Not About U: Social Dissonance at a Land-Grab University

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Abstract
Mattin’s durational concert Social Dissonance and concept of social dissonance offer compelling devices to understand a central tension within institutions of higher education in settler colonial contexts. As faculty and students increasingly enact and experience forms of decolonial pedagogy in their classrooms, the settler colonial origins and structures of the university remain unchallenged. In the specific case of the ‘Land-Grant’ university system, created through the federal 1862 Morrill Act, the findings of a 2020 ‘Land-Grab Universities’ report describes the extent of their founding on the forced expropriation of Indigenous land and life. This article mixes the settler author’s repeated experiences of Social Dissonance at documenta 14, in both Athens, Greece, and its traditional home of Kassel, Germany, and how its institutional and pedagogical contexts translate to a sequence of teaching experiments in his classrooms at a ‘Land-Grab’ university. These experiences and experiments are framed by two failures, both institutional and individual, that offer the author a concrete insight into the concept of social dissonance to understand how different levels of alienation operate through colonial intrusion into educational contexts by an exclusionary settler worldview. At the same time, the author attempts to harness this settler colonial noise-as-device by attuning to echoes of Social Dissonance in the vital work of living, Indigenous artists, and their alternative pedagogical initiatives.

Keywords
settler colonialism; unlearning; decoloniality; arts education; alienation; Indigenous arts.

1 | INTRODUCTION: ECHO-QUESTION-FEEDBACK

Talking-As-One: the whole group speaks as if it were one person. (Mattin, 2022, p. 212)

It is my last day in Athens, and I am exhausted. Over the past five days, in addition to visiting ancient sites and a dizzying array of venues at the documenta 14 exhibition of contemporary art sprawled across the city, I have also been writing daily posts on my blog Minus Plato (Finlay Fletcher, 2012-2022), working late into the evening.¹ Punctuating my experience has been a

¹ I created Minus Plato in 2012 as a blog to share my work as a classicist engaged in how contemporary artists turn to ancient Mediterranean culture, literature, art, philosophy, and mythology in their work. During documenta 14, I was in the middle of writing daily posts, following the devastation of Trump’s election in November 2016, and continued this practice while at documenta 14 in Athens, Greece, and Kassel, Germany. See Minus Plato (2017b, 2017c) for my documenta 14 diaries, reworked and published in Minus Plato (2020). Following the experience of documenta 14, with its centering of global Indigenous arts, experimental music, radio, and sound art, with a focus on decolonial listening as a method of unlearning colonial histories and structures, including the neocolonial politics of German relations with Greece, I left the academic field of classics for arts education, and turned Minus Plato into a platform and persona, which I used to commit to developing unlearning gestures in place of a traditional academic practice. The project is now archived as Finlay Fletcher, 2012-2022.
daily (excluding Mondays) exercise of participating in Mattin’s durational concert Social Dissonance at the Athens Conservatoire (Odeion). Perhaps I did what I did out of exhaustion or some sense of wanting to offer feedback gathered from my repeated participations, or to ‘check out’ on a high on this, my final day. This is what happened, and you can watch for yourself via the archived video of this, and all iterations of Social Dissonance (Mattin 2017a). I arrive, sweating as usual, to join my fellow participants in this darkened, wooden-floored, and white-columned room. As with each previous iteration of the ‘concert’, we are given the score by the two interpreters, who tell us the rules, letting us know we will be filmed (streamed live and the recordings archived), and that if we decide to leave early, we need to provide feedback so that they can get better and learn from us. We proceed to carry out a series of imitative actions, first in response to those participants gathered in Kassel streamed live on a screen, and then amongst ourselves. We stomp, we sing, we whistle. Then, as some people get tired or bored, sit down or walk around the space, I start to give what can only be described as a speech. With my head down, pacing back and forth, I share how I had come to Athens to see the ruins, and that I would come back repeatedly to this space and the Social Dissonance ‘performance’. I confessed that this would be my last ‘session’ as I would be leaving tomorrow, and I even mumble some obscure comment that the nearby site of Aristotle’s Lyceum may not actually have been Aristotle’s school. In the midst of my rambling comments, I decided to create the fiction that I was somehow part of the interpretive team for Mattin’s work, using a ‘we’ to describe what we had been doing together: The other thing is, we really need your feedback, because we want to get better. We’ve been doing this for fifty-plus days, and we’ve been trying really hard to get better, so we need your help. (Mattin 2017a).

After the ensuing (somewhat stunned) silence, one of the interpreters, who happened to be holding the phone streaming the action, proceeds to ask a series of questions in response to my speech. But curiously she addresses her questions not to me, but to other participants. This had the effect of their answers (when they answered) creating a surreal situation as they were questions aimed at what I had said, not something they had said. The questions and answers went as follows:

Q: “Which was your favorite day?”; A: “Sunday, I went swimming”
Q: “Why do you have to leave tomorrow?”; A: “I don’t have to leave tomorrow.”
Q: “If it is not the Lyceum, what do you think it is outside?”; A: Silence
Q: “Why did you come here so many times?”; “Because I like it, the movement of the bodies”. (Mattin 2017a)

Then, the other interpreter asks another participant: “And did we get any better?” (Mattin 2017a), who replies with an extended, thoughtful answer about freedom, inspiring the interpreter to finally move on from my speech as a prompt for her questions and ask someone else a question about freedom. Then silence. Someone moves over to read the floor-text and the camera follows
her. At that precise moment, a man stands up and walks over to unplug the spotlight, which had been turned on during my speech, with the main lights turned off. We are plunged into darkness; someone screams. When the main lights are restored, the man who turned off the spotlight is asked by one of the interpreters: ‘Why did you turn off the light?’ (Mattin 2017a). You cannot make out his answer in the video but in response the interpreter holding the camera says it was ‘not about you’, and how she needed the light to see the woman reading the floor-text. Then, prompted by this exchange, the two interpreters start singing the phrase ‘It’s Not About You’, which, initially seemed improvised, but I later learned is one of several ‘devices’ used in the work by its interpreters to enact the score’s explicit aim to ‘explore the dissonance that exists between the individual narcissism that capitalism promotes and our social capacity.’ (Mattin 2022, p. 201). As we continue, the score becomes centered in our discussions. For example, there is an exchange about the final phrase of the score – ‘Help the collective subject to emerge’ (Mattin 2022, p.201) - and the possibility that this could happen more effectively without the camera’s constant presence. At the same time, there was an acknowledgment that the filming process is not only part of the structure of the piece, but also enables future experiences, including more ‘subjects’ than those gathered there and then at documenta 14.\(^2\) It is after this discussion of the score and the camera, that one of the audience members begins to question what they consider to be the aggressive tone of questioning by the interpreters, as well as asking them why they don’t smile. An uncomfortable silence follows.

