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Dancing With Land: An Asynchronous Artist Panel

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Article abstract

In this forum, I bring a set of five questions about dancing with land to five contemporary dance practitioners based in and around the city colonially known as Vancouver, constructed on the unceded and ancestral territories of the xʷməθkʷəj̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səłlwətaʔ (Tsilil Waututh) First Nations. The artists featured include Michelle Olson of Raven Spirit Dance, Julie Lebel of Foolish Operations, Olivia C. Davies of O.Dela Arts, the OURO Collective, and Lee Su-Feh of battery opera. The questions build on my ongoing research (both academic and artistic) into the politics and kinaesthetics of site- or land-based movement. I seek to spotlight the grounded, refined, and body-based knowledge that dancers and choreographers cultivate in the articulation of their practice.

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Dancing with Land: An Asynchronous Artist Panel

Alana Gerecke, with Michelle Olson, Julie Lebel, Olivia C. Davies, OURO Collective, and Lee Su-Feh

Questions about the role of place in performance—and land in movement—have found new resonances within academic conversations in recent years. The increasing urgency of the ongoing environmental crisis has forced an examination of the reciprocity between cultural practices and the lands on which they are situated. That is, the ecological emergency asks us to think hard about how our actions and choices shape our immediate material environment—and how the specificities of our respective material environments shape our seemingly autonomous choices and actions. Framed by this expanded understanding of relationship and relationality, arts practice and research have become increasingly interested in decentring the human within a broader network of agency and action. I am thinking, for example, of the rippling effects of new materialism, with its emphasis on the animacy of the more-than-human (Barad 2003; Bennett 2010) or, as Rebecca Schneider frames it in her analysis of the new materialist “turn” in performance studies discourse, “the idea that all matter is agential and that agency is distributed across and among materials in relation” (2015, 7).

These important lines of inquiry and practice are inseparable from a multifaceted effort to account for the ongoing enactments of colonial claim on ancestral Indigenous territories. Indeed, Indigenous scholars trace unaccredited borrowings of Indigenous worldviews through many of these conversations. Consider Vanessa Watts’ (Mohawk and Anishinaabe) articulation of “Place-Thought” as it operates in Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe cosmologies: Watts describes Place-Thought as “the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated” (2013, 21). This worldview holds that “land is alive and thinking” (21). Watts goes on to critique a “colonization of these Indigenous cosmologies” (22)—a position echoed by Métis scholar Zoe Todd, who seeks to “indigenize these Euro-Western narratives” (2015, 11) by “credit[ing] Indigenous thinkers for their millennia of engagement with sentient environments, with cosmologies that enmesh people into complex relationships between themselves and *all* relations, and with climates and atmospheres as important points of organization and action” (Todd 2016, 6–7). Consideration of land/body reciprocity on Turtle Island must be grounded in its cultural, historical, and embodied specificities.

The kinaesthetic implications of this inquiry into the animacy of land is not new terrain for movement practitioners, many of whom have long engaged with the embodied complexities of dancing with land. Dance artists practise intimacy with ground on a nearly daily basis: with the rubbery marley surfaces in many ballet and contemporary studios, with the individual floor textures of a specific training or company studio, and—in many cases—with non-theatrical, non-studio spaces. The practice of what is sometimes termed “site-based dance” has a vibrant history in the Western theatrical tradition (Kloetzel and Pavlik 2011; Hunter 2015; Gerecke 2016), but this is only part of the story. Longer and deeper histories of dancing with land weave through Indigenous

Based in Vancouver, on the unceded traditional territories of the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh nations, **Alana Gerecke** is a settler scholar, mother, and dance artist of mixed European descent. Her research examines the spatial politics of site-based dance. She is Artist-in-Residence at Vancouver’s Dance Centre and a 2021–22 Shadbolt Fellow at Simon Fraser University.

movement histories, functioning in some instances to establish land claim and law (Dangeli 2016; Robinson 2017). Of course, dancing outdoors in public spaces also has rich histories in street, social, and community dance traditions. Dance and land intersect in myriad and material ways across a range of movement forms.

In what follows, I bring a set of five questions about dancing with land to five contemporary dance practitioners based in and around the city colonially known as Vancouver, constructed on the unceded and ancestral territories of the *xʷməθkʷəj̓əm* (Musqueam), *Skwxwú7mesh* (Squamish), and *sə́ilwətaʔ* (T'sleil Waututh) First Nations. Within the broader conversation on site-specificity, I am interested in the unique expressions of place-based practice that manifest in response to different landscapes, histories, and eco-social compositions; as such, I keep my focus contained to the specific site I call home. I approach these Vancouver-based artists as a white, cis-female, uninvited settler of mixed European descent who does not live with a disability; I have lived and worked in Vancouver for two decades. I intend this panel publication to offer a platform and readership for the important contributions of the artists featured; for this reason, I pose my questions as invitations, and then I pass the mic to the artists to have the last word.

The artists featured here represent a spectrum of backgrounds, career stages, and aesthetic approaches, and they bring their specific embodied histories into their respective formulations of relation with the land. **Michelle Olson** of Raven Spirit Dance is a guiding force in Vancouver's dance scene, an established choreographer and performer who has cultivated a contemporary dance aesthetic shaped by Indigenous worldviews. **Julie Lebel** of Foolish Operations focuses on intergenerational and community-based processes in her improvisation-based choreographic methods, with a particular focus on dancing with young children. **Olivia C. Davies** of O.Dela Arts is an Anishinaabe woman, mother, and Indigenous contemporary dance artist with an investment in nurturing connections between Indigenous women in dance through her *Matriarchs Uprising* festival and other community-engaged initiatives. The **OURO Collective** (current members include Cristina Bucci, Rina Pellerin, Maiko Miyauchi, Eric Cheung, Shana Wolfe, and Ash Cornette) fuse contemporary dance aesthetics with street dance techniques like hip-hop, waacking, breaking, and popping. **Lee Su-Feh** of battery opera explores themes of colonial violence, immigration, pleasure, place, and displacement in her movement and voice work. Each artist articulates a fuller and self-defined understanding of their context and background in the opening of their respective contribution.

I should note that because this writing was developed amid the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, my approach to gathering has been shaped by the material conditions of remote engagement. The questions were posed and answered asynchronously via email correspondence, and the responses drew together into a whole with a kind of staggered, patchwork temporality. As you will see, each artist took their own approach in determining the format—as well as the content—of their responses.

My five questions build on my ongoing research (both academic and artistic) into the politics and kinaesthetics of site- or land-based movement. With the questions I pose, I seek to spotlight the grounded, refined, and body-based knowledge that dancers and choreographers cultivate in the articulation of their practice. These artists speak to the careful and—crucially—*kinaesthetic thinking* that dancing with land demands. Although their contexts and practices differ in important ways,

these artists share a committed attunement to how the land moves them, to the “land [as] an active collaborator, a co-choreographer” (Gerecke 2019, 39).

