

# Finding the New Radical: Digital Media, Oppositionality, and Political Intervention in Contemporary Canadian Theatre

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Alan Filewod argues that in contemporary performance, “Digital media is both the means and the form of the reconstitution of activist theatre: it disrupts and relocates cultural genealogies, reterritorializes artistic traditions, produces new structures. Digitalization is the enabling condition, then, of new theatricalities.” In November 2011, Quebec playwright Oliver Choinière created a digital performance that, in line with Filewod’s claim, challenged existing theatre conventions and explored new possibilities for activist performance interventions. His performance, *Project blanc*, used pre-recorded audio on MP3 players, which participants clandestinely listened to while watching a production of *L’École des femmes* at Montreal’s Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. The audio was critical of both the production and the theatre’s role as a commercial institution.

This article investigates the relationship between this production’s oppositional stance and use of digital tools. Choinière’s protest performance creates affinity and proximity within his audience, thus working against what Jason Farman refers to as the “distancing-through-proximic” that usually occurs when individuals are connected to mobile devices in public. However, the production’s own exclusivity and antagonistic tone undermines Choinière’s critical stance. Another digital site-specific performance, Jonathan Goldsbie’s *Route 501 Revisited*, provides a counterpoint to Choinière’s approach. This example, which had participants ride on a Toronto streetcar and communicate through a Twitter hashtag, illustrates the potential for mobile technologies to politicize spaces and users via performance. While Goldsbie’s work is less overtly political in its aims, his encouragement of collaboration contrasts with Choinière’s more traditional narrative approach and oppositionality.

Dans la performance contemporaine, écrit Alan Filewod, « le média numérique est à la fois la forme et le moyen par lequel on reconstitue le théâtre activiste : il perturbe et déplace les généalogies culturelles, il reterritorialise les traditions artistiques, il produit des structures nouvelles. La numérisation est donc une condition essentielle aux nouvelles théâtralités » (traduction libre). En novembre 2011, le dramaturge québécois Oliver Choinière signait une performance numérique qui, dans la logique de ce qu’affirme Filewod, mettait à défi les conventions théâtrales actuelles et explorait de nouvelles formes d’intervention pour le théâtre activiste. Sa pièce *Project blanc* intégrait un enregistrement audio sur lecteurs MP3 que les participants écoutaient clandestinement pendant qu’ils assistaient à une production de *L’École des femmes* au Théâtre du Nouveau Monde à Montréal. L’enregistrement était critique à la fois de la production et du rôle du théâtre en tant qu’institution commerciale.

Dans cet article, McLeod examine le rapport entre l’opposition exprimée dans cette production et son emploi du support numérique. La pièce contestataire de Choinière crée un sentiment

d'affinité et de proximité avec son public et va ainsi à l'encontre du phénomène que Jason Farman nomme la « distanciation par la proximité » (traduction libre) qui se produit normalement quand des individus sont branchés à des périphériques mobiles en public. Or, l'exclusivité de cette production et son ton antagoniste ont ironiquement pour effet de miner la position critique adoptée par Choinière. Une autre pièce numérique ancrée dans un lieu, *Route 501 Revisited* de Jonathan Goldsbie, offre un contrepoint à l'approche de Choinière. Cet exemple, où les participants voyagent à bord d'un tramway à Toronto et communiquent entre eux au moyen d'un mot-clic sur Twitter, illustre le potentiel des technologies mobiles dans la politisation des espaces et des utilisateurs dans la performance. Si l'œuvre de Goldsbie n'est pas aussi ouvertement politique que celle de Choinière, le fait qu'elle encourage la collaboration contraste avec l'approche narrative plus traditionnelle et l'opposition inhérentes à l'œuvre de Choinière.



3 November 2011. It is a cool night in Montreal. A large group is forming outside the Monument-National, waiting for an event they know little about. At 6:30 pm everyone takes an MP3 player and headphones and they all press play together. A male voice then leads them through Montreal's urban landscape. They move as a group through the city's arts district, eventually stopping at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. The voice informs participants that the theatre's entire second balcony has been reserved and instructs them to hide their MP3 players, pick up their tickets, and find their seats. They are told to restart the audio when the lights dim. As the lights go down, a production of Molière's *L'École des femmes* begins. Unbeknownst to the larger audience, a second production is also taking place. The group in the second balcony restarts their MP3 players, their spectatorship now doubled as they hear the voice disparage the production onstage and criticize the theatre's role as a commercial institution.

This series of events was part of a one-off mobile audio performance by acclaimed playwright Olivier Choinière and sound designer Éric Forget. While some of Choinière's previous mobile, site-specific audio walks were affiliated with established theatres, including Ottawa's National Arts Centre and Montreal's Théâtre La Chappelle, this performance, *Projet blanc*, was an independent creation by Choinière's company L'Activité. As this sound walk was a form of invisible theatre, reactions to the infiltration of the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde only occurred after the event took place. In interviews following the intervention, Choinière described the performance as a form of theatre hacking, a suggestion praised in reviews of the work. However, not all reception was positive. Most notably, Lorraine Pintal, Artistic Director of the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, criticized the work's infiltration of her theatre and its overtly negative tone. This reaction spurred an ongoing debate between Choinière and Pintal in both French and English media. Quebec theatre journal *Jeu* even dedicated part of a 2012 issue to the dispute.

Whether positive or negative, most of *Projet blanc's* reception has focused on the location of the intervention within the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde; however, there has been little discussion of the tactic of the digital audio walk and how this form connects to the content of the work. Alan Filewod argues, "Digital media is both the means and the form of the recon-

stitution of activist theatre: it disrupts and relocates cultural genealogies, reterritorializes artistic traditions, produces new structures. Digitalization is the enabling condition, then, of new theatricalities” (292). In line with this argument, *Projet blanc* challenged existing theatre conventions and explored new possibilities for activist performance. Through the audio walk form, Choinière situated his audience within the theatre in an innovative way, thus enabling a “new theatricality.”

