



Interview with Aleasha Chaunte

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Interview conducted by Jennifer Verson

Interview edited by Lena Šimić and Jennifer Verson

Aleasha Chaunte, head and shoulders image with shadow, photo by Ian Brown as part of Research for *The Handless Project* @ Bluecoat, Liverpool 2016.

Aleasha Chaunte is an artist who works primarily on audiences, finding ways to cue, gain consent and encourage authentic, public intimacy. Her primary interests are ritual, the wisdom contained within fairy/folk/mythic tales, handmade crafting and social justice. Past work includes *The Handless Project* (2016–2017), a city-wide two-year experiment in public meaning-making and ritual. Chaunte washed hundreds of strangers' hands, recorded the stories of over three hundred people onto a giant fabric map and staged a thirty-six hour pilgrimage around Liverpool.

Chaunte teaches socially engaged performance practices, including delivering sessions in diverse settings such as drug and alcohol support services, parenting classes, women's empowerment sessions, galleries, universities and theatre schools. Chaunte also works as an actress, most recently in the work of award-winning theatre-maker Andy Smith for his

play *Summit*. Her training includes a Masters in Acting from MMU in collaboration with Polish theatre company 'Song of the Goat'.

Chaunte is currently engaged in research she has called the *Humanise Project* which is exploring ways to reveal the mechanisms by which we (de)humanise one another. This work has evolved into a personal piece of work exploring her own humanity as refracted through a world that is shot through with white-supremacy.

One September is the arts partnership Aleasha Chaunte runs with Deborah Wintle-Escott.

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Jennifer: I want to thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. Your contribution is really important for me, because I think your work bridges critical spaces in maternal performance discourse. I started thinking about *The Handless Project* (2016–2017), a series of experiential events, using actions that you can reproduce easily yourself and particularly *The Water Experiments*.¹ The images spoke to me of maternal themes. I wanted to start by asking you how the theme of maternal performance resonates with you?

Aleasha: It's quite an interesting one in that I'm not a mother. So, maybe there's a border there in my mind between what I'm doing and actual

¹ For more information see [Handless Project Your Journey — One September Art](#)

motherhood. I feel like there's something about that space that doesn't really get the respect it deserves. The Israeli artist Shira Richter questions the degree to which reverence is shown to women who have given birth.²

Birth is an amazing experience, it's the miracle of life. But, it doesn't necessarily translate into being treated well. Even in delivery rooms, you're not respected. It's not sacred. It's not any of those things. I'm just aware that there's a border between myself as not having given birth and motherhood as a thematic space within my artwork.

Motherhood was an explicit part of *The Handless Project* because it is based on the fairy tale, 'The Handless Maiden' which features women at the three archetypal stages: maiden, mother and crone.³ The relationship between those stages is quite explicit in that fairy tale, in that it is a woman going from being a young wounded person to incorporating 'the wisdom of motherhood', but it kind of goes beyond that.

There are practical skills that she picks up along the way, skills of discernment and seeing into what is really needed in a particular situation – not just looking from the perspective of the dominant culture, not just looking for some sort of social hierarchy – but really looking into a situation and seeing what's really happening. That's the function that the mothers play in that story. She becomes able to connect with her own wisdom, which is very connected to natural spaces, to forests, very much a somatic experience.

² For more information see [Shira Richter | MAMA \(globalfundforwomen.org\)](https://www.mamafundforwomen.org/)

³ For more information see [Grimm 031: The Girl without Hands \(pitt.edu\)](https://www.pitt.edu/~grim031/)

Jennifer: The first performance that I saw of yours *Stating the Obvious* (2020), was during *Proximity: New Directions in Art and Social Repair*⁴ which was a performance with your mother. For me, the performance unpacked memory, ritual and migration. I was struck by the tension in your work between what is said, what is performed through metaphor and what's left out. I was wondering about your identification around maternal themes, but also the role of the daughter/child in relation to maternal themes in art. How does it feel to be speaking from that position in your work? Does identifying yourself as a daughter sit well with you?