MICHELLE OLSON

Biography: *Michelle Olson is a member of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation and the artistic director of Raven Spirit Dance. She studied dance and performance at the University of New Mexico, attended the Aboriginal Arts Program at the Banff Centre, and was an ensemble member of Full Circle First Nations Performance. Michelle works in dance, theatre and opera as a choreographer, performer and movement coach, and her work has been seen across Canada. She was the recipient of the inaugural Vancouver International Dance Festival Choreographic Award and currently teaches movement at Studio 58 and the UBC Theatre Department.*

AG: What first drew you to dancing in close proximity with site or land?

OLSON: When I engage with site-specific practice, the spaces and places that I work in have their own story to tell. What is the meaning of the space and place, what memories does the land have to share with us, and how, as an artist, can we jump on this invisible current of memory and articulate it into space?

The draw for me to do site-specific work/land-based work is that there is an immediacy to sensation, impulse and connection. The land is the container that holds us, and through our sensations, we build a relationship with this land, diving into the images, story and impulses that are offered to us. These unique offerings are specific to time, place and space and are the heart of this kind of work for me.



Grey hoodie woman in cityscape. Lacey Baker in *Ta’wan*. Photo courtesy of Chris Randle.

AG: How does your place-based practice shape your movement vocabularies, presentation choices, and your approach to collaboration?

OLSON: My movement vocabularies are guided by land that they exist in. I have a fuller human experience when I create and perform on the land. The reciprocity of the land cultivates this language of deep human sensation and experience. When I lean into the earth, balance on the side of my hip, and look up to see the shimmering of trees' leaves and the light flickering through those leaves, that outer experience pierces deep back into me, and from there, the image of the bird stirs in my belly and then erupts from my sternum and flies towards the light. My image-making is in relationship with the land. It is not unlike how my out-breath from my lungs feeds the trees and how the trees exhale to feed me. The interdependence to realize images is tangible and so satisfying.

Being on the land can be overwhelming as well: there is so much to attend to and so much to see and listen to. I remember a moment with [Yvette Nolan,] my dramaturg for *Ashes on the Water*. I was sitting on the beach at Crab Park, looking at the mountains, ocean, the port, the boats, the seabus, the people and all the dogs. I looked at her and said, I do not know how I am going to do this; I do not know how I am going to find focus in this work. It was overwhelming. But through the process, I started to find my relationship with the environment. Align with the land, and then you can make choices that guide focus, that disappear elements and amplify what you want to see and feel.



Woman on rock against sky. Jeanette Kotowich in *Ashes on the Water*. Photo courtesy of Chris Randle.

AG: In your practice—and beyond—what is your relationship to the specific Indigenous practices, histories, and ways of knowing that are embedded in a given place?

OLSON: Doing this work on the traditional and unceded territories of the Sk̓wxwú7mesh (Squamish), Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh) and xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam) Nations affects the work deeply. There is an uncovering and deep listening that happens in the creation of work. For *Taʷan* (Illuminations in Sk̓wxwú7mesh), the piece was danced in Coal Harbour, where the edge of the built-up city meets the ocean. With the guidance of Bob Baker—an elder, mentor, and dance group leader and choreographer from the Squamish Nation—we imagined the not-so-distant past, where there were not large condo buildings but were large maple trees in a huge grove where the First Nations used to hunt deer. Remembering with the land, we built this work. We were gifted a deer mask for the piece, and, wearing the mask, the deer dancer led the audience to the different sites of the piece. We had a feast with the performers and creative team and offered a spirit plate to the spirits of that land so that they may be fed and honoured. Because it is also them that hold us as the land does. So many memories want to be remembered and spirits want to be heard, so we tread lightly and with respect as we smudge, sing, and give thanks so we can align ourselves with these deeper and wiser voices and let these voices be amplified and seen through our bodies.

AG: Can you describe one moment in your personal performance history when the land or site surprised you and/or redirected your movement choices?

OLSON: The land always surprises me and always affects my choices. That is the joy (and terror!) of this work. In the studio, the process can be so self-referencing at times, therefore control can be maintained—and this has its own rightful place. But when an artist goes out on the land, some of that control has to be given up to trust: the body must respond first, and you do not know what you are responding to until you meet it. There is a fear that you might not meet it; it is thrilling when you do.

I am also surprised by the process that our dancing presence invokes in the spaces where we do this work. In *Ashes*, as we were improvising at the edge of Crab Park, we were joined by a young Indigenous man, ever so briefly. The dancers began to howl—and from across the park, this young man responded with his own howl. This response went on, and then he came racing around the beach where we were working with smudge in his hand, almost as if it was an Olympic torch. He circled us quickly and ran off. As we were making connections to space, place, and memory, our creative process ignited his own connections as well. It was a beautiful moment.

AG: Is there anything else you think we should consider about dancing with land?

OLSON: Dancing on the land is a real thing. It is not an abstraction. Your experience is not an abstraction. The land is your body, your body is the land.

JULIE LABEL

Biography: Born and raised in north-eastern Québec, on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Innu Nation, from a family of settlers of French and Irish ancestry, Julie Lebel now gratefully lives and dances on the ancestral and unceded Indigenous territories of the xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), Sk̓wxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔ (Tseil Waututh) First Nations. She is a choreographer invested in intergenerational community-engaged dance, often

in public space settings, involving musicians, visual artists, filmmakers and writers with a body of work spanning twenty years. She is the artistic director of [Foolish Operations](#), connecting people of all generations through new dance experiences, especially with and for very young children, often in francophone or bilingual contexts. As a member of [Lower Left Collective](#) (USA, Germany, Norway, and Canada), she teaches and performs Ensemble Thinking. Julie is a proud mother of very active twin girls who act as first consultants in all of her creative endeavours.

AG: What first drew you to dancing in close proximity with site or land?

LEBEL: It started when I moved back to Sept-Îles after graduating from UQAM in 1998 with a BFA in Dance in the *interprétation-création* program. The lack of access to indoor spaces is what first brought me to dance outdoors and opened an endless set of questions.

Sept-Îles is a twelve-hour drive east and north of Montreal, on the unceded lands and waterways of the Innu. Its population ebbs and flows with industrial developments, roughly around thirty thousand people, including the people of the Innu community of Uashat mak Mani-Utenam.

I am a child of a boomtown flourishing from resource extraction, mainly iron ore. My parents had settled there in the 70s. Most of my friends' parents were also settlers. We were children of The Quiet Revolution: our parents fought to take power out of the oppressive clergy's hands. We were children of Québec Inc, taking power back from the anglophone economic dominance and fighting for workers' rights. We were children of the feminist movement in which our mothers made a place for themselves in the workforce, opened daycares and refuges for women suffering from violence and abuse. Caught in this electric current, there were few efforts toward building bridges in our white and settler-dominated schools with the few Innu children who attended the off-reserve school, leaving us separated by a deep cultural divide.

