Soul of Stones

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Inhabiting a body that is not extended by the skin of the social means the world acquires a new shape and makes new impressions.

- Sara Ahmed

Queer phenomenology (20)

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Abstract

Soul of Stones is a reflection on how pain and endurance can become tools for transformation in queer performance. This work comes from my own journey as a non-binary artist growing up in Colombia, and the ways performance has helped me make sense of trauma, reconnect with my body, and offer a space for others to witness discomfort, strength, and vulnerability.

Through live performances, photography, and installation, I work closely with stones, beings that hold memory and weight. These stones are not props but collaborators. By walking barefoot, kneeling, or balancing or gathering them, I examine how physical intensity can mirror emotional experience, offering a language when words fall short.

Drawing from feminist, queer, and performance theory, the project also responds to wider struggles, including anti-trans legislation and global violence. My performances invite quiet forms of witnessing, encouraging moments of reflection, care, and solidarity. Rather than offering fixed answers, this work remains open-ended, unfolding through process, repetition, and the ongoing effort to find meaning in the weight we carry.

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Acknowledgments

I am beyond grateful for everything, all the support, care, conversations, ways of connecting and understanding that I have found in the ECUAD community, and I continue finding.

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Gracias especiales a mi madre, por hacer esto posible, por dejarme soñar y creer en mis sueños, por apoyarme a la distancia. Este logro también es tuyo. Y gracias pa, por siempre encontrar maneras de conectar conmigo y poner el arte como escudo y destino.

Special thanks to my partner, for your unwavering belief in me. For reminding me of how important it is to enjoy the process every time I forget how sweet it is to create.

And to my queers in Colombia, thank you for being fierce.

Land and Stones

I am currently residing, and creating work on unceded, traditional, and ancestral land of the wmaOkwayam (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), and salilweta? (Tsleil-Waututh) nations.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to them for taking care of and protecting these lands for thousands of years. As a newcomer and outsider, I am committed to learning how my presence and work can honour this land while I collaborate with some of their powerful stones that would be returned to their home after this project ends.

¿Qué llevas en los bolsillos?

Mi acercamiento a las piedras no es científico o físico o geológico, mi acercamiento a las piedras es pasional, instintivo, y mal hecho: apegado.
No me importa si esta piedra es mas blanda, mas vieja, mas fuerte o mas grande. Me importa si vibra, si salta, si canta o si llora.

A veces las quiero recoger para abrazarlas y susurrarles lo mucho que me enseñan
de mi
de ti,
y de esta tierra tan sabia.

A veces las quiero recoger para sentir su fuerza, su frio y ver como mi cuerpo sangra y llora con ellas.

Y a veces las quiero recoger y pintar para pensar en ti,
en tu pasado y en tu fuerza
en la violencia que viviste
y como siendo niña decidiste pintarlas y venderlas para sobrellevar pobrezas que muchos no conocen y que gracias a ti, yo tampoco conocí.

Las piedras son estos grandes seres, algunas veces abuelos, algunas veces guías pero siempre energía, esa que transforma. Esa que busco crear en mi trabajo para poder compartirla con los demás.

Porque al final, este proyecto es también una excusa para volver a guardar piedras en los bolsillos y correr hacia mi madre para mostrarle no solo qué encontré hace años, sino lo que estoy encontrando ahora.

Threshold

We live in difficult times. After years of struggle, the rights of 2SLGBTQ+ people are being eroded, threatening hard-won spaces of visibility and resistance. In this landscape of uncertainty, art becomes a way to hold pain, to transform it into testimony. *Soul of Stones* is the culmination of two years of study and creation during my MFA at ECUAD, a body of work shaped by endurance, vulnerability, and the quiet weight of stones.

While working on *Soul of Stones*, I deliberately chose the word *stone* over *rock* for its layered significance. As Métis artist David Garneau notes, “Stones are rocks altered by human hands and intention” (2). This distinction is integral to my practice, where my performances physically engage with stones, holding, balancing, and enduring their weight, transforming them through human interaction. *Stone* also resonates with me personally, closely aligning with the Spanish word *piedra,* a term from my Colombian upbringing that carries emotional weight. *Piedra* evokes memories of my childhood, the landscapes I inhabited, and the language that shaped my early understanding of the world. In choosing *stone,* I honour both the physical transformation these objects undergo in performance and the cultural and linguistic ties that ground my work in personal history and lived experience.

There is so much pain in the world, and in this project, I chose to work with stones as vessels for emotional energy. I could have chosen any natural material, but stones hold a particular resonance. They are weighted with meaning yet also absorb and carry it. All things have animacy, stones are not passive objects but collaborators. They anchor, hold, and witness. They speak to the land and offer a stillness that calms my nervous system.

Collaboration often implies working with another person, but for me, collaborating with stones opened a space of grounding and connection to this territory. On a personal level, stones hold memories of my childhood, a reminder of the little gender-bending girl who navigated a world that told her she was too much, not enough, or did not deserve a place at all. Working with stones became a way to honour that child and cultivate self-compassion. It also became a means of reconnecting with my body after years of psychiatric medication left me feeling disembodied. In psychology, disembodiment is understood as a dis-integration of body and mind. This was unfamiliar to me. I grew up in a Waldorf school, with a mother who always told me to listen to my gut when in doubt. I had always felt deeply in my body, knew it well. And then I lost that connection. Performing with stones helped me reclaim it. In some ways, I had to learn to embody my own body again.

Beyond their symbolic and personal significance, stones were also accessible. As an international student, I quickly realized I could not afford expensive materials, but stones were abundant and free. They became artistic elements and necessary companions in this process of making and unmaking.

Writing path

This thesis paper is written in a deeply personal voice because the work itself is personal. My artistic practice is rooted in storytelling, in bearing witness to pain, and in creating spaces where intensity can be held and transformed. Growing up in Colombia shaped my relationship with language, passion and intensity are woven into the way I speak, think, and create. As someone with hypersensitivity, I have always felt things deeply, and I embrace that depth in both my performance work and my writing.

I also made the deliberate choice to incorporate some Spanish into this paper. This decision is for my mother. I want her to feel included in this achievement because it belongs to her as much as it does to me. Writing in my first language is an act of intimacy, a way to bridge distances, and a form of resistance against the challenges of navigating academia in a second language.

My MFA thesis project emerged as a surprise. In recent years, I have delved into the concept of binary limits, what inhabits within and beyond them, and how these constructs shape our experiences, especially in Colombia, a country entrenched in opposites. There is no middle ground between right and left; women continue to fight against patriarchy, while machismo dictates what belongs in the categories of woman and man, leaving no space for gender dissidence or even self-expression. From a queer and collaborative perspective, I have approached these questions through performance, doubts that have accompanied me since I first inhabited my biologically female body in a macho, violent, homophobic environment surrounded by drug culture, where I grew up.

Why do I feel this is important? Growing up in a space where the Catholic male gaze and double standards dictated everything, binary extremes began to harm me. These extremes raised questions about what it meant to be a woman and why it was so uncomfortable. I started questioning myself: how does my body feel calm for the first time in years?

Why do I speak of the calm body? It wasn't until I arrived in a new country that I began to understand where this discomfort came from and what it was rooted in. Here, my dissenting

gender was not questioned; the name I chose for myself was respected, beauty came in all shapes and colours, and even the restrooms had respectful and safe options. Even my appearance stopped being strange. What once made me uncomfortable no longer bothered me. The scale, the breasts, the femininity that was once so feared and rejected, started to look different.

It was precisely this new perception of myself that, during a conversation with my soon to be supervisor in my first term of the MFA program, the first steps of this project emerged. We talked about my creative process, and I remember mentioning that I create from the inside out, that things have to feel uncomfortable in my body in order for me to do something about them. After that conversation, I began working with second-hand t-shirts I found in thrift stores around Vancouver, wearing them, painting them while I wore them, and then collaborating with water to let the stains flow until the writing on them was barely visible. With those 25 t-shirts, I created an installation piece called *Fluid T-Shirts* (2023) (see Fig 1), where I aimed to examine discomfort, struggle, and the journey of feeling inadequate in a body I was taught to hate. My intention behind using second-hand t-shirts stems from their genderless nature and the anonymity of their previous wearers.