Aleasha: I am an only child of a single parent. I do not know my father. So, being a daughter is my defining relationship to a greater extent. I am very close with my mother, but at the same time, I think there have been very key moments of distance. I think there's a lot in single parenthood that maybe encourages daughters to assume some of the mothering roles, whether they need to or not. We worry about our parents. And that brings in a certain distance.

Examining my daughter's role, what does that mean? Maybe we all have a defining struggle that we keep returning to – the need to complete something in childhood, like 'The Handless Maiden' does, to heal from something and to then assume that adult strength and resilience.

As a part of an exploration last year I was involved in doing an ancestry DNA test and looking at where I fit in this long story of my family. Our

⁴ For more information see [Proximity: New Directions in Art and Social Repair – Migrant Artists Mutual Aid](#)

relationship with our ancestors is very important, and the more I explore that in terms of being descended from people who were enslaved, the bigger the issue of an awful lot of inherited trauma that gets passed through. As we're now learning, there are so many different vectors through which that trauma can travel down, everything from discipline to what stories get told about the past and what stories get omitted from the past.

My mom says I'm an awful lot like my grandmother, and in lots of ways I know almost nothing about her. I know she was estranged from her family, so there's all these things that that need unpacking and I've just found it really fruitful to engage with those thoughts through myth, through story, because I guess it's a way of zooming out. I can't access a lot of my ancestry. So, approaching and thinking about my history through a broader, zoomed out, archetypal lens has been a route into healing for me.

Jennifer: When you talk about ancestors and your own work in terms of the maternal and the daughter position, you're opening the space in the discourse beyond biological birth. For me, your work speaks to radical inclusivity in the maternal and performance. Bracha Ettinger writes about the maternal as an alternative to the patriarchal and the phallic. One of her key concepts is *carriance* where she situates the maternal in this idea that we all have been carried in a womb and that the aesthetics and practices of maternal performance have the capacity to include everybody because everybody has been carried.⁵ In light of this, I wanted to ask what you see as the limitations of integrating maternal themes?

⁵ For more information see Ettinger, Bracha L. (2015b) 'Carriance, copoiesis and the subreal', in Leah Abir (ed.) *Bracha L. Ettinger: And My Heart Wound-Space*. Leeds: The Wild Pansy Press, pp. 343–51.

Aleasha: I'm thinking back to *The Handless Project*. It was a project that was very much focussed on the experience of the audience member's body. I would invite people to put their body inside a particular experience, such as a circle of chairs to receive the handwashing. The handwashing involved some very clear physical stages, that had resonance with birth: having your hands held, and having your hands swaddled. It was important as a grounding exercise to make sure that people felt held, their hands were bound relatively firmly. I'm just trying to think what the limits are.



The Handless Project handwashing ritual, photo by Deborah Wintle Escott @ Liverpool Cathedral 2016.

There's a very particular experience of motherhood, which I know for a lot of the women has totally changed their relationship to their body, their relationship to the NHS, to their lives, to their work. And while we live in a society that is definitely patriarchal, there is always going to be a tension that needs to be expressed in a way that's very specific.

Generalising about motherhood at the moment isn't as valuable to me as hearing from mothers. For me that feels like what's missing. I'm

thinking a lot about motherhood. One of the books that I read when I was developing *The Handless Project* was *In the Body of the World* (2013) by Eve Ensler. It is an autobiography, sort of. But it's also talking about the relationship that she had with several women who were building a City of Joy in Congo.

But at the same time, Eve Ensler was going through some quite difficult surgical procedures. She had a lot of gynaecological issues. I think it was a cancer and she had a hysterectomy and lots of tissue removed. She drew this parallel between her experience of losing so much of her uterus and the rest of her body in that area, and the experience of women in Congo and the experience of the actual land mass of Congo, which was and is being exploited so devastatingly politically, economically, but also literally. Our phones depend on minerals, much of which come from Congo. So, the modern age is built on the destruction of Congo, and women's bodies are at the centre of that. There's a lot of rape used as an act of war. The City of Joy is a place where women who've experienced sexual violence can go and heal.

