



# ATTENTION ACTIVISM TOOLKIT VOL. 1

A C21 Story Cart project

# Attention Activism

## WHAT IS ATTENTION ACTIVISM?

At C21, we started wondering how humanities students and scholars could partner with communities to rethink the fast-paced timing, rapid rewards, and short attention spans that are damaging our long-term capacity to participate meaningfully in civil dialogues as attentive citizens.

Enter “attention activism”—defined as “the movement to push back against the fracking of human attention by coercive digital technologies” by our friends at the Strother School of Radical Attention (SoRA). [Schoolofattention.org](http://Schoolofattention.org)

Attention matters, socially, politically, and civically, because positive change requires citizens who can sustain focus on our shared problems long enough to solve them. It matters emotionally, intellectually, and even spiritually because attention is the gateway to the mind, deep feeling, memory, and meaning-making — in other words, the self.

# About Story Cart: Attention

Story Cart is C21's a mobile story collection program that travels to community spaces and engages Milwaukeeans in conversations about their lived experiences. Our Story Fellows craft questions related to the current C21 research theme, record participant responses to those questions, and add them to our Story Cart digital archive (forthcoming).

From September 2025 through May 2026, our community Story Fellows introduced Milwaukeeans to practices of radical attention by staging attention workshop pop-ups throughout the city and recording discussions with participants about the experience of paying attention. [uwm.edu/c21/events/current-programs/story-cart](http://uwm.edu/c21/events/current-programs/story-cart)

# HOW TO USE THIS ATTENTION ACTIVISM TOOLKIT:

SoRA came up with three ways to practice attention activism: by 1) studying attention, 2) organizing around attention (or paying attention with others), and, 3) by designating space and time to nourish attention.

Throughout fall 2025, C21 enlisted the help of three Story Fellows to lead pop-up workshops that implemented all three modes of attentional practice. From Klode Beach to Cactus Club, in museums and community spaces, we attended to attention. And we wrote down some instructions so that you can do it, too.

The exercises in this booklet can be completed alone or in a group. Some are best in public spaces, but most can be performed anywhere. If any materials are required, they're simple—paper, pen, a timer—stuff you probably have at home already. When you're ready, take a deep breath, start reading the instructions, and tune in to your attention.

## More Resources

- SoRA's toolkit and reading list: <https://tinyurl.com/SoRA-toolkit>
- Attention Activism Reader, Summer 2025:  
<https://tinyurl.com/aareadersummer25>
- C21 events calendar: <https://uwm.edu/c21/events/>

*The Listening Sound  
bath of the ordinary*

MADELEINE  
DOELKER  
BERLIN,



# *“The Listening / Soundbath of the Ordinary”*

MADELEINE DOELKER BERLIN

1

PUT YOUR PHONE AWAY. GET SOME PAPER AND A PENCIL/PEN. GRAB A TIMER IF YOU HAVE ONE.

TAKE A SEAT. SETTLE IN. GET COMFORTABLE.

2

LISTEN TO THE SOUNDS AROUND YOU. DO NOT ENGAGE WITH THE SOUNDS OR RESPOND TO THEM.

JUST TAKE THEM ALL IN.

FIRST, LISTEN WITH YOUR EYES OPEN FOR THREE TO FOUR MINUTES.

NEXT, LISTEN WITH YOUR EYES CLOSED FOR THREE TO FOUR MINUTES.

(USE A TIMER TO TRACK YOUR TIME, IF NEEDED.)

3

TAKE OUT THE PAPER AND PENCIL/PEN.

