

WHAT VISIBILITY DO WE WANT? CHAOTIC EXPRESSIONS

Jenelle Rouse and Alice Lo¹



Figure 1. Co-Visual Essay Authors, 2023.

Image descriptions: On your left, Alice is an **Art Photographer**. An Asian (Chinese-Indonesian) woman with dark brown shoulder-length straight hair. She has a pair of glasses, wearing a black button up shirt with rolled-up sleeves and a pair of denim jeans. Alice sits on another wooden stool in front of the white wall. On your right is Jenelle, the **Dance Artist**. A Black (Caribbean, European and African-descent) woman with coiled dark brown-black braided hair, long past shoulder-length. Other than wearing a pair of glasses, she wears a white, long sleeve button shirt with a loosely fitting white dress shirt and grey leggings. She sits on a wooden stool in front of a large canvas with a vibrant, colorful painting.

¹ **Co-Visual Essay Authors:** Jenelle Rouse, PhD in Education Studies (Western University), Dance Artist and Freelance Contractor (Multi-Lens Existence), Adjunct Professor (George Brown College, York University); Alice Lo, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Visual Media (Rochester Institute of Technology), Freelance Art Photographer (Multi-Lens Existence), Video Editor (Canadian Hearing Services). Email: multi.lens.existence@gmail.com.

[Silence]

Image description: This square shows a Black Deaf dancer's face with her hands appearing as though they are fragmented in time. Her eyes looking through the hands and at the viewer. The background is black with three specks of color in purple and light blue.



Figure 2. Untitled.

Chaotic Expressions is our artwork. This exploration of visual essay leads to discussion of the following topic, *what visibility do we want?* Through arts, we want to show that although we are culturally Deaf and use Sign Language in Canada (American Sign Language [ASL] in this case), we still are perceived as invisible. No one would have known that we Deaf exist if we walked past each other, unless we opened our mouths or used our hands (Figure 2). Our distinct voices and ASL bring us out of invisibility into visibility.



Figure 3. Imagine, Vision, Dream.

Image description: This is a horizontal, wide photo that shows a dancer's arm movements signing "Imagine", "Vision", and/or "Dream". There are small red and light blue specks throughout the bottom-half of the picture and the background is black. The action is captured through multiple exposures giving the illusion of stop motion.

In a present sense, whenever we choose to use ASL, we suddenly become marginalized and intentionally pushed into invisibility—again. We want the public to open their minds and recognize us as Deaf beings, including our chosen languages. The public needs to imagine the world and space where we can be ourselves (Figure 3). By social interaction through hands (gestures, signing) and emotions, they can be felt when we are expressly communicating, regardless of our different abilities.

Image description: This square photo shows a dancer in a black tank top against a pitch black background. Their arm movements are visually captured by the flow of bright blue paint splashing out of their hands. The action is captured through three multiple exposures giving the illusion of stop motion.



Figure 4. Splash Through.

There are in/visible barriers which can be overcome and break through. It is our symbolic action to cut or swim through different barriers—one obstacle at a time (Figure 4). Indigenous, Black, and Racialized (IBR) people have lived experiences of getting through different barriers. At times, getting through them can be chaotic.

Image description: This is a vertical photo that shows the upper body of a dancer. The dancer is wearing a black tank top, but covered almost entirely in red, bright blue and purple paint. Her hands are exclusively in red paint and she is signing "chaotic" above her head. The action is captured through multiple exposures giving the illusion of stop motion. The background is pitch black with many specks and splashes of the paint coming from the dancer's body.



Figure 5. Chaotic.

To tell stories about our journeys —our struggles and accomplishments—we need to be reminded that each of our stories have their intermingled meanings that cannot always be visible nor understood. Are our stories being acknowledged and/or discussed? No, not really. Not in Canada in the 21st century. We choose to keep this dialogue going by making references to Chaotic Expressions, where we get to experiment on different methods such as photography like the ones we just shared, see through images or transparency photos, appropriate use of a camera lens, and light to capture three significant different colors (red, purple and blue) along with four elements (eyes, mouth, ears and hands) through shutter shots of body movements (Figure 5).

Image description: This is a horizontal photo that shows a dancer caught in a running motion. The dancer is in a black tank top and black shorts covered almost entirely in paint. Their motions are visually captured via splashing of red, bright blue and purple paint. The action is captured through multiple exposures giving the illusion of stop motion. The background is pitch black with many specks and splashes of the paint coming from the dancer's body.



Figure 6. Untitled.

As seen in Figure 6, each movement has its own meaning; a symbol which offers different interpretations. Each movement applies to our complicated (intersectional) stories as IBR Deaf individuals whose life journey (and experience) can be carried through with our light inside us to ensure that we are being respected, celebrated and mainstreamed. This light is interpreted as part of our passion and grit to thrive in the midst of chaotic circumstances. With our skins, our Deaf beings, and choices of using sign language(s), we are here to stay—visibility.