In my work there is a definite push to rebalance the world as I see it, away from those exploitative, disconnected and physically damaging ways and back into something that is much more connected to our senses, to our health, wellbeing, planetary connection, which I guess gets aligned very strongly with the female and the feminine. Those are the archetypes that we're working with. I'm still thinking about limitations.

Jennifer: In the beginning of Migrant Artists Mutual Aid (MaMa), the first thing we did, in 2012, was a performance of *The Vagina*

Monologues.⁶ We were raising money for the first member, one of the founders who was seeking sanctuary to protect her daughter from FGM. We raised a couple of thousand pounds for our legal fund, which enabled her to eventually win the case.

The choir started, because the first performance didn't represent the members of MaMa. Progressively MaMa became a very international organisation, and we had to grapple with this fact that women in the asylum process, surviving gender-based violence, didn't necessarily want to talk about their vaginas on stage. So how could we enable our presence on stage to better represent what MaMa actually looked like? MaMa as this transnational, trans racial, trans religious organisation. I knew that I was not going to be able to get everybody on stage talking about their vagina. But the question remained regarding how we were going to be able to make a picture of ourselves. This is how we started singing and how the choir started.

You said something really important about centring on yourself in your writing and your practice – your practice is beautiful and aesthetically rigorous. I wanted to tease out a little bit about your personal approaches to your aesthetics as a creator, as an artist.

Aleasha: I find it much easier to plan the aesthetics and to consider the audience experience than I do to place myself as the central focus of anything. I'm tracing it back now, but it's a long process. Incorporating an awareness and articulation of how race has impacted me has been very important. Theatre is very white. It's common knowledge now that

⁶ For more information see <https://migrantartistsmutualaid.org/>

a lot of people of colour going through theatre education, especially as performers, encounter a lot of very jarring experiences, I don't think very many people get through their training without having some sort of racial shock. There are so few teachers of colour, and I don't think you really get the chance to articulate what that experience is like. You don't really get to process it in your training. I have had to do an awful lot of processing afterwards. It's complex because you then have to give yourself the permission to process it. Theatre is like the Navy, it has a real sense of hierarchy. Don't talk back to your superiors, just take on the information from the genius and then shut up about it. And if you can't hack it, get out.

So, you find yourself in a space where you feel like your presence or your identity is somehow problematic. I took it personally and while I knew it wasn't necessarily entirely my failing that I struggled to access work, I knew that there was something that I wasn't completely able to articulate about why things were difficult.

When you're a performer, especially if you're a solo performer, being at the centre of your work requires a real sense of self-awareness and a knowledge of how you come across; understanding of what the details are of your presence, what are people receiving when you stand in front of them. And for me, especially thinking about this from the point of view of race, is difficult because it's likely that you will be in a space where you'll still be a minority. Your audience is unlikely to be entirely made up of people who look like you.

We know that unconscious bias exists. We know that the world of theatre criticism has a very serious race problem. We also know that existing in those spaces for people of colour is damaging to your sense of belonging and well-being: like it is for footballers, like it is for everybody in the public eye. Being publicly a performer is one thing, but I don't have a choice but to be publicly a black performer, and being a black performer, I feel like I've needed to do some work that requires a bit of self-restoration. That's taken some time and that's taken a lot of reading and exploring.

We live in a British society, and I am British, which very much requires a separation from self. As part of what it is to be British is a sort of separation from self. Even the way we use language, you have a gap between the meaning of the word and what you mean with the word and our sense of humour is based on that gap. You know, you can say one thing and mean another, and that's what we find funny.

People are much more comfortable with it in the gap. They're much more comfortable saying, 'oh, your race doesn't matter to me', because we're all so used to not thinking about certain things. If you look at the response requests and demands for accountability for Britain's colonial past, then you see how strenuously people are working to keep those things in that gap where they are known but not spoken of. It's quite an interesting feature of Britishness.

