informed a seemingly global array of myths, beliefs and stories – sees the archetypal figure enacting his journey in seventeen stages across three distinct acts (Departure, Initiation and Return). With this singular narrative as a guiding principle, curators Jess Dobkin and Shannon Cochrane enlisted artists from across Canada, the United States and Mexico, revising the heroic structure with a decidedly anti-linear approach. Each performance represented a stage from the first act of the hero's journey, refusing the narrative's reductive authority by enacting alternative (and deeply politicized) modes of storytelling.

We attended *MONOMYTHS* together, with the intention of responding to the project collaboratively. Collectivity remains key to the performance series at large: co-curated, co-presented and co-interpreted, there wasn't a single moment where an artist was presented as a standalone, heroic figure. When we first began to discuss the series, we regularly called it "multi-vocal," without immediately linking this descriptor to the concept of voice – speech as practice, conversation as a medium. However, the challenge of speaking with someone also offers the potential for misunderstanding – speech is peppered with gaps in meaning and intention. Where many modes of performance see speech as too theatrical or didactic, *MONOMYTHS* lives in the productive messiness of dialogue. What follows weaves together notes, conversation transcripts, associations and tracked changes. We recount *MONOMYTHS* in (imperfect, non-linear) pieces, lapsing from one voice into two, and back again – another kind of call and response.

### The Five Stages Of *MONOMYTHS*

First, a quick synopsis. *Stage One: The Ordinary World/Call to Adventure* featured Ursula Johnson working in collaboration with Cheryl L'Hirondelle to produce *Nikamon Ochi Askiy (Ke'tapekiaq Ma'qimikew): The Land Sings*. Johnson drew a line on a map from the Georgina Island First Nation to the performance location at the Theatre Centre, following the contours of the terrain. After transcribing that topography as a musical score, turning the land's crests and plunges into notes on a scale, she invited L'Hirondelle to compose a corresponding song in her native Cree. The two then performed the song together for approximately four hours; in a decisive turn away from Campbell's "departure" from the familiar, Johnson and L'Hirondelle began this heroic narrative firmly anchored in home, singing in apology and acknowledging the specificity of this geography. Following their performance, artist Maria Hupfield led a discussion with both artists – one aimed at discussing reconciliation but which turned toward the affect and labour of the endurance piece itself.

For *Stage Two: Refusal of the Call*, Winnipeg-based artists Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan presented an astronomy-lecture-turned-monologue-turned-reflection-on-gender-in-mythology titled *Refusal of the Call or Your Local Stars Tonight*. Dempsey, dressed as a beleaguered rabbit and equipped with a laser pointer, introduced a series of increasingly fantastical-feminist constellations, while ruminating on the responsibilities of heroism from Greek mythology to *Alice in Wonderland*. At turns sweet, funny and speculative, Dempsey and Millan's collaboratively written monologue pointedly asked: who has the power and privilege to choose adventure or turn away from its call? And who does a story just "happen" to?

Toronto's Feminist Art Gallery (FAG), led by Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue presented *Stage Three: Meeting of the Mentor*, alternatively titled *The Exquisite Course*. FAG turned the stage over to a group of younger queer and feminist-identified artists, who each presented short lectures on forms of mentorship – both affirming and disappointing, sought-after and imagined. Through burlesque, poetry, reflection and live drawing, Tamyka Bullen, Eliza Chandler, Johnson Ngo, Ariel Smith, Dainty Smith and Zanette Singh each upended the unidirectional trajectory of mentor and mentee, sharing their own needs and desires instead of privileging what they might learn from others (seemingly) more established than them.

Campbell's fourth stage was *Crossing the Threshold*, with the thresholds of *MONOMYTHS* re-conceived as national borders for Armando Minjarez's *AlieNation: A Visual Story of Our Generation's Global Migration*. As part of a long-term project considering his own status as an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the USA, he silently invited participants to sit across from him and address him with a stack of notecards he provided. The phrases on the cards were deeply vitriolic forms of anti-migrant hate speech culled from the utterances of an ever-present horde of anonymous online commenters. Minjarez remained blank, yet the readers – who had participated in a workshop held by the artist earlier that day – were told to react however they felt they should. Under the eyes of an increasingly tense audience, Minjarez's participants cried, lashed out, pleaded, remained stony, made apologies, performed guilt. Eventually an audience member stepped in and tore up Minjarez's cards, breaking the pattern and ending the performance.

