

# Co: A Lexicon of Creating Together

Jessica Renfro  
ArtEZ University

*Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd...We assigned clever pseudonyms to prevent recognition...To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.3).*

Global issues like climate change, public health, and social justice require diverse, collective thought in order to materialize solutions, but the way to achieve this is less clear. In a digital age where mistrust of new information is rampant and online communities are increasingly segregated by political identity and specialized interests, any form of widespread collectivity feels out of reach; however, discourse on how it can be achieved extends over a wide range of disciplines like arts, philosophy, public policy, behavioral economics, and psychology, and contains a wealth of transdisciplinary potential. A collective comprised of this discourse, technology, and participants could offer fertile ground for research into this topic. And *participatory art*, particularly, can act as both laboratory and playground in the quest to harness the resulting emergence that springs from some collective methods. In this essay, I will explore some of this interdisciplinary discourse and elaborate on how I synthesize it into my artistic practice.

Participatory art<sup>1</sup> is often created in response to a need for collectivity. Its great hope lies in activating the spectator in a way that causes them to challenge their current paradigm and find empowerment in the artwork's unfolding. This, along with an egalitarian desire to share authorship and renew the social bond (Bishop, 2006, p.12) has inspired many artists to rethink the role of the spectator since the 1960's. And while popular, participatory art is also often reviled because it can be seen to accuse those who merely watch of social passivity, embarrass

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<sup>1</sup> Participatory art, a genre with its roots in Dadaism and the *happenings* of Alan Kaprow, is "a form of art that directly engages the audience in the creative process so that they become participants in the event" (Tate Modern, 2020)

audience members who do not desire the spotlight, and sometimes promote the dogmatic agenda of an individual artist (White, 2013; Rancière, 2014). It has also been heavily criticized for its adoption as a method of corporate advertisement and its perpetuation of neoliberal values that reward only those in a position to take public risk (Alston, 2013). At its best, however, participatory art can create a shared identity based on intersubjective cross-cultural engagement and start a meaningful dialogue within communities (Kester, 2004, p.8). The manifestation of this dialogue is the artistic *process-as-product* of collective-based participatory methods.

When speaking of collectives, I would argue that what we call *human* is, in fact, already a collective entity, inextricable from both the networks that constitute it and those which it co-constitutes with technology and nature; the difference being only a matter of scale and focus. Geoff Mulgan, Professor of Collective Intelligence at University College London (UCL), posits:

*Evolutionary biology shows that the major transitions in life—from chromosomes to multicellular organisms, prokaryotic to eukaryotic cells, plants to animals, and simple to sexual reproduction—all had a common pattern. Each transition led to a new form of cooperation and interdependence so that organisms that before the transition could replicate independently, afterward could only replicate as ‘part of a larger whole’ (2018, p.6).*

The networked entities formed between humans and technology produce emergent properties not attributable to any individual component within them (2018, p.5). In this lexicon, I will explore mechanisms for cultivating this emergence, or *collective creativity*, and how this can be achieved through a *co-creative framework* that promotes *disidentification*, *unauthorship*, and *access*, and demonstrates *coevolution* with participants.

## **Collective Creativity**

Because *creativity*, along with the word *collective*, is liberally applied over many disciplines, it is important to define the term specifically in its relation to my practice. Creativity is the ability to metamorphose formlessness into form. Many definitions of the word add an aspect of novelty or even relevance, but I find those additions redundant in the sense that any new form will be, in fact, *new*, and its relevance lies in having manifested a form from

formlessness. Form does not necessarily imply a physical object; it can also be language, music, or even smells and flavors.

A *collective* in my practice is a Deleuzian/Guattarian rhizomatic assemblage<sup>2</sup> lacking hierarchy, beginning, or end (1988, p.9). I would insert the significant caveat that in my practice the lines of connection that form this networked entity are guided by the choice of the participants to operate collectively, and that the borders of this network are demarcated using a *co-creative framework*, which itself is subject to evolving.

