

## Performance Matters

# The Speed of the Land: An Interview with Karen Jamieson

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Article abstract

Settler scholar and artist Alana Gerecke interviews settler choreographer Karen Jamieson about her decades-long career making site-based and community-engaged dances. In particular, Jamieson reflects on what she has learned about the complexities of orienting dance practice toward deepening connection with land, and of working with Indigenous collaborators in a respectful and non-extractive way.

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## INTERVIEW

### The Speed of the Land: An Interview with Karen Jamieson

Alana Gerecke

It is a rainy winter day in Vancouver, on the unceded traditional territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy<sup>ə</sup>m (Musqueam), Sk̓w̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətəl (Tseil-Waututh), and I have just climbed the steep steps into Karen Jamieson's old character house in the Mount Pleasant neighbourhood—the city's first suburb. I've been here before, seated at the end of the long, wooden table that fills her living room—a table, she tells me, that she adopted from a performance space her company used early in her career. I have been engaging with Jamieson and her place-based dance practice for a decade now, learning from her about her explorations of topography, settler-Indigenous relations, and the role of dance in creating bridges between ecosystems, cultures, and animacies.

Jamieson is a settler dance artist who has made significant contributions to place-based dance, community-engaged performance, and settler-Indigenous collaborative practice. She is currently in the midst of a multiyear retrospective project, *Body to Land*, which has her returning to three pieces she choreographed in the 1990s: *Stone Soup* (1995–97), *The River* (1998), and *Gawa Gyani* (1991–94). Jamieson's return to these key works is motivated by an effort to share with the next generation of settler artists what she has learned about collaborating with Indigenous artists and communities. I am in the early stages of a creative process with Jamieson, building on my practice-based doctoral research on *The River*. Together, we plan to co-direct a reimagined version of this site-based, processional, and community-engaged piece in spring 2025. Because Jamieson focuses on *Stone Soup* and *Gawa Gyani* in our conversation, I'll offer a bit of context to set up each piece.

*Stone Soup* took the form of a five-week tour of Northern British Columbia that sought to perform a “Gluk”—which the [Karen Jamieson Dance company website](#) defines as a Gitksan concept meaning “a ceremony of redoing a wrong.” Central to this ceremony was the process of asking permission, according to Nation-specific protocols, to enter and dance. Jamieson's return to this piece has resulted in the development of *Gluk* (2024), a documentary that revisits the communities *Stone Soup* travelled within. In *Gluk*, many of the Indigenous collaborators from the original *Stone Soup* tour share their memories about the events and speak about the value of returning to these memories more than two decades later. This documentary centres around Gitksan artist, educator, and writer Doreen Jensen, who mentored Jamieson in cross-cultural collaboration from the time of their first encounter in 1987 until Jensen's passing in 2009.

Performed at the Museum of Anthropology, *Gawa Gyani* was a collaboration between Jamieson and Chief Kenneth Harris, late Gitksan Chief and co-founder of [Dancers of Damelahamid](#). The piece grew out of the conversations Jensen and Jamieson were having about cross-cultural collaboration.

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Based in Vancouver (Canada), on the unceded territories of the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tseil-Waututh Nations, **Alana Gerecke** is a settler scholar and artist of mixed European descent. Her exploration of the spatial politics of urban choreographies spans academic research and artistic practice, grounding her performance making, writing, teaching, and parenting. **Karen Jamieson** is acknowledged nationally for her choreographic masterworks and innovative work in community engaged and cross-cultural dance. She co-founded the experimental collective Terminal City Dance, before establishing Karen Jamieson Dance in 1983 as a vehicle for the creation and production of works exploring dance as a mytho-poetic language. <https://www.kjdance.ca>

Jensen's definition of *Gawa Gyani* is quoted on the KJD company website: "Sometime during our discussion, I told Karen about an ancient and still used method of Gitxsan government. When there are differences and conflicts, the two sides would be called into to discuss these differences in neutral territory for just resolution. This ancient system is called 'gawa gyani.'" In this instance, the structure of the collaboration positions performance as a site where settler collaborators are invited into a "gawa gyani" so that they might learn and have the opportunity to acknowledge, embody, and navigate differences with respect.