Jefferson Pinder's *Thoroughbred* signalled the final stage of this iteration of *MONOMYTHS: Stage 5: Belly of the Whale*. *Thoroughbred* was a different kind of conversation – a wordless one, spoken instead through endurance. Pinder rigged up four treadmills to operate via a series of controls placed on a desk. Stoic and methodical, he sat and controlled the treadmill-system, routinely in-



MONOMYTHS: Stage 2, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Refusal of the Call or Your Local Stars Tonight*, 2016, FADO Performance Art Centre  
PHOTO: HENRY CHAN; IMAGE COURTESY OF FADO PERFORMANCE ART CENTRE

creasing its speed at the sound of a bell. Four black performers, naked save for their running shoes – Danièle Dennis, Jasmyn Fyffe, Chy Ryan Spain, and Ravyn/Jelani Ade-Lam Wngz – ran on these treadmills to the point of sheer exhaustion. The performance concluded when the final runner stopped her machine; the space musty with sweat, the “race” complete.

### Paying Attention

**DANIELLA (IN CONVERSATION):** ... if you know that you’re writing about a work, you approach it differently. It’s an anxiety issue of mine that provokes over-noting something in the moment, but it’s also a flawed way of actually engaging with something in the present.

Throughout *MONOMYTHS*, we became increasingly aware of how our presence as note-takers inflected differently on each performance. During Dempsey and Millan’s astronomy lecture, when we were sitting amid a darkened audience with clear spotlights framing the bodies of both the ASL interpreter and rabbit-lecturer onstage, that separation between note-taker and note-subject remained clear, distinct and familiarly academic. Yet given a performative framework with an undisclosed set of rules, one that implies the possibility of intervention (such as Minjarez’s *AliëNation*), these divisions between performer and audience can be murky and uncomfortable.

As critics and spectators, *MONOMYTHS* constantly implicated our attention within its performative field. Each artist butted up against our presence in multiplicitous ways: tender, uncomfortable, painful. Johnson and L’Hirondelle’s song *The Land Sings*, though short – hardly a minute long – was performed for hours on end, at some moments sounding triumphant or giddy, at others weary and mournful. By sheer force of repetition, the song permeated our attention and memory. Despite our clumsy phonetic transcriptions, Johnson and L’Hirondelle’s sung topography remained stuck in our heads for weeks to follow.

**DANIELLA (NOTES FROM THE LAND SINGS):**  
a pop song that gets stuck in your head  
- pleasure? smiling? yes we did it? CATHARSIS (applause)

Alternatively, note-taking during Pinder’s *Thoroughbred* was shaded with a sense of responsibility. As his runners slowly wore themselves down, we felt the heaviness of recording this interaction between artist and co-performers, recognizing an uncomfortable parallel between Pinder’s detached gaze and our own studiousness. The endurance of *Thoroughbred* was made more tense by its escalating visceral pull: running shoes thudding with increasing frequency, the buzz of treadmills like a slow, mechanical crescendo, the room growing hotter with sweat and effort. Yet is it disingenuous to speak about our own endurance, our own discomfort in watching and recording *Thoroughbred*, when Pinder’s co-performers are arguably experiencing something far more intense and gruelling?

**DANIELLA (IN CONVERSATION):** There are also moments in which you glaze over a bit, and the performance becomes briefly abstract. And that happens when you’re watching anything endurance-based, for sure. You can become numb to what you’re seeing. Yet as a witness to the intensity of effort throughout *Thoroughbred*, sliding into numbness feels difficult, depersonalizing, complicit. Pinder is making use of our lapses in attention in a challenging and interesting way.

**DANIELLA (NOTES TAKEN DURING THOROUGHbred):**  
how do I feel writing notes during this? / a chance to disconnect, look away - on her own she seems more vulnerable.

**ALISON (AFTER):** This is so sticky – because, of course, being a witness is so complicated and it’s important to keep your own attention in check. But I feel uncomfortable broadly ascribing blame to zoning out. Something wonderful about live performance is the natural wavering of attention. While you’re present in space, you’re given the opportunity to follow divergent thoughts that involve other parts of your experience. And then, zoning out can also be about self-preservation – or a way of linking your experience in the space to other embodied memories. This seems especially true to me about difficult works: that it is important for there to be space to touch the world.

Of course, our notes were only one form of documentation that arose from *MONOMYTHS* and its divergent performances. During Maria Hupfield’s discussion following *The Land Sings*, a transcriber documented the conversation as it unfolded, typing out direct questions as they were asked. These were projected onto a screen; a fragmented buildup of queries, a document that recorded not the full detail of the conversation, but something of its inquisitive scope.