This divide is sensitively captured in the film [Kuessipan](#), released in 2019. It is set in the amazing landscape around Sept-Îles. My words to describe both this divide and the landscape are inadequate in comparison. Watching the film brought me right back to my birthplace and also reminded me how I long to connect to this place and do my part of the work to build bridges, and how complicated it is, now that I have roots and a family on the opposite side of the continent. Alone in a crowd of unknown people in Vancouver [watching the film], laughing at the jokes nobody got, I cried my longing for this community in this landscape.

Back in the late 1990s, few of us returned to Sept-Îles after university. The town was slowly rebuilding after a long recession, but there was little infrastructure for artists in Sept-Îles at that time, especially for dance artists. As a young artist, participating in building that infrastructure in Sept-Îles felt more compelling than creating a space in the Montréal dance scene. I started creating works with unusual dance partners for the time, such as an eleven-year-old girl, an intergenerational group of people, and a range of people who participated in the collaborations with other (non-dance) kinds of expertise.



Julie Lebel dancing in *Hiveresse*, a short dance film captured in -30°C (2002). Still from video footage by Gabriel Rochette-Bériaux.

Dancing in the snow or the sand, I worked in dialogue with the elements: light, water, minerals, wind, and often away from urban sounds. I often worked with people of all ages, from different walks of life, and in dialogue with artists from across disciplines. These experiences expanded my notion of what dance could be—and of who (and what) I could dance *with*.



Left: Jasmine Lebrun, a member of a choreographic research group in Sept-Îles (2001–2002) who participated in a first edition of *Drift-Walks*. Experiments with these walks seeded choreography for *Relevé de terrain* (2006–11), a piece that referred to the sensory memories of these walks. Right: Gabriel Rochette-Bériaux, filming elements to be projected in the theatre. Image by Julie Lebel at Rivière Manitou, Québec.

AG: How does your place-based practice shape your movement vocabularies, presentation choices, and your approach to collaboration?

LEBEL: The centre of my practice is a collective choreographic approach called [Ensemble Thinking](#) developed by Nina Martin in the late twentieth century, and then within the Lower Left Collective (from 1994, onward). Since I was first introduced in 2004, I kept reaching out for more Ensemble Thinking workshops and experimenting in my own practice. I was invited to join the collective in 2019. As members of the collective, we define Ensemble Thinking as a set of dance improvisation movement scores that deeply focus dancers' attention to compositional forms in order to hone the capacity to shift fluidly among solo, group, and [Contact Improvisation](#) compositions and to artistically navigate the complexities that often arise in improvised group dances.

A significant part of Ensemble Thinking is the set of tools for composing space as an ensemble. Ensemble Thinking is usually practised indoors, in the studio and the theatre with professional dancers, but I kept wondering about possible applications for outdoors and with a community of people who may not identify as dancers.



Left to right: Sabrina Dionne, Joan Grégoire, Marco Dionne, Josée Chaboyez, Emmanuelle Roy, two unidentified child participants, Kathy Ouellet St-Pierre, Marie-Claude Laberge, and Françoise Cliche. These were participants of an experiment called *Solo for One Idea*, which was part of the project *échelle humaine* (Sept-Îles, 2005). This photo was taken by visual artist and collaborator [Sébastien Cliche](#).

This photo documents an Ensemble Thinking score called “One Idea Spatial” that I modified for this site, a track and field park, with long-time friends and family, many of whom had participated in a multi-generational choreographic research group in 2001–2002. “One Idea Spatial” invites dancers to form one simple spatial idea together, as simply as possible—this means, usually, that each dancer should have a similar amount of space between each person, for example, because, otherwise, it makes two spatial ideas or more.

In the summer of 2019, I travelled to Marfa, Texas—Nina Martin’s home base and Lower Left’s summer intensive central—with the intention to explore the possibilities for Ensemble Thinking outside of the studio, in the desert. We experimented with silent walks while sensing light, sounds, space and other living beings. Though onsite, I felt that I could not dance. I felt that adding content was not my place. It felt more appropriate to listen and witness with presence.

AG: In your practice—and beyond—what is your relationship to the specific Indigenous practices, histories, and ways of knowing that are embedded in a given place?

LEBEL: One of my favourite places in this world is “La pointe de la rivière Moisie.” This river is called Mishta-shipu in Innu-aimun, the language of the Innus. I have visited this place many times, in all seasons. This place is filled with my own memories, visits with my mother, my brother, my daughters, in times of hardship and in times of celebration. I also try to listen and notice the older history. I can see how the unique biodiversity of this place has been carefully tended for thousands of years by people who knew the medicine of these plants. I can see how the salmon must have brought communities to these shores.

I have often wished to dance in this place, but every time I set out to go dance, my dance is a quiet walk: a simple dance of awareness, of being present in space. In Ensemble Thinking, we practise giving and taking focus. In this place, I can only give focus, I stay still, I make myself small, my dance is to watch and listen; it is my way to give respect.

I am grateful for this short [video-poem](#) about the Mishta-shipu, *De la rivière à la mer* (2019). This piece gives us access to some of the Innu ways of knowing about this place. Set in this place, the document features celebrated poet [Joséphine Bacon](#) and artist Johanne Roussy, who returned to Sept-Îles, developed a practice of “sculpture sociale,” and built much-needed bridges between Innus and settlers, artists and people of all walks of life and ages.

Caring deeply about a place like La pointe de la rivière Moisie is what supports my learning process about truth, permission, responsibilities, relationships, interconnection, and my environmental footprint.

AG: Can you describe one moment in your personal performance history when the land or site surprised you and/or redirected your movement choices?

LEBEL: I recently went for a walk with Carmen Rosen, the Artistic Director of the [Still Moon Arts Society](#), who has a life-long artistic practice embedded in environmental stewardship. I wanted to consult her on her artistic process with birds for our new project for families with babies and toddlers: *Moving Resting Nesting*. She told me how she became fascinated by birds because she realized that their call was telling her where she was, giving her information about the specific lay of the land (like how the presence of a seagull tells you that you are near the ocean). I was telling her how birdsongs helped me through the pandemic lock-down depression by bringing me back to the present, back to the fact that I was OK and that my immediate family was OK. I am hoping that by bringing attention to birds in our project, we can provide the same feeling to other families—to feel centred, to feel in connection with the land and each other.

