

# Trouvé dans la traduction / Found in Translation

Jacinte Armstrong  
Camille-Zoé Valcourt-Synnott

A conversation  
between Jacinte  
Armstrong and  
Camille-Zoé  
Valcourt-Synnott

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# Preface

Jacinte and Camille met for the first time in 2018 in Halifax (NS) when they both started their Master of Fine Arts (MFA) at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD University).

They quickly collaborated on performance projects, using instructions and scores as a way to make audience participation more accessible, and by exploring the gallery space as a site for activation. Their recent collaborations include *PLAY*, a participatory piece choreographed by Jacinte, which was presented in Halifax by Mocean Dance in 2023. For this conversation, they met in a coffee shop while Jacinte was visiting Montreal (QC) for a dance training she was participating in). They talked about the piece *Found in Translation / Trouvé dans la traduction* and discussed the place that French holds in their practice/their life, but also throughout their relationship.

The transcription of this meeting was edited for length.

# A conversation between Jacinte Armstrong and Camille-Zoé Valcourt-Synnott

Camille: Well, thank you Jacinte for meeting with me, officially ! (laughs) You have already mentioned to me the reality of the Halifax milieu, specifically in relation to the Acadians and the place that the French language occupies, and I was wondering if you could speak to that separation you experience in your life ? Until recently, you kept a separation between your personal life, which happens more in French, and your professional life, which really exists in English, and I was wondering if you could speak to that a little bit...

Jacinte: Yes, I've been thinking a lot about it this year and I find that talking about it helps me question my own thoughts and my own perspective. I've talked a lot about what is missing for me in relation to the French language in Halifax - my dance life is very much in English and the part of my life that is more French relates to Clare [in Nova Scotia]. I feel that it's really really hard not just to progress but to merge dance and my personal life together. In Halifax, the dance milieu is not bilingual, it is completely anglophone. And then like I told you, I try to make projects happen. I had projects that exposed me to the many things happening in Acadian in New Brunswick - things that really interest me with people who are really inspiring - and then all the things I think like: "In Nova Scotia, we don't have this or that or this other thing", well there are actually many different people in New Brunswick who work this way. So one of my thoughts is simply that I need to be in relation with New Brunswick artists more often. I do this to change this idea that I have that it doesn't exist and to show myself that yes, it does and that I have to develop those relationships. I really thought it was black or

white, that it exists or it doesn't, but now I see it two ways: one of them is "Oh, I had no idea that those acadian artists who work with these methods or questions or relations to acadian culture existed" and then I start to look more into it. So that's one of the ways I try to meet more Acadian artists especially in New Brunswick, and then to not reinforce this idea that "nobody does this" because it's not true. I also search for other contemporary Acadian artists here in Nova Scotia, because it's possible that they're around but I'm just missing them!

C: But it must be hard, still... What you mentioned earlier about the challenges with grant writing for projects in Acadian in Nova Scotia and to have it happen in Clare, where you're from - these are personal relationships, too - wouldn't it be something really special for you to have these projects happen in Clare, specifically?

J: Yes! Completely. I have this image of an invisible black wall, of invisible forces. I have written grants to do projects in Clare but I think relating to funding, there is a real invisibility for Acadians. There are people in Clare who are supportive and interested in contemporary art in the region, but it's still quite a small or outsider milieu. There is a strong Acadian culture and a huge pride in the region for the language, food, and music! And there is more traditional dance. But there are no higher education programs in the arts over there.

C: It's clear that artists often go elsewhere to follow fine arts training, but they rarely

return to their small communities afterwards and settle back there...

J: That's it! When I think about it, if you are in Clare and you want to pursue your education, it's almost impossible to do so without losing your Acadian identity. If you go to Halifax - and in Halifax, I know, there aren't many contemporary Acadian artists - you would have to let go of your "Acadian-ness" to become an artist. Even I feel that way. And just to say, I don't think that my friends in Moncton would feel this as strongly as I do if they were to go to Montreal for example.

C: There is still a francophone and acadian artistic scene in Moncton, and there is also the University of Moncton that offers a Fine Arts program, so this already is very rich, it's true.