Networked entities, co-constituted by humans and technology, are capable of a variety of high order tasks, including self-organization, problem solving, and research. These can be classified under the broad multi-disciplinary field of *Collective Intelligence*, which primarily concerns itself with how groups of people engage in complex tasks online (Mulgan, 2018, p.1). Many disciplines from Psychology to Business Management are drawn to the idea because of its startling emergent properties and proven track record of better decision-making. Core to achieving this emergence are the mechanisms by which a collective operates (Sawyer, 2010, p.367). These mechanisms can include things like adopting a *beginner's mind*, creating a culture of empowered vulnerability, and committing to wholeheartedly engage in the project (Hamilton and Zammit, 2008, p.44).

*Collective creativity* is a vital aspect of Collective Intelligence; however, it is distinguishable as a separate concept in several ways, as laid out by R. Keith Sawyer, an American psychologist and creativity researcher. The first is the unpredictability of the process, wherein participants leave space for the unexpected to happen. This creates an initial ambiguity that results in the attribution of *retroactive meaning*, shaped by the subsequent response to each participant's contribution. Lastly, this constant flux of meaning creates *processual intersubjectivity*, or, a state wherein participants do not share identical representations of what is happening, but nonetheless proceed with a coherent interaction (Sawyer, 2010, pp.372–374).

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<sup>2</sup> Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduced *Assemblage Theory*, a way of thinking that decentralizes and connects the social world through lines of intensity that perpetually change signification by seeking new territories and segmentations.

This relates to participatory art through Rancière’s notion of an *emancipated spectator* as one who has the power to “translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other” (Rancière, 2014, p. 17).

As used in my practice in projects like *Dream City* (Renfro, 2020a) (Appendix A) and *Dream Teams* (Renfro, 2020b) (Appendix B), the process of *collective creativity* is the primary artistic product. My role as an artist is perhaps more suited to the title *facilitator*, and entails creating a robust *co-creative framework* that builds the conditions wherein this delicate process can occur using techniques of visual, musical, and digital arts.

### **Co-creative Framework**

*Collective creativity* rarely occurs spontaneously. In my essay, “From dogma to anarchy: Models of participation in utopian approximations,” I identified three models used by artists to create participatory work: *anarchic*, *dogmatic*, and *coevolutionary* (Renfro, 2019). Each is determined by its mechanisms of engagement and the role of the artist; and while all three works espouse the importance of collectivity and equality among the participants, only the *coevolutionary* model exhibits emergent properties. This is achieved through a robust but adaptable framework.

The *co-creative framework* in my practice establishes conditions that mitigate disruptions of egoic overidentification like confirmation bias (seeking to confirm assumptions), social interference (being unduly influenced by others), and anchoring (only exploring the known), that, in studies, have shown to inhibit collective functioning (Bonabeau, 2009, p.46)<sup>3</sup>. In this vein, it also abolishes single authorship as a concept, dispersing ownership of the process and its content throughout the entire network, inviting all participants to contribute playfully. Lastly, the framework must set a low bar to participation by laying out easily understandable instructions for participant engagement.

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Bonabeau is a preeminent researcher in collective intelligence and distributed adaptive problem solving.

Once established, a *co-creative framework* must be dynamically facilitated by the artist, and have the capacity to evolve with the changes made by the collective. This *coevolution* ensures generative longevity of a piece, and converts participants into stakeholders.

## **Disidentification**

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan posits that the creation of the ego is a “narcissistic process whereby we bolster up a fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which we can identify (Eagleton, 2011, p.143).” Understanding the relationship between identification and the ego is core to facilitating collective practices. My artistic practice is frequently carried out in a digital environment because the internet is currently the primary means of connecting networked entities. And while it presents enormous potential in the arena of collective action, identity-based platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (and others that include the creation of public profiles) can just as easily sow division and highlight difference. Overidentification contributes to this because an indication of sameness with one group, trait, or idea simultaneously asserts difference with other groups. This “endless splitting”, according to Haraway, “searches for a new essential unity” rather than forming coalitions through affinities (Haraway, 2016, p.17).

