

iihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin

by

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Abstract

iihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin uncovers and puts into practice an Indigenous performance-creation paradigm. As a dancer, performance artist, musician and composer, I incorporate ritual as a way of inviting the viewer to become an active part of the work itself. My vision is to continue to investigate de-colonization methodologies in performance creation through my own embodied experiences. Indigenous Contemporary Dance has been a growing field, and the field of Critical Indigenous Dance Studies has not grown at the same rate. Historically, Indigenous dance artists and scholars have had to engage in western pedagogy and theory in order to discuss their work. We are now in a resurgence era, where, Indigenous dance artists and scholars are now able to discuss, theorize and create works grounded in Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, ethics, and paradigms. This performance presents research, context, and highly structured improvisation in an Indigenous dance work theoretically and ethically based in Cree and Blackfoot ways-of-knowing.

Keywords: Indigenous Dance; Contemporary Dance; Ethics; Indigenous theory; ethical creation

i dedicate this to

*young Indigenous
performing arts
students in post-secondary.*

i dedicate this to

*my ancestors
those who have retrieved their
Master's degrees
clearing the path
for this research to travel on*

i dedicate this to my nieces

Quinn

Violet

i dedicate this to my nephews

Jayden

Zachary

Free

Pharrell

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Table of Contents

Approval	ii
Abstract	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vi
List of Figures	vii
Introductory Image	viii
Statement of Defense	1
Background of the work / previous practice	1
Contextualize the work in relation to the field	4
Current Theory and Practice: a brief overview	6
<i>ihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin</i>	8
Reflection on process and influence on the work	11
Reflection on performing the work	16
Works Cited	20
Works Consulted	21
Appendix A. Indigenous performance research: a theoretical research paper.	23
Definitions	23
Prologue	24
Introduction	26
Background	27
Theoretical trajectory (historical/present)	28
Historical trajectory of Indigenous research methods to the present	30
Elements of Indigenous Research	30
Practical Applications – Positionality and Relation	32
Practical Applications – Land connection	34
An uncovered path – My own work as Synthesis	36
Conclusion	38
Works Cited	40
Appendix B. Video Documentation of Live Performance 1	42
Appendix C. Video Documentation of Live Performance 2	43

List of Figures

Figure 1.	Lysol Ceremony, photo: Amy Wilson	2
Figure 2.	Research photo 1, Nose Hill, Calgary, Alberta	9
Figure 3.	Research photo 2, Nose Hill, Calgary, Alberta	11
Figure 4.	Photo by Yvonne Chew, Sunday Feb 25th, 3 pm performance.....	15
Figure 5.	Photo by Yvonne Chew, Sunday Feb 25th, 3 pm performance.....	18



Statement of Defense

Background of the work / previous practice

To speak to my work is to speak to its origins deep within the land where I was born (Mohkinstsis/*Calgary*), and where the blood and bones of my ancestors are buried (*Saskatchewan*). My connections/relationships to these two places are vastly different due to the '60s Scoop and my displacement that followed. The work I create is steeped in these landscapes and soundscapes, and in a critique of institutional and colonial practices that frame them.

Prior to my studies at Simon Fraser University, much of my work was guided by commission or grant guidelines, leading me to produce work for young audiences or highly traditional dance works. I carry in my body the dance knowledge from dancing Jingle Dress, Fancy Shawl, Grass Dance, Traditional and Hoop Dance for 18 years. I have been involved in cultural learning for 20 years, elders and communities sharing knowledge, teachings, values and instilling in me a code of Indigenous ethics. My first full-length dance work (*Too Good; That MAY Be*) was an exploration into contemporary movement, but only in that it was a performance in meditative movement with a soundtrack I created myself. The research I have engaged in here at Simon Fraser University is a further development into mastering the skills and engaging in deep research methods around Indigenous inter-disciplinary performance creation and research. My interest in improvisation/composition/soundscape is deeply rooted in my own Indigenous traditions. There is potential for these to hold narrative¹, yet at the same time allow the narrative to be abstracted so the audience receives viscerally, the methods and thought behind the structure.

During my tenure in the program, I have been experimenting with various mediums of movement performance, and how colonial boundaries can be expressed in intimate and visual ways and how Indigenous aspects of storytelling are brought into performance choreography and composition. This includes self-exploration of personal histories and displacement, Indigenous research methods within performance-based

¹ For this statement, I abide by an Indigenous definition of narrative, one that holds true to the storyteller/dancer/singer/performer. This narrative may be perceived by audiences and participants differently.

works, and effective composition/generating scores. Through all of this I sought to integrate my training in improvisation in dance and music with composition (music) and choreography.



Figure 1. Lysol Ceremony, photo: Amy Wilson

In the MFA program, I started out with exploring the use of lights on skin, the boundaries that light projects, violent smells, and exploring those liminal spaces that such binaries create. In my first exploratory work, I washed the floor of the gallery bathed in a pool of light. I used Lysol wipes to wash my skin and hair, sanitizing both myself and the space, treating the objects (Lysol bottle, used and new Lysol wipes) with the utmost care, not unlike that of a sacred bundle. I created a second work that went deeper into personal histories, utilizing a personal traumatic experience with the police, highlighting my adoption and the disparate identities I was both gifted with and lied to about. *I Was Born a Little White Girl* also touched on the reality of being a Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman. This experimental work that bridged theater, spoken word, dance and composition allowed me to explore the uncomfortable ambiguity of presenting difficult topics in intimate audience placement. Eye contact with audience members exacerbated this sensation of extreme uncomfortableness. Working with another student in my cohort, Minahil Bukhari, we washed sacred fabrics in bleach, the

intimate violence of smell being the violence of colonialism and racism. These experiments guided my path into *ihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin*.

As a musician, I had not had the time nor space to work with field recordings, and during the past 13 months, I have had quite some time to capture sounds in a variety of natural locations, and was able to manipulate the recordings to create subtle soundscapes. *The PostHuman Project* was a collaboration with Amy Wilson which consisted of 15 minutes of ocean waves, slowly and subtly edited from natural rhythms to metronomic waves. The sound experience was presented with listeners laying down, the sound washing over them. Again, anxiety was experienced. With sound being the only sensorial stimulant, some participants experienced drowning sensations. The message was an alternative view on what would be in a post-human world. While some theorists include machinery and robotics in a post-human world, we explored what it would mean if post-human meant non-human. The eternity of waves was a point of exploration.

Building on this work, I decided to use my own experiences in dance along with personal histories and supported by soundscape and music composition to create a work that brings the audience into a world of my own experience. Utilizing Indigenous philosophy, knowledge and structures, I explored intersections of Indigenous queer normativity², philosophies and ethics contained within the Cree language and Indigenous self-determination. Throughout my research process I uncovered four spheres of Indigenous creation methods. This research is presented in Appendix 1. Working within these four spheres, my embodied histories and theoretical research, I created *ihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin*. The title for the work was given by my mother-in-law, Molly Wells, a fluent Blackfoot speaker.³ The title encompasses the entirety of the narrative.⁴

My thesis performance uncovers and puts into practice an Indigenous performance-creation paradigm, following other Indigenous women in contributing to a

² Chapter 9 of Simpson's "As We Have Always Known" places Indigenous Queer Normativity as a foundational philosophy in Anishinaabe thought.

³ Name included with her permission.

⁴ My definition of narrative is based in Indigenous story: one that holds true to the storyteller, dancer, singer, and/or performer. This narrative may be perceived by audiences and participants differently.

collective archive of story-being (or the corporeal documentation of truth). As a dancer, performance artist, musician and composer, I incorporate ritual as a way of inviting the viewer to become an active part of the work itself. My vision is to continue to investigate de-colonization methodologies in performance creation through my own embodied experiences.