J: Yes, it's true. I believe that to do something equivalent, for example for an Acadian to pursue dance like I did, it would require exceptional circumstances. You would need to have seen someone do this before, it would need to be imaginable. There are one or two dancers who went back to Clare (one has a sister named Jacinthe, the other Jacinte). (laughs) But there's only one or two! There really aren't a lot of people, it's not a path that's easy to imagine, so I'll continue to do this because I feel that it's shocking how much there is a gap. I think that to ensure that it's possible for Acadians to pursue dance, and to have a community that includes dance at all, we need to make it imaginable.

C: Yes, it's so important to have a model! It's really true what you're saying. And I feel that maybe you were forced to evolve in the anglophone milieu against yourself... You know, in Halifax everything is happening in English, and even your studies, the vocabulary you use to talk about what you're doing...

J: Yes!

C: Am I right in thinking that it's actually pretty recent that you started working in acadian? Your piece *I Chart*<sup>1</sup>, when you performed it in Moncton in 2023, was that the first time you did something that wasn't in English?

J: Yes, that's right. Throughout my dance career, there have been many phases and there was a moment when we were all very interested in dancing while talking. Often my being able to speak Acadian was like a party trick, so there were moments when I brought it out. And it's always funny, Acadian is always funny if you understand French! But I never pursued that further. And then I realized that I had another standout moment - I did a piece with my friend Elise and two more people and I believe we all spoke or understood French, and the choreographer was from Montreal so the rehearsals were happening in French and it was the first time that had happened to me.

C: Was that a long time ago?

J: Well, it was maybe 10 years ago, in 2015 or 2016. For me, it was really a realization that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/2109568/jacinte-armstrong-danse-contemporaine-i-chart-en-acadien>

"Oh, this is not just a translation, I'm *thinking* differently, we're thinking differently in French than in English" and I found that remarkable. I was just realizing that it's not a literal

translation, that it is an absolutely different thing. And I found that really, I don't know... poetic? All the images that came to mind were different...

C: Is that true?!

J: Yes! It was really outstanding to me.

C: Well, that makes sense and of course it makes me think of your piece *Found in Translation* that we'll be performing in Ottawa in June. I don't know, the idea of *Found in Translation* has something that... not that it illustrates, but it feels like it *connects*, that it crystallizes or documents these reflections that you've been having throughout this piece that explores the idea of translation...

J: Yes. I started to realize at a certain point that I'm very interested in translation. Maybe it's the quality I just described - the use is just to convey a meaning from one language to another, but how you convey the meaning in a different language has such a different feeling. I'm obsessed with two things that are happening simultaneously: one is easy to understand like the word in English and the word in French, but then also that in French there is a world, and in English there is a different world. And I'm interested in this in relation to objects - how objects are translated through space, or through a drawing or in a movement. When we were

drawing scores in *PLAY*<sup>2</sup>, the scores were two-dimensional and how do we interpret them?

We translate - on paper, with two-dimensional mark-making and then we bring it into three dimensions.

C: Yes, it's like you're using the idea of translation between mediums, through space and the body, too. It's really interesting!

J: Yes, for some reason I love it when everyone understands what we're trying to do and it's normal to have an expectation of what is going to happen, but through the process something unexpected happens and you face the fact that what you really thought was gonna happen didn't, but then it's funny...

C: I feel like what you are describing, it's something that is always present in your work...

J: Yes!

C: It's always like, extremely funny and since you're a very charismatic person, even when you're simply introducing the work and explaining that this or that will be happening... There is always an element that is a bit off in a funny way, but also an aspect of discovery, too?

J: Yes! Exactly. I did a show last year where we were using some of the elements that you already know from my work, it was with musicians, we did it quickly and it was a bit different, and then my friend who came to see

the show said: "It's strict, but I don't mind it" (laughs)

C: Strict to have that many rules?

J: Rules, but they're not rules that close off the situation...

C: I know that you always say: "This is the rule or the score, but you can follow it or not follow it", you can also break the rules!

J: Yes. I have this obsession to make it legible, but unexpected. Because people in my Acadian family, I don't know why, they're confused with everything, I don't know why they don't understand.