Figure 1. *Fluid t-shirts,* 2023, Grad Gallery, ECUAD, Vancouver

That was the first time I began working with performance again, not in public, but in the performative act of wearing and painting, which opened up a new exploration. Later, combining performance and the live art component of text, I began writing the pronouns they/them, the ones I go by here in Canada on a my studio and gallery walls. It was then that the concept of punishment and endurance started to emerge. While doing 30-minute performances writing on a wall with charcoal, I incorporated the pronouns elle/elles in a performance piece called *elle/ they* (2024) (see Fig 2.) These pronouns, particularly in Spanish, felt like a battleground, every stroke of charcoal carried the weight of trauma, pain, and uncertainty. Each time I confronted them, I experienced a deep discomfort I hadn't encountered before. The act of writing them became both a form of endurance and a confrontation with language itself.
This experience made me reflect more deeply on pronouns, how they are not just linguistic tools but sites of power, identity, and validation.

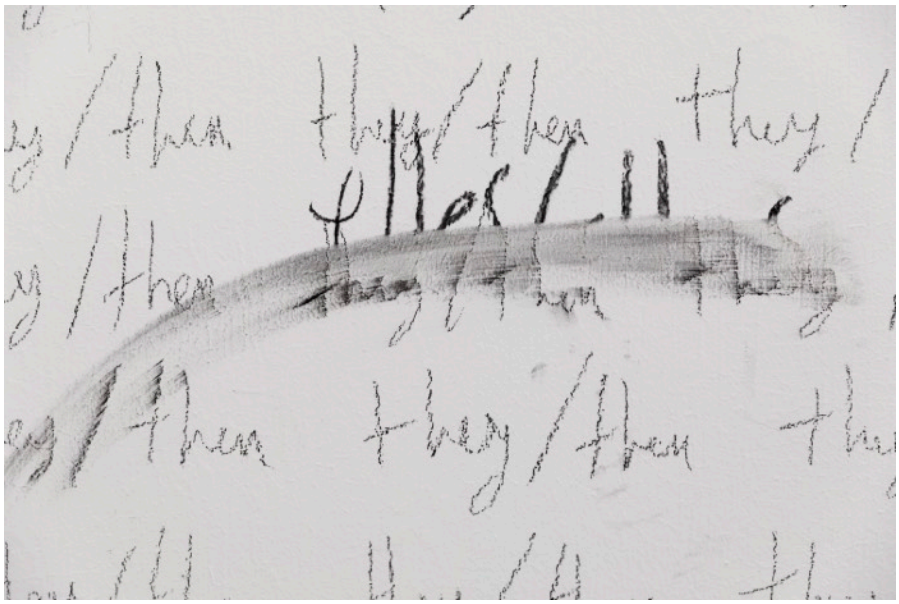

Figure 2. Detail from elle/they. 2024. Documented by Jianing Li

Pronouns and Identity

Many assume that the need for inclusive and gender-neutral pronouns is a recent development, but linguistic debates around gendered language date back centuries. In *What's Your Pronoun?: Beyond He and She* (2020), writer Dennis Baron traces the use of gender-neutral pronouns as far back as 1789. And during the suffrage movement, feminist activists challenged the assumption that 'he' was a neutral term. Baron also highlights how new words

gain acceptance, stating, “For a word to arise naturally, first someone has to create it, and other people have to find it useful enough to repeat it” (111). Words like *ze* and *hir,* often labeled as ‘new pronouns,’ are not new at all. *Ze* was introduced in 1864 by J.W.L., and *hir* first appeared in 1920, thanks to the editor of the *Sacramento Bee,* a newspaper in Northern California. These words have existed far longer than many realize, they are simply finding new life today.

This history reveals something crucial: the need for inclusive language has always existed. Pronouns are not arbitrary; they shape how we acknowledge and respect each other. To refuse someone's pronouns is to deny their existence, reinforcing exclusion and erasure. My performance *elle/they* (2024) forced me to sit with this tension. It was not just about what words I used; it was about the internal battle of being seen in a world that often refuses to see us.

As I reflected on pronouns, I also reconsidered the labels I have used over time, bisexual, non-binary, trans, pansexual… Yet, the term that resonates most with me is 'queer.' It can mean strange or odd, describe an identity outside of heterosexual and colonial norms, and can also refer to an orientation. As Sara Ahmed states, 'queer' can describe something 'oblique' or 'out of line' (161). It captures the fluidity and resistance of my experiences. Ahmed further explains, 'I have used queer to describe specific sexual practices...referring to those who practice non-normative sexualities' (161). I use the term 'queer' in this paper because it embodies a refusal to conform, offering a deeper understanding of identity and sexuality beyond traditional confines.

This resistance extends beyond language to how I present myself. Clothing, hair, and aesthetics have been ways of foregrounding my gender ambiguity. I gravitate toward oversized clothes, neutral tones, and a sparse aesthetic, not as a mere stylistic choice, but as an embodiment of my desire to be unreadable, to exist outside imposed gender norms. As a Colombian, my body is shaped by curvy, stereotypically feminine genetics, yet my relationship with my body has been one of negotiation and tension. I shaved my head, wore black, sought androgyny. My work does not engage with gender through the hyper-visible, rainbow-coded aesthetics of mainstream queer representation. Instead, I speak to the erasure of gender, to the non-gender, to the void. The black clothing I wear is not just an aesthetic choice; it is a refusal.

After reflecting and crying through my piece *elle/they* (2024), I performed *I wish I could* (2024), where I stood before an audience, holding intense eye contact for ten minutes. This experience opened a new exploration, focusing on the concept of intensity as form. It was intense,

uncomfortable, even confrontational, forcing me to confront my own history: “You’re too much; you feel too much…” I feared creating something as painful as my experiences with Spanish pronouns. But a conversation with my supervisor about the conceptual role of materials in contemporary art shifted my perspective. She shared her fascination with geology and asked, *What about stones?* That question sparked something in me. I began thinking about collaborating with stones, combining the challenge of intensity with something that brings me comfort and joy.

Figure 3. First approach to *Between a Stone and a hard place.* 2024

Little did I know I was entering another difficult quest. Stones reminded me of a project I did years ago, where I spent hours drawing the same stone. That memory resurfaced my early childhood: for at least three years, I collected stones daily, filling my pockets and bringing them home to my mother. She used them to build pesebres[1], Catholic nativity scenes where families gather to pray and sing for nine nights leading up to December 24th. Each stone was a small treasure, something I eagerly collected as a gift for my mother when she returned from work.

I began experimenting with stones that caught my attention, using them in performances exploring intensity, endurance, physical pain, balance, and energy. This led to *Between a Stone and a Hard Place* (2024) (see Fig. 3)*,* where I kneeled on two small pebbles for ten minutes, enduring the pain and sustaining eye contact. Spending time with stones and incorporating them into my practice brought me back to Samuel Beckett's *Molloy,* particularly the passage where the protagonist obsessively rearranges four stones between his pockets and mouth:

> "Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I replaced by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it. Thus there were still four stones in each of my four pockets, but not quite the same stones" (69).

I wonder if, after working with them for so long, they are the same stones I started with. This obsessive act reminds me of my own process. After handling stones and performing with them, I feel they are not "quite the same stones" anymore. They have changed, or perhaps I have. Now, they hold memory, energy, and transformation. Through these rituals, stones become collaborators, teachers, and companions that reveal parts of myself I did not know were there. Beckett's words echo my experience: the act of engaging with something as simple as a stone is never truly neutral. It becomes charged with emotion, significance, and even a kind of life. Stones have transformed for me, and in turn, they have transformed me.