Contextualize the work in relation to the field

Historical Indigenous dance practices are often only defined as what a non-Indigenous person sees as authentic Indian performance. Most often, this includes some type of modified powwow dance, or using feathers, masks, and in certain situations, scantily clad costumes. Unfortunately, this type of performance was supported by both the Canadian Government and the United States government in the 1970's⁵. It is known and documented that certain dances, while banned for those living in North America, were chosen to be put on stage and celebrated at world fairs, human expos, and for shows about the wild west. When Indigenous dancers were well known and celebrated, it was due to the assimilation factor. For example, Jose Limon and Maria Tallchief were two dancers who were well versed in contemporary dance (Martha Graham) and classical ballet (NYCB) respectfully.⁶ When asking my peers about Indigenous dancers, Maria Tallchief is often referred to as trailblazer in dance, as well as Jose Limon. Jaqueline Shea Murphy documents their history as dancers and includes Tom Two Arrows (Onondaga) in her thorough history of Indigenous Dance as documented by Jaqueline Shea Murphy. From my research in to Indigenous dance history and current realities I identified 4 historical paths in dance for Indigenous people. Classical (Maria Tallchief, Osage), Modern dance (Jose Limon, Yaqui) and a third path of traditional dance, which has not often been celebrated in in the public and colonial eye.⁷ A 4th path, which I go into more detail later, is a merging of contemporary and traditional dance. Due to federal legislations from both the Canadian and United States government traditional Indigenous dance was criminalized until the 1950's. Traditional

⁵ Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*.

⁶ Shea Murphy offers a thorough and well researched book on the history of Indigenous dance and how this influenced current realities of Indigenous dance in a contemporary context.

⁷ Indigenous dance is celebrated in many Indigenous nations across Canada and the United States, sometimes in secret. What is discussed here is the representation in academia and critical discourse as well as the public eye.

dance eradication was furthered by residential school indoctrination, attempts and Christian conversion and demonizing dance.⁸ It was not until the 1980's when traditional powwow dancing started to gain recognition with the formation of the American Indian Dance Theater in 1986. They toured traditional powwow dancing around the world. (Murphy, 200) Often still today, traditional dance is not given the same recognition as institutional dance styles such as ballet, jazz, tap, modern, and contemporary. Over the past 40 years, as documented in the seminal work *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing* there is a large and varied history of Indigenous dance that rarely reaches the history books. The fourth path of contemporary Indigenous dance merges contemporary and classical training with traditional dance practices and philosophies. This has led to companies such as Raven Spirit Dance (Vancouver), Red Sky Performance (Tkaronto), and Dancing Earth (Santa Fe/Los Angeles). There are quite a few dance theater companies exploring this path, bringing in theater elements as well.⁹

Before continuing, a note needs to be made a-propos Cree/Blackfoot dancers/creators. I have mentioned Mara Tallchief and Jose Limon, and I position them as the first dancers widely accepted and known by the public. These two individuals are used as a point of reference for those who may not know Indigenous Dance history. Other dancers who were just as/more prolific in Canada include Rene Highway (Cree). June Scudeler's (Metis) of Rene Highway states that "he was one of the first Indigenous choreographers in Canada to reflect a nation-specific, in this case, Woods Cree, sensibility in his work." (p. 1) Rene Highway identified was a modern dancer. (Scudeler, 1) Christine Friday (Temagami Anishinabbe, Cree) is a Canadian Ballet dancer. "I started in classical dance, moved into contemporary, dance and am now part of the powwow circle as a fancy shawl dancer working towards being a jingle dress dancer." (Ontario Presents) Christine Friday's self-identification of her journey illustrates these multiple paths. Another Indigenous Contemporary dancer of note, a trailblazer in Canada is Byron Chiefmoon (Blackfoot).

⁸ Oral history learned as a youth.

⁹ These companies travel on multiple paths, often also travelling the 5th, 3rd, 2nd and 1st paths as well.

In addition to the four paths described¹⁰, there is a fifth path that is being created now, where Indigenous bodies are moving within traditional frameworks and philosophies, but creating new movements, new dances and stories within those frameworks that are then designed to tell contemporary stories. Bangarra Dance Theater is amongst the top world Indigenous dance companies to do this. In Vancouver, The Dancers of Damelahamid do this as well within their own cultural framework with works such as *Flicker*. From their website: “It is through continual and diligent practice that Indigenous dance endures as non-static and relevant to current innovation, influence, and insights.”¹¹ It is along this fifth path that I situate my research and work.

Outside of my field there is an “Indigenous Renaissance” happening. Jeremy Dutcher (Wolastoq First Nation) coined this term during his Polaris prize acceptance speech.¹² This is happening in archeology, science, and within the arts, the fields of Film, Dance, Music, Theatre, Animation, and Literature to name a few. I perceive myself to be part of this renaissance, pushing the boundaries of what Indigenous dance can be and can mean with a solid groundwork of Cree/Blackfoot knowledge and ways of knowing as well as storytelling and dance frameworks.

Current Theory and Practice: a brief overview

Current theories of Indigenous performance are being embodied by dance companies and choreographers in Canada and the United States. There are multiple methodologies being used. The diversity of methodologies is a result of the diversity of Indigenous nations in North America, with 600 nations in Canada alone. As stated before, critical and theoretical writing about contemporary and current Indigenous dance has only begun to emerge in the past 10 years. The writers working on this research have often looked to Indigenous literary studies from which to draw theory and method. Craig Womack is a leading Creek scholar for work in Indigenous literary studies. While the introduction to his book *Red on Red*¹³ emphasized a framework for analyzing

¹⁰ Not always historical paths, as many people still engage in traditional dance, theater dance, ballet/modern/contemporary and merging. They are still valid, alive, and well-travelled.

¹¹ <https://damelahamid.ca/our-work/current-productions/>

¹² <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2018/09/20/jeremy-dutcher-puts-spotlight-on-indigenous-renaissance-in-canadian-arts-scene.html>

¹³ Womack’s introduction to *Red on Red* is reprinted in *Learn, Teach, Challenge*.

Indigenous literature as well as positing Indigenous literature as its own canon and not an addendum to hegemonic literary studies, the following idea is what I would like to apply to current theories around Indigenous performance creation.

I seek to examine these histories to search for those ideas, articulated by Indian people, that best serve a contemporary critical framework. More specifically, in terms of a Creek national literature, the process has been based on the assumption that it is valuable to look toward Creek authors and their works to understand Creek writing. My argument is not that this is the *only* way to understand Creek writing, but an important one given that literatures bear some kind of relationship to communities, both writing communities and the community of the primary culture, from which they originate. (Womack, 242)

I would like to emphasize the last sentence in relation to the first part of the quote. Indigenous dance also bears relationship to communities, the dance community at large and the community from which the choreographers and dancers belong or to use Womack's word; originate. Instead of Creek writing, shift the origin of writers to the origins of the choreographers/dancers. The relationship of the *performance-creation* to origins then starts follow lines to communities, and thus to methodologies grounded in those communities. Michelle Olson (Raven Spirit Dance), Santee Smith (Kaha:wi Dance Theater), Sandra LaRonde (Red Sky Performance) will all have different creation methodologies and *performance-creation* as they each identify as belonging to their own communities, which are vastly different from each other. Like Womack, the theory presented here is one of many, and should not be taken as apodictic, but one of many paths, petals, roots, beads.¹⁴

Many dancers/choreographers are participating in resurgence of Indigeneity. I identify with Michael Elliot's resurgence overview to discuss emerging resurgence theories in current dance practices.