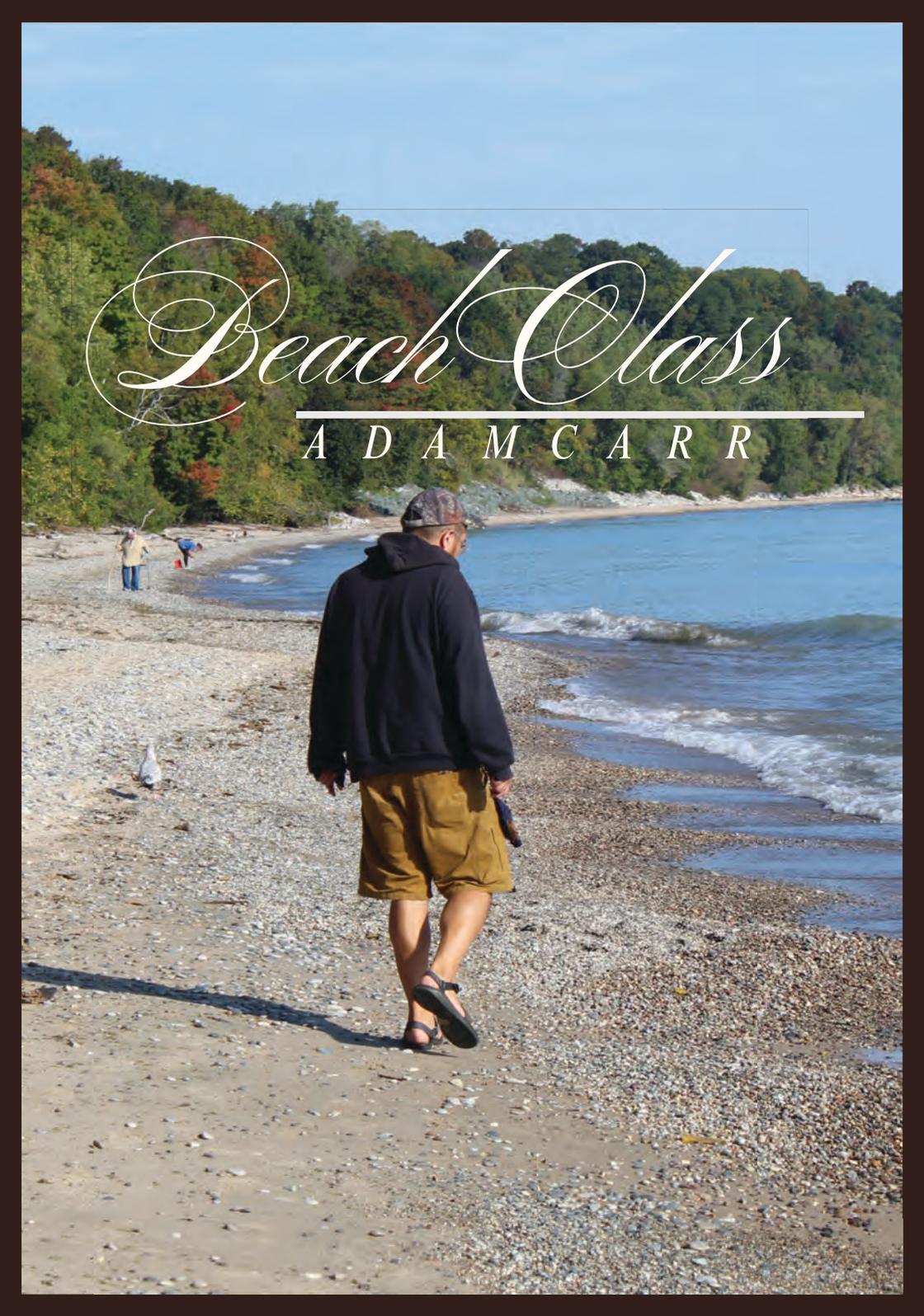
THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU JUST EXPERIENCED. WRITE ABOUT IT FOR FIVE TO TEN MINUTES.

4

TALK TO A FRIEND ABOUT WHAT YOU JUST EXPERIENCED.





A man in a dark hoodie, olive shorts, and a cap walks away from the camera on a pebbly beach. The ocean is to his right, and a forested hillside is in the background. The text 'Beach Class' is overlaid in a white script font, with 'ADAMCARR' in a white serif font below it, separated by a horizontal line.

# *Beach Class*

A D A M C A R R



Beach Class is an excuse to spend a healthy chunk of time on the beach, where your attention can belong to you and dwell in your immediate surroundings. If you do not have access to a beach, walk around your neighborhood, your park, or another public space of your choice. Beach Class was designed to be completed with a group, but with a little imagination, it's possible to complete the exercises solo.