Returning to this experience now and rewatching the ‘episode’\(^3\), I am struck by the sequence of events that led from my speech and the interpreter’s questioning responses accompanied by the use of other devices, then from the centering of the score and camera to the climactic moment of harsh feedback that singled out the interpreters and their gestures. On reflection, my speech, which I had spoken in desired communion and solidarity with the interpreters, echoing their instructions as my own, now feels more aligned with the actions of the man who turned off the light, with both enacting ‘look at me’, disruptive narcissistic gestures. Worse of all, I now see a cause and effect between my initial echoing gestures and the culminating abrasive response, as a result of the curious form of mediation adopted by the interpreter’s redirection of questions from me to the group. All in all, looking back at what I learned from this experience in Athens, I feel an acute sense of failure.\(^4\)

But how did this happen? How did my good intentioned intervention lead to a hostile reaction from others? This is the question that motivated the writing of this article, as a mechanism to engage with the formal modality of Social Dissonance, both from reading Mattin’s book (Mattin 2022) and by bringing Social Dissonance into my classroom teaching, grounded in the theoretical force of social dissonance as a concept grounded in forms of alienation. While I

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\(^2\) The video of the performance - SOCIAL\_DISSONANCE\_ATHENS\_130617\_058 -, is available on the project YouTube channel, Mattin (2017a).

\(^3\) I use the term episode as a way to endow the recordings of Social Dissonance an existence beyond the mere documentation of a performance. This inspired my series of blogposts ‘Three Athenians in Kassel’ (****)

\(^4\) The reason that failure permeates this article is a way to recognize the limits of my positionality as a settler in enacting a decolonial pedagogy. Recounting my own ‘history of failures’ is also a way to highlight broader institutional failures, from the Land-Grab University to Documenta, grounded in systemic colonial violence and exclusions. In both cases, highlighting failure is my way of demanding responsibility at an individual and collective level. At the same time, readers may see in it an attempt to generate sympathy or to recuse me or these institutions from true accountability. (I am grateful to a non-anonymous, third reader of an earlier draft of this article for this interpretation). While I hope the former is as apparent as the latter, and regardless, any success of this article depends on what changes it can inspire.
center other failures along the way, both individual and institutional, I hope by the end of reading this, what I dub as the ‘unlearning gesture’ of Social Dissonance will emerge, like the startling moment of questioning at the heart of this pivotal experience in Athens. These questions – which I understand now as an improvised inversion of the ‘Talking-as-One’ device – generated a discursive leaking beyond the closed systems of both individuated dialogue and societal norms. The questions bordered on a kind of interference that takes on some of the valence of noise, becoming noise-as-device. As Miguel Prado, quoted by Mattin in his Social Dissonance book (Mattin, 2022, p. 158), notes: ‘What noise interferes in is the assumption of closed autonomy or independence within a system.’ By echoing my already echoing speech to ask questions of other participants, the interpreters generated a critical form of feedback, directed against them (for their tone, for not smiling), rather than against me (their fellow participant), that emerged as much an expanded exhibitionary context of documenta 14, as from the ‘concert’ and its conditions (the score, devices, improvisation, setting). The emergence of this echo-question-feedback loop acts as a powerful reminder of how, in spite of the resilient, sustained labor of the interpreters in following Mattin’s directive to aid the emergence of a collective subject, the individual self and its fragile narcissism (e.g. my speech imagining affinity with the interpreters and the attacks directed at the interpreters), have the tendency to dominate precisely because this is what operates across broader societal systems and structures. This is precisely why the interpreters’ echoed questions instigated the later attack, generating a form of negative feedback loop, although I – and, by extension, the individual subject as an ‘I’ - somehow escaped unscathed. This failure of my fellow participants to see that the echo-question-feedback loop emerged from the interpreters enacting a transition away from a conventional ‘performance’ by an individual, moving from the improvised questioning as an inversion of the ‘Talking-as-One’ device to the ‘Not About You’ device, reenforced the entrenched and closed capitalist systems of alienation that social dissonance, the concept, and Social Dissonance the artwork, were created to reveal.

It is the claim of this article that what the interpreters carried out in generating the echo-question-feedback loop within the Social Dissonance performance, calls to be expanded outwards and interfere in other contexts. The context within which I want to show Social Dissonance interfering, while deeply enmeshed within the capitalist system interrogated by Mattin’s work, has a significant nuance that I believe needs to be processed more explicitly in the work’s ongoing extension and reception, especially in the academic field (through the pages of this journal special issue) and beyond the spatial and temporal settings of the Athens and Kassel of documenta 14 in 2017. The context that I want to generate an echo-question-feedback

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5 The short-hand echo-question-feedback is an attempt to codify into an unlearning gesture the formal modality of Social Dissonance as performance which incorporates a score, the devices to enact it, and moments of improvisation used by interpreters. The reference to echo is not so much the ancient Greek mythical character Echo, which I will turn to for another, less improvised, intervention in a ‘performance’ of Social Dissonance in Kassel, but to the following words of Clare Butcher in her short, but endlessly generative, text ‘Curriculum’: “While the dimensions inspired by the thinking body – moving, exercising, learning – might be useful, the questions around what kinds of bodies, which exercises, pronounced by whom, and for what purposes, echo loudly among ruins. Other voices, other words, those forbidden, interrupt the comfortable canons that encircle education.” (Butcher (2018) 118). For a more delayed echo of this unlearning process, see Balaguer and José (2023). As for feedback, I wrote this article in the library of the Zentroa Azkuna in Bilbao with Mattin’s earlier work Feedback Conceptual (2009) Mattin (2009) in my headphones (I can’t exactly say I was listening, as much as enduring, it!). For earlier reflections on Mattin’s pre-Social Dissonance work and his Basque and Bilbaino context, see Minus Plato (2017a).