It centres on three basic contentions: (1) that colonialism in the Canadian context is an active structure of domination and fundamentally oriented towards the elimination of Indigenous societies rather than merely their subjugation; (2) that the prevailing normative-discursive environment powerfully reflects these underlying imperatives despite apparent shifts towards better addressing colonial injustice; and (3) that Indigenous peoples must consequently seek to turn away from this hostile environment wherever possible and channel energies into independent programmes of cultural, social, spiritual and physical rejuvenation. (61)

¹⁴ As per Absolon's re-search terminology, chapter 1 and 2, p. 12 - 36

It is the third point that applies to contemporary Indigenous dance. Dancers are forging paths in their own environments, while perhaps using western technology and resources, but firmly grounded in Indigenous epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodologies. By this grounding, and creating environments for *performance-creation* that are separate from colonial structures of domination and elimination, the resurgence of Indigenous performance arts grows. I use the word *creation* instead of composition or choreography as the Indigenous creation of work often comes from a different ontological practice than western theater/dance/music.

ihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin

As an Indigenous performance artist, academic and researcher, I refuse to relate my work, methods, process and theory to the academic tradition in the arts of western philosophy that is usually based in Descartes, Delueze, Liebnez, Spinoza, Whitehead North and many others. As a fellow Indigenous artist-scholar Roxanne Charles (Semiahmoo) said to me “you have knowledge and theory all around you”¹⁵. Theory is drawn from the land, and theory-thinking seeds in the bush/on the land/on the water.¹⁶ In the sciences, there is a concept emerging that validates aural traditions and Indigenous knowledges. TEK is *Traditional Ecological Knowledges* and has “been recognized as complementary and equivalent to scientific knowledge” (Kimmerer, 432). This practice, when connected to the concepts written by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Anishinaabe) on Indigenous self-determination, a framework that validates self-knowledge and land-theory for performance-research starts to emerge. I acknowledge that these systems of information have existed apodictically since time immemorial in Cree and Blackfoot culture. Because of this, I can write these concepts as grounding my historical and theoretical approach by centering Indigenous thought practices in research and creation methodologies. During my readings, I came across a quote from Willie Erminskin’s *Aboriginal Epistemology*: “Fragmentation has become embedded in the Western world-view and is the cornerstone of Western ideology. Aboriginal people should be wary of Western conventions that deny the practice of inwardness and fortitude to achieve transformative holism” (Ermine, 103). It struck me as a good theoretical starting point to the creation process for *ihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin*.

¹⁵ Conversation on October 18th, quoted with permission.

¹⁶ Simpson, Absolon, Ermine

Apsey's research also positions inwardness as a common theme/concept in Indigenous dance, and illustrated the common themes in a constellation of Indigenous dance elements (Apsey, 76 - 80). Inspired by these ideas, I started a journey of inwardness towards the work of *ihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin*.



Figure 2. Research photo 1, Nose Hill, Calgary, Alberta

At the very beginning of *ihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin* I went out to Nose Hill. I had just finished reading *Violence Against Indigenous Women* and had finished sketching out a work for class about Missing and Murdered Indigenous women and was carrying quite a bit of pain. Reading *As We Have Always Done* I could familiarize myself with Simpson and taking myself to the land to connect, think and heal. I was frustrated with the lack of power of Indigenous women, and my own lack of power. I knew that I needed to share this pain but within the framework of my MFA degree. After putting my tobacco down in the way that my Nana taught me, the visioning for *ihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin* started. Many things intertwined for this specific performance; the searching for metaphor, the searching to validate my research through Indigenous methods, to put my pain in research terms and into a full-length work, a place to start, and how I would be accountable to my own community, and who that community even was. As I stared around the spot I had chosen my eyes were drawn to the rocks strewn everywhere. (Fig. 2) Some were just peeking out of the earth, and others were sitting on top of the grass. Orange lichen decorated some, and yet others

were stained a deep ochre. (Fig. 3) Some were seemingly haphazard, or perhaps dropped by a child too tired to carry them anymore. Some were perhaps there since before time, and just years of erosion exposing them to air. Just over the knoll, there lay a large stone circle, placed there at a spiritual point by elders of the 4 Blackfoot Nations of the Confederacy. Nose Hill holds ceremonial importance for and with the Niitsitapi (Blackfoot people), and there is archaeological evidence of tipi rings, sacred circles, and burials. When I was a child I spent many hours on Nose Hill trying to forget my own grief and pain from bullying, loss, and trauma. This tradition, known to me or not, has been passed down through generations of Indigenous bodies fasting, praying, dancing, celebrating, being in ceremony, and living on the hill. As I looked at the stones, I felt a deep pull towards the stories that these rocks had witnessed and held over millennia. I remembered an excerpt of *Spine of the Mother* by Starr Muranko that I had seen at the Coastal First Nations Dance Festival in 2017 (March), and the deep connection that stones have to story. (Muranko, 153). I also remembered the role of the stone in creation, and the sacrifice stones made to carry our prayers. This story is translated and written in the epic *Ahtakakoop* (Christenson, 6) I did not know yet how I would bring these stones into the work, but I did know that they would be important co-collaborators. The process that I engaged in is written about in *As We Have Always Done* through thinking-with and thinking on the land. (Simpson, 102) More than once through this process have I taken my thinking home¹⁷ and taken books out to these places to be read. This process has also been in-studio¹⁸, dancing with these texts (also on the land) and physically embodying these ideas, using somatic and theoretical research on different levels.

¹⁷ By home I mean Ghost River, Nose Hill, and various places around southern Alberta that hold significance to me.

¹⁸ In-studio sessions happened in Calgary and Vancouver.



Figure 3. Research photo 2, Nose Hill, Calgary, Alberta

Reflection on process and influence on the work

By following Indigenous Methods of Inquiry¹⁹ and Indigenous ethics when working with land, I felt a grounding and a permission granted. I knew that the rocks from Nose Hill were not to be physically moved. My initial research process started off with sound gathering from a coulee. I recorded the sounds of footsteps, the wind, small grasses, and plants. This was a first research phase that happened during the winter in -35 degrees. In the last few minutes of battery of my devices, I was trying to record the sound of trees, but they were not speaking. As I was freezing in my boots, my hands red from the wind-chill, a raven came flying by. It was speaking as it flew, and it was looking at us intently. I moved the sound recorder to better capture the Raven.

I have had to explain the concept of non-human beings expressing consent through the course of my degree. This concept is deeply rooted in Indigenous

¹⁹ See research paper, pp. 14

philosophy and ethics, and was one of the first teachings I learned. Plants express consent by willingly being pulled from the ground. Those that are not ready, do not leave the earth easily. For the sound, the trees were not speaking, but a Raven that had been watching us chose to speak. This is how much of the sound recordings were collected. I trusted in the agency of the beings to communicate consent by speaking or not speaking.

Some people may or may not write ceremonial rites into academia.²⁰ I chose to acknowledge my process in order to continue accountability to those who may read this after it is published. My teachings have guided me every step of this process.

This same philosophy guided my gathering of stones. While I specifically chose both Bow River and Ghost River for gathering locations, and I knew that there must be rocks, I was open to all possibilities of what the experience could be. My first gathering happened on the Bow River. I put out tobacco, and proceeded within cultural protocols to gather the rocks. I will not delve deeper into this process for the purposes of this paper. I did, however, go deeper into sharing process during the talk-backs at my performances, accountable to elders and other Indigenous people who attended. At first, I was choosing smaller rocks, and eventually larger and larger rocks started being collected. The weight of these rocks became at times a burden and sometimes a comfort. While 8 of them were from the Bow River, halfway through my creation process, I knew that I needed that river connection from my childhood. I went back to the Ghost River, and collected the remainder of the rocks following protocol, and journeyed back to Vancouver.