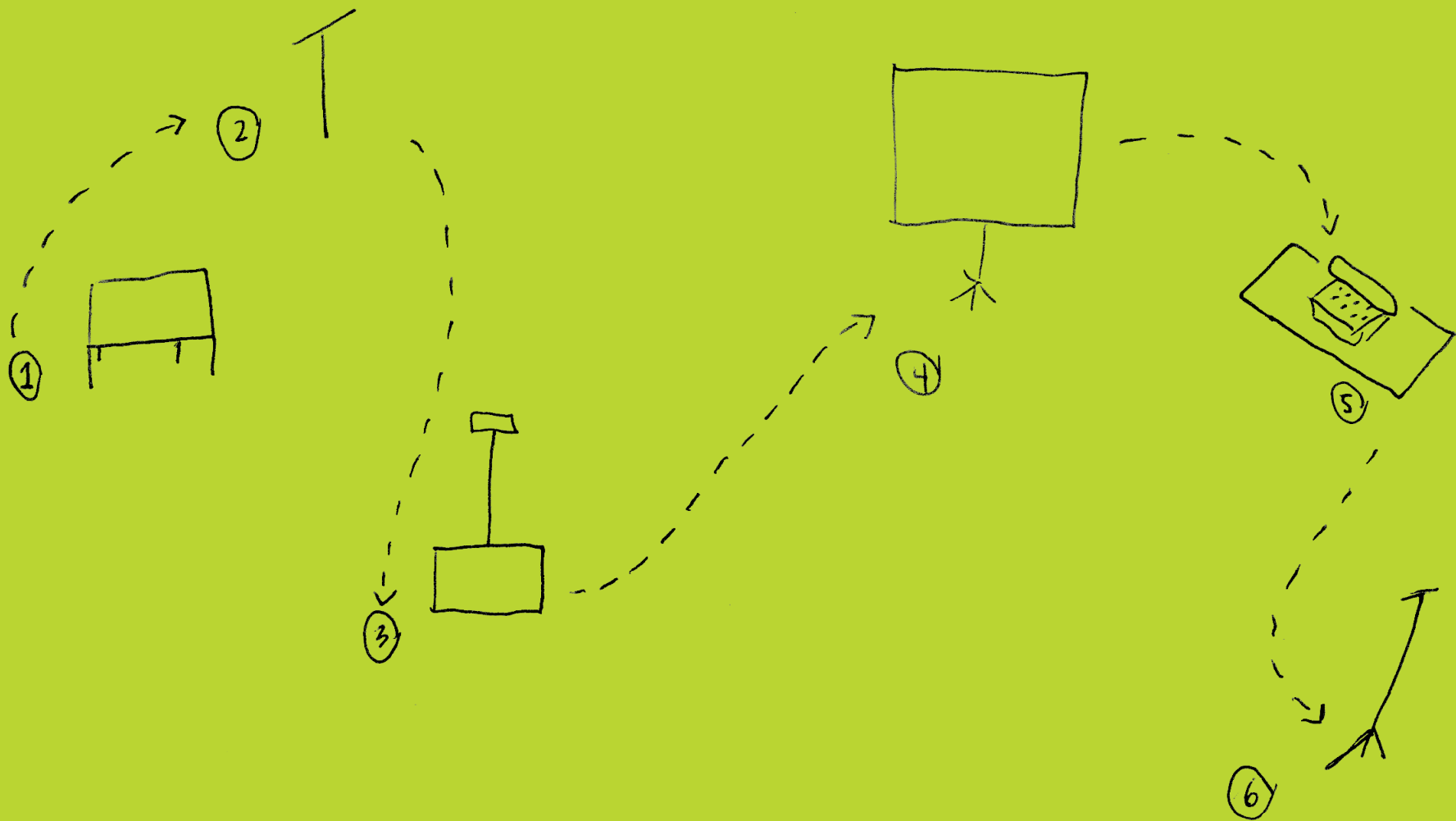
C: Oh, yeah! You're trying to make it accessible to your family... I also think about the fact that, what is super interesting with an instruction or a set of rules, it kind of puts everyone on the same level. Everyone starts at the same level and is being told: "This is the instruction, did you get everything?" And then, you start. So that makes it not a "secret". It's a little bit of an accessibility method, no?