Many of the problems recognized as inhibitive of emergent collaboration involve ego-generated biases such as self-serving bias, confirmation bias, and belief perseverance. (Bonabeau, 2009, p. 46). Craig Hamilton and Claire Zammit, in their essay “Thinking together without ego: Collective intelligence as an evolutionary catalyst” write,

*Whether in the form of self-concern, self-aggrandizement, self-doubt, self-consciousness, self-infatuation, or self-absorption, this knot in the center of the psyche has long been recognized to be the lone obstacle to higher moral, spiritual and psychological development in individuals. But the recognition that this same unhealthy self-focus is the prime saboteur of higher collective functioning is a relatively new idea (2008, p.41).*

It is thus important in a *co-creative framework* to build a mechanism that can transcend individual egos. *Disidentification* is an aspiration of my practice, and I employ a few different methods in order to achieve it.

The first is to encourage the Zen state of *beginner's mind*. "If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few" (Suzuki, 1970, p.21). The freshness of a beginner's perspective can be cultivated through an immersive, playful, and non-realistic environment within which all participants have to learn to interact. As the facilitator of this environment, I strive to normalize and empower the sense of vulnerability that comes with not knowing what you are doing. A beginner does not hesitate to ask for help if they are confused and they are not embarrassed by "mistakes"; they are relieved of the pressure to be "correct".

Another way to attempt *disidentification* is to deny participants a link to their public identity within the work. This can be achieved by identifying them pseudonymously. In a similar vein to *beginner's mind*, choosing a new name for oneself can signify rebirth into a new environment. This can create equality among participants and a desire to explore and interact with the unknown.

## **Unauthorship**

*Unauthorship* is the abolition of any prescribed meaning that can be given to a work based on the identity of its author(s). The primary function of authorship is ownership and accountability (Rose, 1993), two concepts antithetical to *collective creativity* due to their egoic roots. Intentions are often ascribed to a work based on biographical details of the author that fail to recognize that "[n]o poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone." (Eliot, 1919, p.2). Each artistic work is a pressurized melting pot of life experience, culture, zeitgeist, and tradition; it is a network in and of itself that is done an injustice when attributed to the "originality" of a single author.

In my practice, I recognize that meaning takes many forms, acting as a projection of the psychology of each spectator, be they participants or viewing the work from outside (Foucault, 1979, p.127). This de-coupling of participatory work from the artist's identity allows for true emancipated spectatorship.

*It is not the transmission of the artist's knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect (Rancière, 2014, p.15).*

Here, however, I must make a distinction between authorship of the process and its content and authorship of the *co-creative framework* that facilitates it. While the collective process is formless and ephemeral, the framework is an object, an artefact, and requires clarity in order to be understood, consented to, and amended. Therefore, for both practical and ethical reasons, I do not remain anonymous or pseudonymous in my practice; I instead liken my role as the facilitator to a child inviting her friends to play in her backyard sandbox. The child does not own the sandcastles or the new games created that day and shares only an equal part in the play; and yet, she (or a parent) is responsible for maintaining the sandbox as a fun and safe site of play. In my artistic practice, I consider the sandcastles (*collective creativity*) more consequential than the sandbox (*co-creative framework*). In my research, the sandbox takes a much more prominent role.

## Access

In addition to encouraging *disidentification* and *unauthorship*, a *co-creative framework* cultivates emergence best when it invites participation from a high diversity of backgrounds, opinions, and knowledge (Bonabeau, 2009, p.47). This requires outreach beyond a theatre or gallery to include those who might never have come into contact with participatory art. The internet has the potential to reach out to participants from around the world, and can amass diverse, large-scale participation, but this diversity poses an additional challenge that many artists prefer not to consider: *access*.

Producing *collective creativity* within participatory art can sometimes run at odds with the ethos of the postmodern artworld, wherein explicitness is considered distasteful:

*Modern critics have displayed a singular hostility to artworks that solicit the viewer's interaction in a direct or accessible manner. The purpose of avant-garde art, in this view, is to point to the inevitable compromises entailed in any attempt to represent external reality, or even to invoke that reality as a shared frame of reference with the viewer (Kester, 2004, p.82).*

Each networked entity that participates will absolutely have a unique connection to the work and understanding of the language it contains. This is why it is imperative not to assume that each participant will have the same level of facility with participatory art or using the internet. Clarity is key when writing instructions for such works.