While I was at the Ghost River, I filmed and recorded images/sounds from the river and rocks. This was the place I grew up, the home, the river that changed every 4 or 5 years, a river I learned to swim in, to work with, to honour, that watered my family, and joined the Bow river downstream. So many memories, and I wanted to bring that connection, that land, into the studio with me. I wanted to share the strength of my land-connection with the audience, as I was moving through the space.

²⁰ Absolon discusses “preparation” and includes tobacco offerings as part of this process. p. 25.

After a year of gathering, reading on the land, dancing at the rivers and on Nose Hill, I went back into the studio with my images, sounds and movements. At this point, I was still fresh from the Movement Culture training by Charles Koroneho (Maori), having taken part in a Shadbolt Center for the Arts training series. Koroneho worked to develop dancers inner dance landscapes with participants, building from the liminal space mitigated through Maori philosophies of mourning. I had created a base landscape of movements and these also formed a base set of movements for this piece.

I engaged my somatic blood knowledge activation²¹ in my process. I trusted the impulse and space of my ancestors. Working with the image and form of ribbon skirts, I explored building landscapes with the fabric, imitating the shape of stones with fabric, and worked with the spatial movement restrictions of the skirt. I ended up making 3 skirts to continue my work. I fabricated a large 7-foot skirt with deep brown fabric that had swirls woven in the design. The second skirt was a large 5-foot skirt, a deep blue embroidered with blue roses in a tight pattern. The last skirt was a pencil-ish skirt in a tartan that resembled residential school patterns.

The brown skirt I called my *land-skirt*. Working with this skirt quickly became frustrating. At the same time, I was working with each rock, one-on-one. Each rock had a 5-10-minute solo in-development. I was drowning in the skirt and unable to move. An image came into my head, with me pulling these rocks around the room. Rebecca Belmore (Anishinaabe) had a performance piece where the audience placed rocks on her dress until she could no longer move.²² This image of this stuck in my head, and I continued to work with imagery, weight, and cultural knowledge. What came of this in-studio exploration was a shedding of skirts, from the *land-skirt* to the blue roses skirt (*my-colonial-skirt*) to my *residential-skirt*. I cut down all the solos to 3 important rocks. For source material, I started working from a monologue that was created in my 1st year studies; *I was born a little white girl*.²³

²¹ See page 21 of my research paper.

²² I searched for a reference/name to the work, but I could not find a reference. I reached out to colleagues, and while they know of the performance too, they also did not have a name, year, or place of performance.

²³ *I was born a little white girl* was developed in a studio class with Dr. Jin-Me Yoon. I used narrative from when I was born and adopted to my first encounter with the police, realizing the

As I got deeper into the creation process, I started building layers of meaning, literal representations, comments on modern dance practices, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, my own life narrative, and Indigenous philosophical thought and method.

While in my creation process, I read Katie Apsey's *Embodied Sovereignty*. One of her images struck, and that was an analysis of Indigenous Performance Theory (p. 76-80), which offered a list of 11 themes that relate to Lara Evan's (Cherokee) 9 spheres of performance (Apsey, 76). I found that the work that I was beginning to generate fell into their theoretical models easily. As I was trying to remove the dance from my dance and to require a meditative present-ness in my performance, the first theme from Apsey resonated: "*Embodiment rather than performance" (p. 78) Reading articles by Floyd Favel, Rulan Tangen and Willie Ermine, I saw myself aligning with Blackfoot and Cree teachings, presenting the outward effects of an inner journey through embodiment in a work for an intimate audience. The rest of the list is as follows:

- *The Inseparability/Interconnectedness of art forms (dance, music, visual, oral)
 - *The creation of sovereign space/Sacred space/Alternative space
 - *literal healing/Working with trauma with the body/Dealing with effects of colonization
 - *Combating stereotypes and expectations
 - *Fusion, inseparability, and interdependence of "contemporary" and "traditional"
 - *Self-Representation and authority over cultural representations
 - *Access to Blood Memory and essential imagery through bodily experience
 - *Dance as embodiment of history (oral, physical)/ Embodiment of Knowledge
 - *Aboriginal methodologies/ Experiential learning/Community Involvement
 - *Reciprocal relationship between the performer and the audience
- Embodying Sovereignty: Dialogues with Contemporary Aboriginal Dance, p. 78*

All these themes can be directly mapped onto my four spheres of Indigenous creation as well.²⁴

I must make a note of my choice of audience placement. I had the opportunity to explore audience placement with my studio work and open studio showings. I kept wanting an intimate experience that brought the audience close into the work, but still allowed the audience members to choose to be distant. When Indigenous storytellers tell a story, they bring you into the narrative, so that even if you did not know the subject of

racial privilege my Dad had and personal stories of Missing and Murdered Women in my life. For my graduating project, I explored specific moments and removed the monologue.

²⁴ See research paper in appendix.

the story, you felt an immediate intimate connection with the family member. This is my experience of Blackfoot story and narrative, and Cree storytelling. The “audience” was not so much audience but a participant with self-choice as to how involved they would want to be. I wanted to re-create this in the studio as I shared my life narrative. With this, I chose a semi-circle format, with audience close, but not too close, so that the audience did not feel imposed-upon. I chose not to perform in the round, as I was working with projections, and in-the-round is not conducive to projection screens. By placing the speakers in behind the audience, they would be enveloped in sound, furthering the intimacy of the work.

One of my research questions was how do I connect to the land, and how can I represent that land-connection in my graduate work? To do this, I decided to center the images and video in the dancing area, the image taking up large surface area (both floor and wall), to give them their own durational presence and soundscape. For this effect, people would sit in a visual, with the sound, and bring the land into the studio.



Figure 4. Photo by Yvonne Chew, Sunday Feb 25th, 3 pm performance

While reading *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, I was taken aback by the documentation of appropriation of Artists in the modern era. Murphy contributes an entire chapter to Martha Graham, offering a new/unique perspective on Graham's relationship with Indigenous dance. The following quote: "The INDIAN GIRL is not a threat but a dream. She is a human figure standing there at the fence of our dreams always. The legend of Pocahontas has a real hold on us and we are never quite free from her." (Murphy, 148) lodged itself in my psyche, and settled in with the other layers of thoughts around violence against Indigenous women, the erasure from history, empty lands, and even the places I was connected to. A particularly strong image of Nose Hill resonated with that quote, the problems of prairie grass preservation, the controversy around Nose Hill and even the permissions from the City of Calgary that have to be granted before picking medicine on the hill. This, intersected with the history of Indigenous dancing bodies and the fear that governments had of dancing Indigenous bodies was expressed in Copland's request to remove the INDIAN GIRL. (Murphy 157) This became a driving force to re-claim the presence, and to problematize the ghost presence of "Indian" dancing in modern/contemporary dance. This force of reckoning with Martha Graham guided some choreographic material. For part of my process, I learned several pieces of choreography from Appalachian spring, stripped it down, and re-appropriated these movements into my work.

Reflection on performing the work

Prior to performing the work, I prepared myself spiritually and mentally to be in the slow time required for this work. During rehearsals, I always moved too fast and during the show, I needed to access slow breathing, comfortableness in space, and proximity to people I may or may not know. I was re-opening wounds and offering a vulnerability to the audience, who was then free to interpret the work as they needed to. I prepared the studio by smudging, praying, singing and placing medicine in the studio. I allowed quiet moments to enter into my narrative.