**DANIELLA (IN WRITING NOW):** I recall Maria saying that she would make use of this document later. I’d be curious to see it again, see how it meets my memory of the conversation. Rosary Spence also acted as the audience’s mediator or translator – questions were whispered into her ear and then she relayed them to the artists via microphone. In a lot of ways, she added a whole other level of interpretation. The whole conversation privileged the voices of Indigenous women.

Lastly, there's a final layer of translation and multi-vocality that deserves mention: throughout *MONOMYTHS*, ASL interpretation was provided by Christopher Desloges, Amanda Hyde, and Sage Lovell. In Stage Three (FAG's *The Exquisite Course*), interpreters moved in and out with performers, giving each other equal space: watching, listening, translating in tandem. Support for the deaf and hearing impaired wasn't relegated to the sidelines – like subtitles or an afterthought – but rather, those moments of translation were woven into the project's very aesthetics, its performative field.

**ALISON (IN CONVERSATION):** I found Eliza Chandler's presentation [during *The Exquisite Course*] important in so many ways, asking what can we do as an artistic community to actually desire the disruption that disability brings. To not just tolerate or accommodate, but to think about how making our spaces more accessible is an opportunity to think differently.

## Working Together

*MONOMYTHS* is a series keenly attuned to disrupting performers' authority. Each work took a form that played with this destabilization: a performance and discussion, informal lecture series, performance materialized by volunteers, performance involving several trained assistants. That so many of the artists Cochrane and Dobkin enlisted responded to the possibility of disrupting canonical notions of heroism by stepping back, deferring or sharing responsibility demonstrates the radical potential of these gestures. But the breadth of these strategies for withdrawal also sketches out, by contrast, the unequal and complicated ways performative accountability/collaboration shakes down.

There was a moment, at the end of *Refusal of the Call*, where Dempsey, who had finished her script, turned, watched, and waited for the ASL interpreter performing the work alongside her to finish. Her simple social grace read as an affirmation that she and the signer were performing the work together.

**DANIELLA (IN CONVERSATION):** I'm thinking about what Shawna and Lorri brought up, the idea about who receives the call to be a hero, who has the privilege to refuse it, versus who never gets offered that in the first place, who can't turn it down. Maybe that's making me think about the FAG performance in a different way. They were offered a stage and made the choice not to mentor in a standard way but instead to disperse it amongst people who might not have been offered it in the first place.

**ALISON (IN CONVERSATION):** When we were talking afterwards I said it felt a bit like a TED Talk. Despite FAG's valuable activism, there's sort of a capitalist underlying logic to the format – perhaps because those forms have been so co-opted by the tech sector and the capitalist innovation model.

**DANIELLA (LATER):** It may be the sign of a generous mentor to recognize one's own privilege and set it aside, giving space for others to speak. And yet you're still able to structure where and when that speaking occurs.

In an era where crowdsourcing and unpaid/underpaid arts work are still normalized labour dynamics, we're critical of the often presumed radicality of collaboration – still, we'd like to hold this together with the knowledge that something significant can happen when practices are allowed to converge and respond to each other. It was apparent that the artists and curators involved in *MONOMYTHS* had ensured participants were willing and informed, that they felt the value of their contributions, that the artists had placed themselves strategically within the frameworks of the performances in order to be accountable. Across *MONOMYTHS* there were, however, performances that troubled those dynamics.

**DANIELLA (IN CONVERSATION):** The hero refuses the call, but is still the hero, still receives recognition. These artists deferred responsibility in different ways for different reasons. Perhaps some of those choices were more nuanced – which is why Jefferson Pinder was so interesting because he was deferring attention, but remained in control. He had this icy gaze, he was the person pulling all the strings. He was attentive to the fact that even in that choice to step back, his agency is still a huge part of what's happening.

**ALISON (LATER):** To contrast, in Minjarez's work, though the artist was present and was being spoken to, he did not act. And although several of the volunteers reading his cards drew attention to the fact that the words were not coming from them (but rather from cue cards the artist had prepared, and using a framework he had set up) it was difficult to place responsibility with Minjarez because the performance essentially involved his victimization. It wasn't clear to me that the volunteers had been informed ahead of time what they would be doing – that they would essentially be reading hate speech.



Still from *MONOMYTHS: Stage 3*, Feminist Art Gallery (FAG), *The Exquisite Course*, 2016, with Eliza Chandler, Johnson Ngo, and Ariel Smith.