Between Borders

My MFA Thesis project grows from my experience at the intersection of two countries Colombia and Canada, two cities Cali and Vancouver, and two languages Spanish and English.

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[1] *Pesebres* is the Spanish word for nativity scenes or portals that depict the birth of Jesus Christ, an important tradition in Catholic Colombian households.

Fig 4. Cali, Colombia

Fig 5. Vancouver, Canada

Growing up non-binary, middle-class, and mentally ill in a Catholic, violent society, I carry those experiences into my art. My performances confront the challenges of navigating oppressive systems, channeling both lived struggles and broader histories of resilience.

Colombian artist María José Arjona's deep engagement with the body as a medium for resistance, transformation, and communication has influenced my approach to performance. In her work, the body becomes both a link and a battlefield, embodying the clash between individuals and the objects that share their space. For Arjona, gestures act as archives, preserving emotions and experiences within political and social power structures. This resonates with my understanding of movement as a repository of experience, connecting my personal history to larger struggles against oppression (Rolf Art).
My work resists the systems I encountered in Colombia and continue to witness in Canada, challenging gender norms, religious fundamentalism, and the forces that seek to control non-conforming bodies. The emotional, physical, and political violence I explore reflects this resistance and the broader fight for queer survival.

One particularly compelling piece by Arjona is *All Others in Me* (2012) (see Fig. 6) at the 4th Marrakech Biennale, where she simulates a striptease, removing clothing without fully

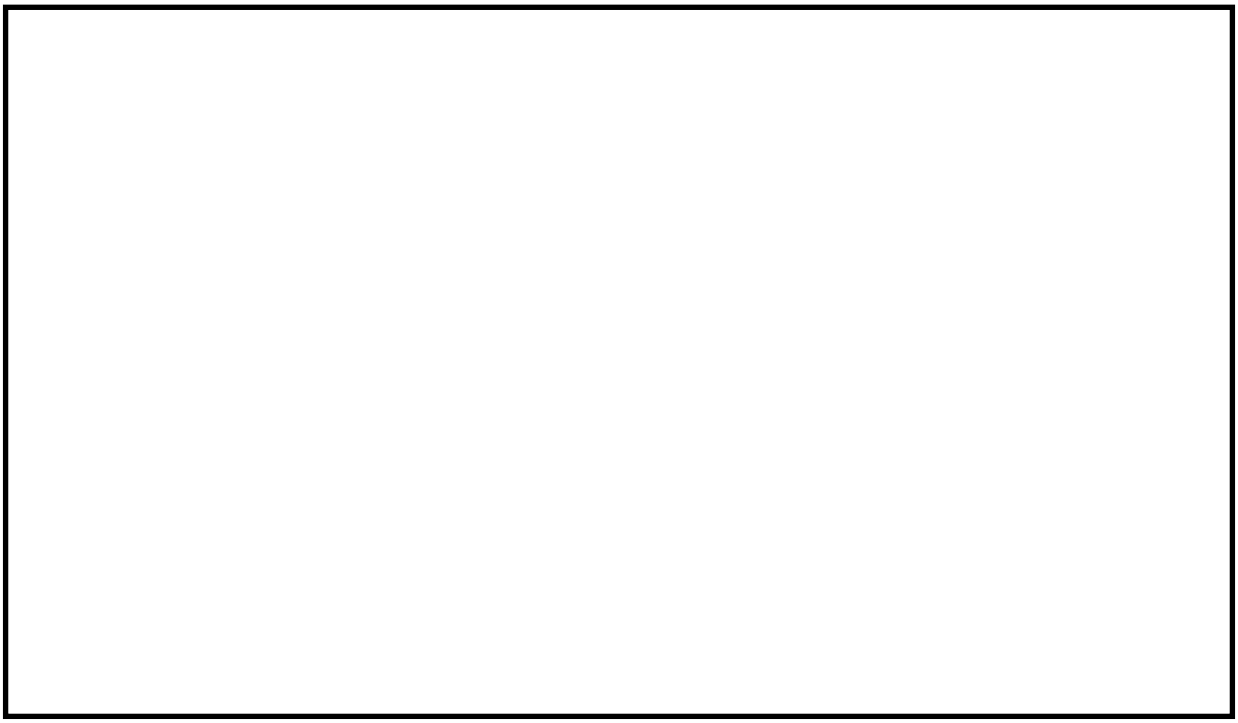

Figure 6. *All the others in me,* 2012, Maria Jose Arjona, Casa della Fontana, Milan. Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is a documentation of a performance where the artist is undressing themselves found in https://www.artealdia.com/News/MDC-S-Museum-of-Art-and-Design-presents-Maria-Jose-Arjona-All-the-others-in-me

undressing.This was her first direct allusion to gender politics, examining the connotations of femininity and the public's desires and expectations. The piece concludes with an androgynous body that fuses gender categories, proposing a fluidity that transcends traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. This exploration of fluidity mirrors my practice, where I push the boundaries of the body to redefine how it communicates, resists, and transforms within both personal and political contexts.

Arjona's ability to invite viewers to engage physically and intellectually in her work mirrors my desire to create a shared experience with the audience. My performances compel spectators to witness and engage with the intensity of the moment, opening space for dialogue and reflection on the body as a site of transformation and endurance.

Anti-trans legislation is rising globally, and recently three Canadian provinces have introduced laws and policies that directly restrict trans rights. In October 2023, Saskatchewan enacted a law requiring parental consent for students to use their affirmed names or pronouns in school. New Brunswick has proposed a similar policy, while Alberta's proposed bills go even further, aiming to limit access to gender-affirming care and participation in sports for trans individuals.

Alberta's policies are on the brink of becoming law, raising serious concerns about the erosion of 2S/LGBTQIA+ rights in the country (Community-Based Research Center).

These movements, often linked to government actions, seek to erase trans and queer lives by denying us basic human rights, such as access to healthcare, safety, and dignity. As author and performer Alok Vaid-Menon writes in *Beyond the Gender Binary* (2020), "The best way to eliminate a group is to demonize them, such that their disappearance is seen as an act of justice, not discrimination. But this is about discrimination, and it's time that we address it" (6). This demonization creates a world where violence against gender-nonconforming people is not only tolerated but framed as acceptable, a point that deeply resonates with my experiences as a non-binary artist navigating systems of oppression.

In Colombia, the fight against oppression is also full of setbacks. One example is the *Nada que Curar* (Nothing to cure) law, intended to ban 'conversion therapy,' which was blocked in the Senate on June 2024. These failures remind me that the fight for a livable life free of violence is far from over. As Vaid-Menon emphasizes, "Gender non-conforming people face considerable distress not because we have a disorder, but because of stigma and discrimination. There is nothing wrong with us; what is wrong is a world that punishes us for not being normatively masculine or feminine" (41). This quote underscores the fundamental issue: the problem is not our existence but a society that refuses to acknowledge and respect it. The rejection of the *Nada que Curar* law exemplifies this, reinforcing systemic efforts to delegitimize queer and trans lives. When governments and institutions fail to protect marginalized communities, they send a message that our suffering is acceptable.

Like Vaid-Menon's call for reclaiming gender nonconformity as a radical and imaginative space, I use endurance and vulnerability in my performances to create a dialogue about resistance, visibility, and transformation. In *Beyond the Gender Binary* (2020), Vaid-Menon envisions gender as a flexible and creative form of expression, unbound by the limitations of the binary system. This perspective directly informs my performances, where I use my body to explore identities beyond rigid binaries, with stones serving as a metaphor for the pressure of being an outsider. Through acts of endurance, I aim to invite the audience to reflect on the oppressive systems that queer and trans people face while imagining new possibilities for resistance and solidarity.

Witnessing and Resistance

In my performances, I confront oppression by inviting the audience to share in the intensity of the moment. When I kneel on pebbles or endure the weight of stones on my body, I experience pain transforming fear and vulnerability into strength. This shift is not just personal; it is something the audience witnesses, and in a way, feels alongside me. It becomes a shared experience, a communal act of endurance.