While performing the piece, I allowed myself to trust the space, trust the ancestors, and to trust the following of impulse. Floyd Favel wrote: "... and the soul of our ancestors which live in the fibres and sinews of our bodies and in the pauses and intervals." (*Artificial*, 90) Charles Koroneho shared teachings of how the ancestors live in

the space-between, in between our movements in the studio, that we are enveloped in our ancestors when we dance.²⁵

I leaned into the space, and gave myself completely. I embodied the chosen moments and let my being embody the pain and healing of these times. I grew unaware of the audience, as my dance was prayer, at the same time embodying my personal history, layers with choreographic choices in improvised composition. I had grounding moments where I could re-center before continuing onto the next section. While performing, I was aware of consent within myself. I had taken a workshop with Jacob Boehme²⁶ (Narangga/Kaurna). A portion of the workshop was creating movement from traumatic memories. To facilitate this, he opened a space of consent, telling us that we can give or take consent to ourselves, if we do not want to go deep into trauma, then we do not have to.²⁷ Bringing this knowledge into my graduating project performance, I was able to work with deeply traumatic content, yet still take care of myself.

Coulthard's argument – stressing the importance of placing our bodies in opposition to other bodies that serve the continued exploitations of Indigenous peoples' land – emphasizes a materialization of the unified relationship between Indigenous lands and First Peoples. This materialization upends the settler fantasy of land as an abstract place for development and resource extraction. ... We must be conscious firstly of how our bodies are in relationship with other bodies so that they are read not just as a mass of disgruntled others and angry Indians. We must think strategically of the aesthetics and specialization of protest in ways that maintain the singularity of Indigenous political sovereignty, and at the same time disrupt the ontology of protest in ways that ask non-Indigenous audiences to consider the issues our bodies stand for, sing for, and dance for. – Dylan Robinson, pp. 230

While I was processing the performance and re-reading my chosen texts, I came across this article by Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) about Idle No More and his call to resist “the tendency to disassociate our dances, songs, oratory, and regalia from their ontological significance as living, sensate, and what I am here calling their “instrumental” capacities to do things in the world.” (212) The questions that have arisen for me can be encapsulated by the two quotes from Robinson. How conscious can I be about my

²⁵ This is paraphrased from my notes taken during the Movement Culture Workshop in January 2018 with Charles Koroneho at the Shadbolt Center in Burnaby, BC.

²⁶ Saturday, February 2nd, 2019, at Simon Fraser University, as part of Talking Stick Festival, DanceHouse and Simon Fraser University.

²⁷ Paraphrased from my own notes from the workshop.

placement of my body to audience so that my Indigenous female-presenting body is not read as faceless? Nameless? How does this act aesthetically translate my own political sovereignty while at the same time bringing a way for the audience to “consider the issues our bodies stand for, sing for, dance for.”? (230) This question weighs heavy in my mind, as the topic and starting points for this work are political places of unrest and trauma. My connection of my body to the land was a central and grounding relationship that guided the work through all stages, and disrupted the dance studio as a place-itself. What has my dance and music done?



Figure 5. Photo by Yvonne Chew, Sunday Feb 25th, 3 pm performance

I set out to create a many-layered performance, using my own personal life narrative as source material to work with questions of land, connection, violence against Indigenous women, cultural ethics, and displacement as well as centering Indigenous methodologies and ways-of-knowing. This, I believe was accomplished. The performance itself was for myself, with the invitation of witnesses. This was a culmination of research and personal thoughts, including my experience of western dance history/theory.

I would like to have extended the work, and re-introduced sections of the monologue in to the work. Doing this would have solidified the work's subject matter as layered violence, not to be mistaken as a modern dance piece. There perhaps is also a better way to show how this work is deeply embedded in Indigenous ethics, Indigenous modes of inquiry, and Indigenous spheres of creation. Perhaps an Indigenous body in

the space is not enough. These are questions that I will continue to engage with in my career.

Ekosi – Jessica McMann

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Appendix A.

Indigenous performance research: a theoretical research paper

Definitions

Bead-design	is placing knowledge in an order so that others may see/read it easily, but still open to change/structure.
IMol	Acronym, Indigenous Modes of Inquiry
Knowledge-bead	is a container, or an object of knowledge. “Bead” is reference to <i>beadwork</i> method of research – and this <i>bead</i> is knowledge. Knowledge has a place where one can think-through it, demonstrating that there is a place for self in knowledge.
Positionality	is a core element of Indigenous research, as Indigenous researchers position self in research following cultural and nation specific ethics.
Relation	is an element of Indigenous research methods. This idea positions relationship to a thing/object, and that knowledge itself is situated <i>in</i> -relation.
SBKA	Somatic blood knowledge activation. A term for somatic research that embodies more than just physical knowledge, but blood memory and ancestral knowledge.
Smoke-Hide	is a theoretical framework that supports Indigenous knowledge gathering and placing. <i>Smoke-hide</i> is thus a set of paradigms as determined by the Indigenous researcher.
Somatic Blood Memory Activation	the activation of ancestral/blood/cellular memory through movement research and embodied movement research that works on the three levels – body – mind – soul

Prologue

Oki, Nitánico Ootski-piikis akiíwa. Tanisi, nítisihkeyason sîpihkomâmaskâc kîkway iskwew. Greetings, my name is Jessica McMann, nee Virginia Sparvier.

I was born in the General Hospital. Unknown to me, I was registered to Cowessess¹ First Nation in Saskatchewan², with a birth father from Ontario. I am Plains Cree and Sioux from my mother's side, and Northern Cree from my father's side (who is actually from Northern Alberta). From birth, I was designated to Christian Adoption Agency in Calgary, Alberta. In 1987, I was legally adopted by my father who is Irish-Norwegian and my mother who is of unknown decent, but raised by a Ukrainian step-father.

It is important for me to place myself within relation to my performance practice and to announce myself to the conversation that I am entering into as a scholar-performer. To do that, I must acknowledge where I come from and what influences I have had. I was raised as a christian-assimilated person, with no connection to Indigenous cultures or realities. I was also raised half-in the city and half-out of the city. My home is Mohkinstsis (Calgary) as well as a section of land off the Ghost River (named by the Niitsitapi). I grew up boiling water and chopping wood, and spending so much time outside on the land. I consider myself to be from the foothills, knowing the river and the hills intimately. I learned music at a young age, performing flute in church, and travelling with church bands, yet dance was not present in my life. It was not until I was a teenager that I was connected to my culture, through dance outreach programs for foster and adopted youth. What followed was a few years of identity struggles, taking a classical music degree, leaving that for a Jazz degree, and returning to an Interdisciplinary degree in improvisation, touring, teaching, dancing and learning Indigenous dances and struggling with the culture binary that I was put in. I am continually learning and existing as an adoptee Indigenous person.

Not only was I navigating non-Indigenous and Indigenous realities, but I was struggling with internalized homophobia. What entrenched me in my Identity of being a

¹ Ka'awasis was the original name, after Chief Ka'awasis, and the anglicized version will be used.

² Kisiskatchewaní Sipi is the original name, and has been anglicized. The English version will be used in this paper.

Plains Cree woman was coming out to my adopted family, and falling into the welcoming arms of my birth family. This strengthened the cultural connections that I was supported by and upon learning my family's history, a grounding and strength that has guided my work since.

I would not have had a connection to my birth family if it was not for learning how to dance powwow at 13 years of age. Powwow dance was not only healing for me, but it also instilled in me confidence, and self-purpose. The organization that hosted the powwow classes encouraged me to teach powwow and hoop dance as well as do dance shows. These original classes unlocked in me my love for dance. My dancing has taken me across the world, and to meet and learn from many different cultures. I am grateful to the many mentors and teachers who have supported me along this journey of powwow dance to contemporary dance and the connections and relationships that were fostered.