In my practice, I consider this to be not only a matter of showing participants how they can operate inside the environment I have introduced, but also a matter of showing care-*Beginner's mind*, empowered vulnerability, wholehearted commitment; all of these depend on my ability as the facilitator to help participants feel comfortable taking a leap into a new way of being. This is why my own role in the collective process of the work is often different from that of a participant. In *Dream City*, I appeared as a benevolent extraterrestrial in a tutorial video before participants entered the city (Renfro, 2020a) (Appendix A). In *Social Isolation Beach Vacation* (Renfro, 2020c) (Appendix C), I introduced myself as a translator/medium between the participant and “the beach entity.” In both instances, this intervention accompanied simple written instructions that were easily accessible to the participant at any point.

## **Coevolution**

*Coevolution* occurs when the process of *collective creativity* and the *co-creative framework* exert selective pressures on each other. A framework sets in motion the quality and types of interactions that can be achieved during the piece, but in accordance with its own rules, it too must be adaptable. Participants are encouraged to be generous and uninhibited in contributing to their environment. Due to this, both the framework and the collective coevolve simultaneously as the work progresses. “This results in both top-down and bottom-up processes;

the emergent is initially created with bottom-up dialogic processes, but immediately it takes on constraining, or top-down, characteristics” (Sawyer, 2010, p.377).

The ability of participants to alter the work over time converts them into stakeholders, and creates incentive to continue contributing to the work. Furthermore, this can result in real world impact. As Rancière notes, the collective “woven together by artistic practice is a new set of vibrations of the human community in the present; on the other hand, it is a monument that stands as a mediation or a substitute for a people to come (Rancière, 2014, p.59).

In my practice, works are ephemeral but never complete. I prefer to leave a sense that each piece could generate endlessly as long as participants remained with which it could coevolve. In the future, I plan to encourage participants to use any part of what is generated to create their own work. In this way, the piece can evolve even beyond itself.

## **Conclusion**

Thinking, creating, and acting collectively are some of the most urgent tasks of the twenty-first century.

*Progressing collective intelligence is in many ways humanity’s grandest challenge since there’s little prospect of solving the other grand challenges of climate, health, prosperity, or war without progress in how we think and act together (Mulgan, 2018, p.6).*

Recognizing humans as networked entities capable of creating on an unprecedented scale means foregoing the urge to claim individual authorship over collective contributions, and taking a closer look at how to curb biases and facilitate new connections.

Participatory art can act as a powerful reminder that *collective creativity* is an invaluable facet of Collective Intelligence, and performs within a network of interdisciplinary research as both laboratory and playground. By exploring, through a *co-creative framework*, issues of *disidentification, unauthorship, and access*, it is my hope that participatory art itself will *coevolve* with other disciplines into a tool for shaping a collective and equitable future.