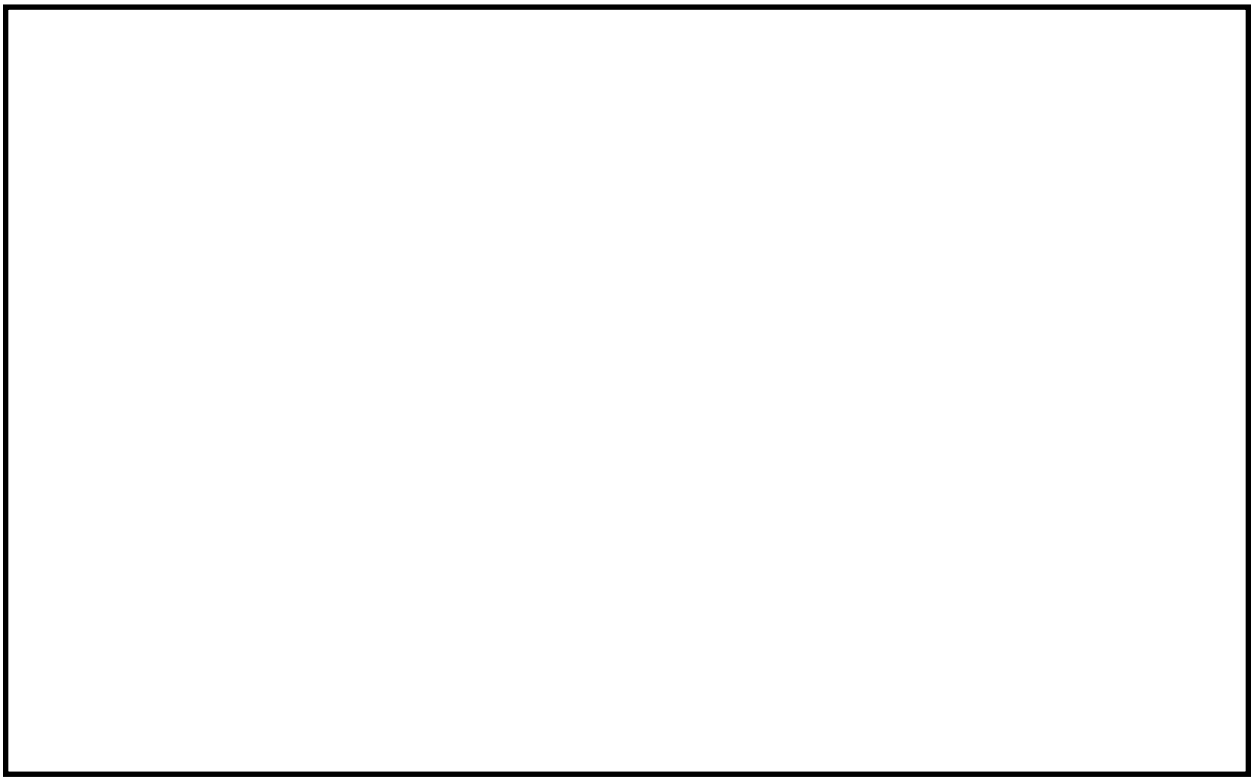

Figure 7. *In Ten Sity,* 1978, Paul Wong, Richmond Art Gallery. Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is a documentation of a performance where the artist is grabbing his feet found in https://paulwongprojects.com/portfolio/in-ten-sity/

Artist Paul Wong has been a key influence in my MFA thesis project, particularly his performance *In Ten Sity* (1978) (see Fig 7). Wong's endurance-based work made me consider how duration and physical intensity can evoke emotional and psychological responses. His multi-channel video installation and 20-minute performance was dedicated to Kenneth Fletcher following his death by suicide. In this work, Wong places himself in a psychiatric institution-like padded cell, where he trashes, dances, and moshes. He pushes his body to its limits in order to explore the theme of the "othered" body which is scrutinized under institutional surveillance

systems. This piece resonated with my explorations of pain and endurance, shaping how I view my body as both an object under pressure and a site for emotional and physical transformation.

Inspired by Wong, I use a sparse aesthetic and endurance to strip my performances to their raw essence: a body, an object, and the passage of time. This intentional simplicity focuses attention on the act itself, mirroring Wong's exploration of the body under pressure. Just as Wong invites the audience to witness his discomfort, I invite my audience into mine. When I kneel on stones, the discomfort of my body becomes a shared experience, and the boundaries between us dissolve, as their witnessing becomes part of the act.

My work stands as a statement against oppression, not just for myself but for those whose struggles often remain invisible. Each performance is my way of saying: this is my body, my story, and my refusal to be silenced. By enduring pain, I hope to make visible the struggles some queer people face, the fear, the resilience, and the power of refusing to disappear.

Lines and Orientation

Artist Adrian Piper's work around identity, race, and power structures has influenced my exploration of queerness and the non-binary experience in my performances. Her direct engagement with the audience, forcing them to confront their own perceptions of identity, resonates with how I integrate eye contact and breath to create a moment of confrontation. These elements transform passive observation into active complicity.

A significant piece is *The Mythic Being* (1973) (see Fig 8.), where Piper adopts a male alter ego and merges personal history with public performance. Through repeated newspaper ads and live enactments, she exposed identity as a fluid construct, shaped by both internal narratives and external reception. This interplay between private and public reflection informs how I use my body in performance to disrupt notions of authenticity and visibility. Like Piper, I aim to challenge the audience’s assumptions, using endurance and transformation to reveal the instability of identity and the pressures imposed on non-conforming bodies.

My performance stems from my personal journey as a queer artist, but it also connects to larger artistic and political conversations. It draws inspiration from Piper’s piece, where identity is a performance and a tool for personal and public transformation. Similarly, my work explores how queer bodies navigate and disrupt oppressive spaces. This is informed by Sara Ahmed’s