6 While Social Dissonance has been ‘performed’ in the Basque Country (Tabakalera, Donostia, 2017) and the UK (Café Oto, London, 2022), it has not (yet!) travelled to a settler colonial context. At the same time, the colonial
loop through the mechanism of this article is that of the settler colonial institution of the Land-Grab university in the United States. My claim is that, like the questioning of the interpreters, the concept and concert of Social Dissonance can enact an unlearning gesture within the settler colonial system of higher education in the US that can best be seen through the collective and relational work of non-settler, Indigenous artists and their alternative pedagogical initiatives. To frame my analysis and introduce you to this context, in the spirit of my speech during Social Dissonance and its attendant failures, I want to tell the story of two failures, both stemming from my position as a faculty member and settler at the particular Land-Grab university I work at: This* Ohio State University.7

But before we leave Summer 2017 and the Odeion in Athens for a university campus in Columbus, Ohio, in Spring 2023, please take a moment to pass by the video ‘E’, created by Martijn in’t Veld as part of European Everything by the Samí artist Joar Nango and reflect on the following section of the text quoted in the book produced by the documenta 14 Aneducation program (Angiama et al., 2018, p. 21):

SOME OF US WILL BE AGAIN WHAT WE WERE
GOING BACK TO LIFE WE KNEW
SLIGHTLY ALTERED8

2 | GATHERING PLACE: CENTERS OF SOCIAL DISSONANCE

Not About You: when somebody is trying to show off, the interpreters sing: It’s not about you. (Mattin 2022, p. 212)

In early July 2023, Ohio governor Mike DeWine signed a 2-year $191 billion budget (News 5 Cleveland, 2023). Included in the budget bill was the controversial plan, first introduced as Ohio Senate Bill 117 (although never introduced into the Ohio House), to create five so-called “intellectual diversity” Centers on five Ohio university campuses: Ohio State University, the University of Toledo, Miami University, Cleveland State University, and the University of Cincinnati. The original Bill, introduced in May, proposed the creation of only two new entities - the Salmon P. Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society at Ohio State’s John Glenn College of Public Affairs and the Institute of American Constitutional Thought and Leadership at Toledo’s College of Law, was introduced by Republican state senators Jerry Cirino and Rob McColley (Honesty for Ohio Education, 2023). Senator Cirino was also behind Ohio Senate Bill

context at documenta 14, thematized through the ‘Learning from Athens’ working title, and its emphasis on global Indigenous artists, informs this articles' provisional speculations as to what such a transposition to a settler colonial context could look like.

7 Although I abbreviate it to ‘Ohio State’ or ‘Ohio State University’ in general, I write This* Ohio State University, both here, at crucial moments during this article, and as part of my academic credentials at the beginning of this article, as a modest intervention in the corporate branding of the institution as The Ohio State University. The deixis is important because I cannot speak for, both on behalf of or in defense of, the university, nor can I speak directly against the university, as I remain working within and a part of it. This*, therefore, is an unlearning gesture in its own right and is a direct extension of my current book project (Finlay Fletcher (in preparation)).

8 The whole video is available at in’t Weld (2017).
83, the so-called ‘Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act’, which targets academic freedoms, banning instruction on ‘controversial beliefs and policies’ bill, mandatory Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training and programs, academic partnerships with China, and collective bargaining. This rattle-bag Bill of justly received unprecedented push-back from faculty and students at several Ohio universities, giving opposition testimony that went late into the night. Even the Board of Trustees at Ohio State opposed the Bill (The Ohio State University, 2023) and the Bill was eventually dropped (although later revised and taken up in Fall 2023). While Senate Bill 83 does not focus directly on the curriculum, it is generated out of model legislation that posits such changes through the mechanisms of Center or Institutes like those in Senate Bill 117, passed through the budget. The proposed intent of the Bill was to counter imagined liberal bias on Ohio’s university campuses by creating academic centers that were independent from the rest of the university. What was less transparent in the Bill was how this kind of initiative is part of a well-funded plan by extreme right-wing groups to gain a foothold in institutions of higher education to offer legitimacy to their think-tanks, even using model legislation from such a think-tank to generate this very legislation (Wilson and Kamola, 2021).

While I was part of a small group of vocal opponents among the fellow faculty and students of both Ohio State and Toledo, supported by our local and regional chapters of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), there was much less attention given to this Bill due to the recent efforts to fight against the sprawling Senate Bill 83 and also because the timing following the end of Spring semester. Even though these, the culture wars climate in the US, and the Republican control of the Ohio legislature are factors that can help explain the immediate failure to prevent its passing through the budget, here I want to dwell on a broader, more fundamental reason for this failure. There is a shared structural context between the Bill and the entrenched, intimate relationship between settler colonial violence of the state and institutions of higher education in the United States. In short, both the power grab of the Republican legislature in the form of establishing independent academic Centers and the land grab that enabled the founding of the academic institutions in the first place are central features of settler colonialism.

As Leigh Patel has shown, higher education within a settler colonial context, whether in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or Israel, is structurally dependent on the forced seizure of land (Patel 2021). Such land-grabs, in turn, enact an erasure, displacement, and replacement of Indigenous peoples by and with settler communities, creating the fiction of independent nations from the latter while reinscribing the former with a dependent, contingent role. These two features of settler colonialism are accompanied by a third, which extends beyond the settler/Indigenous dichotomy to a third feature of the Settler Colonial Triad (Tuck and Yang, 2012): the force labor and chattel enslavement of Black African peoples. While these are all historical processes, they gave birth to structures that are very much still in place to this day. The state of Ohio holds a unique place in this history, not only as a frontier that, as the scholar of Cherokee descent Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has shown (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021), initiated a policy of settler colonial genocide, but also because it closely aligned the founding of educational institutions at the same time. For example, the story of the founding of Ohio University is directly aligned with the Northwest Ordinance.