I prepared for my conversation with Jamieson by generating a list of questions, a list I sent Jamieson some weeks prior to this meeting. Each of my questions grows out of my positionality as a white, settler artist who is seeking to be a better guest on unceded Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh land. From this vantage point, one I share with Jamieson, our conversation considers the complexities of orienting dance practice toward deepening connection with land, and of working with Indigenous collaborators in a respectful and nonextractive way. Because of its focus on settler perspectives—Jamieson's and mine—this conversation is circumscribed by its positionality, yet I also feel like there are insights in Jamieson's reflections that can serve the important work of decolonization. In what follows, I've pulled out highlights from our ninety-minute-long conversation, selecting moments that will contribute, I hope, to broader considerations of the potential of performance to reconfigure settler-Indigenous relations. In Jamieson's work, this reconfiguring is enacted through a slow growing of relationships, a centring of Nation-specific protocols, and the effort of settler bodies to physically meet and inhabit these protocols, where appropriate—all nested within a willingness to be called out and corrected.

Our conversation starts with a discussion of Jamieson's training and early career, before I lead us toward her experimental uses of proscenium spaces, her explorations with audience placement, and her choice to make place-based dances. As we discuss her innovations within and beyond stage spaces, she notes her early-career curiosities about the power of dance to transform our relationships with spaces and their communities: "Well, first of all, an underlying thing of just being in *love* with this artform and wondering: what other powers does this artform have? What other layers and powers does this artform have? What other facets to this art form can I explore?" To flesh out this point, Jamieson describes her 1990 National Gallery of Canada commission, *Passage*, a commission sited within the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg. As she describes it, this piece opened Jamieson to choreographing beyond the stage: in rotundas, stairwells, and hallways; her company found themselves "embodying the architecture [and] playing with the space."

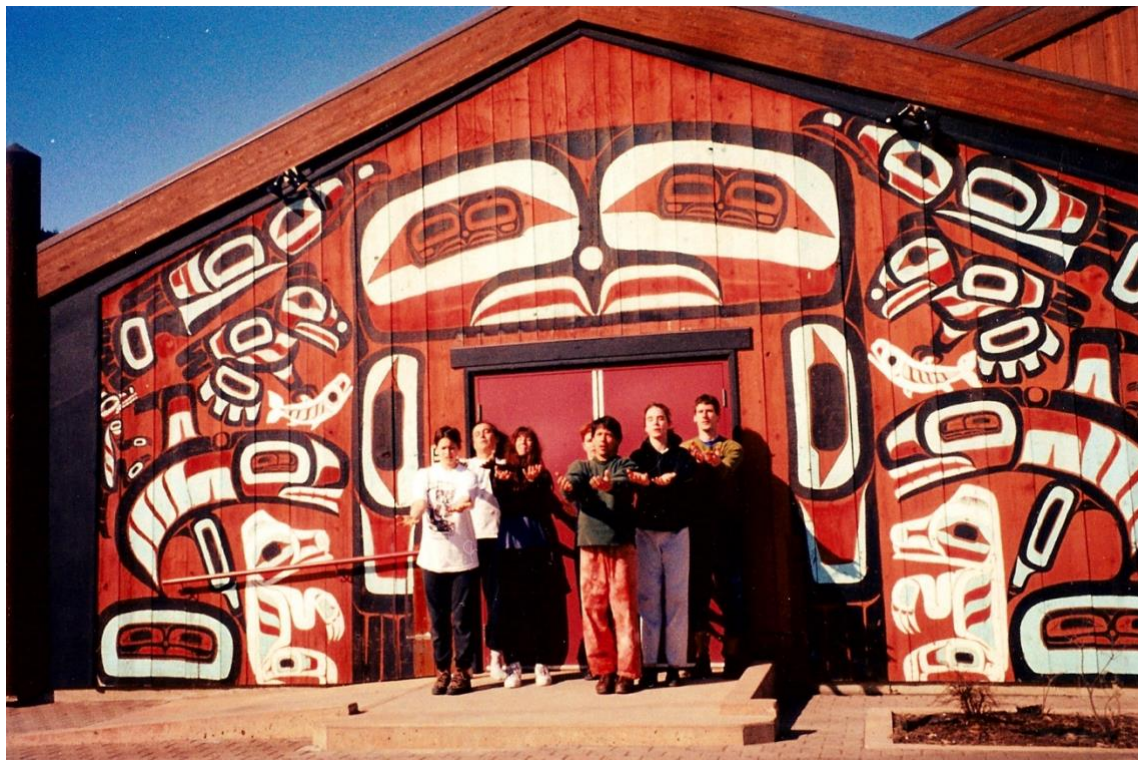
**Alana Gerecke (AG):** So this is a real shift. You're doing site-based work here. . . . And did that whet an appetite for you?