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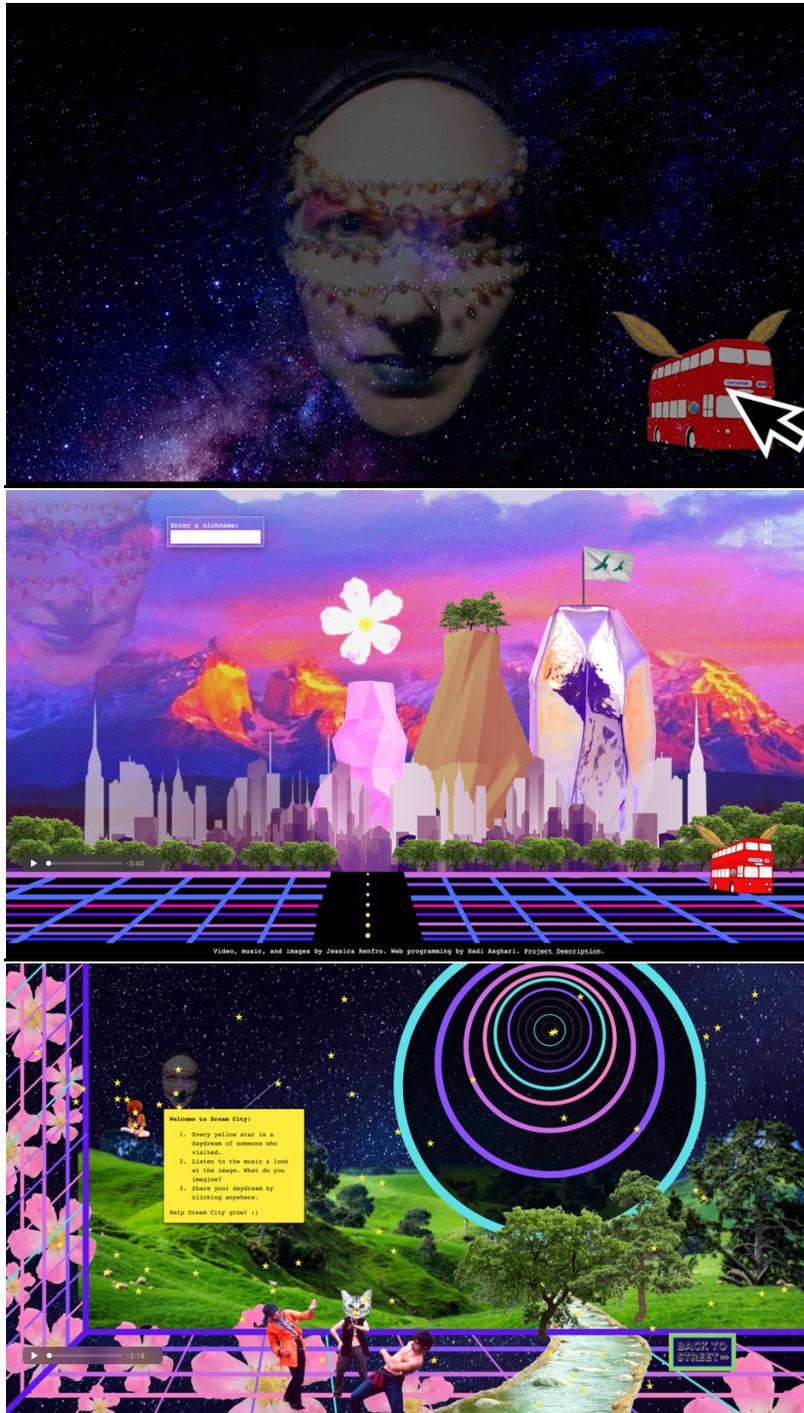
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## Appendix A, Dream City

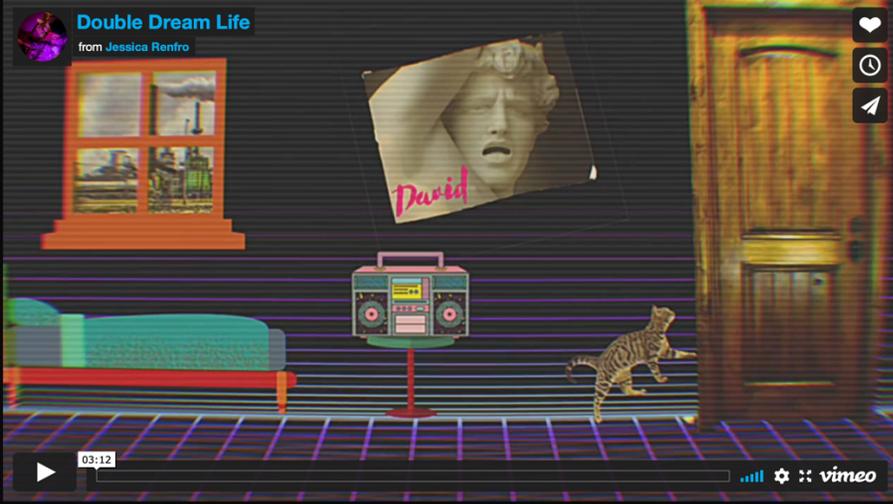
Participants were asked to immerse in the environment and then record their daydreams, which appeared as falling stars. Each dream was visible to all by hovering over its corresponding star.