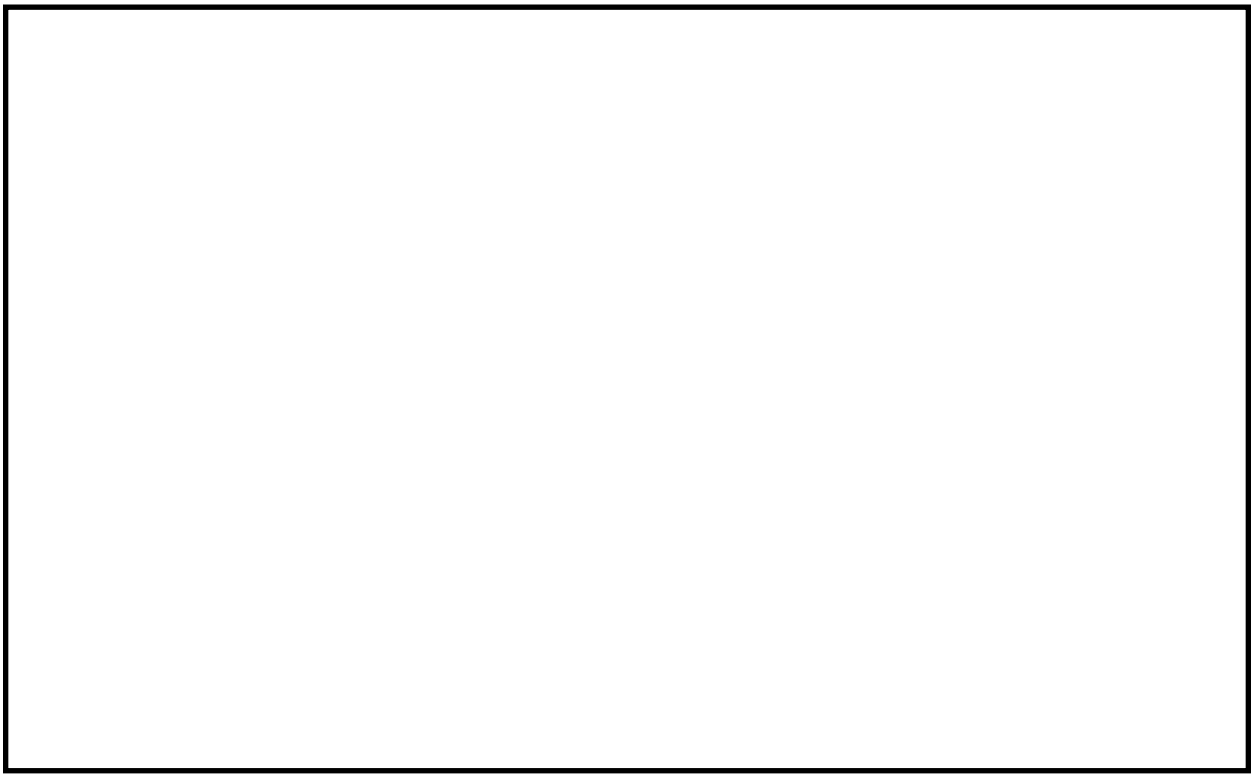

Figure 8. The Mythic Being, 1973, Adrian Piper, MAMCO, Genève. Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is a documentation of a performance where the artist is crossing the street found in https://artlead.net/artist/adrian-piper/

Queer Phenomenology, particularly her concepts of orientation and lines. Ahmed suggests that we are oriented when we can find our bearings, understanding where we are and how the world shifts depending on the direction we turn (1). Orientation is about alignment, about how bodies and objects realign with norms and expectations to create a sense of stability.

In my performances, I feel this negotiation with space deeply. Ahmed describes being 'in line' as following paths set by societal norms. These lines are performative; they emerge through the repetition of conventions and guide our movements by determining what is reachable and what is excluded (14-16). For example, normative bodies, those conforming to societal standards of gender and sexuality, are 'in line', easily moving through spaces designed to accommodate them. In contrast, queer orientations disrupt these lines, refusing to follow normative and accepted paths. Ahmed refers to this disruption as 'desire lines,' the alternative paths marked by deviation, and through this disruption, a politics of disorientation emerges, placing other objects, bodies and new possibilities within reach (20).

This framework provides an understanding of my relationship to the stones I collaborate with. Balancing on them or walking barefoot, I feel how my queer body refuses the paths society has prescribed. Like Ahmed's 'desire lines,' my work creates new ways to interact with space, pushing against normative expectations to imagine something beyond them.

Testimony and Solidarity

Creating art is, for me, an ethical act, one that carries a responsibility toward the world and its inhabitants. Through my performances, I seek to make visible the pain and resistance that shape queer existence. Ahmed's framework informs this approach. She writes, "for bodies to arrive in spaces where they are not 'in place' involves hard work; indeed, it involves painstaking labor for bodies to inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape" (62). My work embodies this labor, reflecting the resilience required to challenge spaces that reject us.

I see my performances as a testimony, a way of bearing witness to struggle while imagining new possibilities for healing and solidarity. The word *testimony* comes from the Latin *testimonium* ('evidence, proof'), derived from *testis* ('witness'), meaning "one who stands as a third" (Harper). In my work, my body serves both as subject and as witness, carrying histories of endurance and resistance.

Testimony is not just recounting experience; it is an act that demands recognition. As theorists Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), testimony transforms individual pain into collective responsibility, compelling the audience to become witnesses themselves. My performances, through their raw physicality, do not invite passive observation but demand engagement. In this sense, testimony is not a completed or totalized statement but a speech act in process. As Felman and Laub note, "To testify—to vow to tell, to promise and produce one's own speech as material evidence for truth—is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement" (5) Testimony, then, is not just about speaking, it is about being heard. It requires an audience willing to bear witness and take on the responsibility of recognition. In my performances, testimony is enacted through endurance, where the body itself insists on being seen, and acknowledged.

My performances, therefore, go beyond endurance; they are acts of connection and hope. By foregrounding pain, I aim to foster empathy and solidarity. Feminist philosopher and gender scholar Judith Butler describes solidarity as a tool for resisting the global rise of

authoritarianism. Art, I believe, has the power to bridge differences, creating spaces where discomfort becomes a catalyst for reflection and transformation. In *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2023), Butler states, "We need to create from our bonds of solidarity as we create a vision that is finally more powerful and desirable than the one we oppose, (…) in which the right to live, to breathe, to live as body in the world without the fear of violence" (18:14). My performances seek to materialize this vision, where pain is not just endured but transformed into collective strength.

Butler further discusses how "gender substitutes for a complex set of anxieties and becomes an overdetermined site where the fear of destruction gathers" (26). The anti-gender ideology movement exploits these anxieties to invalidate reproductive justice, weaken protections against gender-based violence, and strip trans and queer people of their basic rights. This movement frames gender nonconformity as a threat, making it a rallying point for exclusionary ideologies. These dynamics resonate deeply with me, and my work channels this tension, transforming fear and vulnerability into resistance.

The physical endurance in my performances, symbolized by bruises from stones and the precarious balance I maintain, mirrors the resilience required to exist in a world that seeks to erase us. Yet these acts are not just about survival; they are about imagining new futures. My work aligns with intersectional struggles that recognize the interconnectedness of oppression across race, gender, and class. This tension drives me to create art that amplifies marginalized voices and challenges exclusionary ideologies. As Butler reminds us, solidarity is not an abstract ideal but a lived practice with transformative power.

Soul of Stones

Soul of Stones began as a means to confront and express both physical and emotional pain. Growing up in a violent, religious environment in Colombia, I often felt the burden of being out of line, queer, and misaligned with societal expectations. Through performance, I have sought to translate this experience into something tangible, something that both my body and my audience can witness and endure.

My first experiments with stones came from a desire to explore discomfort and endurance as pathways to understanding my past and transforming it into something visceral. I began by walking barefoot on a train track full of stones for ten minutes, feeling the different textures and shapes under my feet as a metaphor for the uneven terrain of my personal history (see Fig 9).

This evolved into performances where I held stones while walking, and eventually standing on a single stone, balancing as an act of defiance against the instability of the world around me.

Figure 9. Performance experimentation, 2024, Surrey. Documented by Sebastian Nule

What initially drew me to this material and gestural research was the intersection between physical endurance and emotional release. As I shifted from performing outdoors to more controlled, simple environments, such as a gallery space, the stones became more than just objects, they became collaborators. These performances opened up a creative space that grounded me in the present while forcing me to confront the traumas of the past. The project evolved naturally as I continued to test my body's limits, finding new ways to share my experience with the audience. The moments of shared intensity, when I made eye contact or allowed my breath to fill the space, became crucial to the performance. These interactions embodied resistance and vulnerability, echoing the 'desire lines' that Ahmed describes as disruptions to normative paths.

At the time, I was deeply concerned with issues of war and violence, not only globally but also personally. The violence in Palestine and Gaza in particular weighed heavily on my mind, as did the rise of anti-trans legislation worldwide. As a queer person who grew up in a hostile, religious environment, I knew too well the fear of being visible. This project became a way to process those fears, not only for myself but for others who share similar struggles.

Through this work, and after a conversation with artist and scholar Francisco-Fernando Granados, who asked me about the limits of my pain, I found myself continually asking: What exists beyond the pain? The question became both a guiding principle and a challenge. In grappling with the limits of endurance, I also began to imagine the possibilities for healing, transformation, and connection that might emerge from it.

Intensity and Pain

Intensity is at the core of my work. The limits of my body are tested, walking barefoot on jagged stones, balancing painfully on pebbles, pressing my weight into stones. This physical intensity mirrors the emotional turmoil I have lived through. Growing up in a violent and religious environment in South America, I learned to carry fear, to live inside tension. Being queer in a world that rejects difference has meant constantly negotiating survival. The intensity in my work is not just about sensation; it is about testimony. It is about making pain visible, making it felt, creating a space where the body speaks when words fail.