OLIVIA C. DAVIES

***Biography:** Olivia C. Davies is an independent producer, consultant, and contemporary Indigenous dance artist who creates across choreography, installation, and community-engaged projects, exploring the emotional and political relationships between people and places, often investigating the body’s dynamic ability to transmit narrative. Her work traverses boundaries and challenges social prejudice, conveying concepts and narratives with creations and conceptual platforms that open different ways to see and experience the world. She honours her mixed Anishinaabe, French Canadian, Finnish, and Welsh heritage in her work. She is the artistic director of O.Dela Arts, Matriarchs Uprising Festival, and a founding member of Crow’s Nest Collective (Vancouver) and Circadia Indigena Arts Collective (Ottawa). www.oliviacdavies.ca*

AG: What first drew you to dancing in close proximity with site or land?

DAVIES: I think I have always had an affinity for dancing outdoors, though it has only been in the last ten years that I have actually activated sites outside of the studio or the theatre with my own work. Growing up, I remember witnessing Dusk Dances in Toronto, Ontario, in the Trinity Bellwoods Park near where I lived and thought that was a really cool way of presenting dance. Fast forward to 2011 when I was an usher for the Dancing on the Edge Festival in Vancouver, BC, where I volunteered to accompany audience members in their walk from the Firehall Arts Centre to Crab Park where they would witness the work *Ashes on the Water* by Raven Spirit Dance, and I was immediately inspired to create dances for outdoor sites. The way Raven Spirit Dance’s choreography incorporated the specific landscape of the site and drew audiences into the land and the water was very compelling and brought about a whole new way of experiencing the site.



Olivia C. Davies during her 2019 Leña Residency on Galiano Island, hosted by Dayna Szyndrowski. Photo courtesy of Dayna Szyndrowski.

In the following years, I have created a number of works for different outdoor sites, including a few unique locations along the Vancouver Seawall for a series of “pop-up” performances. These dances were very fun to make and perform—in part because they were witnessed by an audience of nearly a hundred fun-loving cyclists led by a merry motley crew of hosts who took them along their “PUP BIKE TOUR” at sunset in the summer months. I would continue coming back to dance at the

water's edge, experimenting with the way the shoreline landscape inspired choreographic experimentation. Back in 2013, I received an invitation to compose the choreography for a Fringe theatre show that was being created on Granville Island, specifically using the architecture of the walkway surrounding the Sandbar Restaurant. This work was especially interesting as the site itself kept changing; construction and various upgrades to the façade meant that the site was in constant flux, different from one rehearsal to the next and posing the challenge of creating and re-creating the ensemble choreography each day.

In collaboration with other Indigenous creators, I have enjoyed a special connection to the way our stories want to be danced in relationship to the earth, the sky, the waters, and the fire of our hearts. This became apparent to me as I experienced working with dancers on the land in Six Nations Territory, Ontario, mentored by Santee Smith; working with Charles Koreneho in the parks surrounding the Shadbolt Arts Centre in Burnaby, BC; and working with Penny Couchie and Aanmitaagzi ensemble members on their land in Nipissing First Nation, Ontario. Each of these experiences helped me to develop a keen sense of how the body can work in coordination with the natural elements of a site, expand storytelling, and deepen my awareness of how much my spirit longed to be in connection with the land in this way.

I have now made several solos and duets on the land in various sites in Ontario and BC that stem from this source of inspiration that comes from listening to the land and waters and reflecting back to the site how my heart is activated. The invitation from Canoe Stories Festival in Ottawa, Ontario, to share a dance in honour of the Water allowed me to envision and share "[Kichissippi Love – An Honoring](#)" in 2019, which has now been followed by three similar solos honouring specific aspects of site, including "[Apple Tree Honoring](#)" for the 19 Waltzes performance series in Vancouver, August 2020, and then the short film, "[Xwáyxway Swoon ~ A Love Song](#)" created and filmed in Stanley Park, BC, September 2020. Each solo brought forth a new way of experimenting with how the land and water invoked choreographic impulses that connected me to the site in new and powerful ways.

AG: How does your place-based practice shape your movement vocabularies, presentation choices, and your approach to collaboration?

DAVIES: Movement generated in land-based explorations is experiential in a way that is different from what comes out of my body when in a studio setting. The shaping of the body is influenced by the variety of shapes, tones, and textures existing in the site. The body deciphers the inherent rhythm found in the way the landscape rolls out. The heart tunes in to the pulsing energy of living matter in the plants, bugs, and birds above. Breath quickens and slows with the changing wind. The play of light and shadow encourages me to risk the new discoveries to be made with a heightened sense of inner vision. I am making new connections to the environmental features through the senses, and my movement adapts accordingly.

AG: In your practice—and beyond—what is your relationship to the specific Indigenous practices, histories, and ways of knowing that are embedded in a given place?

DAVIES: Through reflection on where I am and what has existed in the site prior to my entering upon it, I can experience a sense of time and history that engages me in the reality of our interconnectedness. An aspect of my own Indigeneity as a mixed heritage Anishinaabe-Kwe (Ojibwe

Woman) is to recognize my responsibility to the lands and waters and the creatures who share this earth with humankind. By entering a site and taking a moment to breathe, look around, and sense the others in the space that share its experience with me and its deeper history, I ground myself in deeper connection with the site and can tap into the way of being that is required of me for a fully embodied experience. Certain sites are embedded with long-standing histories that, when researched, can impact the choice made to enter into the space or not and what must be considered in doing so; it is important to understand that there are Indigenous practices specific to territory and tradition that ought to be considered before moving forward in explorations on certain sites. For instance, before I start a movement exploration, I will put down tobacco and burn smudge (traditional plant medicines) as an offering to the site as this protocol was shared with me as a way of honouring all creation before setting out to investigate what choreographic impulses emerge.



Olivia C. Davies during a *Tinana Whenua Project* workshop, hosted by Charles Koroneho at the Shadbolt Centre for the Arts in 2018. Photo courtesy of Yvonne Chew.

AG: Can you describe one moment in your personal performance history when the land or site surprised you and/or redirected your movement choices?

DAVIES: In creating a duet for Vines Festival with aerialist Emily Long, we needed to choose a site in Trout Lake Park, Vancouver, BC, where the aerial hoop could be rigged to a tree branch safely. By choosing this particular tree, we were beholden to it as our landmark for the ensuing choreography in this part of the park. It became a very important focal point for the work. Upon noticing the many small twigs the tree had shed, we were inspired to use these as the demarcation of our performance space—laying out twig after twig in a giant circle around the tree that separated us from our audience and the rest of the park. The tree became a part of the choreography in multiple

ways: holding the space, drawing us to it, carrying us in the aerial hoop, and providing us with the means of creating a boundary between the space we activated and the space of our witnesses.

AG: Is there anything else you think we should consider about dancing with land?

DAVIES: Consider the multiple histories that exist in the site and move with consideration for how you enter and leave the site, the others who inhabit the space (past, present, and future), and what you might do to carry out the choreography in such a way that honours and respects the natural rhythms of the space.