**Karen Jamieson (KJ):** Well, what it whetted is an *old* obsession of mine, which is spirit of place. That spirit of place is real: you actually can capture it through the dancing body. [As we talk, Jamieson scrolls through her website to jog her memory about piece titles and production dates.]

And then—spirit of place—then, yes, *Rainforest* in 1987. Michael Ames, the director of the Museum of Anthropology invited me to bring *Rainforest* to show there. And then [Gitxsan artist and writer] Doreen Jensen pushed back. She said: "No! It's full of appropriation." So, Michael introduced Doreen and I, and we had a chat. And it was quite adversarial. What she said is: "It's full of appropriation. You can't do this." So I was uninvited from the Museum of Anthropology; the

invitation was rescinded. But then Doreen and Michael and I started meeting to discuss the question: *is it possible to create collaboratively with white people, European, and First Nations?* We spent three years talking, and out of that came *Gawa Gyani*. *Gawa Gyani* was a collaboration between a professional dance company and a First Nations dance group, a traditional family dance group. . . .

Ah yes, and then there was *Stone Soup*: there's a big, monster of a piece—'95-'97. That piece was instigated and kind of co-directed by Doreen Jensen. She wanted me to understand the Gitksan concept of *gluk*. Actually, she wanted me to understand how the Gitksan language worked—which is much more poetic than European languages; one word, like *gluk*, can have multiple meanings that gives it a kind of poetic capacity that English just doesn't have. So, she tried to teach me Gitksan. It was hopeless. The language was simply beyond me. But I understood a lot *about* the language from trying to learn the language—and this concept of *gluk*. She explained it as a “ceremony of redoing a wrong as in replacing a rotten plank in the foundation of a structure.” She introduced the concept to me and proposed that we create a dance ceremony that would fulfil a *gluk*. It is a piece in the system of restorative justice: you fulfil a *gluk* by taking this ceremony asking permission to enter and dance on each of the First Nations ancestral lands we came to. So we did! At the beginning of every performance, we would ask people who had an ancestral connection to the land for permission to enter and dance—which they always gave to us.



*Stone Soup* dancers standing in front of Kitsumkalum Community Hall, Tsimshian territory, 1997. Photographer unknown; image courtesy of Karen Jamieson Dance.

**AG:** Ok, so then, this piece is mid-1990s, and you're returning to it now...

**KJ:** Yes: I've been observing the up-and-coming artists in the dance community—and also being asked questions like, “how do you collaborate with Indigenous people?” And I thought, I can't *tell* anybody how to do this work. But if I could, with the significant pieces, the pieces I've created over

the fifty years that I think are significant and that carry information, insights, discoveries that I *really* want to pass on—those are the pieces that I am returning to. . . . The batch of returns that I call *Body to Land* are those pieces that revealed or uncovered connections between our bodies and the land.