PHOTO: HENRY CHAN; IMAGE COURTESY OF FADO PERFORMANCE ART CENTRE

Minjarez's performance hinged on the responses of both his volunteers and his audience – the possibility of the intervention. As such, *AlieNation* read as a difficult articulation of the discomforts of allyship and solidarity: complicity made visceral. With his face-to-face configuration, Minjarez removed the protective shield of anonymity favoured by online trolls to reveal the real violence that hate speech can produce, with excruciating intimacy. However, at several turns participants undermined the presumption of the audience's uniformity. Some participants remained as stony as Minjarez, reading through the cards with a mechanical regularity. Others took long pauses, cried or apologized. Some chuckled at the perceived stupidity in the texts being read. One participant eventually returned to the stage to confront Minjarez in Spanish.

**ALISON (IN CONVERSATION):** Art audiences in Canada are often so white that my writing has often implicitly assumed that works like this are about teaching white people something, which is a pretty narrow assumption to make. Thinking about this work within a spectrum of immigrant experiences and the experiences of people of colour who are routinely told they don't belong really expands the underlying structure of Minjarez's performance. Certain volunteers were able to carry the performance to a new place by re-centring the voices of people of colour in the work—their interventions destabilized this white-pedagogical role that *AlieNation* seemed to be flirting with.

**DANIELLA (LATER):** I feel a lot of ambivalence around Armando's piece, but producing ambivalence in a viewer can be a productive strategy too.

**ALISON:** I actually feel this performance was fairly manipulative of the volunteers, even though many of them were at his workshop in the afternoon, and may have had a sense of what they'd be doing. But he also chose not to inform his performers in advance – I wish they had been given the opportunity to decline.

**DANIELLA:** However, the dynamics of participation in performance-based work do not always have to feel fair or equal. I think it's important to acknowledge that Minjarez and his participants had surely developed a level of mutual trust during their workshop, discussing these politics in advance, which would influence this dynamic differently. Additionally, they (we? those distinctions remain unclear to me) also chose to make it stop. How long would the performance have continued if that audience member hadn't torn up the notecards?

**ALISON (LATER):** I understood the performance to be essentially over by the time someone tore up the notecards. Does that make a difference?

Choosing to retain some of the critic's purported objectivity and thus not intervening in the work, are we even in an appropriate place to address its ethics of collaboration? *AlieNation* has left us tense and uneasy, disagreeing with each other. Addressing the work is difficult because the performance doesn't neatly answer its own problems. It feels like *not enough*. Yet do we stand in a position where we can effectively ask for more?

## Telling A Story

**ALISON (NOTES FROM ALIENATION):**  
What is happening underneath and how is it surfaced?  
What have we agreed to be a part of?

In Joseph Campbell's writing, the monomyth is a cohesive, familiar, overdetermined story. *MONOMYTHS* is similarly structured, tying disparate performances together under a familiar arch of departure, initiation and return. These are narrative dynamics that are typically forceful and unforgiving, yet across *MONOMYTHS*, each performance stretches, bends and pushes back against the neat category Campbell has provided.

As *MONOMYTHS*'s audience, perhaps it falls to us to collectively stitch the story together. This is not a chore, but also a common impulse, even a pleasure. And this is *MONOMYTHS*'s shining characteristic so far – that it has the emotional, story-driven potential of something far more cinematic, and holds a critical space for rethinking what narrative means in a social context. As audiences and critics, how do we begin to assess the efficacy of the subversion of the myth, when we are so heavily culturally indoctrinated into it, and find so much pleasure in watching a good story fall into place?

Unlike a text, a story that begins in performance and takes place over the course of a year has chances to calibrate and recalibrate. The figures cast as heroes or antiheroes are in the room with us – we are sharing their space as they adjust, reflect, move forward. Thinking back to the first stage of the project, we were both enthralled by L'Hirondelle and Johnson's careful re-tuning of their voices to each other – the simple micro-adjustments of voice and gesture that bring singers into harmony, or cause them to fall out of it yet again. Perhaps, when put in relation to other voices, this hero (and his attendant myth) has the capacity to retune as well.

These conversations took place across February, March and April of 2016. Stage 6 of *MONOMYTHS* occurred in early May.

**Alison Cooley** is a critic, curator and educator based in Toronto. Her research deals with the intersection of natural history and visual culture, socially engaged artistic practice and experiential and interpretative dimensions of art criticism.

**Daniella Sanader** is a writer and curator who lives in Toronto. She has previously held positions at Oakville Galleries and the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and University of Toronto Art Centre.