Yet the most explicit union between settler colonialism and higher education was the 1862 Morrill Act. Founded in 1870, This* Ohio State University is a so-called ‘Land-Grant’

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14 For more on this story, see the very much settler-centric account of McCullough (2019), with the corrective of Minus Plato (2022a).
university created by the 1862 Morrill Act, whereby the sale of expropriated Indigenous land was used to generate endowments for public universities across the US. In 2020, *High Country News* published the report ‘Land-Grab Universities’ which meticulously documented where each Land-Grant university gained its land from, wherein Ohio State, given the earlier removal of tribes from the state of Ohio, receiving scrips of land from Indigenous nations in California, Michigan, among other States (Lee and Ahtone, 2020). At This* Ohio State University, while there have been important, Indigenous-led research projects aimed at responding to the report (Gavazzi and Low, 2023), as we shall see, they are complicated by the participation of a non-Indigenous academic, whose career has been built by championing the Land-Grant mission (Gavazzi and Gee 2018; Gavazzi and Staley 2020).

More modest attempts to understand how this Land-Grab history underpins the operating structures of the contemporary university, specifically in how students learn within such institutions, have been made at the curricular level. These include the recommendation of including a Land Acknowledgment on the syllabi for courses in the new General Education (GEN) curriculum foundational category of Race, Ethnicity & Gender Diversity, as well as a module on Land-Grant/Grab in the 1 credit launch seminar. I have been involved in both of these initiatives in my role on the College of Arts & Sciences Curriculum Committee (ASCC), which oversees the GEN for the whole university, as well as in my capacity as chair of the ASCC panel on Race, Ethnicity & Gender Diversity. It is precisely these initiatives that have been targeted by right-wing legislators in the Ohio Statehouse, with far-reaching Bills (e.g. Senate Bill 83 and 117) that attempt to wrest control of the curriculum to correct what they claim as the liberal bias of the university, through limiting academic freedoms, faculty rights to strike, and imposing academic centers to foster right-wing ideologies across governance structures, hiring, and curriculum.

It is no coincidence that the Republican-controlled Ohio state legislature imposed a right-wing indoctrination Center on Ohio State in backlash to a renewed push for centering social justice in the curriculum. At the same time, some responses to the report have attempted to register the moment of awaking to the settler colonial gesture of the Land-Grab while at the same time recoding the corporate mission of the ‘Land-Grant’. This gesture is epitomized by the scholarship of Gavazzi. Before the report, Gavazzi used the term ‘Land-Grant fierce’ as a call to action for those institutions to maintain their original mission of closely serving their local communities and states, in opposition to other higher educational models. And while he acknowledges – especially in shared work with Potawatomi Ohio State colleague John Low the importance of ‘Land-grab truth’, he is committed to remaining ‘land-grant fierce’. Gavazzi’s revisionist work, albeit good intentioned and funded through grants in collaboration with Indigenous scholar, nations, and communities, demonstrates a closed system, resistant to delinking from or unlearning settler colonial gestures of the rapacious ‘grab’. As such it maintains the governmental agency and intervention within the institution of higher education encoded in the benevolent ‘grant’ language. Furthermore, it is echoed by the imposition of “intellectual diversity” centers as part of a settler colonial reset aiming to ‘take back’ the university and to maintain its original (settler) purpose.

But where does Mattin’s concept of social dissonance fit into this context? I do not have space to rehearse here a longer argument that I am developing elsewhere that posits unlearning gestures, such as *Social Dissonance*, within a broader process of how decolonial methods that emerge from temporary exhibitionary contexts can be tools for disturbing established settler
colonial educational structures (Finlay Fletcher (in preparation)). Instead, I want to follow the contours of Mattin’s philosophical and artistic hypotheses about the central theme of alienation. The settler colonial land-grab enacts a brutal form of alienation; an alienation that continues so long as the misleading ‘Land-Grant’ language and mission is retained, no matter how inclusive it may become. Alienation structures Mattin’s book, with its three main sections dedicated to alienation from below, alienation from above, and where they relate to each other or meet in what he dubs ‘externalising alienation.’ (Mattin, 2022). The place of the colonial, while not centered in Mattin’s project, is, however, referenced in various, significant ways. The most pervasive is how Mattin describes how capitalism works through colonializing acts. For example, how capitalism colonizes our consciousness or conceptual mediations (Mattin 2022, pp. 70-76). While lesser engagements are historical in his readings of Marx, such as the fetish and its origins in colonial Africa (Mattin 2022, p. 63). Yet there is one important early section of the book called ‘Sociogeny: Racism and Society’ (Mattin 2022, pp. 18-20) in which Mattin traces how the concept of social dissonance offers important insights into this situation specifically because a significant aspect of its theorization is grounded in the social aspects of colonial contexts. Central to these social aspects is the work of Sylvia Wynter in expounding the decolonial work of Frantz Fanon through the concept of sociogeny (Wynter, 2001). Mattin builds on Wynter in moving beyond the psychological and individuated conception of cognitive dissonance by turning to Fanon’s ‘much deeper analysis at the societal level in relation to the racial processes of colonisation’ (Mattin 2022, p. 18). The crucial lesson is how alienation is produced by sociogeny in the process of intrusion, whereby ‘certain forms of subjectivation reproduce violence, injustice, and forms of exploitation, which in turn contribute to the sociogeny of neuroses, complexes, mental states of noise, and catastrophic reactions’ (Mattin 2022, p. 20).