OURO COLLECTIVE

Biography: *[OURO Collective](#)* (OURO) creates and produces new dance works on the unceded territories of the *xwməθkwəyəm* (Musqueam), *Skwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) and *Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh* (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. OURO was founded in 2014 by Mark Siller, Dean Placzek, Maiko Miyauchi, Rina Pellerin, and Cristina Bucci. Fusing hip-hop, waacking, breaking, popping, and contemporary dance as their foundation, each street dancer has trained with the founders of their respective dance styles and brings specific knowledge to the group aesthetic. The collective aims to advance the public's appreciation of street dance culture through dance classes and events/workshops, with a focus on youth engagement activities in smaller communities in BC and creating high-quality dance work for public presentation.



OURO Collective exploring the relation between movement and environment at Spanish Banks Beach in Vancouver. Photo courtesy of Jessika Hunter.

AG: What first drew you to dancing in close proximity with site or land?

OURO: Street dance communities around the world frequent public spaces for their practice. It is not uncommon to find professional street dancers and enthusiasts who flock to the same area to perfect their craft—Vancouver is no different.

For several years, dancers and members of OURO Collective have been working and training in Vancouver’s Robson Square ice rink. The location, easily accessible by public transit, allows movers from different parts of the city to congregate, create, and exchange together. Robson Square remains one of the few free public spaces with shelter, contributing to an ever-growing dance community.



OURO Collective rehearsal for *SOTTO 51* at Robson Square. Photo by Vitantonio Spinelli.

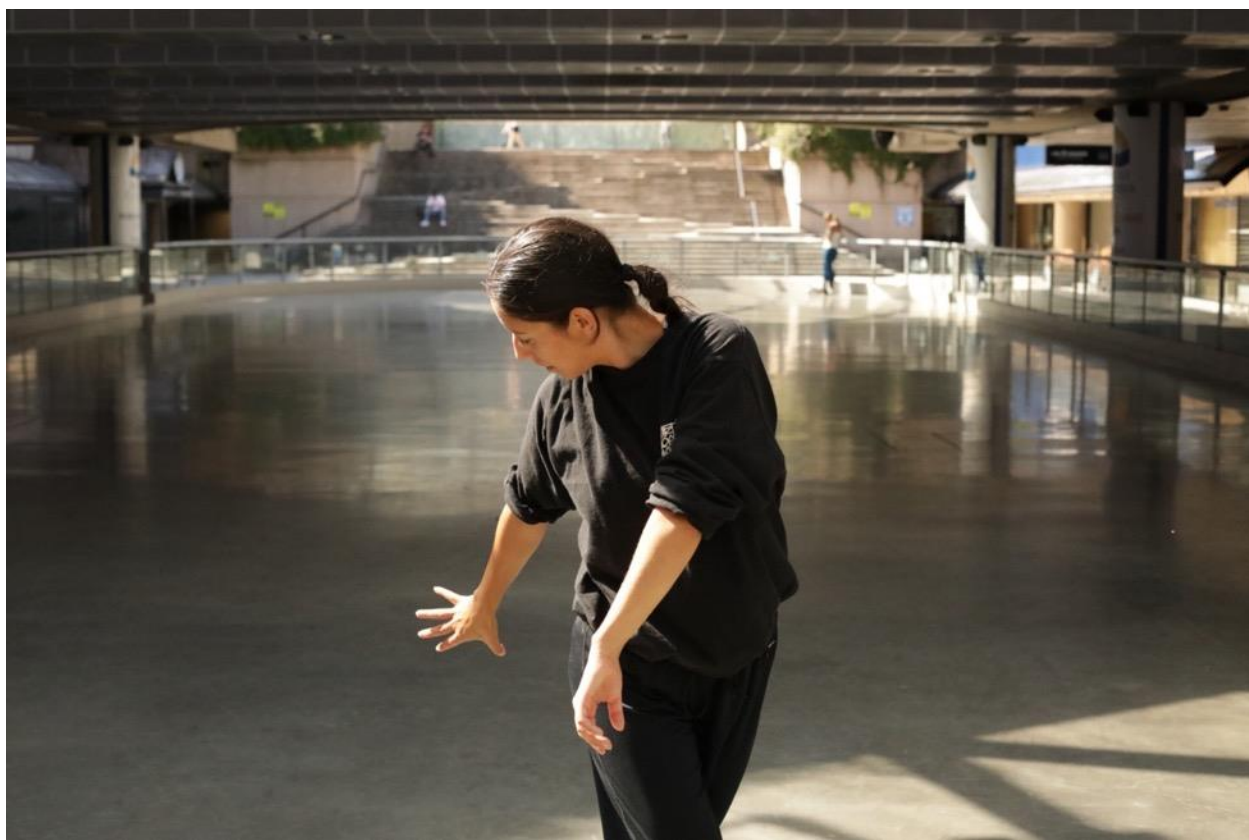
This past year OURO has been interested in exploring how creating a piece in an unconventional space such as Robson Square, where we have grown as individual artists, could shape new work as a collective. The new work, entitled [SOTTO 51](#), premiered as a digital presentation this fall (October 1–7, 2021). A live presentation of the work will take place in August 2022 at Robson Square.

AG: How does your place-based practice shape your movement vocabularies, presentation choices, and your approach to collaboration?

OURO: Unconventional spaces lead to unconventional results. The ice rink is architecturally and acoustically unique due to its sunken plaza and dome, which provide artists with a sense of security and privacy to create. The public frequently watches from above and at the perimeter of the rink.

The live premiere of *SOTTO 51* will reflect and pay homage to this. The show will be donation-based and open to the public, and our audience will move throughout the plaza as our piece progresses.

Spaces in which OURO Collective creates are integral to the outcome of our work. Throughout the years, our pieces have given off different tones depending on which studios and spaces we are working in. Studios with fluorescent lighting and white walls delivered more angular choreography with synthetic sounds. In contrast, a studio with natural lighting and wooden tones resulted in deep earthy music with melting and connecting movement. We are excited to see what we produce in this outdoor space as we continue rehearsals. Robson Square is a mix of so many elements—hard concrete angles with flowing trees and bushes, quiet breeze with a sense of urgency, and the sound of the waterfalls against the hustle and bustle of the downtown business district. Everything from sight to smell inspires new movement ideas.



OURO Collective rehearsal for *SOTTO 51* at Robson Square. Dancer: Rina Pellerin. Photo by Vitantonio Spinelli.

We see *SOTTO 51* as an enormous collaboration with our dancers and the entire plaza. Robson Square is an uncontrolled environment where elements of nature, pedestrians, and fellow artists in the space influence what we create. In [rehearsing in the rink](#), our work has sparked onlookers' curiosity, invited dialogue, feedback, and adaptation to the site.