## Appendix B, Dream Teams

In *Dream Teams*, an exchange of daydreams was performed between artist and participants in a multi-step process.

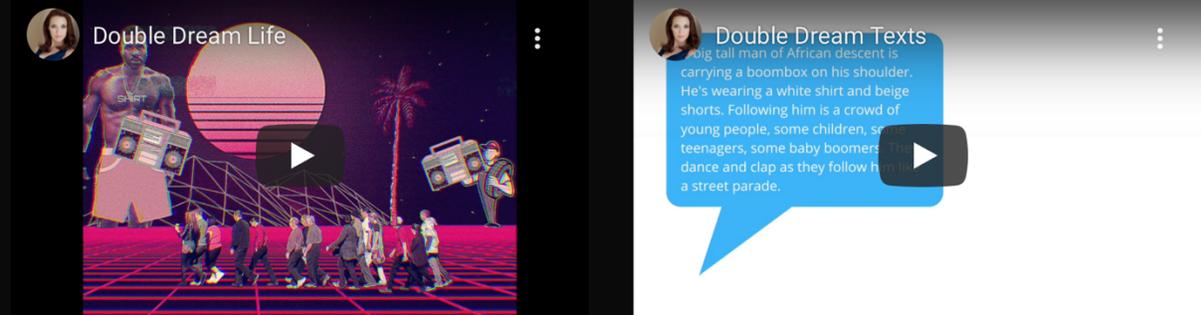
The following is a request for your daydreams, fantasies, and adventures in a world we will share. Please watch the video and read the story below it. When you are done, close your eyes and let your mind daydream for a minute or two, then respond in the form below (or, if it is an image, send it to J.Renfro@student.artez.nl). Thanks!



**Double Dream Life**  
from Jessica Renfro

*You wake up from a nightmare. Giant white marshmallows were trying to blot out the sun. You remember trying to shoot them down with a laser gun, but this just caused them to ignite, and fiery bits of sugar fell around you, creating massive craters. Through one, you could see below the Earth's crust to the core of everything. In your dream, you bent down, sticking your head into the crater to see what lay*

In *Dream Teams*, I ask for daydreams and fantasies based on an image and narrative prompt. It was fascinating to receive the submissions, particularly because many of them fit together with each other so seamlessly. After ordering them, I created several images with accompanying musical numbers that were inspired by the dreams. I then asked a group of participants to follow me to a Jitsi channel (this is an online video conferencing platform) where I played a video styled like an early video game containing these images and musical numbers. In the chat box, I interpolated the dream submissions I had been sent. I also encouraged chatting as a way to encourage playfulness and daydreaming in the moment. The performance is meant to be live for that reason, but below I've posted two videos: one of the images and music and one of the dream texts. Play them side by side (pressing play as close to the same time as possible) for an impression of the performance. This may require a larger screen like a laptop or desktop. Feel free to leave your responses, impressions, and comments below :)