My contemporary creation work in performance art, music, dance and interdisciplinary creation more often than not resides in this intersection of Queer Indigeneity, and Indigenous ways-of-being. I am constantly amazed by the writing being published by Indigenous scholars and the works being created by Indigenous persons and grateful for the paths they are clearing in academia. For this master's degree work, I entrench myself deep in the land in which I was born and raised. I go back to the rivers and hills I grew up on, and within the city I was raised. I follow in the steps of many Indigenous and decolonizing non-indigenous scholars relating themselves and visioning themselves directly in their research. (Absolon 2011, Kovach 2009, Murphy 2007, Wilson 2008, Simpson 2017, Dector and Tauton 2013)

Introduction

There is an emerging branch of scholarship in the field of Indigenous performance, specifically dance and performance art. Scholars have taken to analyzing the productions, methods and content of contemporary Indigenous performance works across the globe. While this ever- expanding field offers hope to Indigenous scholars, to use Indigenous methodologies calls for Indigenous researchers to be sourcing Indigenous writing on Indigenous people and practices. (Byrd 2011, Kovach 2016, Absolon 2011, Moreton-Robinson 2016, Simpson 2017, Wilson 2008, Womack 2016³) During my initial research survey for this paper, there was a small body of literature written by non-indigenous people on Canadian Indigenous dance practices, and very few articles or books by Indigenous writers. However, as Moreton-Robinson (Goenpul, Quandamooka) states in her introduction to *Critical Indigenous Studies*; “Indigenous-embodied knowledges means non-Indigenous scholars can engage with Indigenous analytics but not produce them.” (4) Moreover, there is writing by Indigenous writers about Maori and South American Indigenous dance practices, and even West Coast Native dance practices, but those do not translate easily to Cree/Blackfoot dance practices.⁴ Even with the writing, there is a lack of theory papers/research into Plains dance (contemporary and traditional) practices.

The question was then raised, for me, is how can I cultivate a grounded Indigenous dance-music creation epistemology, when paths are hidden, obscured or difficult to access? How can research frameworks from other fields inform and affect performance based/somatic research practices? How can this include ethically writing Indigenous ways-of-knowing (epistemologies?)

In order to start this research, I needed to choose a method/framework through which to gather and sort knowledge. My method of research is a Cree beadwork method, which will be explained further. Through this research, I have been establishing a case for Indigenous methodologies, both in performance and research. Part of this has been to center Indigenous scholars and their writing for the basis of my own research, moving away from western- informed philosopher/thinkers. There is a gap in the

³ Womack’s article was published in 1999 and reprinted in Reder and Morra in 2016

⁴ While some ideas are transferable, Indigenous cultures are vastly different and to use Coastal First Nations dance knowledge for Cree/Blackfoot practices is an exercise in appropriation.

knowledge production as there is not much writing from Plains-Indigenous peoples (Nehiyiwak/Niitsitapi/Sioux) on performance creation/theories/methods/epistemologies/ontologies/paradigms. I make a case for Indigenous methodologies as written by Indigenous artists/scholars for use by Indigenous creatives to fill this gap. In addition, I use *Elements of Indigenous Style* (Younging, Opaskwayak Cree) to pay respect to Indigenous scholars.

My intended outcomes are to make the case for Indigenous methodologies as written by Indigenous artists/scholars for use by Indigenous creatives, to offer a path that may or may not be used by Indigenous peoples when creating new performance works, to place this work in the national Indigenous academic conversation as well as the performance conversation, and to explore how the uncovered methods and frameworks can apply to my own artistic work. My own arts practice engages Indigenous creation methodologies and Indigenous story frameworks to share knowledge, theory, story, and ways-of-knowing through dance and music performance, music composition and choreography. The site of investigation is always my body first and I situate myself in contemporary Cree dance practices as a dancer/scholar/choreographer. I do not speak for all Cree people, nor for all Cree performer- creators. I do, as stated in the prologue, speak from my own perspectives and experiences.

Background

First, it is important to state the current state of affairs in critical Indigenous dance studies. There is no established field of Indigenous critical dance studies, this field is developing. However, there is no firmly established nor solidly emerging field of critical Indigenous dance studies. There are several papers and theses that are setting the foundation for an emerging field.⁵ Critical Indigenous studies as a field in itself is in emergence. As Moreton-Robinson further states into make the case for such a field: “The build critical Indigenous studies as a discipline requires academic substance and relevant subject matter.” (5) Apsey offers a literature review in her thesis *Embodied Sovereignty* and since 2009, not much more has been published by way of contemporary Indigenous dance specific academic books. (22) There are performance

⁵ See Mi'queel Dangeli's dissertation: *Dancing sovereignty: protocol and politics in northwest coast First Nations dance*, 2015, University of British Columbia

studies readers such as *Performance Studies in Canada (2017)*, *Caught in the Act (2016)* and *Narratives Unfolding (2017)* that offer a few chapters by non-Indigenous and Indigenous authors on Indigenous performance and perhaps dance. *Medicine Shows (2016)* by Yvette Nolan focuses on theater performance and *Performing Indigeneity (2016)* has short chapters that focus on theater and dance. There are many smaller articles, as well as master theses which are important, but do not offer the wide academic substance of published books that establishing a field requires.

Noted non-Indigenous authors include Jaqueline Shea-Murphy, Carla Taunton, and Diana Taylor. June Scudeler (Métis) is a literary scholar who writes about dance, specifically Renee Highway (Cree). Dance is a literature in itself, and from this point, I seek to use writing from Indigenous literary studies. The weaving of disciplines to support Indigenous dance methods includes the fields of Indigenous education, linguistics, and visual arts. As I have encountered writing in critical Indigenous studies, I use this as well to make the case for dance specific Indigenous research methods in contemporary Cree dance practices. Geraldine Manossa, a Cree scholar, dancer, and choreographer writes for the argument that “reinforcing the position that a contemporary Cree performer can and should rely on Indigenous contexts for creative sustenance.” (2) A note needs to be made as to why I did not choose to approach my research through dance anthropology. There is a long and contested history between Indigenous people and anthropology. The field “tend[s] to view Indigenous People as remnants of the past.” (Younging, 51) and as such provides problematic viewpoints on Indigenous dance.

Theoretical trajectory (historical/present)

Before I go into the historical theoretical trajectory, I first must explain the Beadwork method and Hoop Dance as it exists in the present. After reading about the berry-picking research methodology of Anishinaabe scholar Kathleen E. Absolon (10), I traced this framework onto my own situations of learning. She identifies terms that relate to Indigenous knowledge gathering: “. . . searching, harvesting, picking, gathering, hunting and trapping.” (21) This is terminology that I will adapt to my method as well. As a bead worker, I start with smoked hide, or felt, and I gently trace the outlines of what I would like to bead. These drawings are almost always done freehand. From there, I start to bead either 1 bead at a time, or 2 at a time. I was taught to never lazy stitch, which is a beading method of putting 7-15 beads at a time so they loop out.

Beadwork must last, and be meticulous. The first work you make is to be gifted away. For my research and creation, I have decided to use a beadwork methodology. I searched for the *smoke-hide*, the beads to lay down and to gently trace the outlines of the image to bead. The situation of myself in the research is the string on which the beads are placed, going through the center of the bead, the center of the knowledge. Each *knowledge-bead* I read was gathered and sorted, and then placed with care into a design (research paper). To think-through knowledge also requires a method attached to a research framework. The method I use is *Hoop Dance*. Hoop Dance was first taught to me by Alex Wells (L'ilwat). Through hoop dance teachings I started to recognize the relationship from hoop to hoop and how they all work together around my body and my body around them to create images, stories and beings.