Within important attempts to understand the relationship between Land-Grab universities and decolonial and anti-racist resistance movements that center Indigenous worldviews (Patel, 2021, La Paperson, 2021), the concept of social dissonance helps us understand how among settler colonial higher education institutions, the Land-Grab relies on intrusion as a specifically sociogenic form of alienation. Furthermore, attempts to speak exclusively on behalf of ‘the student’ (what they learn and are taught) Mattin’s reference to John Cage and the emphasis on ‘sounds themselves’ could be understood as ‘what is taught’ aka the curriculum. Yet within the settler colonial context of the Land-Grab University, what is taught cannot be separated from the intrusion of racist and exclusionary sociogenic histories and structures through which students learn, even when curricular changes are made to reveal such histories and structures in how they taught. At the same time, within current extremist right-wing discourse on higher education and

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15 A significant aspect of that project, which is mirrored in microcosm here, is to track three stages of these unlearning gestures. The first is to outline how different features of the Land-Grab university have been established, historically and structurally, through settler colonialism, the gestures of which continue to control many aspects of institutional life in higher education, from forms of communication, internal and external, the physical space and place of the campus, governance structures, libraries and archives, the faculty body and student organization, as well as the networks of academic publishing which this journal participates in. The second stage is to show how temporary public learning programs at the documenta 14 and Toronto Biennial of Art exhibitions offer ways to break free from these structures if brought into the university context. The final stage is to report parallel attempts to make this happen within the specific context of This* Ohio State University, one of which, an informal regular collaborative meeting space called Our Unlearning Hour that I helped to develop. It is important to acknowledge here that the form of the single hour of unlearning together has a deep affinity with Social Dissonance in form and intent.
accompanying legislation, the mantra of indoctrination, that universities should teach students ‘how to think and not what to think’, presupposes a capacity for a clear discursive intrusion to be made into the learning environment of the university, specifically through the imposition of “intellectual diversity” centers. Yet, this intrusion is already there in the sociogenic process whereby students are produced as settlers through the deeply exclusionary settler colonial origins and structures of the university as an institution in the ideological branding of the land-grab as land-grant.

It is here that there is a troubling interest convergence between such attempts to transform universities and research projects that want to continue the Land-Grant mission, while acknowledging the unfortunate Land-Grab truth, without rupture. This smacks of the politics of reconciliation in Canada, as analyzed through another careful reading of Fanon, this time by Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (Coulthard, 2018). In fact, Mattin shows a careful awareness of the issue of reconciliation in how he uses ‘externalising alienation’ later in his book as a mechanism to bridge alienation from below and above, not only without needing to reconcile them, but also in making their irreconcilability an important feature of this phenomenon:

Externalising alienation, then, recognises the inexistence and impossibility of reconciliation and takes these as its starting point (Mattin 2022, p. 190)

In short, it is through social dissonance that we can understand how it is the settler colonial gesture at the heart of the Land-Grab university that both emboldens the right-wing legislation forcing the creation of an independent ‘intellectual diversity’ Center and also enables the maintenance of a ‘Land-Grant fierce’ mission at the Land-Grab university that is This* Ohio State University.

The question, however, remains: what can we faculty and our students who work within such a context and are aware of the social dissonance it generates do about it?16 In short, once it is registered and recognized as such, in other words when settler colonial social dissonance is centered, only then can we initiate a decolonial process of delinking from the settler colonial educational institution (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Mattin offers a roadmap through the process of externalizing alienation as a means to avoid such reconciliation, and in the following section, I will follow his approach in outlining several uses of the Social Dissonance artwork in my classes and beyond. But I want to end this section with Mattin’s description of Social Dissonance in terms of an Indigenous-led project at another university in a settler colonial context. When Mattin writes:

16 One possible answer, intimated by the centering of Indigenous artists in this article, is offered by Kwakwak'awakw artist and Impact Chair in Indigenous Art Practices Carey Newman at the University of Vitoria, British Columbia, Canada. Newman has proposed the creation of what he dubs the unCentre for Arts and Decolonization “to act as an interdisciplinary, collaborative, and non-hierarchical forum that shifts the colonial mindset and explores new ways of approaching problems, projects, or research…to be developed with other artists, knowledge keepers and scholars…and to form founding principles that are anti-oppressive, to kind of try to rethink the structure of an academic environment. Newman quoted in Baker (2022).
The question, though, is what type of social relations are at play when we gather to perform and listen, and this is the question inhabited by those who interpret and participate in *Social Dissonance*. (Mattin, 2022, p. 27)

I am of my experience visiting the exhibition ᖃᐅᓲᖅᖃᒡᒋᖅᑲᑎᑦᑕᕐᕕᒃ *Qaggiq: Gathering Place* at the Art Museum of the University of Toronto in partnership with the Toronto Biennial of Art. The Inuk curator asinnajaq and her collaborator Barbara Fischer write in the guide for the exhibition:

The goal of *Gathering Place*—composed of a reading and meeting space as well as several screening rooms—is to create a place where people may be able to become active through Isuma’s work. (asinnajaq and Fischer, 2019).

It is not my place (a place occupied by all too many settler academics) to articulate the *how* of the Inuit collective Isuma’s practice in creating a place to become active *through*, merely that what is created by *Gathering Place* is something both within and beyond the settler colonial institutions of the university and the museum. Like social dissonance as a concept that cannot be separated by how it is enacted in the world in the form of an artwork, *Gathering Place* demands us to acknowledge that the neutral university or white cube gallery does not exist, any more than Cage’s ideological anechoic chamber (Mattin (2022, p. 30).

### 3 | TALKING TREATIES AND DISH DANCES: EXTERNALIZING SOCIAL DISSONANCE

*Lecture: when somebody is behaving like a teacher or a professor start repeating the word ‘lecture’ while clapping.* (Mattin 2022, p. 212).

The video starts with a shot of a clock on a wall – the time is 12:47pm, which is 2 minutes after the class is meant to start. We then see a hand opening a door belonging to the person holding the camera and we enter into a classroom where rows of university undergraduate students are watching something on a screen at the front of the class. The video shows a room where people are gathered, lined up along the walls, and in the center a man is lying on a table, naked except for his underwear and a blindfold. Sitting in a chair next to him, a woman, also blindfolded, is wearing blue surgical gloves, and holding something in her left hand. Moving away from the screen, the camera turns to face the students, turning back to the screen before ending abruptly.