AG: In your practice—and beyond—what is your relationship to the specific Indigenous practices, histories, and ways of knowing that are embedded in a given place?

OURO: Members of OURO are not Indigenous to this land, and it is of utmost importance that we seek knowledge of the history and people of these territories to better understand the world today and discover new ways to contribute to reconciliation. By dedicating a portion of our creation process to learning Indigenous history and practices through Indigenous educators, we hope to have this information resonate throughout rehearsals as we continue to progress towards reconciliation as individuals and as a collective.

We are thankful and grateful for our time at the [Aboriginal Gathering Place at Emily Carr University](#) with Brenda Crabtree and Connie Watts. Crabtree is the Aboriginal Program Manager at Emily Carr and belongs to the Spuzzum Band and has both Nlaka’pamux and Stó:lō ancestry. Watts is Associate Director of Aboriginal Programs and has Nuu-chah-nulth, Gitksan and Kwakwaka’wakw ancestry. Through several educational sessions, they shared their knowledge of Aboriginal history, culture, and stories. It is our mission to create work that acknowledges and respects the people, land, and culture that came before us.

AG: Can you describe one moment in your personal performance history when the land or site surprised you and/or redirected your movement choices?

OURO: When we planned the opening of *SOTTO 51*, we had envisioned a large stage spread across one side of the plaza. Once we got into the space, everyone gravitated to the pattern on the pavement—the cement slabs were laid out in wide rectangles that grew smaller and tighter in the centre, which resulted in a duet that begins far apart, then pulls closer towards the centre on a small patch of marley as dancers start to connect. The dancers incorporated elements of Robson Square’s architecture into their respective styles, popping and waacking, and adopted a method in which they reacted to exterior sounds, animals, people, structures, and textures of the ground while following a loose score.



Robson Square, Vancouver. Photo by Vitantonio Spinelli. This photo was taken during an OURO Collective rehearsal for Act I of *SOTTO 51*. In Act I, we focus on developing choreography that is directly influenced by our surroundings.

AG: Is there anything else you think we should consider about dancing with land?

OURO: Education, understanding, and respect are key elements before creating a piece. It is so important to respect where you are, who came before you, and how you leave the land for future generations.

LEE SU-FEH

Biography: *Lee Su-Feh is an artist whose work encompasses choreography, performance, teaching, dramaturgy, writing, and community organizing. Born and raised in Malaysia, she was indelibly marked by teachers who strove to find a contemporary Asian expression out of the remnants of colonialism and dislocated traditions. Since moving to Vancouver in 1988, Lee has created a body of work that interrogates the contemporary body as a site of intersecting and displaced histories and habits. In 1995 she co-founded battery opera performance with David McIntosh, and together they have led the company to earn a reputation for being “fearlessly iconoclastic,” producing award-winning works that take place in theatres, on the street, in hotel rooms, and in print.*

AG: What first drew you to dancing in close proximity with site or land?

How does your place-based practice shape your movement vocabularies, presentation choices, and your approach to collaboration?

In your practice—and beyond—what is your relationship to the specific Indigenous practices, histories, and ways of knowing that are embedded in a given place?

Can you describe one moment in your personal performance history when the land or site surprised you and/or redirected your movement choices?

Is there anything else you think we should consider about dancing with land?

LEE: My work is informed by my settler-immigrant body. My body carries multiple generations of not belonging to the land and waters it lives on.
I dance with the land in order to find belonging.

I was born in what is now called Malaysia.

Before it was Malaysia, it was a British colony called Malaya.

These days, however, in an effort to know myself differently, I prefer to remember that I come from a peninsula protruding out from the mainland of South-East Asia into maritime South-East Asia, into a stretch of islands called the Malay Archipelago, or the Nusantara Melayu. I come from a complex part of the world that has had a long history of cultures meeting and mixing, and it has been this way since antiquity.

I was born on the coast of a narrow body of water called the Straits of Malacca, which connects the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. This body of water has also connected peoples and cultures from China, India, the Middle East, and, of course, was vital in the European colonial project. Tea, opium, and spices brought the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Spanish, and the British to South-East Asia; and along with them, the ensuing ruptures from land and waters, from language, from community, with repercussions all over the planet.

My Southern Min-speaking ancestors came to the Nusantara many generations ago from Fujian province, on the east coast of China. I come from a place defined by the movement of bodies and water.

I also happen to now live in a part of the world defined by the movement of bodies—both human and nonhuman—and water: I am honoured and grateful to live as a guest, uninvited, on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish people—the x^wməθk^wəj^ʔəm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and sə̌ilwətaʔ (Tseil Waututh).

It took me, however, almost twenty years after arriving in Vancouver, as an immigrant from Malaysia, to remember those names—x^wməθk^wəj^ʔəm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and sə̌ilwətaʔ (Tseil Waututh). When I reflected on why, I realized it was because I didn't see those names as often as I saw the name of Captain Vancouver. I didn't hear them as often. I also realized that I had been looking at geography from very colonized eyes. I saw geography as a two-dimensional map with clearly demarcated borders. I began to realize that as long as I thought of territory that way, I was never going to understand where I lived. I was never going to understand my relationship to it, and my relationship to the bodies it held. Because this two-dimensional way of looking at land does not include time, nor history. This way of looking at land erases histories that are inconvenient. Histories that trouble the flat surfaces, the clear lines of the settler-colonial imagination.

So, this is an answer to the question, “What first drew you to dancing on the land?”: I dance on the land in order to trouble the flat surfaces of the smooth dance floor. To remember an older technology of knowing inside me.