In this article, I investigate the relationship between this production’s content and its use of digital tools, particularly in terms of the “new theatricality” that Choinière was attempting to activate. I argue that Choinière’s protest performance created affinity and proximity within his audience through the audio. However, I also consider how the production’s exclusivity, antagonistic tone, and audio tour format undermined Choinière’s critical stance, as he reinvoked the very hierarchies he set out to critique. Rather than using new technologies to open up dialogue about the current state of art and performance, Choinière—and his opinions—remained at the centre of the work. His approach leads to questions about the role intermediality can play in political performance practice. By placing discourses on intermediality in conversation with recent debates in political and site-specific performance, I consider how new performance practices can still get caught up in traditional theatre hierarchies. Situating all of these discourses in tandem allows me to address intermediality as an interdisciplinary mode that traverses multiple performance practices simultaneously. Building upon Peter Boenisch, Sigrid Merx, and Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink’s concepts surrounding an intermedial “politics of spectating,” I envisage how this transdisciplinarity gives digital practices the potential to activate participatory, activist interventions in urban space.

Throughout my analysis, I consider several questions related to both *Projet blanc* and intermedial performance more broadly, including: How does Choinière’s overt oppositionality impact the politics of the performance? How can technology be used to both open up and limit political dialogue? How is digital media changing the ways in which we engage in public space? How has digital technology’s potential for heterogeneity and polyvocality impacted intermedial performance practices? In addressing these questions, I find it productive to consider how Choinière’s practice contrasts with other recent approaches. Thus, to conclude, I place this work in conversation with another recent digital site-specific performance, Jonathan Goldsbie’s *Route 501 Revisited*, in order to further interrogate intermedial performance’s political potential.

## **Ambulatory Theatre, PodPlays, and Sound Walks: Hybrid Forms / Hybrid Frameworks**

Olivier Choinière describes *Projet blanc* as a form of “ambulatory theatre” (qtd. in Nestruck, “How”). The performance marks his fourth foray into this site-specific format, in which audiences listen to a soundtrack via a mobile device. His performances are part of a recent upsurge in audio walks internationally, due largely to the increasing accessibility of affordable, portable digital tools. Within this field, Canadian artist Janet Cardiff’s audio walks and Vancouver company Newworld Theatre’s PodPlays are prominent examples. Like L’Activité, Cardiff and Newworld Theatre usually create site-specific audio performances designed for

single audience members who sign up for a specific time at which to receive the MP3 player and headphones needed for the walk. Usually this device is the only performance tool; however, in Cardiff's *Her Long Black Hair* (2004), staged in New York's Central Park, she included photographs that audience members were directed to pull out at various points. While the content of these walks differ, they frequently examine the history and current use of the urban spaces in which they take place. They have the potential to alter perspective, as the performance audio encourages spectators to look at everyday sites in new ways.

Newworld Theatre's Associate Artist Adrienne Wong describes their PodPlays as "a cross between a radio drama and an audio guided tour" (Newworld Theatre). This description reveals the intermedial nature of the audio walk form, as it builds on practices from different disciplines—including theatre, digital/media art and sound art—and utilizes various media simultaneously. In their most recent publication, The International Federation for Theatre Research's Theatre and Intermediality Research Group promotes thinking through concepts of intermediality via a 'both-and' approach. Robin Nelson notes that this idea builds on the group's previous focus on the 'in-between', but also evokes how digital culture relies on a network of relations. He argues, "The manifestations of digital culture—the media forms, operational modes of devices, and cultural habits of consumers and users—not only inherently entail a relationship with an 'Other', but are structured according to a necessary interrelation with any number of 'Also-Others'" ("Prospective" 17). Sound walk projects exist within this concept of the 'both-and', concurrently falling into various performance modes, including site-specific, locative, digital and one-on-one.

Chiel Kattenbelt situates the performative power of intermediality in this interplay between various medial forms, as it provokes a new form of perception on the part of the viewer (19). Several other intermedial performance theorists, including Robin Nelson and Peter Boenisch, share this perspective. In a Brechtian line of criticism, these scholars focus on moments of rupture and explore the potential for intermedial performance to make visible the workings of conventional media. Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx build upon this idea of disruption in their discussion of an intermedial "politics of spectating," in which the hybrid, or both/and, nature of intermedial performance disturbs spectators' senses and rattles their normative assumptions (219).

As an intermedial performance form, sound walks can embody numerous modes concurrently, including being public and private, in real-time and recorded, real and virtual. The latter combination highlights how sound walks provoke a "politics of spectating." For example, Cardiff recorded *Her Long Black Hair*'s audio on site in Central Park. The audio unsettles audiences' sense of perception as they hear both recorded everyday sounds and real-time ones, but are unable to decipher which is recorded and which is live (Carlson 401-402). This contrast can be even more jarring, as in Newworld Theatre's *Ashes on the Water* (2011), which contrasts the relative calm and quiet of the waterfront off Vancouver's Main Street with a story set in the heat and chaos of the city's 1886 Great Fire.

The differences between the sounds and the walk sites point to the roles presence and absence play in urban space. Sean Cubitt notes that recording technologies are also "dependent on the odd dialectic of presence and absence, where the presence of the recording demands the absence of *the* performance, a distance which is both temporal and geographic" (101, my emphasis). In the case of sound walks, the tension between presence and absence is

actually highlighted by the performance event. Artists like Cardiff and Newworld Theatre use recording technologies to animate historical events and reveal layers of experience embodied in urban spaces. Working against Cubitt's supposition that recording is a singular performance, these artists fuse listening and walking to create a hybrid performance form. While primarily disseminated through the aural, these walks involve other performance elements, which collectively form the ambulatory sound experience.