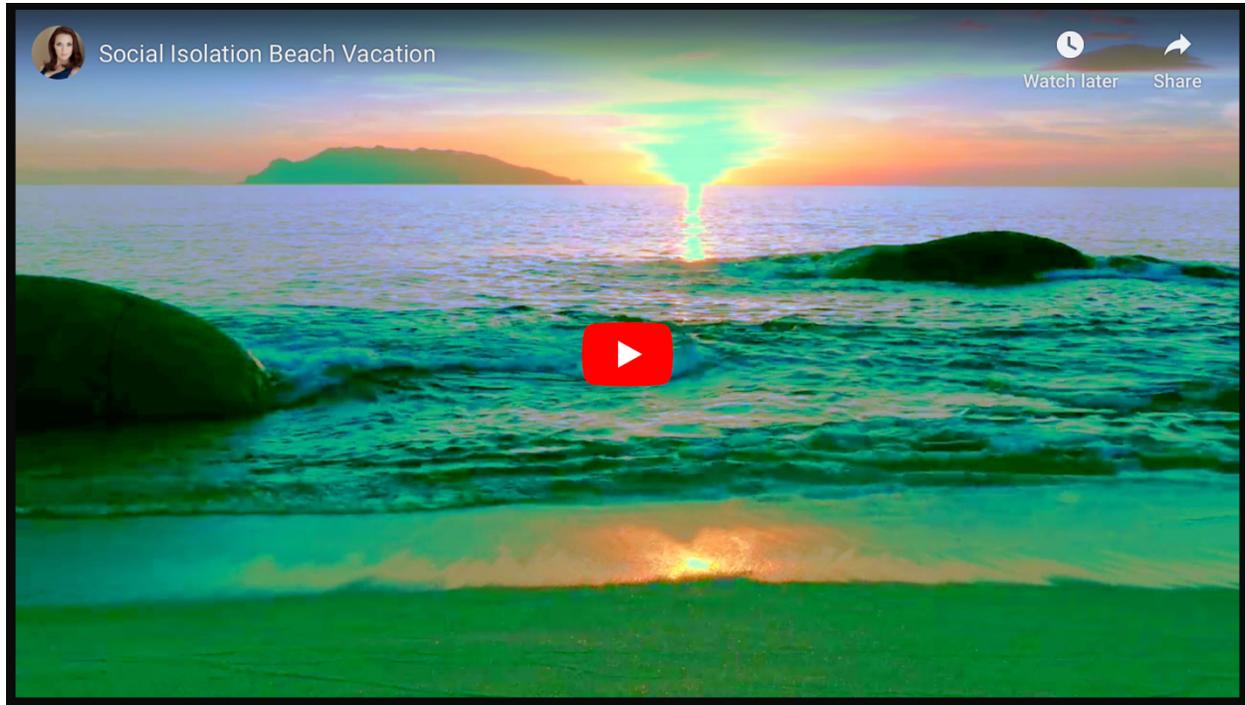


**Double Dream Life**

**Double Dream Texts**  
A big tall man of African descent is carrying a boombox on his shoulder. He's wearing a white shirt and beige shorts. Following him is a crowd of young people, some children, some teenagers, some baby boomers, some dance and clap as they follow him like a street parade.

## Appendix C, Social Isolation Beach Vacation

Participants were introduced to the “beach entity”, then asked to close their eyes and dream as images from the previous participant’s dream were spoken.



<p>Salty children Ending in tears Underground caves Blue stone glimmering Shifting light above Swirling rainbows of colorful tails.</p> <p>Eyes meeting the sun, Finding the air Under the sand Hair tangled in the weeds.</p> <p>A cloak of seaweed So heavy Weighed down and submerged.</p> <p>A man whispers from behind Wet and caked with sand Dive into darkness</p>	<p>Sitting on a beach On an island Quiet, some strangers around Some kids and some women At some distance The water is pretty warm.</p> <p>On the red tree It's too hot, Shade, wet sand Laying there, distant waves All the times at the beach Thinking about thinking about the beach.</p> <p>In sync with nature Feel the breeze, the sand Feel the red tree Arranged nap</p>	<p>Sitting in the chair Heat on legs The sun in a place it doesn't usually come.</p> <p>A lot of red, A nice red, Not a scary red, Sunset or early dawn, More likely sunset Boy flying a kite My love and his love of flying kites.</p> <p>Picturing him as a little boy Flying a kite Not right next to me Not far away The beach is not expansive Not an alcove Protected maybe It feels warm there..</p>	<p>Sitting in my chair Feet in the sand The reflection of the sun on feet.</p> <p>Orange and yellow glow The red tree and pelicans A little boy flying a kite A cardinal Lands on the red tree Red disappears in red</p>	<p>Not a dream Sort of like a dream Real things that happened Not just dreams Thoughts of kites Little boy before school Playing with a kite stick Splinter in the skin Between thumb and index finger.</p> <p>Part of a waking Bonding with mother Deep part inside Not a dream Just a memory</p>	<p>Seeing the ocean The very first time Terrified of the waves Chasing them down, They chase back up the sand Pelicans over head Brother has a kite, Watching-- He doesn't let sister play Brave enough The ocean touches the toes Very big girl Let it touch the feet A happy, lovely time</p>
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