Note One: If you want to leave your phone behind, please do. If you bring one, please put it in airplane mode and use it solely as a timer. And whatever you do... don't text!

Note Two: Each person should bring two bags, one for collecting and one for trash.



# Wave 1

## Be Here

(60 minutes)

### Goal:

Transition, bringing your attention from wherever you've been to the beach.

- Unclench (15 minutes) Let your attention linger, moving from horizon to waves to sand. Walk silently with the group. Your mind should wander.
- Now, beach comb! (20 minutes) There is no wrong way to do this. Notice what you notice. Gather objects of interest. Slow down. Look closely at rocks of different sizes and whatever else draws your attention (drift wood, plant matter, bones). Let your attention wander generously, but collect sparingly (a handful at most). No need to remain silent — feel free to chat with other folks if they are receptive.
- Discuss (15 minutes) Reconvene at a pre-appointed meeting place to discuss your collection.



# Discuss

Consider the micro-decisions made – why did each collected item make the cut?

Consider the object you didn't collect. What drew you in? What did you miss?

Consider what you didn't notice at all. What did you pass up?

Balance:  
Each wave is an hour. Spend any time remaining in the hour doing whatever you want.



# Wave 2

## Be You

(60 minutes)

Goal:

Explore personal stories, allowing the beach to inspire your memory.

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- Share personal stories (15 minutes)
  - Break into small groups of 2-3 to share personal stories. Share with your group either
    - a) a favorite personal story exemplifying who you are or
    - b) whatever story you feel inspired to tell in the moment.The goal is – good stories!

- Beach comb (20 minutes)

Continue sharing stories in small groups, or mix groups organically. Let your attention linger with the memories and stories you choose.

- Discuss (15 minutes)

Return to your meeting spot to discuss the stories that were shared.

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# Discuss



Consider the “why” for the story you shared. What made it feel right for the moment? Do you share this story often? What and who do you associate with this story?

Consider the process of collecting the stories shared. Did the stories give you ideas for reconnecting with people, places or beyond?



*Balance:  
Finish the hour  
however you  
want.*



# Wave 3

## Time Together

(60 Minutes)

### Goal

Share meaningful ideas, together.

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### Unclench (15 minutes)

In groups of 2-3, discuss:

1. questions your attention is most drawn to at this moment
2. an “answer” (or two) you’ve found to answer the riddle of life (i.e. a lesson, idea or piece of wisdom you want to share)
3. the small questions you wish could occupy your attention
4. Beach comb (20 minutes)

Beach comb, as in the previous waves. Share the ideas and wisdom that you hold.

- If doing so requires free-flowing conversation, let the conversation flow. If conversation doesn’t flow, that’s okay, too. Sometimes stillness is the right dialogue.
- Discuss (15 minutes)

Return to your meeting spot to discuss the stories ideas were shared.



# Discuss

Consider the “why” for the story you shared. What made it feel right for the moment? Do you share this story often? What and who do you associate with this story?

Consider the process of collecting the stories shared. Did the stories give you ideas for reconnecting with people, places or beyond?