I'm in the middle of some training to become an affinity group, anti-racism trainer. There is a process that you have to go through as a black British person, especially with a history like mine, my family line comes from the Caribbean, not directly from Africa. There's that trauma that

we're dealing with, but there's also many, many years of being British subjects and then several betrayals that came as part of that. I can't contend with theatre without contending with colonialism. I can't be in it if I can't be honest and authentic, because that's what my work requires. That's not to suggest that I'm always honest and authentic, but my work needs to acknowledge what is really happening. That's hard to do when there are so many layers of convention that are about looking away. We're at a time of real change for that. I don't know whether it will all end up as positive change – I don't think any struggle ends as quickly as that – but things are changing and people have more power to speak out, which they didn't have necessarily before.

Jennifer: A comment that you made during the panel for *Proximity* has stuck with me. You were talking about dismantling the structural racism in art institutions. Forgive me, it's not a direct quote, but you commented on buildings. When you redesign a building for physical access, the walls need to be taken down, and the same is true for creating access that deals with structural racism and arts institutions. The walls need to be taken down. In what ways do you feel that maternal performance has capacities and limitations to be part of this process? And I'm wondering if you could speak about your own artwork and experiences.

Aleasha: I suppose that the modern definition of theatre doesn't require you to be in a building called a theatre, and a lot of my work is in a theatre, and that's been deliberate. I'm just trying to relate that to the maternal.

Jennifer: With my work with Migrant Artists Mutual Aid, the maternal becomes radical solidarity. We've broadened it out from this idea of a necessarily biological definition of birth to more of a definition of *carriance* or solidarities. We use those narratives, in a radical way, to disrupt the violence and oppression of the migration restrictions that are part of the UK's policy of creating a hostile environment. I'm returning to your discussion about your reticence to your own maternal. I am wondering how your experience of preparing for adoption impacts on your work? The tension between the expansive maternal and the specific maternal.

Aleasha: Psychologically it is a bit of a firewall between my work and that. I think there's a sort of element that it's a bit too raw – because of the reasons why I am at my age, considering adoption, having been in contact with services at the NHS, that were about trying to get assistance with getting pregnant. So maybe it's not as articulated in my work, but it's very articulated in my life.

I have many cousins who are adopted. For me as a child, adoption was a very normal way to acquire new cousins. So, the difference between being born into the family and being adopted into the family, for me it's non-existent. I know that my adopted cousins might speak on that differently, but that's always been my thinking, children can come into families in lots of different ways. And adoption is one way. It's about concentric circles of attachment, isn't it? If someone *is* in your family, your obligations to them, your feelings for them, the things that it's acceptable to do with and for them are all different.

Performance? It's difficult because, to use 'The Handless Maiden' as a metaphor, we're all caught in a very powerful devil's bargain around commerce and the relationship between an audience and your work. The arena in which work is shared here in the UK is often about commercial exchange rather than gift exchange. It's not a part of the heart of a community. There is a very strong push towards viewing yourself and your work as a product. I think a lot of the work that I'm doing, especially the work that I'm doing with the *Humanise Project* (2020) is partly about offering some resistance to that.

It is very hard to do within existing funding structures because of the obligations that you have to the people supplying the money. These are very much to do with you as an artist becoming more famous, taking your work on tour and making money. How much will other people from other organisations pay to bring your work into their spaces? How are you valued? Like a lot of artists, I'm always in a bit of a struggle with that. These are the circumstances that we're working with. Sometimes I view the work with funders as one of two-way influence. If I produce this work in a way that works against that idea and I articulate that well enough, maybe I'm pushing the funders towards commissioning more work that's a bit like that. There are obviously limits to that. The notion of adoption is a difficult one in a society that values individualism, if that makes sense.

When you go to the theatre, it's very hard to be received by that theatre as belonging there. You belong there for the show. You belong there when you have got the ticket. Then after that, that relationship is

different. A theatre is not a church. Unity Theatre used to be a synagogue, and I'm curious about that relationship.

Where we are now with theatre is a divergence from when theatre started. The more I'm exploring ancient Greek theatre, the more I see that it had this civic function, but it also had a psychological function. It had a function in helping a community who had experienced traumatic wars.

I think that is probably still possible again for theatre. There's a difference between this theatre that's on the track to go to Edinburgh, get famous, make a name for yourself. And then the theatre that's being done by youth theatre groups that embraces that kind of maternal idea, where you as a participant are part of their circle of care. They will call you up and check how you are and have input into your wellbeing and your mental health support and check in on your family. That to me feels much more useful. I think theatre has a function that it's not always fulfilling. That's basically my contention. And it is more towards the maternal.