I made this video in my class Philosophical Problems in the (offered by the Philosopher Department at Ohio State) at the end of Spring semester, 2019 and posted it on my website Minus Plato – a blog, platform, and persona that I created back in 2012 and ended in 2022, along with another video and 3 sound files under the overall title *This Class Was an Artwork (Social Dissonance after Kant)* (Minus Plato, 2019b). The other video was an ‘episode’ of *Social Dissonance* that I attended in person in Kassel in September 2017 involving a blindfolded tattoo artist and her (willing) ‘subject’. The three sound files in which you can hear students in the

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17 The ‘episode’ SOCIAL_DISSONANCE_KASSEL_050917_079, is available at the project YouTube channel, Mattin (2017a).
class describing artworks from documenta 14 based on still or moving images, or sound clips, shown on the screen in class. The last sound file includes 8 different students describing the following still from *Social Dissonance*.

![Live streaming and documentation](https://www.documenta14.de/en/calendar/22473/social-dissonance)

Fig. 2 – Still from Social Dissonance in Kassel from the documenta 14 website

While in other iterations of this class project – called the *S.O.F.A.R. Audio Description Project* (Minus Plato, 2019a) – during each class of the semester, students would speak a description of a documenta 14 artwork shown on the PowerPoint slides, based on a prompt that focused on different ways in which art can be defined in terms of representation, expression, form, and aesthetic experience. This class session broke from this routine in two ways – keeping the recorder running while passing between students and by having multiple students respond to the same artwork: *Social Dissonance*. Immediately the students recognized the room where the tattooing ‘episode’ took place and started to analyze the dynamics of the group pictured – the man in the dark blue shirt with his back to the camera, holding forth (it is not me, by the way!), the differing postures of those gathered, the dominant whiteness of the room (and of the people it contained), possible gender dynamics as well as speculation as to what was being discussed. When the eighth student spoke, she made the connection between the artwork and what we were doing in class. She said that based around the piece we’ve saw before this, as in the tattoo video, *Social Dissonance* tends to focus on mostly group conversations and coming to a consensus. And, she continued, it almost feels like just by passing around this recorder to each of the people in this room it feels as if we are participating in our own conversation. She ended by noting how we were using this artwork to transmit into the real world, into the present tense.

By echoing this perceptive student’s observation, *This Class Was an Artwork (Social Dissonance After Kant)* offers a modest challenge to the ostensible subject matter of the course on the philosophy of art, specifically the Kantian approach to aesthetic judgment and experience. Unlike my speculative claim in the previous section that the conditions of the Land-Grab university help us to position how Mattin’s passing reference to how alienation is produced through sociogenetic intrusion, what Mattin calls ‘externalizing alienation’ is discussed much
more extensively in the book, and even acts as its culmination. Mattin’s account of externalizing alienation is not only significant for bridging alienation from above and below, without reconciliation, but also for how it breaks with a Kantian conception of aesthetic judgment and experience. Looking back on my teaching experiment now, the students’ comments echo how the practice of social dissonance as a method of externalizing alienation in the performer/spectator relationship can possibly transposed onto the teacher/student relationship. Try reading the following extended passage from the *Social Dissonance* book with this in mind:

The precondition for producing tension is a suspension of the contract and consensual presupposition between audience and performer. If this tension occurs, we do not relate to each other according to the terms of this consensus, because the elements necessary to constitute it have been removed. In this sense, the situation *ungrounds* itself. It forces everyone involved to think, without their having a totally prescribed role or task, and in this process a collective self-consciousness emerges. We lose the ability to relate either to ourselves or to each other as established selves or liberal individuals, and this forces participants to think about their relations to one another without prefiguration—no longer the impoverished sociality of the consumer nor that of the emancipated spectator, but a suspension of clear-cut roles, where people become able to experience and explore their own conditioning, their unfreedom. This, then, is what I refer to as externalising alienation: producing estrangement while simultaneously incorporating the process of decipherment of what is strange into the experience of noise. This inevitably goes beyond a mere aesthetic experience, because it undermines certain assumptions of what experience as such is, and what you are as a receiver of aesthetic experience. (Mattin, 2022, p. 161)

While Mattin proceeds to enrich this account of externalizing alienation, grounded in the Russian Formalists and their conception of estrangement, with a reading of Brecht, improvisation, and his method of unconstituted praxis (Mattin, 2011), I want you to hold onto this passage because it offers a useful way to consider what happens when the performance of *Social Dissonance* becomes itself externalized in settings like the class I just sketched above. At the same time, we have to remember how this shift of setting layers externalizing alienation on top of the sociogenic alienation of intrusion when the social dissonance of the Land-Grab university is centered. To externalize *Social Dissonance* brings us back to the German *Entäusserung* as the relinquishing ownership of something, which is something that may be impossible to do within the performance itself, perhaps can be achieved by inserting the performance, through its recordings, its score, or its devices, into other situations.

The first class in which I engaged with *Social Dissonance* was a freshman seminar called *Selfie Culture* (Finlay Fletcher, 2017). The class examined contemporary selfie culture from an historical perspective, from ancient Rome and the poet Ovid’s tale of Narcissus, to early Modern self-portraiture and Foucault’s ideas of the subject, to contemporary social media. The class culminated in how, within forms of activism, protest, and witnessing, selfies become a crucial part of a network of perspectives to create new models of collective action and foster, rather than inhibit, empathy between people. As such, we understood the selfie as a medium of community

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18 I did have another class visit the exhibition that same semester, on Philosophical Problems in the Arts, with a focus on Motherhood (we read documenta 14 artist Moyra Davey’s 2001 anthology *A Mother Reader* — although when students came, the students in the Selfie class had changed *Social Dissonance* to some relaxing music.
and collective action. This was enacted in the final assignment: a ‘group selfie’ project set in a small exhibition I created in my campus office called *Perictione & Sons* in 2017, named after Plato’s mother, who was also a philosopher and may have inspired her son’s proto-feminism in the *Republic* in dialogue with his two brothers (Minus Plato, 2017d). I screened *Social Dissonance* live and when documenta 14 ended, aired recorded ‘episodes’. But before getting to this final assignment, I included a specific *Social Dissonance* project with the following guidelines:

**Social Dissonance project (10%)**

The Basque artist Mattin has created what he calls a ‘durational concert’ called *Social Dissonance* in which performers and an audience spend one hour together in a room to “explore the dissonance that exist between the individual narcissism that capitalism promotes and our social capacity”. For this project, you need to watch two episodes of the performance (either live on Periscope or archived on YouTube – see links in schedule below), take a Selfie of you watching, then write a paragraph (no more than 500 words) about how successfully the performance achieves its aims. Upload the Selfie and the text to Carmen [the course website program] and present your project in the next class. (Finlay Fletcher, 2017)