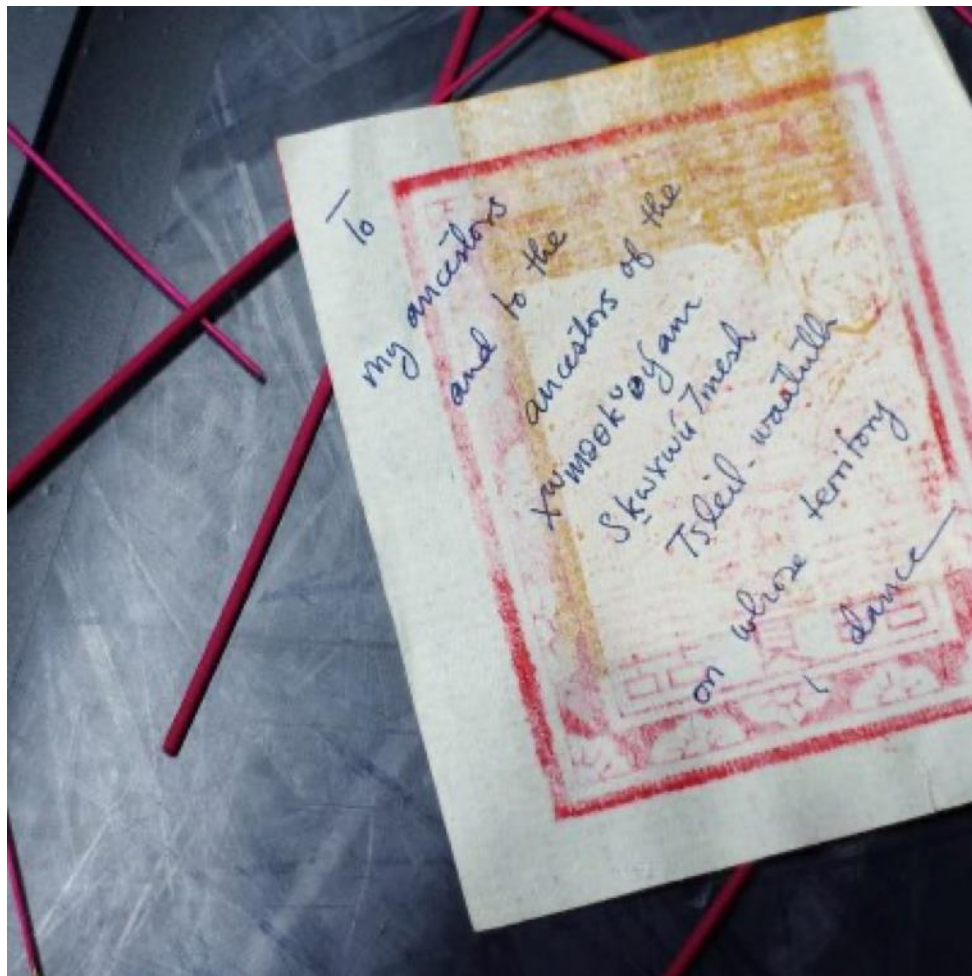
Several years ago, I read an interview of Glen Coulthard. Mr. Coulthard is a member of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, an associate professor of Indigenous and First Nations Studies at UBC, and he wrote the book *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (2014). In the interview, he said a thing that blew me away, and which has since become a bit of a manifesto for choreography for me.

He said, “Land is a relationship based on the obligations we have to other people and to the other-than-human relations that constitute the land itself” (as quoted in Walia, 2015). My work is an attempt to understand and practise this statement in my body through the act of dancing. It is a response to missing parts of my knowledge: knowledge about myself and knowledge of the body I am dancing with. In this case, the body I am dancing with is the land. It is a response to the feeling of discomfort in me that I, as a Canadian citizen, am complicit in the dispossession and genocide of Indigenous peoples here on Turtle Island. And the first step towards being able to do anything about it has to be the act of remembering.

In 2010, I made a work called *Everything* in response to a commission from the Dance Centre and the Canadian Music Centre to create a piece of work “about Vancouver.” I think of *Everything* as one immigrant's way of acknowledging the Indigenous territory on which they dance.

In this solo work, the dance comes out of a negotiation between what I, the dancer, carry and the surface on which I dance. Using Daoist ritual objects such as I-ching sticks, incense, and spirit paper, I create a chance-operated environment that offers obstacles and openings around which I

move. Surrendering to the inherent nature of each object—the weight, the energy, and the tasks attached to each of the objects—the body is called into a dance that connects the human body to the elements. Embedded in the piece is both a personal as well as a public ritual of acknowledgment—of who we are and where we are.



Spirit paper featured in *Everything*. Photo courtesy of Yvonne Chew.

On each piece of spirit paper is written:

To my ancestors

And to the ancestors of

The x^wməθk^wəyám*

The Skwxwú7mesh* and

The Tsleil-waututh*

On whose territory I dance

I figured if I wrote the names of the x^wməθk^wəyám (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səłilwətaʔ (Tsleil Waututh) a thousand times, I would for sure be able to remember them. And everywhere I went with this work, I would be required by the protocols of this work to learn and remember whose territory I was going to be dancing on.

So, another simple answer to the question, “What first drew you to dancing in close proximity with site or land?” is: making a land acknowledgment.

As a settler-immigrant, whenever I make these land and water acknowledgements, I am trying to remember where I am. I am trying to remember that as an immigrant, I have had the privilege of living, singing, and dancing here even as the people whose territory I am on have had their own singing and dancing threatened, sometimes silenced by the state whose passport I carry. I am remembering that this disruption continues into the present day through the prison complex, through the child and family services that have taken away more Indigenous children from their parents than the residential schools did, through the pipelines that run through Indigenous communities, through the resource extraction industries that leave Indigenous communities without clean water.

Because remembering where you are and when you are is to know where you are in space and time, and this is the act of dancing.

I work from a colonized body. I grew up thinking and believing that to be a better human being, I had to be white or to play white. Along the way, I learned to speak English and French better than my mother tongue, Hokkien. Along the way, I learned that in order to be taken seriously as a dancer, or just as a person, I had to move in ways that left parts of me unacknowledged, and therefore, unknown.

My friend and colleague, choreographer Zab Maboungou once said, to dance is to be with what you don’t know about yourself and what you don’t know about the other. So, I dance with the land in order to learn what I don’t know. What I don’t know about myself, and what I don’t know about the land I am on.

After spending a few hours every day writing an acknowledgement over and over for a month or two, I am left in a kind of prayer space. And when I perform the work, I feel my body supported by something more than the potentially violent gaze of the spectator. I feel supported by the objects I am touching, holding, and letting go into space. I feel the presence of my ancestors holding me. The shaking of the joss sticks installs an involuntary tremoring in my body that wakes me up to the autonomic nervous system responses in my body. The chance-operated landscape that the fallen objects create is a sort of chaos that disrupts the known parts of the world, the known parts of me. And my hope is that the body of the performance tremors into the body of the audience; and in that contact between two bodies, in that touch of two somatic systems, there is a possibility that the spectator might become a participant. That we might then dance together, the audience and I. I hope for that because the body that is dancing WITH someone is different from the body that dances FOR someone. To dance WITH is to be in a reciprocal energetic relationship with another. To dance FOR feels transactional and less sustainable.

The early iterations of this work were in the black box, which frustrated me because it felt like I was still dancing FOR, not dancing WITH. Eventually, this work has become a durational piece that I perform only outdoors with the caveat that I be allowed to burn the objects with the public. In this way, the work is now an invitation for the public to partake in a communal ritual of acknowledging one’s own ancestors and the ancestors of the people whose land we are on.



Lee Su-Feh and audience in *The Things I Carry*. Photo courtesy of Yvonne Chew.

Since *Everything*, I have made two works, *Dance Machine* and *The Things I Carry*—and they both are land acknowledgments in different forms that invite the public into different kinds of embodied experiences.