Jennifer: What you say about circle of care and the function of theatre in relieving trauma is so interesting. A lot of what you said has touched on themes that other interviewees have discussed, mother/artists talking about the violence of birth, maternal morbidity, the poor, the potentials for art and social healing.⁷

⁷ See interview with Michelle Hartney in particular, https://performanceandthematernal.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/michelle_hartney-1.pdf

With my role in Migrant Artists Mutual Aid, there's always been tension between my own solo work and the aesthetics of my political work. I'm wondering about the relationships between the aesthetics and practices of the *Humanise Project*, the aesthetics and practices of your solo work, but also the aesthetics and practises of the work that's coming up with *Out of the Narrow: A Ritual for Black Descendants of Slaves* (2021) where you're explicitly entering into that space talking about black descendants of slaves.⁸



In performance photograph, by Vicci Riley @ Unity Theatre, Liverpool as R&D for new piece *Out of the Narrow Place*, 2020.

Aleasha: The tension is often in relation to the structure of the theatre as an industry. The ideal for me is to integrate the two sides of my work and not to have this community side and then this kind of aesthetic side. I want to show up as the artist in the community spaces and as part of the community in the artistic spaces. I really want to integrate that. But again, 'The Handless Maiden' is my trajectory. Integration is what it's all about. And that means integrating history, that involves influencing the system, and it involves working differently with time.

⁸ For more information see [Out of the Narrow Place: A Ritual for Black Descendants of Slaves - Unity Theatre \(unitytheatre.liverpool.co.uk\)](https://unitytheatre.liverpool.co.uk)

With the *Humanise Project*, I'm questioning the community that I need. What is the community that the people around me need? What does it need to contain? What do people need to know? What skills do we need?

Jennifer: Could you briefly describe the *Humanise Project*?⁹

Aleasha: The *Humanise Project* is the research that I did thinking about what it takes for my identity to show up in my work. I started thinking about human rights a starting point for understanding how we belong to each other. It's an interesting place to start, especially here in Europe, and especially in a city like Liverpool that has such a strong relationship with both the kinds of the exploitation that is leading people to arrive here, and also lots of asylum seekers are living here in Liverpool.

I tend to gravitate towards the things that I think people are looking at. It's me trying to problematise that gap that I was talking about. The *Humanise Project* was starting out with noticing that so many of the problems that we're encountering were on the list of 'we need to have a talk about this'. Often that's something that is said by people who have no intention of having a good faith discussion about it. It's usually that they're looking for a crowd of people who will help them oppress a certain group of people. So, the idea was that in the early 2000s we needed to talk about immigration which is what led us to Brexit essentially, and what's led us to the hostile environment.

Instead of a broad open conversation, a real conversation where we all have something to gain and lose – and we all have emotions and we all

⁹ For more information see [Humanise Project – One September Art](#)

have a past and a history that led us to feeling a particular way – what we were getting were ever increasing oppressive practices that feel so familiar. We could be 400 years ago with the attitude that we've got now, we're saying the same things.

The *Humanise Club* was about getting people together to have conversations about these things.¹⁰ It's been about treading very carefully because we do live in a culture where having the conversation is often like shouting at someone across some sort of party line. I knew it was very important that we establish relationships. Before the pandemic, we were having meals together. We were trying our best to create a level playing field for conversation. I believe that you can't just get a group of people together to talk about difficult subjects. We need to learn how to talk. We need to learn how to listen adequately.

I'm very inspired by Professor Judy Atkinson, who is an Aboriginal Australian psychotherapist who has developed culturally appropriate group therapy for Aboriginal people who are suffering or dealing with addiction issues.¹¹ There are some very helpful practices that indigenous populations across the world have chosen in this modern age to share with the rest of the world about how to listen, how to build community, and learn what your community contains. This notion that the community is just a group of people is nonsense. It's also the land that you're on. It's also the creatures you live around.