J: Yes, exactly. It makes it so that no one can blame mystery as the reason they don't understand, because it's very straightforward! And then they can see that, yes, it goes madly off in many directions and you can see that you wouldn't have done it that way, but it's fun!

C: Yes, and you get to see the process, it's a little bit like seeing people in front of you figuring it out...

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2 <https://moceandance.com/works/play>





J: I love that quality, to see something emerging and being figured out, and the thought process in action -

C: Yes and live in front of the public! You know, to have access to that is so rich for the audience to see - the thought process behind and the choices made depending on that...

J: Yes, I tried to create scenarios where all of this is possible. I think that dancers are incredible, but I'm not that interested in a finished product where we see something virtuosic with dancers doing something very difficult. I really like when it's not limited to dancers, when it can be all kinds of artists because I believe in their different ways of working. I love artists! (laughs) In general! (laughs) And I don't want to hide the part where we see the artists in the middle of the process, so I try to put systems in place that are structured enough so that risk seems low for the people doing the work. I try to create something that is structured enough so that we can fail once without the whole thing falling apart.

C: That is super interesting because presenting failure as something that is welcome, as an option (laughs), it's so rare to have access to that! It's the complete opposite of what you were describing earlier - dance that is very technical, or "perfect"... it creates a wall, right? It feels hard to relate to it, it's beautiful and impressive, but I feel that with what you propose, there is a complete shift in the relationship between the two, I mean between the people watching and the performers...

J: Yes, that's it... I already mentioned that in our culture, we don't have a lot of traditional dances where we see men, women and non-binary people participating in something physical, rhythmic, together in space, in the body. We don't have an accessible model for that where everyone learns to do the same thing. This is my version of creative expression with elements that are within reach; I'm trying to do something that brings people together. I believe in pedestrian movement<sup>3</sup>, the idea that everyone is doing artistic things in their daily lives, that nobody's that far from art. But there is a distance that I think is not natural. It's not dance, it's the movement of the body through space and time - we all do it! (laughs) I try to draw little connections between things, steps small enough that people can see themselves doing it.

C: Ah! It's really interesting that connection with everyday movement. Thanks for expanding on that. There is one last thing I wanted to talk about. I feel like we speak in French more often now than before (laughs) - do you remember when we were at NSCAD, we would speak French when we didn't want others to understand? (laughs)

J: Yes, that's it! (laughs)

C: But how do you experience working and expressing yourself in French more and more? I know that it's hard, and it's tiring...

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<sup>3</sup> Idea developed by the Judson Dance Theatre (1962-1964), a collective of dancers, artists and musicians who were using everyday movement such as walking, running, falling or staying still.  
<https://readartdesk.com/feature/from-the-top>

J: Yes, it's tiring and I usually talk really fast in English, and I would say that in English I have access to a lot of words.

The kinds of things that I talk about or write about in school, same with grant writing, I'm not searching for my words, you know? And in French, two different things are happening. I don't speak often. What I often say is that the French that I usually use, that is hardwired, is my "home" French and Acadian. I am really relieved when I go to Clare or to Moncton because they recognize my French, and they don't say that I speak a "home French" or a "child's French". I'm not self-conscious and I'm confident that I know my verbs in a pretty amazing way. If I was to be positive for a minute, I would say that I have inherited a really good vocabulary from my mom and my aunt. I speak really old French and use proper verb tenses, but they are Acadian. But because they're not "correct" now, in today's French...

C: Not "correct" or it depends on the context? Of where you are and the community that you're in?

J: That's it, I can do conjugations in many verb tenses that are correct for the French of this region, so I am proud of that. I went to school in French, and Acadian French in that context is specific; like in Clare, for instance, we'll conjugate different verbs much more with "having" (*avoir*) than "being" (*être*), and I know it's not "right"...

C: But if it's the way you speak at home...

J: It's the way that I speak and that I've learned French. When I want to access more

complex thoughts, I have to switch to French. It's not a rule, but because I've read more in French, and I went to University in French...

C: As you said, you really think differently in French than in English...

J: Differently in French than in Acadian, too!

C: Oh, okay! When you say you think of things more advanced or developed... is that what you meant?

J: I would even say, yes, advanced, complex, conceptual, it's in "French-French". And then, if I speak the French I learned in school, it's more distant. Acadian is like home.