# *Open Attention Walk*

Madeleine Doelker Berlin

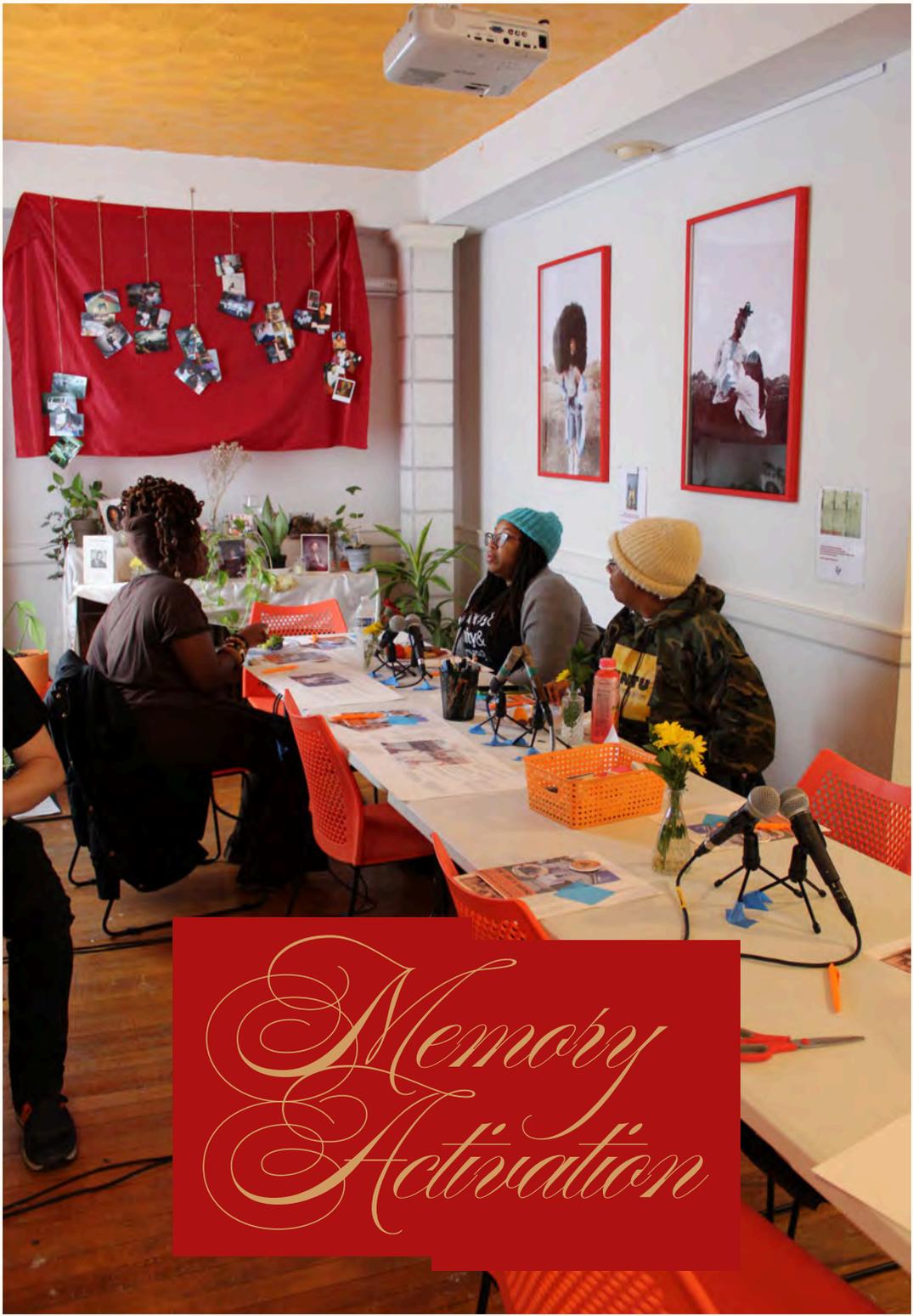


# *Open Attention Walk*

MADELEINE DOELKER  
BERLIN,

1. LEAVE YOUR PHONE IN A SECURE PLACE OR TURN IT OFF.
2. TAKE A NOTEBOOK, A PEN, AND A WATCH OR KITCHEN TIMER.
3. WANDER, ANYWHERE YOU WANT, FOR 30 MINUTES. TAKE IT ALL IN.
4. AT THE END OF 30 MINUTES, TAKE NOTES ABOUT WHAT YOU NOTICED.





*Memory  
Activation*

## Story Cart: Attention

### Symphony Swan Zawadi, “Memory Activation”



- Gather photographs—old or new—from your personal collection to use as a starting point for your memory activation. If you haven’t already scanned or copied\* your photos, you should so that your activation doesn’t damage the integrity of the artifact.
- Photocopy or print out a copy of the image from your collection. Set up your activation space by setting a large sheet of paper in front of you. Then, place your printed image in the center of the sheet of paper.
- You may wish to pause here to read bell hooks’ essay, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” keeping its themes in mind as you begin your activation. If you are completing the memory activation with a group, discuss the essay together.
- Begin to slow-look at your image. Interrogate everything in the image and use an archival pen to make notes, on the large piece of paper, of all the things you remember.
- When you feel like you’ve activated all aspects of the image and asked all the questions you can, consider combining the annotation with a written narrative that summarizes all that you’ve activated. If you are with a group, this is a good time to share your experience if you feel comfortable doing so.