The *Humanise Project* is focussed on – in the same way that *The Handless Project* was – a very physical experience of being human in that very

¹⁰ The Humanise Film Club is one part of the Humanise Project. [Humanise Film Club — One September Art](#)

¹¹ For more information see <https://wealli.com.au/about/our-staff/judy-atkinson/>

broad sense of being connected, because we need that. We cannot survive without it. But also incorporating a connection to the environment.

The *Humanise Project* has been going for a couple of years. We watch films, we eat together. It's generally about getting people together to think about what it means to be human. I think it's been helpful, for me. It's a situation that hasn't let me get away from that idea of needing to pay attention to what has happened to me that has led me to be the person I am. Because there are barriers for me to really integrate into the community. I have a slightly problematic identity for myself and need to heal.

There's so much I'm learning about nervous systems and how contagious our nervous system states are. I'm retroactively looking back at my work and looking at how much regulating and co-regulating nervous systems was a big part of what I was doing and what I was moving towards. I'm only just learning the language to talk about that and having spaces where you can do that feels very important.

I think that's something that theatre can do in particular – you're in a space live with people who will have toned and tuned their nervous systems in order to give a particular experience to an audience, especially in physical theatre. I know there's a sort of crossover between the therapeutic and the theatrical. It's therapeutic to go for a walk in the park, it's therapeutic to sit out under the sun. It's therapeutic to read poetry, it's therapeutic to read a novel. It's therapeutic to sit in a space

with people laughing together. Art is therapeutic, to go and stand in front of a very large painting and feel yourself in relationship to it.

But art exists often within a very exploitative space, and so you need the safety of the boundaries that are part of therapeutic practice in order to not be manipulated. If we could get more of that kind of therapeutic and boundaried relationship perspective in performance, I think we would be a lot better off.

Jennifer: There was an interesting comment you made about working differently with time. I'm wondering if there are any sort of final thoughts you have about your work, and working differently with time.

Aleasha: Theatre is a time-based media. People are breaking that a lot these days, but mostly you go into a space and you've got ninety or seventy minutes, which I've always really struggled with.

Theatre is speaking to you from the minute you decide to see the show, you anticipate going to the theatre, you go through the foyer and finally you experience the performance. For me, theatre should continue, if it's good, to resonate into the future as a good book does. You don't read a book that really affects you and remain completely unchanged by it. If a book really affects you, it has a continued effect. A lot of my thinking comes from having worked front of house at the National Theatre. I could see very clearly everything that was happening in the foyer, everything people thought about the building, about the actors, the prestige, the skill. People who can afford to go and sit in the expensive restaurant, people who can afford only to go and have a piece of pizza,

or the people who bring a packed lunch. All of that was affecting how people viewed the show. We know because we were hearing the complaints. I was a tour guide there for a while and, the knowledge of how a prop was made influenced the way people engaged with the work.

Jennifer: It goes back to what you were saying about taking down the walls and understanding what access is in terms of the capacity of performance to reimagine social healing. What is the capacity of maternal performance aesthetics alongside circles of caring to recentre the public practice of theatre as an important and vital social function?

Aleasha: We need to move away from that idea that theatre is a product, because that's not going to get us anywhere. It won't get us any more funding. In fact, it's the thinking of theatre as a business and as a product that has seen theatre funding get cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, making theatres far less resilient, especially during this pandemic. We've just seen the effect on vast swathes of people working in the industry –as soon as the pandemic hit, the system broke because there was nothing to back it up.

I'm trying to think of a pithy summation. I think to me, the maternal in performance is about balance. It's about balance and authenticity. I mean that because we live in a world that is so unbalanced, away from the maternal. You just have to put in a little bit and suddenly you've made a revolution.

Our bodies are very important because this disembodied life that we've all been living is very obviously making us all very, very unwell. I think that theatre has the potential to be a space for redressing that, for

developing new strategies for addressing the trauma epidemic. There are very few people who have got through life without at least one adverse childhood experience. And then add to that living in a world that is just disintegrating around us, because of us as a species. Those are traumatic experiences, and theatre has historically been the vehicle for transforming that.