The project was timed for the week of September 7th, while documenta 14 was still happening – and I had returned to Kassel to participate in *Social Dissonance* once again. I told the students that I would be part of the performance on Tuesday September 5th and Wednesday September 6th, curious to see if they would watch these iterations live or opt for watching prerecorded ‘episodes’. The following week, they were to deliver their *Social Dissonance* presentations, after reading the bio of Mattin on the documenta 14 website and the score. The students’ responses, centered on the ‘episodes’, one the tattoo ‘episode’ that I screened in my Philosophy class a year and a half later, and another, in which I made a direct intervention (more on which below) and participants were asked what they would say to their 16-year-old selves. One student wrote how they found the *Social Dissonance* project an interesting, artistic perspective on what it means to exist in a group and to exercise our social capacity. They also reflected on how the project related to the class context more generally by stating how *Social Dissonance* reminded me of schools and universities, with their frequent discussions and exposure to interaction in all different settings.
The exhibition *Perictione & Sons* was set in my campus office and open during my regular office hours (12-2pm or by appointment) from August 24th to December 9th (the length of the Autumn semester), along with installations of books covering my couch and desk, including interventions in copies of Plato’s *Republic* by students in the Drawing Class (‘Drawing Ideas’ – Fall 2016), I included a screening of recordings of *Social Dissonance* on my laptop, placed on my chair. During the ‘group selfie’ project, students made the connection with *Social Dissonance* directly, beyond its direct presence in the exhibition. One student wrote how, when I left the office, the students operated like participants in *Social Dissonance*, since they just stood there awkwardly until one of them spoke up with an idea, then they would share more ideas, until one of them was acted upon. Beyond this description, the recording of their project showed them in action: arranging books and other objects, but also moving the camera positioned to film them, to face outside the window – showing people walking across the green space of campus called the Oval. They also turned off the video of *Social Dissonance* to play some relaxing music instead.

While the *Selfie Culture* class was my most involved engagement with *Social Dissonance* to date, in other classes some aspect of the work would make an appearance, directly or through one of its devices. In my Graduate class on Contemporary Theory and Art Education in Fall 2021, the score as a form was a central focus of the class. There were regular ‘score notes’ assignments, where they focused on artists and educational programs at both documenta 14 and the Toronto Biennial. In addition, after so many classes of online learning during the heights of the COVID-19 pandemic, the expansive artistic mode of the score was used to focus our work leading up to a final group performance project called the *Columbus Chorus* for which we would develop a collective score, using the score notes as a basis. As I wrote in the syllabus:

> Unlike other pedagogical tools, the score – whether verbal or visual, for music, dance, performance, or other actions – prioritizes liveness, embodiment, and collectivity. (Finlay Fletcher, 2021b).
Mattin’s *Social Dissonance* score was part of our discussions, among other examples of verbal scores (e.g. by Pauline Oliveros). Yet this focus on the score took on another dimension beyond the class the following Spring. In *Whisper into a Hole*, a collaborative exhibition I created as a way to end my Minus Plato project and persona, along with three Indigenous artists, educators, and scholars (Indigo Gonzales, Anna Freeman, Rebecca Copper), we not only generated a score together using the platform of my radio show *dear fellow settler colonizer*, on the local, online radio station Verge.Fm (Minus Plato, 2021-2022), but as part of a daily practice of printing and scattering on the gallery floor Minus Plato blogposts, we included the score of *Social Dissonance*, along with a picture of the book cover. I posted an image of the installation on Instagram with the question: does the presence of a Basque artist in an exhibition about relationality and global Indigenous arts create social dissonance? It is through tracking some of the instances I have done this at the university, both within the preconditioned environment of the classroom and other ‘freer’ exhibitionary contexts, that there emerges an implication of the relation between the forced intellectual diversity center and the institutional responses to the Land-Grab U report as a failure that relates to another, curricular and personal failure on my part. This accounting of my pedagogical experiments with and through *Social Dissonance*, through which I could track my academic transition from the foundational, colonial (not-so) hidden curriculum of Classics to the more precarious, yet bolder field of Arts Education, cannot be left to stand without also mentioning a moment of personal failure that speaks to the challenges of doing this kind of work at a Land-Grab university. While Republican lawmakers in Ohio were pushing me and my fellow faculty members, and our students, into protest against their power-grab legislation, I was meant to be focused on curricular matters. I wanted to put together a course-proposal for a new General Education course in the Foundational field of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Diversity on the topic of global Indigenous arts called *Worlds of Indigenous Arts*. I had taught a class called *Global Indigenous Arts: Education for Settlers* (Finlay Fletcher 2021a) back in Fall 2021, in which there was a participatory curricular development component where me and my students worked together, in dialogue with invited Indigenous interlocutors at Ohio State and beyond, to create this new course. There had been several recent hires in Indigenous Studies, and my aim was to do the work of creating this course so that new faculty members didn’t have to do so the moment they arrived. Also, one student in my class, an Indigenous graduate student whose research was focused on Indigenous-led artist residencies at Ohio State, including visits to the earthworks, was the person who would be invited to teach the course first, once it had been approved. I worked on it, but I just couldn’t pull it together and my failure to do so hangs over the writing of this article. I cannot explain my inaction purely based on grappling with the question of my positionality as a settler and how appropriate it could be for me to design such a course, even when based on collective curriculum building that included Indigenous participants. My failure runs deeper than that and feels like a result of a strange twisting of both sociogenic intrusion and externalizing alienation. My white male settler subjectivity, with its inherited sense of superiority, through its emerging realization of inferiority had internalized my privilege grounded on the oppression of others and materialized it as a personal failure, producing its own form of alienation, one that I recognized as distinctly lacking at a structural level at my university as an institution. At the same time, the unfinished syllabus stared back at me as stark reminder the paradoxical, externalizing quality of what could be called settler

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19 I want to publicly thank Carcross/Tagish First Nation curator and writer Candice Hopkins for speaking with me about the discussions around including Basque artists in an exhibition of global Indigenous arts during the Toronto Biennial of Art in Fall 2019.
colonial noise. In my proposed course, Indigeneity was not only figured as estrangement, but also simultaneously, through the organizing form of curriculum, incorporated into the process of settler decipherment of what is Indigenous into the experience of teaching.