Emotion, as Jennifer Doyle suggests in *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (2013), "can make our experience of art harder, but it also makes that experience more interesting" (4). This complexity is vital to my work, where physical pain intertwines with emotional turmoil, creating an inseparable bond between the body and the emotions. Pain becomes a bridge between personal experience and larger struggles: the violence queer and trans people face, the erasure of our existence, the global suffering of communities under oppression, from Colombia to Palestine. In my performances, pain invites the audience to confront their own relationship with suffering, to feel its weight, and to witness its presence in both personal and collective struggles. Doyle notes that "emotion is profoundly intersubjective" and shapes boundaries between the self and the other (109). In this way, my performance is not just about enduring pain on my own; it's about creating a shared space where emotional experiences circulate and connect us all.

Intensity in my work, then, becomes a means to foster empathy. It is not just about individual pain but about creating a space where that pain becomes a collective experience. Doyle's assertion that "emotion brings those boundaries into being" (109) helps frame my approach to performance as a site of emotional exchange. The emotional intensity that I embody does not simply represent my own experience but invites the audience to navigate their own feelings, reflecting on how emotion is not contained within the individual but shared across bodies.

Embodiment and Endurance

Embodiment is a state of being. My body does not merely represent pain; it experiences it. The bruises, the pressure, the weight of the stones are real. In this process, my body becomes both a site of endurance and a space of transformation. The performances do not separate mind from body; instead, they insist on their integration. Every step on stones, every moment of balance, every act of submission to gravity is a reminder that my body holds knowledge that cannot be intellectualized. Artist and writer Elizabeth Chitty in *Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women* (2004), describes embodiment as a "conscious awareness interconnecting our physical bodies with our emotions, thoughts, and spirits" (73). Similarly, scholar Stephanie Springgay and Debra Freeman, in *Curriculum and the Cultural Body* (2007) argue that "embodiment disrupts the notion that the inside (psyche) and outside (corporeal) are separate but rather flow one into the other and the surface or border becomes a place of interaction and transformation" (Springgay xx). These perspectives resonate with my practice, where physical sensations during performance are inseparable from emotional and mental states, creating a holistic experience of being.

Endurance is a methodology. My performances rely on repetition, testing limits, and pushing through discomfort until something shifts. Endurance in performance art is not simply about suffering; it is about resilience, refusing to be broken, and finding strength in vulnerability. By repeatedly placing my body in states of discomfort and uncertainty, I engage in a process where pain, duration, and transformation become inseparable. This process is iterative; each performance builds upon the last, refining my physical thresholds and deepening my collaboration with the stones. Emerging from the Body Art movement of the 1970s, artists like Vito Acconci and Chris Burden used their bodies as central elements of their art (Goldberg 156-159). Marina Abramović, renowned for her endurance-based practice, has consistently tested the boundaries of physical and mental resilience through her performances, such as her 2010 piece *The Artist Is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art, where she engaged in silent, prolonged interaction with visitors for nearly three months, highlighting endurance as a profound intersection of physical effort and emotional connection (Artsy).

In my work, endurance is not an end in itself but a means to explore the interconnectedness of body, mind, and environment. Through sustained physical engagement, I aim to uncover layers of experience that speak to both personal and collective narratives, using the body's endurance as a pathway to insight and connection.

The stones in my performances are not just tools of discomfort; they are active collaborators in the process of transformation. While they challenge my body, they also become extensions of it, amplifying sensations and reflecting the complexity of my personal and collective history. Over time, I have come to understand the stones as symbols of resilience and struggle. As I kneel, stand, or balance on them, they demand engagement, making my body confront its own limits. The stones embody the forces that shape me, amplifying the emotional and physical experiences I navigate. They push me to explore vulnerability, and in doing so, they reshape the performance.

Rocks, as geologist Jan Zalasiewicz reflects, “tell stories of past worlds,” acting as witnesses to histories long before and beyond human existence. In my work, stones carry these layered histories, becoming silent yet profound collaborators that hold and reflect the pressures I endure as a queer artist. Geologist Marcia Bjornerud’s assertion that “rocks change under pressure and stress” resonates with my own journey, my body like stones, shaped and transformed by forces that both weigh on and fortify me.

This connection is not coincidental. My choice to work with stones stems from an instinctive recognition of their endurance and quiet strength. While anthropomorphizing nature is often viewed with skepticism, Bjornerud challenges this notion, emphasizing that seeing human experiences mirrored in nature is not a flaw but an acknowledgment of shared existence. In my practice, I do not seek to understand stones through a scientific lens but to love them for what they endure and embody. Like me, they bear the marks of pressure and change, and in their stillness, I find a reflection of my own resilience.

By incorporating stones into my practice, I embrace both their history and their symbolism. They are records of time, shaped by natural forces, much like my body is shaped by societal pressures and personal experiences. In this collaboration, stones become more than mere props; they are co-creators of a performance that navigates pain, resilience, and transformation. My work does not aim to explain or dominate these natural elements but to coexist with them, allowing their silent stories to intertwine with mine, creating a space where human and non-human experiences resonate and endure together.

Trauma and punishment

The body is an archive of lived experiences, holding onto past encounters and shaping the present self. Trauma, both psychological and embodied, permeates our identities, influencing

how we move through the world. While the DMS[2] (1980) defined trauma as "an event outside the range of human experience" (236) framing it as an anomaly, theorist Ann Cvetkovich expands this definition, recognizing trauma as an ongoing, affective force embedded in both personal and collective histories

The body remembers; pain, endurance, and survival become markers of an ongoing negotiation with trauma. *Cvetkovich* expands on this, challenging medicalized approaches that reduce trauma to psychiatric diagnoses. In *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003), she calls for “ways of thinking about trauma that do not pathologize it, that seize control over it from the medical experts, and that forge creative responses to it that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political situations” (3). For Cvetkovich*,* trauma is not limited to catastrophic events but also emerges from everyday afflictions, especially for marginalized identities shaped by systemic violence and exclusion.

In my work, trauma is not an individual affliction to be medically resolved but an embodied experience that demands a creative response. Growing up queer and mentally ill in a strict, religious environment, I internalized a sense of punishment for existing outside of normative expectations. The weight of guilt, fear, and anger imprinted itself onto my body, becoming a latent force that performance allows me to unearth. My performances reject clinical narratives that seek to contain trauma, instead confronting it through endurance, pain, and physical trial. By kneeling on pebbles, balancing on stones, and subjecting my body to discomfort, I externalize internal wounds, making them tangible as a means of survival and transformation. Trauma is not passively endured but actively reworked, turned into a site of resistance rather than victimhood.

Through aligning trauma with punishment, my work bridges personal history with collective struggle. The queer body, historically subject to violence, erasure, and discipline, finds in endurance a means of asserting presence and resilience. My performances channel these echoes, using discomfort as a language to articulate what is often unspeakable. In doing so, I position the body as both witness and site of resistance, where trauma is not just relived but actively confronted and reshaped.

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[2]Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

Figure 10. *Between a Stone and a hard place*, 2024, SoP Exhibition, ECUAD, Vancouver.

Global Resonance

The MFA Thesis project is intrinsically tied to the world around me, both in terms of the personal and the political, reflecting a dialogue between my lived experiences and larger societal issues. Growing up queer in Colombia, I was constantly navigating fear and repression. The stones I work with in my performances continue to serve as a tool for resistance and connection helping me navigate my present and embark on a path of transformation and healing.

On a broader scale, my work engages with themes of war, violence, and systemic oppression. *Between a Stone and a Hard Place* (see Fig. 10) explores not just my personal history, but the global struggles of queer and trans individuals. The rise of anti-trans legislation worldwide represents a systemic violence that targets visibility and existence. My performance embodies this fear of being seen as I kneel on pebbles, making sustained eye contact with the audience, inviting them to witness both my pain and resistance. This act embodies not only my personal pain but also the resilience of marginalized communities worldwide.