Although these walks depend on audio for their dissemination, the multimodal experience of the sound walk can be highly synaesthetic. Through their auditory components, audio walks invoke what intermedial scholars Rosemary Klich and Edward Scheer term "sensory immersion" (131), with a focus on presence and experience rather than representation. According to Klich and Scheer, this form of immersion centers on spectators' physical location within particular spaces in real-time. They note that the 'sensory' aspect "relates to the audience members' level of sensorial stimulation at any one moment, and their awareness of being with in the present of the performance and its capacity to involve them emotionally and corporeally (heart racing, hair raising, sweating and fidgeting)" (131). In audio walks, this awareness augments the experience of space. While the aural is the focus in the creation of the work, the result is a multimodal, multi-sensory journey as spectators connect the audio to environments around them. In addition, these walks tend to include moments of reflection, with audio gaps designed to allow audiences to experience their spatial surroundings within new performative contexts ("Retour" 34). This degree of involvement has led Robin Nelson to problematize the use of terms "spectator" or "audience" in relation to mobile, technology-based performances. Instead, he refers to an "experiencer" involved in a kinaesthetic, visceral journey. Because sound walks situate audience members as physically and aurally involved participants, I believe the term "experiencer" is a useful descriptor of the embodied experience walkers take part in. Thus, I use Nelson's term as I discuss *Projet blanc* ("Experiencer" 45).

Intermediality is a useful lens for considering how sound walks' hybrid, multimedial form creates potential for socio-political engagement. However, their political potential can also be considered in relation to the multiple performance modes they traverse. For example, sound walks' site-specificity leads to questions about how they intervene into public space. As Nick Kaye notes, "site-specific art frequently works to *trouble* the oppositions between the site and the work" (11). This is seen in a sound walk's ability to juxtapose a site's current use and its history and to encourage experiencers to observe urban spaces from new viewpoints. This inquiry into the construction and inscription of public space reflects site-specific performance's roots in various twentieth-century movements, most notably Situationism. Through tactics like psychogeographic walks, Situationists encouraged citizens to explore the city in previously unimagined ways, highlighting "the hidden, forgotten and obscure" (Pinder 389). The recent surge of sound walks that uncover urban histories (e.g. *Her Long Black Hair*, *Ashes on the Water*) reflects this legacy.

Kathleen Irwin notes that psychogeographic walks are an increasingly popular contemporary form of performance as they can "[combine] art and political activism with an agreeable pastime" (154). Political change was indeed a goal of the Situationists when the psychogeographic form began; however, scholars have questioned the political potency of contemporary performative walks (Pinder 397-401; Tuters and Varnelis 360-1). David Pinder notes that the

politics of these works is usually less overt than earlier psychogeographic forms, as they frequently lack a sustained community engagement and rarely address the privilege embodied in the act of walking itself (397; 401). However, he does not completely dismiss this form's political potential. Instead, he acknowledges the ways in which walking performances question accepted uses of public space and consider new forms of urban rights (399).

Site-specific performance's reliance on experiencers in the creation of meaning also impacts the form's socio-political potential. Site-specific performance enlists spectators as "co-creators" (Eaket 31), whose presence and participation are an integral part of the work. Paul Simpson argues that the presence of experiencers participating in performances can be a political act in itself as it engenders new forms of social engagement and creates the potential for political change (419). With *Projet blanc*, Olivier Choinière used the sound walk form in an attempt to alter how spectators critically approach the theatre. However, I believe his approach also highlights some of Pinder's cautions, as the performance's tone and lack of openings for spectator involvement limit its potential.

### Projet blanc: An Ambulatory Intervention

Olivier Choinière is primarily known as a playwright. Following his 1996 graduation from the National Theatre School's playwrighting program, he had several plays produced in Montreal, two of which—*Le bain des raines* (1998) and *Vénise-en-Québec* (2006)—were nominated for Governor General's Awards. Choinière's best-known work in the English-speaking world is *Félicité (Bliss)*, which premiered in French at Montreal's Théâtre La Licorne in 2007 and in a translation by Caryl Churchill at London's Royal Court Theatre in 2008. While predominantly still a playwright, Choinière's leadership role with L'Activité marks a shift away from a traditional mode of playwrighting. Formed in 2000 under the full name L'Activité Répétitive Grandement Grandement Libératrice, this company challenges theatre conventions, particularly the traditional separation between audience and performer. This separation is explored in both traditional and non-traditional performance spaces. In 2009, the company produced Choinière's *ParadiXXX* at Montreal's Aux Écuries, a theatre space he also co-founded. In the production, a group of actors narrate a muted pornography film. More recently, the company found success with *Chante avec moi* (2010–12), a satirical musical with fifty performers, which premiered at Espace Libre and went on to Ottawa's National Arts Centre and Montreal's Festival TransAmériques festival.

In recent years L'Activité has become increasingly site-specific through their audio-based walks. The company creates each walk for a different environment, although they have adapted some to multiple locales. L'Activité presented their first sound walk, *Beauté intérieure*, in Montreal in 2003. They then produced the walks *Bienvenue à (une ville dont vous êtes le touriste)* (2005) and *Ascension* (2006). The former was translated into English by Maureen Labonté and presented in both English and French at Ottawa's La Nouvelle Scène in 2007 and in French in Chicoutimi, Shawinigan and Mulhouse, France. Although staged at different urban locations, all three productions were designed for one audience member (at a time), with the goal of altering how participants experience and move through public spaces. In 2009 L'Activité expanded this practice to indoor audio tours with *Marche sur ma tombe*, which took place in the gallery area at Quebec City's Musée national des beaux-arts.

While *Projet blanc* marks a continuation of Choinière’s site-specific, urban practice, it also differs from his previous audio walks in several ways. Before attending *Projet blanc*, experiencers received little information about the piece other than Choinière’s involvement and its “ambulatory theatre” format. No media was invited and participants were sent the starting location forty-eight hours before the performance. Choinière and Forget state the performance’s title, evoking a blank page, refers to this lack of pre-show information. They also performed the piece only once so that the surprise intervention would be effective (“Retour” 31-32).

With this single showing *Projet blanc* also departed from the common audio walk form. Cardiff and Newworld Theatre generally create audio for site-specific walks that can be taken at any time, whereas *Project blanc* was a one-off performance in response to a particular cultural event. In addition, while most sound walks, including L’Activité’s previous ambulatory works, are created for one experiencer at a time (Ducharme 86), *Projet blanc* broke from this convention by having all experiencers listen to the audio simultaneously. As the project’s seventy-six experiencers listened to the audio in close physical proximity to one another, Choinière united the group in a shared presence. This sense of common experience deviates from how mobile devices are used both in other sound walks and in everyday practice. In his assessment of how mobile interfaces effect our experience of urban space, Jason Farman argues that devices such as MP3 players can lead to a “distancing-through-proximic,” in which individuals are removed from one another even when they are physically close. He notes how transit users exemplify this concept, as they listen to music to remove themselves from the realities of their daily commutes (4). Marla Carlson relates this idea to sound walks, arguing that, even when walking as a group, the participants have individual experiences (398). However, the clandestine nature of Choinière’s performance worked against the solo nature of the sound walk. Instead of being alone, the experiencers became co-conspirators in the infiltration, united through their double role as TNM spectators and participants in Choinière’s piece.

This doubled spectatorship allowed Choinière to covertly challenge a Montreal cultural institution and how citizens participate within it. Since it opened in 1951, the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (TNM) has been a major force in the Montreal theatre scene. The company, which continues to be one of the city’s largest theatres, defines itself as the home of “the classics, from yesterday and today”<sup>1</sup> (Théâtre du Nouveau Monde). This broad mandate does not limit their work to any nationality or time period and in most seasons the company presents a mix of new works and classic plays, such as those by Molière and Shakespeare. While Choinière is just one of many voices in recent years that have accused the TNM of conservatism, the company has also seen its share of controversy. For example, in 1978, Catholic groups tried to block the TNM production of Denise Boucher’s *Les Fées son soif* (*The Fairies are Thirsty*), which includes a statue of the Virgin Mary as a character. However, in recent years the company has been attacked for its traditionalism. In particular, critics cite the TNM’s continual return to Molière, the first playwright the company ever produced, as evidence of the company’s stagnant and conservative approach. As *The Globe and Mail*’s J. Kelly Nestruck argues, this reliance on a seventeenth-century French playwright reflects how the TNM’s sense of tradition is still front and centre. Nestruck compares the company to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, noting that the institutions started in the same era and are frequently criticized by other theatres companies (“Théâtre”).

Choinière's *Projet blanc* was one such critical reaction; however, his criticisms of the TNM production extended beyond the company's dedication to Molière and sense of tradition. Throughout *Projet blanc* the voice laid out multiple critiques of commercial culture. Once inside the TNM, these statements became focused on contemporary theatre culture. The narrator criticized the decision to stage Molière in a traditional way, noting that theatre companies can add new, contemporary readings of classics that are relevant to audiences today (Choinière and Forget, "Retour" 32). He argued that the TNM production failed in this attempt as it did not take up the play's potential to address contemporary social issues. The TPM's institutionalization of Molière contrasts with the playwright's history as a radical force. His play *Tartuffe* was banned in France in 1664 because religious authorities objected to the criminal Tartuffe's self-identification as a holy man. Thirty years later, Quebec City's bishop Monseigneur Saint-Vallier also prevented a production of the play. The first production of the play in Quebec finally came a century later in 1774 when a group of British officers presented the work in Montreal and it was not until the twentieth century that the province's clergy supported productions of his work (McCord Museum).

Choinière's audio did not address this contentious history. Instead, he focused on the narrative in *L'École des femmes* and how it works as a metaphor for the TNM system. He elided the character of Arnolphe, the older man fixated on having an obedient wife, with the institutional theatre, claiming that rather than being a "jealous and obsessed master of a house" he is a "jealous and obsessed master of the theatre"<sup>2</sup> (qtd. in Choinière and Forget, "Retour" 32). He went on to equate the audience with the role of Agnès, the young woman Arnolphe attempts to mould into his perfect wife. The voice claimed that the audience, like Agnès, was held captive and bored by the theatre, while theatre directors, here embodied by Arnolphe's actions, remain oblivious and uncaring. Choinière broadened his critique as the experiencers left the theatre, moving from the *L'École des femmes* production to a discussion of the commercialization and privatization of the theatre. Once outside the TNM, the audio claimed:

This theatre is just one example among others of public spaces that the market economy has transformed into private spaces, which must, above all else, prove their profitability. As it happens, the present is not a good value. The present is not perceptible or quantifiable. The present is not, by definition, profitable. The present is precisely what escapes us. (34)<sup>3</sup>

This section of audio united Choinière's various critiques. Not only was he critical of the institutional theatre's reliance on commercial practices, but through discussion of "the present" he also lamented how increasing corporatization has created a disconnect between contemporary socio-political issues and onstage discourse. This critique was inspired by Guy Debord's concept of "the spectacle," as Choinière disparaged the increasing role capitalism and corporate interests play in the theatre and other urban spaces.

Choinière's audio also directly addressed the experiencers, challenging them to take a more critical and active stance towards the theatre. During the TNM performance, the audio included probing questions and declarative statements, such as "Why are you here? What is happening in front of you?"<sup>4</sup> and "Wake up! Demand a theatre at the level of your intelligence!"<sup>5</sup> (qtd. in Pépin). These questions and declarations extended the form of the audio



walk to criticize what Baz Kershaw terms the “theatre estate” and the type of spectatorship it demands. Kershaw situates the theatre estate within institutional and commercial theatre practices, which he argues train audiences to expect particular conventions that restrict the direct engagement between performers and spectators (31). Both Kershaw and Alan Filewod argue that radical, anti-institutional performances can break down the strength of the theatre estate and offer alternative practices. In his discussion of different modes of performance in a Canadian context, Filewod explicitly argues that “radical theatre refuses the theatre estate” (17). *Projet blanc* followed this aesthetic of refusal through Choinière’s explicit denunciation of what he saw as a restricted, passive contemporary theatre audience.

In addition to encouraging greater critical approaches from theatre spectators, *Projet blanc* challenged whether the production of *L'École des femmes* lived up to the broad claims made by director Yves Desgagnés in a promotional video. Choinière was particularly critical of Desgagnés’ statement that the production had “resonances with our society, which has problems with pornography and pedophilia”<sup>6</sup> (qtd. in Choinière and Forget, “Retour” 32). In the audio, Choinière challenged this claim and begged the experiencers to find any evidence of such a connection in the actual production. The voice pulled their attention away from the imagined world onstage and pushed them back to the world outside the theatre where their night began, to a world where these issues are visually present. Choinière chose to focus on the director’s claims to point out how this type of publicity is misleading and overstates the contemporary relevance of re-staging classical plays. While he considers theatre an excellent vessel for exploring contemporary issues, in this case he concluded that the production had little to do with these stated aims (34).

Through the use of MP3 players, Choinière had a large audience follow his critiques of the TNM in real time without affecting the TNM production in an aggressive or overt way. While Choinière and Forget term this approach “hacking” (“Retour” 31), I read it as a form of hacktivism because they do not permanently or even visibly impact on the TNM. The term “hacktivism” was first coined in 1998 in an online forum for the hacking group Cult of the Dead Cow to describe new forms of politically motivated hacking (Delio). Jill Lane has taken up this concept in a performance context, characterizing the online actions of Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT) as hacktivist as they create spaces for direct, political actions in order to destabilize existing power relations. For example, the group’s Floodnet applet allows participants to overwhelm particular websites with hits, briefly overwhelming their capacity to reload (139). In hacktivism, no illegal actions take place and interventions are usually short-term reactions to the commercialization of seemingly public online spaces. Choinière’s concept of theatre hacking aligns with this approach since he defines it as “[entering, penetrating], another cultural event without necessarily bothering or breaking or destroying” (qtd. in Nestruck, “Theatre”). Through this hacktivist approach, Choinière seeks to create change by juxtaposing both the form and content of *Projet blanc* with the TNM production. The clandestine nature of this hacktivism directly contrasts with the commercial nature of major theatres in Canada, which rely on media previews, interviews, and other forms of publicity preceding show openings to garner interest.

Much of the critical response to *Projet blanc* lauds Choinière’s hacktivist approach, and particularly the debate within the news media it provoked. Reviewers Elsa Pépin and Catherine Voyer-Léger go so far as to claim that the piece prompted critical engagement

from spectators. Voyer-Léger argues that the work paved the way for democratization by demonstrating how spectators can take on active roles and dialogue with art works. Other critics drew connections between the walk and more widespread opinions about both the *L'École des femmes* production and the TNM in general. When covering the debate between Choinière and Pintal, J. Kelly Nestruck notes that he “[happens] to agree with Choinière’s take on the show, if not the TNM in general” (“How”). Christian Saint-Pierre, editor of *Jeu: Revue de théâtre*, also supports Choinière’s position. In an entry on the journal’s website posted immediately after the intervention, Saint-Pierre argues that the production revealed Choinière to be a leading critical voice in questioning the role institutions play in the cultural sector.

It was Saint-Pierre’s post that prompted Pintal’s initial public reaction. In a letter to the journal, entitled “Projet noir,” she claimed that she was not upset with the critics who applauded Choinière but rather with the playwright for disrespecting the TNM (Vaïs). This action sparked a public debate between Choinière and Pintal, which made national and international news when Nestruck covered it in April 2012 in both *The Globe and Mail* and *The Guardian*. Speaking to *The Globe and Mail*, Pintal described the intervention as an “aggressive act” and “parasitical.” She also confirmed that she had accused Choinière of committing “theatrical rape” in a private conversation with him (qtd. in Nestruck, “How”). In June of the same year, *Jeu* dedicated a section of their issue to the debate, with Choinière and Forget, and Pintal contributing articles. In the issue, Pintal reiterates her argument that the intervention was invasive while Choinière and Forget claim that it had no negative impact on the TNM show. In her responses, Pintal directly refutes the claims that *Projet blanc* activated its audience, noting that the form of the work, with Choinière speaking to the audience via a recording, forced his opinion on the spectators and did not allow for discussion or debate in the moment (Nestruck, “How”).

While Pintal’s reactions are clearly defensive, her critiques point to the limitations of Choinière’s intermedial engagement. Just as Choinière questions whether the director’s aims come across in *L'École des femmes*, I am unsure if *Projet blanc*’s form supported Choinière’s goals. With *Projet blanc*, Choinière impacted the experiencers’ view of *L'École des femmes* and ideally influenced their perception of the theatre; however, he did this through a top-down approach, with his personal biases guiding the meaning-making. It is unclear how experiencers were meant to intervene in the work as they remained seated for the duration of the hacking—a physical confinement that reproduced the very entrapment Choinière was attacking. This physical limitation also clashes with Choinière’s claim, made in writings and interviews since the performance, that the work situated the experiencers as “spectators”<sup>7</sup> (Choinière and Forget, “Retour” 31). While he does not cite Augusto Boal directly, his use of this term suggests an affinity with Theatre of the Oppressed approaches and Baz Kershaw’s definition of effective radical performance, which places the conversion of the spectator into active participant at the forefront (24).

While Choinière criticizes the disconnect between Desagnés’ claims and his production of *L'École des femmes*, I am curious about the seeming difference between the format of *Projet blanc* and the concept of the spectator. In his conception of the term, Boal sees physical investment and action as key to the spectator’s transformation into a subject (122). *Projet blanc*, on the other hand, remains primarily the work of a single author with experiencers

deprived of any moment to respond verbally or physically. Much like Molière's *L'École des femmes*, the playwright remains the sole creator of the work, speaking to an audience who listens and then perhaps begins to view society and institutions differently based on what they have heard. The form of pre-recorded audio also restricts the content of the piece as Choinière's opinion is actually a response to earlier *L'École des femmes* performances. Sean Cubitt sees this as a limitation of sound recording as "every recording is a piece of the past restorable to the present, but the act of recording is also an attempt to secure that piece of the future when the recording will be played. But what is controlled loses its life, its capacity to evolve" (100). In *Projet blanc*, this lack of "evolution" is the result of both the form and content of the piece as the audio is pre-recorded and restricted to Choinière's voice.

The question of whether Choinière's intermedial approach offers a space for intervention relates to the political potential of intermediality. Choinière's work follows a post-Brechtian concept of political intermedial performance as he uses a new media form to clash with the images onstage, and point out the commercial practices of the contemporary institutional theatre. While he claims he is not simply criticizing the TNM, his intervention situates this institution, and its mandate, as part of a larger problem through the audio. This is an attempt to provoke a "politics of spectating" in which the experiencers see the theatre and commercial culture from a new perspective. However, intermedial performance can also go further in the connected digital world of the web 2.0, particularly in challenging the limitations of current audience practices through new media forms. Filewod sees the digital as key to reinvigorating Canadian activist performance, noting that this form can not only disrupt and challenge traditions, but also provide new possibilities for the theatre and spectatorship (292). Yet while Choinière uses digital tools to create and distribute his response, he fails to harness the interactive potential of the digital to provide a space for action. He spends his time focusing on the passivity of the theatre audience, but fails to recognize they may already be what Amy Jensen Petersen calls "participatory spectators" (4) whose exposure to multiple media forms impacts how they receive theatre, regardless of whether this theatre engages with new media itself. Susan Broadhurst argues that with the onset of digital culture embodiment has been altered as we continually experience the world through technology: "Rather, than being separate from the body, technology becomes part of that body and alters and recreates our experience of the world" (187). This notion of embodiment aligns with Klich and Scheer's concept of "sensory immersion," in which technologies affect our understanding of the spaces around us. Choinière uses new technology in his attempt to rework the relationship between the experiencers and the theatre space; however, by denying the experiencers any space in which to engage with the technology themselves, he limits the extent of this alteration.

Rather than situate his experiencers as "participatory spectators," Choinière positions them as passive audience members. He commands them to break out of this mould by "waking up" and demanding change, a call that assumes an ongoing lack of action on their part. This petition sets up a problematic binary with Choinière in the role of the enlightened artist and his audience as those in need of an education. As previously noted, this line of thinking connects Choinière's critique to Debord's concept of "the spectacle." In articulating this idea, Debord emphasizes the disconnections between citizens and social life, lamenting the state of "modern passivity" (15) and expressing a desire for citizen-consumers to re-engage

with creativity and critical thinking. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière critiques this approach, which has led artists to oversimplify the division between spectators and works of art. In particular, Rancière cites how Brecht and Artaud argue that the distance between the work of art and the spectator needs to be eliminated (4). Rancière claims that Artaud and Brecht assume theatre is “the place where the passive audience of spectators must be transformed into its opposite: the active body of a community enacting its living principle” (5). With *Projet blanc*, Choinière follows this assumption. He situates the TNM audience as disengaged from aesthetic and political concerns and seeks to transform his experiencers into critical audience members through his own performance. Rancière challenges this goal, noting that attempts to break down barriers between the spectator and the work of art may in fact create further distance (12). He is particularly critical of artists who assume that an audience member is passive, insisting that:

the spectator also acts. [. . .] She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way—by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them. (13)

Rancière goes on to suggest that, rather than teaching spectators, socially engaged artists should encourage audiences to experience the art work in their own way and to feel free to share their interpretation, whatever it may be (11). Instead of opening up the theatre to such audience driven responses, Choinière demands that his experiencers behave and think a certain way. Through this approach Choinière inadvertently becomes the type of artist he criticizes: an Arnolphe who tries to mould his audience to his own system of beliefs.

Choinière’s critiques were meant to cause a rupture that unveils how institutional theatre fails as a space of political performance. While he intended to unite his experiencers through his statements, this oppositional approach actually emphasized disconnection over connection and thus impacted on the efficacy of his intervention. In recent years, scholars have begun to consider how oppositionality and disruption can diminish the activist potential of contemporary art. Günter Berghaus finds the drive to anti-institutionalism and antagonism to be quixotic at this point in time. He notes that avant-garde artists had begun to move away from oppositionality by the end of the twentieth-century, as the broadening of artistic practices and institutions enabled innovative works to flourish within existing structures. As previously oppositional work now exists within this mainstream, Berghaus believes that activist art needs to find new approaches to and spaces for connecting art to life (261-3). Randy Martin also takes up this issue; while acknowledging the importance of oppositionality and the need for artists to question their relationship to the state, he sees performance’s embeddedness within institutions as ineluctable (26). Perhaps the strongest voice in these challenges comes from Shannon Jackson, whose recent *Social Works* (2011) provides an important counterpoint to the valorization of oppositional approaches by activist performance scholars. Just as other scholars warn that oppositional performance practices

can be used to maintain the status quo, Jackson notes that anti-institutionalism runs the risk of colluding with neo-liberal aims of dismantling social and artistic structures (16). Jackson insists that scholars must critically examine drives to oppositionality and consider how activist artists model sustainment and support. She argues: “When a political art discourse too often celebrates social disruption at the expense of social coordination, we lose a more complex sense of how art practices contribute to inter-dependent social imagining” (14). In his critique of the TNM and commercial theatre, Choinière aims to provoke the experiencers to think about the links between market interests and artistic decisions. However, his emphasis on oppositionality may also close off opportunities for connection because he does not give experiencers an opportunity to imagine how this relationship might be altered.

### **From *Projet blanc* to *Route 501 Revisited*: Participation, Presence and Potential**

Digital media, especially in the socially engaged atmosphere of the Web 2.0, provide infinite possibilities for “inter-dependent imagining.” In engaging with new technology practices, intermedial performance has the potential to model these new modes of connection. To explore this potential, I conclude by comparing Choinière’s approach with another digital site-specific production: Jonathan Goldsbie’s *Route 501 Revisited*. Unlike Choinière, Goldsbie is not primarily a theatre maker, but rather has a background in urban activism and municipal politics. Formerly a member of Toronto’s Public Space Committee and a columnist for *The National Post*, Goldsbie now works as a reporter for Toronto’s *NOW Magazine*. However, as the *NOW* press release about his hiring notes, Goldsbie is best known for his Twitter feed (@goldsbie), which addresses Toronto’s municipal politics and has attracted over 11,000 followers (Love).

Goldsbie’s passions for both Twitter and Toronto’s public space led to the creation of *Route 501 Revisited*. This performance, which took place twice in March 2012, involved participants riding on a Toronto streetcar and communicating solely through a Twitter hashtag, #route501. The first iteration occurred on a chartered vehicle; the second took place on a public streetcar, with only those in the know



**A. R. Arvelo McQuaig**  
@arvelomcquaig



I've never gone so far on streetcar before. Suburban streetcar. Am I still in Toronto? #route501  
pic.twitter.com/0dXEvd5m

Reply Retweet Favorite More



2:28 PM - 31 Mar 2012 from Toronto, Ontario

Flag media

Alexander Arvelo McQuaig (@arvelomcquaig) tweets a picture from onboard the streetcar during Jonathan Goldsbie’s *Route 501 Revisited*.  
Courtesy: Alexander Arvelo McQuaig.

participating. Over the course of the journey, which covered the length of the city along Queen Street, Goldsbie pointed out different locales and gave information about each space. In some cases, the content was historical. For example, as the streetcar passed a movie theatre, Goldsbie tweeted that it is one of only two currently on the route, but “At one time, there were 47.” This hearkening back to earlier urban landscapes connects the work to such audio walks as Janet Cardiff’s *Her Long Black Hair* and Newworld Theatre’s *Ashes on the Water*, which also uncovered the history of urban spaces. The work’s primary focus, however, was on recent political events and current problems surrounding the use of public space. In another comparative tweet, Goldsbie noted, “On our tour, we’ll be passing through 11 city wards, 7 provincial/federal ridings, and 6 closed library branches.” The closure of public libraries is just one of many social and political issues Goldsbie referred to during the ride. When the streetcar passed the east end’s Moss Park, he recalled how Paul Crouch, a homeless man living in the park, had been killed there in 2008 by army reservists. When passing Old City Hall, he mentioned Toronto Mayor Rob Ford’s ongoing legal troubles. The commentary also touched on how Torontonians engage with urban spaces and the tension between urban and suburban values. As the streetcar moved away from the downtown core and into a more suburban area, Goldsbie tweeted: “At a certain point, outside our city-core comfort zones, it becomes like a haunted house dark ride. #route501.”

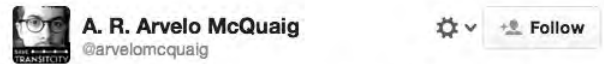
Like *Projet blanc*, *Route 501 Revisited* took participants on a journey through public space via a mobile device. Both projects broke from the ‘distancing-through-proxemic’ strategy that such devices normally invoke and encouraged experiencers to view their surroundings through a new, or at least altered, perspective. Although part of the Theatre Centre’s Free Fall Theatre festival, *Route 501 Revisited* was staged outside of traditional theatre spaces without any clear actors, thereby encouraging participants to expand their definition of theatre. *Projet blanc* also challenges how we think of the theatre, as Choinière included a visit to a traditional theatre production and urban walking as part of a single performance. The two productions also align in their content as both had their creators share personal feelings about the urban spaces the shows took place in. Yet, in their engagement of experiencers, they were fundamentally different.