C: At home, like with your family, with your mom?

J: Yes and we have sentences like: "What did you eat?", "What are we gonna eat?", "Where are we gonna sleep?", "Where am I going?", "Where are you?", "I'm tired", "I'm hungry" (laughs) You know, it's really basic.

C: Well, I think it's interesting that it's a totally different register, it's much more familiar, and it's the way you speak with close family members so that makes sense...

J: Yes, it's not like "What did you think of that museum exhibition?" (laughs) It's more like: "I have *râpure* pie with chicken or clams" (laughs)

C: Yum! I love it (laughs) Does your dad also speak Acadian?

J: Yes and no. I always like to say that I grew

up speaking French with both my parents. On my sixth birthday, in my memory we had a party and my parents were in the kitchen and were talking in English and I said: "*Maman*, why are you speaking English to *papa*?"

C: Did you understand English at that time?

J: Yes, I already understood English but I was like: "*Maman*, why would you talk to *papa* in English?" and she said: "*Papa* is English", and after that, I spoke to my dad in English. My dad would say that it was at that moment, that he realized that I, at six years old, was developing my language skills faster than he could do it himself. I was quickly catching up so I surpassed him. (laughs) I can see that now with my nephews and nieces, you have to force them to speak in French and it's a more familiar register that they understand, but we force ourselves to do it. But if we have to communicate things quickly, then we just can't do it in French. So, we mix it up, but we still make an effort to speak French, more as a family project.

C: Of course! That makes sense.

J: And then when I was 10 or 11 years old, my dad went to do immersion programs like you can do at the Université Ste-Anne. He did that for one or two summers. My dad has a lot of energy and is really curious about many things. He really is a champion of Acadian culture! (laughs) For my mom, for Acadians of her generation in Nova Scotia, there was a lot of prejudice against Acadians, anglophones would make fun of their accent...

C: Was there a desire to assimilate into the anglophone culture?

J: My mom did assimilate a little bit but not fully - not as much as she could have! She always spoke to us in French/Acadian and we always spent a lot of time with our family in Clare. My dad could have reinforced this idea that Acadians are "less than" or "less something" but he always spoke positively and championed the culture. So I think many great things about the Acadian language and culture that comes from my dad: he put those words in my head. So that was really important..

C: Yes, that he championed the culture! (laughs) Whereas your mom was maybe not as outspoken?

J: She would pass it down but she wouldn't necessarily have defended the culture with her words. But he did defend what she passed down. So it was a good team effort. (laughs)

C: I love it - a team effort like in your performances! I feel like this ends the conversation on a perfect note.

# Biographies

**Jacinte Armstrong** is an Acadian artist based in K'jipuktuk/Halifax, in Nova Scotia. Her work explores embodied practice through performance, choreography, collaboration and curation. She communicates the experience of the body with objects, materials, the environment, technology and people. Her choreography ranges from intimate and imagistic to large-scale collaborations with dancers, architects, visual artists, radio producers, filmmakers, theatre makers, computer programmers and musicians. Jacinte holds an MFA from NSCAD University and is a certified Laban Movement Analyst (CMA).

**Camille-Zoé Valcourt-Synnott** (she/her) is a multidisciplinary artist and arts worker from Quebec (QC). She graduated with a BFA (Print Media) from Concordia University in 2018 and an MFA from NSCAD University in 2020. Her performances reflect on the value of the artist's work, perceptions of productivity and where life and art meet. She is interested in the intersections between labor, gender and class dynamics. Her performances and text-based works have been shown in artist-run centers and galleries across Canada.

*Found in Translation / Trouvé dans la  
traduction*

A performance work by Jacinte Armstrong

Performers:

Jacinte Armstrong  
Rémi Belliveau  
Monelle Doiron  
Reza Rezaï  
Laura St. Pierre  
Laura Taler  
Camille-Zoé Valcourt-Synnott

Presented on June 13th, 2025 at SAW Club  
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This piece was created in 2022 with original  
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Breton Lalama, Logan Robbins, Gillian Seaward-  
Boone, and Rebecca Wolfe, with dramaturge  
Kat MacCormack, and produced by Eastern Front  
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