Lee Su-Feh in *Dance Machine*. Photo by Trung Dung Nguyen, courtesy of Festival Trans-Amériques.

Like *Everything*, they both conceptually trouble the flat surfaces of the settler-colonial imagination by literally having stuff on the floor: a bed of cedar (*Dance Machine*) and a blue tarp that crumples up (*The Things I Carry*). Like *Everything*, they both represent an exploration of what it means to be my immigrant body and all it carries, dancing on Indigenous territory and inviting others into this exploration. I wouldn't call them land-based in the sense that one gets immediate proprioceptive stimuli from nature; they were more like responses to the land as a political idea. Or a response to the construct of cities, which is where I have performed them, as layers of human construction over the surface of the actual planet. Like *Everything*, these works have embedded in them, preparations—rehearsals, writing, meetings, visits to places: protocols that demand research and engagement with the land on which they are being performed.

In *Dance Machine*, for example, I gather a group of artists from the place and from afar. Not only do the artists spend time getting to know one another, dancing, working, resting, talking through the interconnected materials of the installation, but they also spend a day visiting with an Elder or representative of (one of) the host nation(s) that the *Dance Machine* is in. The objective here is to listen to history told from an Indigenous perspective as a way to bypass the settler-colonial narrative. The invitation to the artists is simply to listen and situate themselves in relation to this history. For some artists, the process includes engaging the public in their learning/teaching process. For others, it is a more private process. I practise letting go of outcomes. (I am not always successful.)



Lee Su-Feh in *The Things I Carry*. Photo courtesy of Graham Isador: www.instagram.com/presgang.

The inquiry in these works has led me to my current project, *The Territory Between Us*.

The Territory Between Us is a network of dances, exchanges and actions that are based on a mask carved by Bracken Hanuse Corlett (Wuikinuxv/Klahoose). This mask was carved in response to a year of conversation between me and Bracken: these conversations were between two artists getting to know each other, conversations that touched on our relationship to this territory, to art, to traditions, and to our families and loved ones. We would talk of the mask as a representation of the territory between us: me, an immigrant and him, Indigenous to the west coast of Turtle Island. We would refer to the mask as “The Territory Between Us.”



Mask and Bracken Hanuse Corlett. Photo courtesy of Dean Hunt.

My sole task on receiving the mask was simply to submit to it, to be guided by it. At this point, the question I was interested in was: how might the human body write choreography into a mask and then, how might the mask write choreography onto human bodies? In a way, I was asking Bracken, the carver, to choreograph me.



Lee Su-Feh and mask on Gilford Island, Kwakwaka'wakw territory. Photo courtesy of Jason Macnair.

Bracken Hanuse Corlett's practice fuses digital media, audio-visual performance, writing, painting, sculpture, and drawing, combining traditional Indigenous iconography and history with new media and concepts. While he had studied carving with renowned Heiltsuk artists (also his cousins), Bradley Hunt and his sons, Dean and Shawn Hunt, he had not dedicated his career to it. This project allowed Bracken to explore his carving skills while supported by his mentors, his cousins. It allowed me to reflect on my early dance training and performance experience in Malaysia, where I was privy to my first dance teacher, Marion D'Cruz's explorations with masks. So, while the mask is informed by both our respective traditions and histories, this exchange was between two contemporary artists, and the mask is not a traditional one.

In initiating this exchange, I had imagined a process where I would put on the mask, listen to what it demanded from my body, and simply make a dance for it. I wanted to create a score for the mask in collaboration with other dance artists—a score that came out of us all listening to the mask—so that the mask, along with this score, could be danced by anybody willing to submit to its demands.

The big surprise, and one of the answers to the question “Can you describe one moment in your personal performance history when the land or site surprised you and/or redirected your movement choices?” is this:

The mask said, “No. You may not dance with me. Yet.”

I heard the no as a feeling of unease in my body when I put it on in front of the other dancers.

I heard the “no” in the questions and uncertainties of the dancers who had put on the mask.

I heard the no in the look of uncertainty I noted in colleagues to whom I showed the mask.

Bracken and I talked about the politics, the permissions, the historical hurts that have happened in a long history of settlers taking things that weren't theirs to take. He talked about the responsibility he felt in carving into a raw piece of cedar. He talked about carving as an act of responsibility to the

life-giving energy that was in this cedar. And when he gave me the mask, he was giving me the responsibility to continue taking care of it, to listen to the cedar.



Lee Su-Feh and mask. Photo courtesy of Jason Macnair. A moment in a consultation dance with the mask on Gilford Island in the Broughton Archipelago, in Kwakwaka'wakw territory.

I decided to listen to this “no.” I stopped trying to “make” a dance with the mask and recognized the mask instead as a being with a life of its own, not an object for me to impose my will upon. This was the submission I had been looking for, but it wasn’t exactly what I had in mind! But I’m going with it. Because this is also dancing.

Since then, the mask has become a witness to my process. I feel its presence as a witness to all that I do, and as something I have to be accountable to. The mask is, after all, a part of a fallen cedar. It is part of the land, and when I listen to it, I am listening to my responsibilities to the humans and non-humans that constitute the land itself.

So, I take the mask into the studio with me. I take the mask on my travels. I take the mask into the land (along with an assistant to help me record the moments). I have what I call “consultation” dances with the mask: these dances are private moments of intimacy with the mask, sometimes in studio, but most often in the forest, by the ocean. To learn about what I don’t know.

I look through its eyes, but they do not line up with mine. So, I have to move my body in response to this new view of the world. I have to listen harder. Feel more through my skin, my feet, my whole body. I make sounds in the mask as a way of echo-locating myself. I listen harder to the sounds around me as a way to figure out where I am.

When I am behind the mask, I feel quite far from humanity. Sometimes this feels like loneliness, and so I reach out to others. I learn to ask for the support and connection I need. Out of this need has come a set of writings—scores for dancing across distances. These scores get shared with other people—sometimes artists, sometimes not—and they are a way of being in relationship with one

another. Out of this reach out to others, new dances, new music, new songs have emerged. But along with them, the mask (and the land it carries) reminds me to figure out my responsibilities to my collaborators and to the works that emerge out of our relationships. Responsibilities that are beyond those that can be easily framed by capitalism and colonial ideas of property and ownership.

I'm not sure it changes my vocabulary other than in superficial ways. But it has changed how I position myself to dancing. I see dancing now as a way of knowing, as a way of relating.



Screenshot of an “algorithm” that has come out of the listening to the mask. Content by Lee Su-Feh. This algorithm is a set of instructions for dancing that was recently published in the *Capilano Review* (Lee 2021):

An algorithm for dancing with the planet.
An algorithm for dancing with your beloved.
An algorithm for dancing from enough-ness.
To practice love in the midst of distress,
To practice care in the midst of distress.

Acknowledgment

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