**AG:** And that is *Stone Soup*, *Gava Gyani*, and *The River*. Those '90s pieces.

**KJ:** Yep.

**AG:** And you're returning to them in different ways.

**KJ:** Yes, because they're very different.

**AG:** And you've just wrapped a phase of your return to *Stone Soup*, right?

**KJ:** Well, yes. As I said: deeper, deeper, deeper. I have found myself *very* dissatisfied with our original ceremony to ask permission.

**AG:** The ceremony that you had enacted and performed in the piece during the tour of northwest BC in the '90s—with stops in the traditional territories of the Wet'suwet'en Haisla, Gitksan, Tsimshian, Nisga'a, and Haida Nations?

**KJ:** Yeah, that we did then. What was so frustrating with this return to the piece, was as I discovered as I went more and more and deeper and deeper . . . , I really understood something that I hadn't fully understood the first time around, is that the relationship to land and the understanding of the human's relationship to land is so profoundly different that I could see that we had some just *junk* in the '90s ceremony. . . . Ancestral land is the place that gave birth to the people, whoever they are, whichever nation they're from, which creates a relationship to all the flora and the fauna and everything—they're relatives.

**AG:** A kin relationship.

**KJ:** Yes. What I realized is that our original ceremony to ask permission was like: "Yo, you generic Indigenous people over there, we'd like permission to enter your generic piece of land." I realized that this ceremony needs to be redone in terms of absolute specificity of land and the people of that land. Because part of it is understanding relationships to land that are deep, and profoundly different from colonial ones—and that changes everything.

**AG:** It's radically specific—not pan-Indigenous.

**KJ:** Yes. So that's what I've been trying to think about with this return to the piece. And I'll work on a re-created ceremony to ask permission that will specifically address the land-specific people of my local context: the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh people.

**AG:** The process sounds like it's kind of a re-doing of the re-doing—a kind of *gluk* of the *gluk*.

**KJ:** Mm, hmm. Yeah, and in the meeting with the family of Doreen [Jensen], her sisters and daughter—and with Russell [Wallace, a musician from the St'át'imc and Lil'wat Nation]—in coming

up with materials and direction for Doreen's honour song, one of Doreen's sisters said: "Gluk: it means *shame*." I've been told that, but I think that's what Doreen was really after. Like Vince Jackson [Chief Ha'gbil'gwaxtu of the Fireweed Clan, Gitxsan Nation] has said—and he's in our *Gluk* video saying this—what *gluk* actually is, it's a ceremony whereby the person who has transgressed cleanses themselves of the shame of their transgression. And then they are in a position to ask forgiveness. So, do you see the parallel between Canada and some of the terrible transgressions like the residential schools? We, Canadians, have to cleanse ourselves of the shame. But I have to tell you, Alana, that shame is a hard sell. There are not many folks who want to go near it, let alone wear it.

**AG:** Sit with it. Process it.

**KJ:** Have to weep in shame and cleanse oneself. Or even acknowledge that you have to take that shame on. And when I try to explain it, you can just feel people withdrawing, moving as far away as they can—even if they are sitting where you are. Because shame is a hard sell; nobody wants it. What became clear is that the European colonizers took this big *gluk* of shame and forced these Indigenous children to carry it: shame of who they were, shame for their culture, shame for their everything. And that we need to take it back. And wear it. . . .

**AG:** I know that you're not interested in prescribing a process, but I do see you mentoring folks right now, and I wonder: what have you learned about approaching this sort of work from your position as a settler, and what are you interested in passing on to the next generation of artists?

**KJ:** Hmm, well: learning to listen, really listen—listen deeply to all the layers of meaning of what is being said. . . . Which means not necessarily asking questions, but just listen to what's being said for all the layers of meaning within it.

Back then, in the '90s, we wouldn't Zoom or any of that. I had to go there and talk to people, person to person, because that's the only way. And the talk to people meant, keep your talk to a minimum and listen, listen, listen. Meeting people. Developing a relationship of trust—which takes time. Nothing can happen, nothing can be done without building a relationship of trust. [Long pause.] And taking the time that it takes to develop a solid ground to work from. And that's hard for us Western thinkers. I remember being told, somewhere up in Gitxsan territory, "You're just not going to be able to go at the speed you're used to going. It's like you're used to going at the speed of somebody skiing over the glacier down the hill. Think, rather, the speed of the glacier itself as it moves. That's the speed you've got to go."