\* If you don’t have access to a scanner/copier, check your local public library.



# Ask yourself,

What do you see? What do you remember? What did it smell like? What did it taste like? Who are the people in the image? Keep going. No detail is too small!



# Ask yourself,

Who, What, Where, When,  
and Why for every object,  
person, environment in the  
image. Make note of the  
questions that come up for  
you as well. How do the  
memories feel to you? How  
does it feel to remember?



# About the 2025-26 Story Fellows



Adam Carr is an independent writer, artist, journalist, community historian and organizer based in Milwaukee. Carr was director of strategic partnerships at Milwaukee Park Foundation from 2022-2025 and producer at 88Nine RadioMilwaukee from 2008-2011. Working in communities throughout Milwaukee, his work ranges from journalism to public art, film/photography to coalition building, dialogue facilitation to community history, writing to in-depth tours.



Symphony Swan Zawadi is an artist, cultural strategist, and founder of THE CR8TV HOUSE, an arts and community institution reimagining space, storytelling, support and memory keeping for Black and Brown creatives. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) and a graduate degree in educational leadership. Symphony channels her interdisciplinary expertise into building creative ecosystems that honor legacy, foster healing, and invest in future generations. Her work has earned her recognition as the 2023 Milwaukeean of the Year by Shepherd Express, among other accolades. She continues to advocate for artist-led systems change that reflect the communities they serve. [thecr8tvhouse.org](http://thecr8tvhouse.org)



Madeleine Doelker Berlin (LPC-IT) is an Associate Licensed Professional Counselor, Social Scientist, and a few other things—like an immigrant, a parent, and someone who’s lived through big transitions. In both her life and work, Madeleine brings an intersectional, systems-aware lens to understanding how people move through the world. Her current work draws on liberation psychology, existentialist psychology, and feminist psychology to explore how personal healing is connected to social context, meaning-making, and resistance. She’s especially interested in the stories we carry, the cultures that shape us, and the quiet, radical act of paying attention.



The Attention Activism Toolkit was created by Ladasia Bryant, a recent MIAD graduate specializing in Communication Design (2023). Ladasia recently transitioned into working as an upper elementary art teacher at Milwaukee Academy of Science, and owns her own company, Braided Magazine. Her creative journey converges graphic design, fine art, and education, focusing on community and meaningful change through the arts. Ladasia combines all of these media because she believes all five senses will further our understanding of each other and the stories that need to be told.

# ABOUT THE CENTER FOR 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY STUDIES

The Center for 21st Century Studies (C21) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee is dedicated to fostering interdisciplinary research in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. Founded in 1968, C21 builds a community of scholars to address the pressing issues of our time through collaborative knowledge creation. In addition to serving faculty, students, and the broader academic community in the United States, C21 engages with community partners to bring humanities practices to people throughout Milwaukee, WI. [Uwm.edu/c21](http://Uwm.edu/c21)

# Acknowledgements

This project was made possible with support from the Wisconsin Institute for Citizenship & Civil Dialogue (WICCD). WICCD's mission is to provide resources, opportunities, and support for teaching, learning, and practicing viewpoint diversity; freedom of expression; academic freedom; civil dialogue; and civic participation within the Universities of Wisconsin and Wisconsin communities. [Wisconsin.edu/wiccd/](http://Wisconsin.edu/wiccd/)  
Special thanks to C21 staff—including Katie Waddell, C21 Managing Director, and graduate assistants Chloe Kwiatkowski, Ceceilia Loeschmann, Jamee N. Pritchard, and Yuchen Zhao—and fall 2025 community partners Village of Whitefish Bay, Cactus Club, THE CR8TV HOUSE, and the Haggerty Museum of Art.

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**MILWAUKEE**

Center for 21st  
Century Studies

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