While I probably learned this somatically and through blood memory⁶³ re-activated by Plains First Nations dancing, actively thinking about theories of relationship held and shared through hoop dance started when I delved deep into teaching. Thus, the inter-dependence and relationship of all things to each other contribute to a successful life cycle, so must all my gathering contribute interdependently to searching, gathering, and placing knowledge. Fields of study are not silos of grain⁷⁴, but rather an intricate web of hoops. Each hoop holds its own sphere of knowledge yet overlaps in and throughout relationally with each other. Cree epistemology contributes to this point. "Their fundamental insight was that all existence was connected and that the whole enmeshed the being in its inclusiveness. The Aboriginal mind, therefore, an immanence is present that gives meaning to existence and forms the starting point for Aboriginal epistemology." (Ermine, 103) As Hoop Dance is the artistic medium through which I encountered contemporary Indigenous dance, I posit *Hoop Dance* as method. Simpson (Anishinaabe) explains that her method is *kwe*. (29) "My life as a *kwe* within Nishnaabewin is *method* (as written) because my people have always generated knowledge through the combination of emotion and intellectual knowledge within the kinetics of our place-based practices, as *mitigated* through our bodies, minds, and

⁶ Blood-memory is a term for cellular knowledge and embodied ancestral knowledge. Mithlo writes in her essay on Blood Memory that blood memory can be "the internalized memories of communal history, knowledge, and wisdom."(106). Murphy also writes about this in *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, pp. 9, 10., pp. 223, 225., pp. 241, 242., 297n33

⁷ Silos is a metaphor for atomization, see Ermine, Justice

spirits.” (29-30, emphasis mine) *Hoop dance* is the kinetic practice through which my thought is mitigated – body, mind, and spirit. Therefore, *hoop dance* is method.

Historical trajectory of Indigenous research methods to the present

Willie Ermine’s essay *Aboriginal Epistemology* is a seminal work that offers a solid grounding for Cree epistemologies in academia. The writers in *Learn, Teach, Challenge* as well as Absolon and Apsey often quote this essay. He is part of what Shawn Wilson identifies as “Recent Aboriginal Research Phase” (51) and straddles “Second Stage” and “Third Stage” (53) Indigenous research paradigms. Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree) summarizes research paradigms laid out by Patsy Steinhauer (Saddle Lake Cree) as four stages. Indigenous scholars in the first stage worked within western frameworks.” (Wilson, 52) The second stage “introduces the notion of the paradigm but seeks to maintain mainstream western influences to avoid marginalization.” (Wilson, 52) “The third stage [is] in the development of an Indigenous paradigm began a focus on decolonization.” (Wilson, 52) The fourth stage is indicated by Indigenous researchers that can “articulate their own research paradigms, their own approaches to research and their own data collection methods.” (Wilson, 54) Wilson’s thorough research outlines the history of research methodologies, and is used here to position the linear time-line of academic research in which this essay takes part.

Elements of Indigenous Research

Elements of Indigenous research include a centering of self, a positionality. (Absolon 2011, Ermine 2000, Kovach 2016, Moreton-Robinson 2016, Steinhauer 2001, Wilson 2008, Simpson 2017) Relation is another element that Wilson and Moreton-Robinson both discuss. “Thus an object of a thing is not as important as one’s relationship to it. This idea could be further expanded to say that reality *is* relationships or sets of relationships. Thus, there is no one definite reality but rather different sets of relationships ...” (Wilson, 73) Moreton-Robinson articulate this relationship with further clarity:

We understand that knowledge is socially situated. Indigenous lives provide the starting point for asking presuppositions of relatedness to place, people, and the earth.

As such, the connections between Indigenous knowledges, relatedness, and embodiment distinguish and mark the epistemological ground of critical Indigenous studies scholarship. Our tendency is not to telescope in on an object of interested by understand the object in the context of its relatedness.” (5) “In Indigenous science, nature is subject, not object.” (Kimmerer, 434) furthers the social relation of knowledge from a traditional ecological knowledge research position. The third component of Indigenous research is reciprocity, or the contribution of researcher and their research to the community. This is guided by culturally embedded ethics. Steinhauer’s story about her research with youth during her graduate research exemplifies culturally embedded ethics for which she did not have the academic language to argue, and her solution that was grounded in reciprocity. Her metaphor of the tree included community and knowledge reciprocity. (185-6) Wilson, Absolon, and Justice (Cherokee) all discuss reciprocity within research. “a responsible but not unreflective obligation to community” (Justice, 20) This leads to the fourth element of Indigenous research: accountability. As with all knowledge, there is a responsibility in accurately transmitting the knowledge created and found, and whether that knowledge does harm to a community. (Ermine, Wilson) To return to Steinhauer’s graduate research story, embedded in her work is the realization of research harm, and her subsequent working-through with family and community to protect those who may have been harmed by that research-knowledge.

The above is a very brief and most definitely not an in-depth discussion of Indigenous research elements. As noted, scholars such as Absolon, Kovach, and Wilson explore the connotations, ethics, belief systems and ideology behind Indigenous research methods. I seek here to offer what I perceive to be the foundational elements (positionality, relation, reciprocity, accountability), and how those can apply to Indigenous creations, through my own work and through the work of others, and to offer a grounding of performance research method that has not yet been quite explored, and perhaps may be a jumping off point. As Womack (Creek) writes: “a working-out of beginnings rather than endings.” (239)

This quick guide to research theory is the *smoke-hide*. A set paradigm on which to lay my *knowledge-beads* that are thought - together through *hoop dance*, myself as the string. What is missing is a *bead-design*. I will now trace this *bead-design* by cultivating/clearing-a- path/gathering these *knowledge-beads* into a theoretical design by way of a survey of writing from Indigenous performers. This body of literature of work sits

outside of critical studies and moves into performance, poetry, non-fiction, fiction, interviews and artistic mediums as well as academic literature. Simpson, Murphy (2007, 2013, 2017) and Ermine reiterate the presence of kinetic and embodied knowledge within Indigenous bodies. Steinhauer also mentions “cellular knowledge” through the teachings of Lionel Kinunwa (184): “Indigenous people have cellular memory embedded in their molecular structure and that this knowledge is what guides our peoples today.” (185) I propose that is also known as blood-memory. This is an entry point to the work of contemporary Indigenous dancers and choreographers, who theorize and philosophize through their dance works, and their bodies.