The performance's direction, facing southeast where Colombia lies, creates a direct link between my past and my present, sharing this act of resistance with my people - my queers. By inviting the audience into this experience, I create a sense of complicity, recognizing that we all participate in a world shaped by oppressive systems. In this sense, my project does not just reflect the world; it mirrors its fractures, struggles, and possibilities for healing.

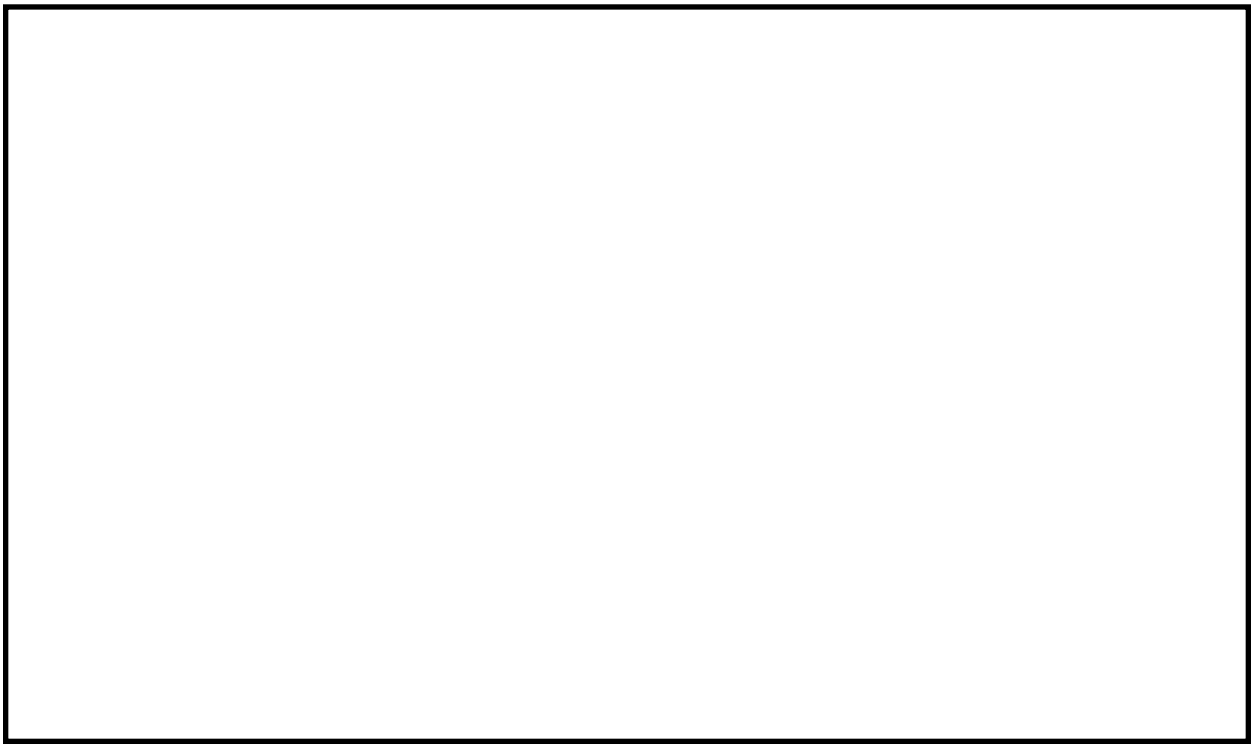

Figure 11. *Sebastian,* 2024, Miles Greenberg, Palazzo Malipiero, Venice. Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is a documentation of a performance where the artist is being pierced by arrows and is raising his arms covered in black found in https://whitewall.art/art/miles-greenberg-and-jordan-tannahill-unpack-sebastian-a-breathtaking-performance-in-venice/

Miles Greenberg's *Sebastian (2023)* (see Fig. 11) is a long durational performance that lasted 7.5 hours. Its exploration of resilience and vulnerability has profoundly influenced my practice. In this work, Greenberg's body is pierced by five arrows, evoking the imagery of Saint

Sebastian, the Christian martyr. As the performance unfolds, a syrup gradually restricts his movement, forcing the audience to focus on the immense physical endurance required to sustain the act.
This slow progression creates a powerful visual metaphor for the physical and metaphorical challenges that people must navigate, an aspect that resonates deeply with my work. Many of my performances center around stillness and slow progression, building tension and intensity over time.

Greenberg's exploration of the body's limits, revealing both strength and fragility, mirrors my own interest in pushing the body to its extremes while exposing its vulnerability. His work has inspired me to consider endurance as a metaphor for survival, particularly in the context of queerness, where the body is often scrutinized and challenged.

To engage with both personal and global pain, my artistic methods act as an extension of this dialogue. Performance is not merely expression; it is a means of transforming external pressures through the body. Over time, I've realized that the stones I use in my work are not just instruments of discomfort; they are collaborators in the act of creating meaning.

Process and Ambiguity

My practice aligns with process-based art[3], where the act of creation is as significant as the final outcome. Each performance builds upon the last, evolving organically through experimentation and the ongoing process of engagement. Performance is not a fixed, static object but a lived experience where change and transience are inherent.

Ambiguity is central to my practice. I embrace the uncertainty and the unresolvable nature of my work. The stones remain, my body endures, and meaning lingers in the in-between spaces.
As ethnographer Louise Meintjes writes, "Enable life to go on without closure or fixity or certainty, and they ensure that the capacity to instrumentalize the arts toward political ends can never be contained or complete." (16). My work resists easy narratives and instead creates space for ambiguity, where pain, endurance, and transformation coexist, offering no neat resolutions.

[3] Process-based art focuses on how the artwork is made, making the steps and materials used just as important as the final piece. Instead of hiding the process, it becomes a visible and meaningful part of the work (Tate).

Figure 12. *Weight of Stones I,* 2024, ECUAD, Vancouver. Documented by Claudia Goulet-Blais.

Soul of Stones is a project grounded in intensity, endurance, and the relationship between pain and transformation. It does not begin with a fixed idea but emerges through my body, discomfort, and a continuous process of experimentation. Initially documented through video, my work has shifted to photography following the *State of Practice* exhibition in September

2024 with a new body of work called *Weight of Stones* (2024) (see Fig. 12 and Fig. 14) in which I shifted the dynamic, instead of bearing my weight on stones, I asked what it means for the stones to bear weight on me. Photography offers a more open-ended engagement, capturing moments without imposing narrative structure. While live performance remains essential, still images allow the audience to experience the work differently, offering an opportunity to engage with the stillness and ambiguity of the performance.