Goldsbie’s strategies for collaborative participation contrast with Choinière’s more traditional narrative approach. While Choinière provided his experiencers with a device loaded with pre-recorded audio, Goldsbie invited experiencers to participate with their own networked device. *Route 501 Revisited* allowed experiencers to engage with new technologies, which broke down hierarchies of authorship and encouraged participants to actively re-situate their relationship to socially inscribed spaces. Drew Hemment refers to this type of performance as a form of “social authoring,” in which locative media is used to expand social spaces through user-generated content (351). *Route 501 Revisited* followed the social authoring approach of other Toronto-based locative projects, such as [*murmur*], which started in the city’s Kensington market in 2003. Both are phone-based projects, with [*murmur*] participants calling a telephone number to hear personal stories or alternative histories about particular locations in the city and *Route 501 Revisited* participants sharing their urban experiences via Twitter phone applications. Like Hemment, Chris Eaket claims there is socio-political potential in this form of performance. He argues that [*murmur*]’s multiple discourses reveal how neighbourhoods are “lived places” (36) and “decrease social distance while emphasizing

individual attachments to places” (33). For *[murmur]*, volunteers collected and recorded locals’ stories about their neighbourhoods. These stories were then uploaded to the *[murmur]* website and made available through a phone number, which was publicly posted at each story site. *Route 501 Revisited* took this distributed approach a step further by allowing anyone to add her voice to the narrative in real-time.

Like *[murmur]*, the social was at the forefront in *Route 501 Revisited*. An overview of the tweets from both *Route 501* performances reveals that other tweeters were just as involved as Goldsbie. The performance allowed for various networks to build, as tweeters replied to both the performance generally through the hashtag and one another directly through Twitter handles. The content of the tweets varies, with some experiencers more interested in how outsiders responded to the form of the piece than in the urban space outside. Throughout her tweets Aislinn Rose (@aislinnto) revealed the interesting dynamic onboard, as riders not participating in the piece became increasingly aware that the performance event was taking place through the experiencers’ reactions. Other tweets responded to Goldsbie’s interest in public space. When passing Queen West’s Trinity Bellwoods Park, Carly Maga (@radiomaga) commented “Trinity Bellwoods, I find you quite exclusive for a public outdoor space #route501.” As Twitter is a public platform available in much of the world, participation was not limited to the physical performance space in the streetcar, but extended to users following the event from different locales. This extension challenges traditional notions of presence and instead follows Russel Fewster and Sarah Bay-Cheng’s claims that with intermedial performance presence and embodiment are increasingly characterized by participation rather than physical or temporal proximity.

The participatory nature of the work also demonstrates how social media outlets, such as Twitter, can be used to create new forms of connection. By highlighting the potential of Twitter to create a shared experience about the politics of urban space, Goldsbie opened up the activist potential of this social medium. Susan Broadhurst argues that digital practices can have a socio-political impact “inasmuch as they question the very nature of our accepted ideas and belief systems regarding new technologies. In this sense, the digital does what all avant-garde art does; it



This is what the Western frontier looks like #route501  
[pic.twitter.com/LXIGiGep](https://pic.twitter.com/LXIGiGep)

← Reply ↻ Retweet ★ Favorite ⋮ More



3:17 PM - 31 Mar 2012 📍 from Toronto, Ontario

Flag media

Alexander Arvelo McQuaig (@arvelomcquaig) tweets a picture at the end of the *Route 501 Revisited* journey. Courtesy: Alexander Arvelo McQuaig.

is an experimental extension of the socio-political and cultural of an epoch” (185). *Route 501 Revisited* acted as an “experimental extension” that explored the ways we traverse through the city and online. By connecting this digital practice to the site-specific streetcar journey, Goldsbie acknowledged that our embodied experiences are entwined with the technologies we use. The performance aligned with Filewod’s description of a digital, activist theatre that “produces new structures” and “new theatricalities” as the technology enabled distributed, polyvocal participation.

In contrast, *Projet blanc* situated the experiencers as listeners. Rather than using technology to open up the conversation about the state of political theatre, Choinière propagated a top-down approach with the artist as authority. Both the form of the work, with participants listening to pre-recorded audio, and the content provided by Choinière limited it to a single discourse. *Route 501 Revisited* provides a counterpoint that opens up the possibility of interweaving digital technologies, performance and urban space. The performance’s polyphonic form followed Rancière’s call for the theatre to have a more distributed quality full of simultaneous, heterogeneous discourses (22). *Projet blanc* failed to make space for such heterogeneity as the relationship between creator and experiencer remained distant. Instead, Choinière embodied the very role he sets out to critique: that of the artist who tells his audience what to think.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Théâtre de tous les classiques, ceux d’hier et ceux de demain.”
- <sup>2</sup> “Arnolphe n’est pas le maître jaloux et obsédé d’une maison. Arnolphe est le maître jaloux et obsédé d’un théâtre!”
- <sup>3</sup> “Ce théâtre n’est qu’un exemple parmi tant d’autres de lieux publics que l’économie de marché a transformés en espaces privés, qui doivent faire, avant toute chose, la preuve de leur rentabilité. Or, le présent n’est pas une valeur sûre. Le présent n’est pas saisissable ni quantifiable. Le présent n’est pas, par définition, rentable. Le présent est précisément ce qui nous échappe. Et si nos institutions sont des lieux clos, barricadés, et que les fenêtres qui donnent sur la rue ont été bouchées, c’est de peur que le présent ne les prenne d’assaut.” (34)
- <sup>4</sup> “Pourquoi êtes-vous ici? Qu’est-ce qui se passe devant vous?”
- <sup>5</sup> “Réveillez-vous! Exigez un théâtre à la hauteur de votre intelligence!”
- <sup>6</sup> “des resonances dans notre société, qui a des problèmes avec la pornographie et la pédophilie”
- <sup>7</sup> “spect-acteurs”

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