Practical Applications – Positionality and Relation

I propose that the way that dancers connect through movement to ancestors is a research method of positionality overlapped with relation. First, I need to define Indigenous modes of inquiry as this is a foundational aspect to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Absolon profiles Indigenous Re-Searchers and their research in chapter three of *Kaandossiwin*, and at the same time introduces Indigenous methods of inquiry (IMol): doing – dreaming – ceremonies – storytelling – self-knowledge (Dr. Hill by way of Absolon, 39). These methods have at the core, the four elements of Indigenous research methods that I have uncovered and defined earlier. Returning to my statement that Indigenous dancers/choreographers connect through movement to their ancestors, and posit this as a way of activating blood memory (see endnote ii.) The process to “trust the ‘voicings’ that come from physical movement work and memories released in the process” (Kane through Manossa, 38) is re-experienced by Manossa through her own movement work. (39) She is not the only dancer to write about activating ancestral memory. Rulan Tangen (Metis) discusses that “Sometimes, contemporary embodiment can [...] filling in in missing links that have occurred through various treacheries of colonization.”(21) Michelle Olson describes the process as working from hunches, impulses, moving with and through movement, “.... ‘creating from a place of kinetic knowledge, rather than thinking we have to create from a technical place, or a really codified place’. For her, the process focuses on ‘that point where you’ve got a kinetic impulse, a sound impulse, an image impulse, a story that comes up. You have to drop into those places physically.” (Murphy, Clearing, 185) Jaqueline Shea Murphy crystalizes this method as: “the process of accessing family and tribal histories through attuned

attention to the physical impulses generated through fragments of information, oral and embodied and written, as well as envisioned or dreamed.” (Murphy, Clearing, 183)

Going back to *positionality* and *relation*, I propose that these two elements are contained within doing – dreaming – self-knowledge modes in inquiry. The relationships in positionality explore the relationships to an object/subject. The subject/object in dance and dance – somatic⁸ research can be a concept, person, self, space, or anything. Floyd Favel (Cree) identifies such relationship could contain “...relationship to the ground, relationship to the song...” (*Artificial*, 90) As researchers position self within research, Indigenous dancers position themselves in research-creation, their own bodies, histories, nations, tribal identities, and associated ethics being the framework through which ancestral knowledge can be activated. By somatically examining *relation* the dancer/choreographer also triggers the “missing links.” (Tangen, 21) The western definition of *somatic research*⁹ denies the deeply spiritual and ancestral component that accompanies Indigenous somatic research. Monique Mojica (Kuna and Rappahannock) in her introduction to *Blood Memory and Organic Texts* acknowledges that this body-knowledge “is the most difficult to talk about because of its intangibility and because of its relationship to the spirit world, its connection to the land, its emotional bond to place, and its link to the healing arts.” (108) Her essay shares with readers an intimate view into her personal body mining processes and the outcome in her body of work. (108) By acknowledging place, history and the non-linear temporalities she places these physical knowledges (a broad definition of knowledges as knowing, not object) into activation. IMol is at the base of the work, uncovered through different stages throughout *Blood Memory*. Furthermore, *relation* and *positionality* are present throughout the process and work presented. The movement through “missing links”, following “impulse” and “voicings” can be articulated through the words of Mojica: “This is our reality. And that reality is inclusive of worlds that are both seen and unseen.” (117) The term ‘somatic research’ is lacking in the extra-dimensional and temporal qualities that Indigenous

⁸ Somatic research is a dance/movement application to the practice-based research method as written in “*Practice as Research: approaches to creative arts inquiry*”, Barrett and Bolt 2007. More can be read here, as this essay does not delve in to the western mechanics of somatic research, but applies the term *somatic research* to mean embodied self-research guided by Indigenous ethics

⁹ Somatic study is an inquiry into our “lived body” by observing and exploring ourselves through sensing and moving. It is simply and most profoundly, the study of how human embodied experience unfolds. –*Centre for Somatic Studies*

dancers and choreographers access. I propose a new term: *somatic blood knowledge activation* or SBKA. This term references ancestral knowledge, blood memory and knowledges that are activated through practice-based research.

I have mentioned that situating self is an element of Indigenous research. Monique Mojica centers self-knowledge (IMol) into her work, and so does Floyd Favel. While Mojica identifies the process as “mining my body” (108), Favel Starr “mine[s] the riches of our Soul.” (83, edit mine) The process of using our body/soul goes deeper than just SBKA, but a deeper philosophical process, intellectual research that has its groundings in Indigenous epistemologies. Simpson shares through the Anishinaabe creation story “that everything we need to know about everything in the world is contained within Indigenous bodies, and that these same Indigenous bodies exist as networked vessels, or constellations across time and space intimately connected to a universe of nations and beings.” (21) Favel also writes about this: “... and the soul of our ancestors which live in the fibres and sinews of our bodies and in the pauses and intervals.” (*Artificial*, 90) Ermine parallels this as well when discussing western knowledge versus Cree knowledge. Cree knowledge “was on a delicate path into inner space, the metaphysical.” (Ermine, 101)

Practical Applications – Land connection

The all relates to another integral aspect that I have uncovered in this process: a deep connection to land. In *Artificial Tree*, Favel connects the integral building blocks to being integrally connected to and “originate in this land.” (83) His example is the round dance, connecting it to a duck bobbing in the lake. (83) Manossa has explored Cree storytelling by way of personal experience, but cites Favel’s article as being central to her writing. She writes “The idea of working from an Indigenous source ... reinforces the worldview of a Native performer whose creative starting points would then originate from the land of his or her ancestors.” (28) She reiterates again on page 29: “A main distinction between contemporary Native performance and colonial Western theater is that the roots of Native performance can be traced to the lands of this country.” The first chapter of her theses is concerned with establishing a cultural and ethical connection between Cree performance to roots in Cree territories. Contemporary dancer Rulan Tangen creates work directly in the land. (Murphy *Dancing*, Tangen) While this is sometimes due to financial challenges from the current state of arts funding in New

Mexico, her work has an intrinsic land connection. In *Dancing Earth: Seeds Roots Plants and Foods, from OriginNation to Re-Generation* Tangen situates her practice directly with, from and through the land. I saw her solo *Walking on the Edge of Water* at the Talking Stick Festival in 2012. I remember sitting in the audience, transfixed by the images she performed with, landscapes transposed into future worlds, soundscapes recorded directly from the land, and narratives that bared forth land-based, living-with, thinking-through ethics. The images and grounded movements were so powerful they are forever etched in my mind.¹⁰ Her body of work “convey[s] messages of ecological balance” (Murphy, *Dancing*, 13) She is not the only one to have land connections. Michelle Olson’s work *Frost Exploding Trees Moon* also explores land and cosmic connections through a woman’s journey on the trapline.¹¹ After reading the two articles by Favel, (*Waskawewin* and *Artificial Tree*) the influence of his methodology can be seen in *Frost Exploding Trees Moon*. There is a presence in movement that bring the audience into the world of the traveller, co-existing in a feeling out of time. Favel was co-choreographer on this work.¹² Starr Muranko’s *Spine of the Mother* (2015), which I had the pleasure of witnessing in Vancouver 2015, and an excerpt again in 2017, also explores land connections. “The piece explores our connection and relationship to Mother Earth and the Cosmos, to ourselves and to each other.”(Muranko, 147)

¹⁰ I had the opportunity to present work at the Talking Stick Festival 2012, and had the opportunity to watch Rulan Tangen’s Solo, as well as work by other Indigenous choreographers. This included Daina Ashbee, Waawaate Fobister, Raven Spirit Dance Society, Dancers of Damelahamid, and Starrwind Dance Projects. This event was pivotal for me in terms of connecting with other Indigenous dance scholars, thinkers and performers.

¹¹ From Raven Spirit Dance: <http://ravenspiritdance.com/project/frost-exploding-trees-moon/> as well as my own experience of the work in 2015.

¹² Ibid.



Figure A.1. “Untitled”, photo still, by Chris Randle, November 2017

An uncovered path – My own work as Synthesis

These components of land connection and *positionality/relation* I posit as essential to uncovering a framework of creation paradigms in Indigenous performance. Floyd Favel Starr started to map a framework of method to approach Indigenous dance creation that included “reductionism” (*Artificial*, 83) He suggests that Indigenous artists should “isolate the building blocks of the song and dance.” (*Artificial*, 90) He further suggests that “... embers, the skeleton. ...” of a dance, song or teaching be at the foundation of creating newness. (*Artificial*, 90) By gathering land, *positionality*, *relation*, and ‘reductionism’ together I begin to see the lines of a *bead-design* begin to appear, colors and sizes being organized. Common threads that run through Indigenous dance performance may not always be literal or seen, but these threads are essential to a performance creation. