

Bon Nadja Joy Mott, *Lightning in the Middle (LIM)*.

Thesis for Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Art

[The Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, the University of Melbourne \(VCA\)](#)

The expansive and processual nature of the thesis, which is truly reflective of the claim of “transdisciplinary transformative mixed methods,” makes this report, perforce, selective. In what follows, I will divide my comments into two sections. In the first section, I will provide a brief reviewer’s interpretative summary of the thesis to locate and establish my level of engagement with the dissertation. In the second section, I offer comments that broadly address the University’s criteria for examination, with the caveat I can only speak to my expertise.

Section 1

The thesis is an impressive feat. It testifies to the substantive performance work it documents - and through which methodology is developed - at the same time as it situates this development and process in relation to the many discourses and resources which inform *LIM*’s genesis and production. Notably, the thesis manages to do so in a unique style that performs its own methodological and theoretical commitments - resisting a reinscription of the phallogocentrism of the textual tradition it critiques. The thesis deploys multiple strategies of its own decentering, moving between registers, forms and modalities, e.g., levels of analysis, voice of positionality, argument/document, etc., all of which enact the central claims of the thesis including, again, an enactment of its methodology.

The performative work of *LIM* is traced in the constellative word-text-image component of the dissertation in such a way that does not subordinate its embodied and located intensity to a theoretical armature that justifies it. Rather, mobilizes theory to expose its limitations - drawing on a transdisciplinary approach, resourced by trans/feminist philosophers, Indigenous wisdom traditions, queer theory, narratives of quantum physics, etc., to outline the contemporary dislocation of theory from the subjects who theorize, especially where that separation enables and justifies the subjugation of subjects. In particular, the thesis articulates and demonstrates the implicit and, arguably, fallacious binaries that subtend much of Western theorization, especially apparent in gender/sexuate identity categories. Yet, beyond critique, the thesis offers a reimagining of gender identity. *LIM* is the performance, argument, corpus, and emergence of this reimagination.

Section 2

Embedded in the discovery and recovery of the artist’s neurodiversity and in its complicated kinship with loss and new imagination, the thesis specifies and considers nonbinary gender identity through performances that queer temporal connection, subjectivity, and identificatory norms. The thesis “entangles binaries of male and female, human and non-human, to ask whether identifying as lightning can guide society to expansive possibilities beyond current social norms” (p. 28). In moving through re-iterative, emblematic mobilizations of lightning - in turn, developed out of a specified relationality and imaginative figuration to the historical figure of Bon Scott – “Lightning in the Middle” (*LIM*) performs its positions and possibilities as nonbinary.

The central exploration of gender identity in marginalized (colonized, racialized), queer, trans, and nonbinary gender identity/ies, through the development of a transdisciplinary methodology, *resourced by these positions but not additive or reducible to any one of them* (e.g., trans/feminist philosophy, queer theory, Indigenous epistemologies, critical disability studies, etc.), demonstrates the thesis to be situated in terms of the most current debates – to which it is also well-positioned to contribute.

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LIM exhibits an ambition of thought worthy of its demonstrative task as a PhD thesis. The ongoing level of creative output not only exceeds the criteria of a “professional level of familiarity with, and understanding of, contemporary work in the field” but establishes that _^_ is already a “professional” working artist with advanced skills in the field. _^_ exhibits an impressive array of professional capacities, which have supported and complimented the process of the thesis: organizing and advertising performances; participating in academic and community discussions about *LIM*; working with diverse artistic communities (both local and international); running a gallery; mentoring and collaborating with others; developing a professional profile of artistic and academic work, to name only a few, and not to mention the technical know-how and breadth of knowledge _^_ has cultivated across art forms and methods. _^_ is well beyond the standard of professional competency detailed in the criteria for doctoral theses that include creative work. Moreover, as *LIM* demonstrates, _^_ is able to sustain extended and iterative research and creative process within the methodological parameters the project develops and articulates. These methodological parameters include ethical commitments as *internal and substantive* to the project’s methodology. *LIM* positions the artist as an activist/activator for social change. The creative practice of *installation activated performance (IAP)* allows _^_ to translate the gallery space into a spatialization of possibilities where space, place, identity, and time, are pulled away from their rigidified form (as distinct categories subtended by patriarchal hierarchized binary oppositions) into a movement of dispersal, illuminating their entanglement in charged sites of bodily happening.

The thesis meets the doctoral criteria of a “command of knowledge in relevant fields.” However, it does so in ways that are subtle and easily missed if one is not attentive to the processive and performative grounding of the work’s methodology or if one is unaware of the core ideas/arguments of its interlocutors. The strength of *LIM* is that it does not rehearse or reproduce the theoretical apparatus of the many thinkers, disciplines, or positions it engages with. To do so would implicitly reinscribe a site of privilege to replication. Nor does the work attempt to synthesize or subsume these divergent and, at times, conflicting accounts under one narrative. Rather, _^_ curates resources without tacitly reducing them to a standard or sameness that would hierarchize them. In this way, the thesis maintains a methodological consistency with its own processes (and, not incidentally, with many of the contributions of queer/feminist/indigenous thinkers it is in dialogue with). In other words, _^_ avoids erecting a new master position that would fall prey to the phallogocentrism it attempts to overcome. *LIM* is the realization and activation of the nonbinary, where the nonbinary cannot be abstracted from the site of its performance. I take this core insight to be echoed (not replicated) across the dissertation in _^_ use of the notion “transduction.” Some examples include the “anti-archive as process” (p. 111); the discussion of queerness and “perceptual ecology” (p. 119); and in the creative account of Irigaray’s “between-two” (p. 120) that moves toward the nonbinary, which even resists a binary of “straightness and queerness” (54). Indeed, the dissertation demonstrates a robust engagement with the thought of Irigaray (especially pp. 181-183).

In consideration of the criteria for examination, I found the presentation of the thesis, including the documentation of creative works, to be professionally presented and extremely well-organized. The references were comprehensive and clear.