My failure to complete the task of curricular development had made concrete the conditions of working within a Land-Grab university, in spite of my attempts to embody and display to students an alternative mode of learning. As such, the only way out of this impasse, would be to, once again, point to another Indigenous-led unlearning gesture, one which could extend to Social Dissonance in the process. Here I am thinking about Ange Loft and Jumblies Theatre and Arts’ Talking Treaties and Dish Dances workshops that took place in 2019 and 2022 in the Toronto Biennial of Art, leading towards the publication of the book and website for the curricular project A Treaty Guide for Torontonians. Here is how the project is introduced on the website:

*A Treaty Guide for Torontonians* is an artful examination of the complex intercultural roots of treaty relationships in the place we now call Toronto. From the Two Row Wampum and Dish with One Spoon to the Treaty of Niagara and the Toronto Purchase, we trace the history of treaty making between Indigenous nations, and between Indigenous nations and the Crown. Part of Jumblies Theatre + Arts’ multiyear Talking Treaties project, *A Treaty Guide* inspires an active approach to treaty awareness through embodied learning tools. Land-based activities, theatrical exercises, and drawing and writing prompts help readers find their own relationship to this history, and to take up their treaty responsibilities in the present. (Talking Treaties Collective, 2022)

What would it mean to bring such active awareness, tools, activities, exercises, and prompts into another settler colonial context beyond Toronto? And how could *Social Dissonance*, the videos, score, and devices, be utilized to ensure that they didn’t become engulfed in settler colonial noise in the process?

4 | CONCLUSION: OPEN REHEARSAL INSISTENCE

*Audience Behaviour: behave as if you are a member of the audience.* (Mattin 2022, p. 211).

We are back in *Social Dissonance*, this time at documenta-halle in Kassel. It is early September 2017, the last weeks of the documenta 14 exhibition, and learning nothing from my experiences in Athens, once again, I have taken it upon myself to occupy center stage and, far worse, I have made annotations directly on Mattin’s score, which is distributed to participants.
Again, I lecture; holding forth, failing to answer my own question: ‘What would it mean to tell the story of Narcissus and Echo from the perspective of Echo?’ After the body of the ‘session’ is devoted to our 16-year-old-selves, I summon my impromptu Athens speech and express my (earnest) bemusement that, if you my fellow participants had the opportunity to come back tomorrow, or the next day, or to continue this work in some other form, why wouldn’t they? I know now that it is within this question that the unlearning gesture of social dissonance lives. It’s openness as a critical space to enable all of us who attend to it to engage in a rehearsal for change as part of our daily lives. At the same time, as such, it has a relentless insistence, that we must remain in this contested space, vigilant and open to whatever comes, where no smooth or easy answers will present themselves. Yet, who among us, who have taken it upon ourselves to hold forth within the pages of this journal, a squarely academic setting, will be able to answer this question in the affirmative, to tell a story of Social Dissonance as a lived experience? The answer is simple and has been staring us in the face (well, from the cover of Mattin’s book and from every ‘episode’ of Social Dissonance): its interpreters. Beyond the artwork and the artist, the book, with its philosophizing and its exegetes, the interpreters are the people who have lived within Social Dissonance, holding it open for others, like me, to enter.  

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20 This portal works equally well for books, as for other bodies. See Minus Plato (2022a), self-published as Minus Plato (2022c)
article, they have been there, just as the students at my Land-Grab university and in my classes, have been there. So, don’t you think it’s about time you heard from one. This is what the interpreter Eleni Zervou, an artist, as well as a student in several of the documenta 14 public education (‘aneducation’) programs wrote when I sent her a draft of this article. Listen to her and you will learn something that you cannot find anywhere else within this journal special issue. Now, as I once did in Social Dissonance in Kassel - the only intervention I’m fully proud of - I’ll hold the phone and record, as a silent, yet active, witness, what Eleni has to say:

[Hi Eleni, can you add some text here? Anything you want to share with the readers of this article, & the volume as a whole, about your experience as an interpreter of Social Dissonance in Athens & Kassel. How did you live it? And how does it live on for you? Imagine it as a checking out moment after the hour…]

There you have it. Why would you need any conclusion or checking out from me after reading that? I have, finally, been put in my place, which reminds me of another experience I had, following my two failures of May 2023. After not being able to prevent the right-wing power-grab of Ohio higher education, or produce new curriculum on global Indigenous arts, I returned to Toronto for a series of open rehearsals by the Alutiiq artist Tanya Lukin Linklater at the Nature Center in High Park, rescheduled from the biennial the year before, called The sky held me (rainfall on hands hair lips). I was there, I watched, I took notes, I learned, but this time, I didn’t intervene. There were no speeches by me. Instead, I witnessed from the outside how Lukin Linklater’s collaborations with dancers (most of whom had worked with her before) were the living manifestation of time’s ‘slow scrape’ (Tanya Lukin Linklater 2022a) and the body’s ‘glossary of insistence’ (Lukin Linklater, 2022b). As I witnessed the open rehearsals unfurl, the terrible insistence of colonial structures was replaced by the repetitious, lived insistence of Indigenous action and refusal. I returned to Ohio and its Land-Grab university, shouldering my settler failures, humming the tune to ‘Not About You’, being again what I was, going back to the life I knew, slightly changed.

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I am deeply grateful to Mattin for creating and recreating social dissonance and Social Dissonance, engaging with my improvised and planned interventions, and celebrating and supporting my ongoing engagement with the afterlife of the work. Thank you to Miguel Prado for welcoming this writing, with its rough edges, into the world.

This article is dedicated both to the interpreters of Social Dissonance, especially the ‘Three Athenians in Kassel’ – Eleni Zervou, Danai Liodaki, and Ioannis Sarris – and to all of the participants of Our Unlearning Hour at This* Ohio State University.
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