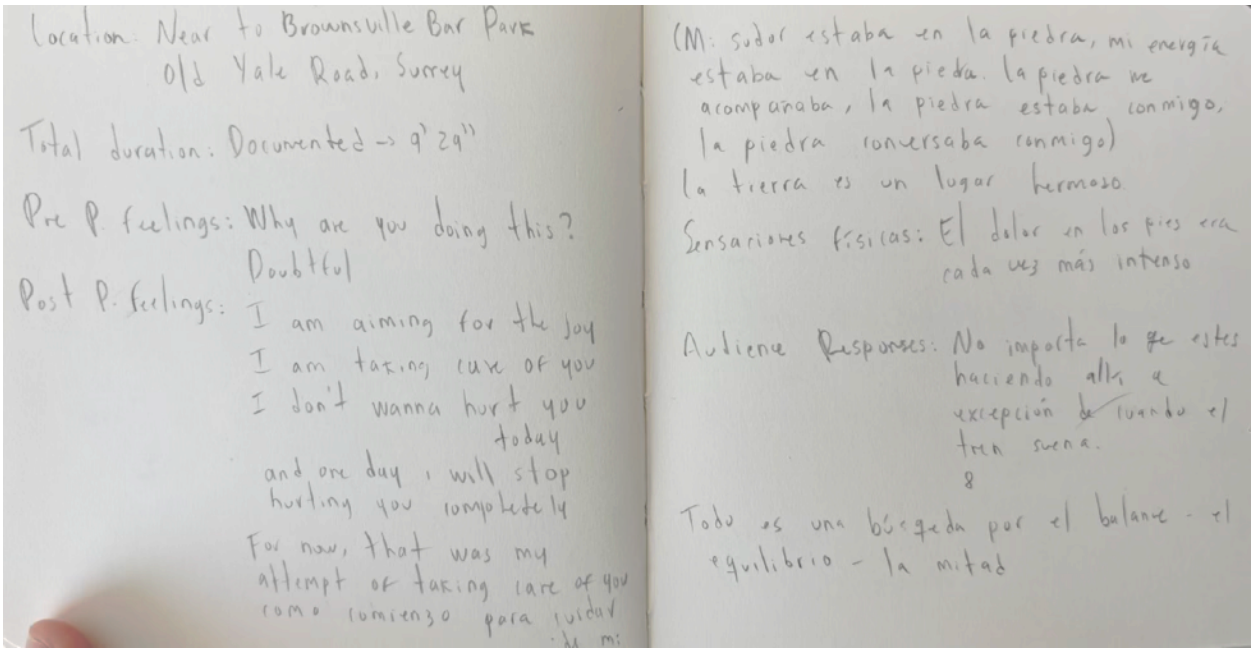

Figure 13. Notebook, 2024, Old Yale Road, Surrey.

This project follows an unfolding structure, where one performance leads to the next. Since April 2024, each engagement with stones has brought me closer to a deeper understanding of physical endurance and its emotional resonance. In the process I was not only experimenting with physical endurance but listening, asking what the stones could reveal, how much they could hold, and what it meant to collaborate with them. This iterative process unfolds through a series of steps that are continuously refined with each performance. It begins by identifying discomfort, then writing about the intended performance, followed by rehearsals and presenting it to an audience. After each performance, I gather feedback and reflect on it, writing both from an emotional and analytical perspective (see Fig. 13). This cycle repeats itself, each time adding new layers of insight, growth, and understanding.

This method deepened through *Between a Stone and a Hard Place*, which clarified a shift in focus: rather than simply asking ‘what is hurting?’, I began to ask ‘where is the limit of pain?’. This shift gave rise to *Soul of Stones*, the final piece of the MFA installed in the 2025 MFA

Thesis Exhibition, March 24 - April 12, that embraces not only pain but care, focusing on endurance and healing, rather than seeking catharsis. Every interaction with the stones embodies endurance, serving as a metaphor for the resilience required to survive and heal.

Figure 14. *Weight of stones II*, 2024, ECUAD, Vancouver. Documented by Claudia Goulet-Blais

What do you carry in your pockets?

My approach to stones is not scientific, physical or geological. My approach to stones is passionate, instinctive, and intuitively. I don't care if a stone is softer, older, stronger, or larger. I care if it vibrates, if it jumps, if it sings, or if it cries.
Sometimes, I gather stones to hold them close, whispering how much they teach me,
about myself,
about you,
and about this wise land.

Sometimes, I gather stones to feel their strength and coldness, to see how my body bleeds and cries alongside them.

And sometimes, I gather stones to paint, thinking about you:
your past and your strength,
the violence you endured,
and how, as a child, you painted and sold them to overcome a poverty that many will never know - a poverty that, thanks to you, I did not know either.

Stones are these great beings, sometimes grandparents, sometimes guides, but always energy, energy that transforms.

Their presence is powerful, almost alive. As Métis artist, writer and curator David Garneau writes, “For human travelers, stones like these were navigation tools. For me, it is a site of ontological reflection. (…) You cannot help but touch it, story it, remember it - its presence exceeds inanimacy.” (1-2). Stones, for me, hold stories of survival, transformation, and memory. They are more than inanimate objects; they are collaborators and companions in my creative processes. That is the energy I seek to create in my work to share it with others. A transformative energy full of solidarity. Because in the end, this project is also an excuse to keep putting little stones in my pockets and running to my mother to show her not only what I found years ago but what I’m finding now.

Installation Notes

In the installation of *Soul of Stones* (see Fig. 15) I divided the work into two parts: a series of six photographs installed over a long horizontal black stripe, and a smaller black strip on the adjacent wall framing a group of stones laid on the floor. These black stripes, painted with the same non-reflective black used in my performances, anchored the space visually creating contrast and framing the work. It also allowed the viewer to walk between the photographs, to slow down, and to stay with the image that resonated.

Figure 15. *Soul of Stones,* 2024, Thesis Exhibition, ECUAD, Vancouver. Documented by Boya Liang

The six photographs were split into two groups of three, drawn from two different performances. Choosing just three images from each made the work feel more open. It avoided creating a fixed or linear narrative, allowing ambiguity to remain central. There is a subtle progression in the first set, an increasing presence of stones.

The final three photographs marked a shift in tone. During that performance, I allowed myself to experience joy, something I hadn't done in earlier works. The performance itself was raw and emotionally intense. I was reliving painful memories, pushing through heaviness, until something shifted. In that smile, I felt a moment of strength, release, and even pride. It was a reminder to keep going.

The images were printed on velvet-textured paper and mounted directly onto the painted wall using large nails. The velvet enhanced the depth of the blacks, linking back to the textures of stone and skin. The nails referenced both the violence of crucifixion imagery from my Catholic upbringing and a desire to keep the photographs exposed and unguarded. Framing them would have created distance. I wanted them to feel immediate, vulnerable, and present.

On the other wall (see Fig. 16), a smaller black stripe grounded a small group of stones. That side of the wall had felt imbalanced so adding the stripe created a quiet place for the stones to sit, giving them visual and symbolic weight. It marked the end of my section in the show and offered a subtle invitation for the viewer to pause.

Figure 16. Soul of Stones, 2024. Thesis Exhibition, ECUAD, Vancouver. Documented by Boya Liang

The live performance did not take place on opening night. I had been hospitalized, after pushing myself too far. It was a difficult and humbling decision to postpone, but necessary. Being present at the opening, though, opened something else. Visitors shared stories about their own relationships with stones, about memory, ritual, and grief. These conversations reminded me that regardless of what I intended, the work resonated. The stones carried the weight.

Closing thoughts

Soul of Stones is an ongoing dialogue with my past, my body, and the world around me. Through endurance, I confront both personal trauma and the collective struggles of marginalized communities. The stones, once objects of discomfort, have become collaborators, witnesses to pain, resilience, and transformation. This project challenges conventional narratives of suffering, positioning endurance as both a means of resistance and a path toward healing.

At its core, this work frames intensity as a form of language, one that emerges when conventional expression fails. Intensity is a mode of communication, of feeling, of reaching toward others. Performing with stones has taught me that the body is not just a vessel of pain but a site where transformation can occur, even in difficult circumstances.

Both the artistic and textual sources I engage with have shaped how I approach this work. Artists like Paul Wong and María José Arjona have pushed me to explore the physical and emotional limits of my body, while scholars like Sara Ahmed and Judith Butler have provided theoretical groundings for queerness, gender, and resistance. These influences have helped me see how my work extends beyond the personal, addressing broader struggles, from the violence of war to the ongoing oppression of queer and trans people worldwide. Performance, in this sense, is both an act of survival and a site of political transformation.

Ultimately, *Soul of Stones* is about visibility and resistance. It stands as a declaration of my right to exist and an invitation for others to bear witness. Through performance, I seek to disrupt the normative structures that confine us, carving space for alternative ways of being. As Ahmed writes, “We have hope because what is behind us is also what allows other ways of gathering in time and space, of making lines that do not reproduce what we follow but instead create wrinkles in the earth” (179). My work exists within these folds, between pain and resilience, between erasure and presence, where endurance becomes agency and survival becomes defiance.

This is where I position *Soul of Stones*: at the intersection of art, identity, and resistance, with the hope of fostering a world where difference is not just tolerated but celebrated, and where every individual has the right to a livable life.

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