**AG:** The speed of the land.

**KJ:** "And if you can't slow down to that speed," they told me, "you're not going to get anywhere." So for me, you know, dependent as I am upon funding bodies who are expecting you to bang out a piece a year, you've just got to say: it takes time. Just accept that, please. Because that's how it's goes. So: slow, listening, and being ready to completely change your ideas about something. You may go in with an idea, what it is you want to do and how it should unfold: be prepared to change all of that—if you're offered information that doesn't fit in with that. Be prepared to change: flexible, fluid, patient.





KJD dancers and Spirit of the Kitlope dancers on a boat heading to Kemano, BC, Haisla territory, 1997. Photographer unknown; image courtesy of Karen Jamieson Dance.

**AG:** I feel like there's also something I've seen in your career about continuing to show up—even when it's uncomfortable, when you've been called out, or when you've made a mistake.

**KJ:** Oh! Totally, totally, totally. That is really important. Yeah, I mean like the very first meeting with Doreen. You know if I had been put off, like [puts on a playful voice]: ah, I thought I did a fabulous job with *Rainforest!* How could she possibly say its...?

**AG:** Or just too ashamed to even show up. Just shut down.

**KJ:** Yes. That's true. I think that has been part of my *modus operandi*, is that I'm willing to be called out, told I've done something wrong, and corrected.

**AG:** Yeah, it seems to me that it's even part of your aesthetic: re-doing a wrong. And then re-doing that again.

**KJ:** Yeah, that is part of it. That's the work.

**AG:** So, coming back to that question that you sat with after *Rainforest*, thinking about whether it's possible...

**KJ:** How would you work in collaboration with Indigenous artists...

**AG:** From your positionality as a white, Euro-settler...

**KJ:** Without it being appropriation? Ah, yeah.

**AG:** So still holding that question...?

**KJ:** That question always has to be there. [Pause] Ken Harris [late Gitksan Chief and co-founder of Dancers of Damelahamid] made me understand that learning the protocols and working within the protocols is part of the work. The protocols cannot be sidestepped.

**AG:** And if I'm understanding *Stone Soup* and *Gluk*, your work lives inside of trying to meet those protocols.

**KJ:** Yeah, yes.

**AG:** As we wrap up, I'll ask you this: You have spent decades of your career exploring the social, community, and healing work of dance. Thinking about healing, thinking about redressing, thinking about connection to land and kinship with land, do you have anything to say about dance as a mode of land acknowledgement, or a way of tending land or a way of understanding land, or relation?

**KJ:** Well, of course all of us—everybody in Canada—should participate in a *gluk*. Are we going to? Highly unlikely. But that's what we need to do. Because a basic fundamental principal of a lot of Indigenous work is that just *saying* something isn't enough. You've got to *do* it. The ceremony, the physical enactment or embodiment is the transformative piece. And what is required here is *transformation*. And I guess I do believe that dance is positioned to be able to help us along this road, but I'm not sure how much we [she gestures outward with her hands] want to go down this road.

**AG:** We, collectively, as a nation that runs away from shame.

**KJ:** We, collectively: Canada. We don't want to feel ashamed.

**AG:** But in an ideal—in your practice—you see a role for dance as a healing force, a way to strengthen connection to land?

**KJ:** Yes, connection to land, connection to self, and healing the spirit. Connection to others in a very solid and healing way.

**AG:** Thank you so much for sharing all of this with me—for your time and your insights. I'm really interested in offering some of your insights to people who are asking questions like this, and who are maybe at a different place on a similar path.

**KJ:** Yeah, and there's a steep learning curve. [Laugh] I can attest to that. This isn't anything that you can know already. Because the hugeness of the difference between, say, Indigenous cultures and European culture is just massive. There is so much to learn. We have a lot to learn. Which I guess is why I think this work is important. Better late than never.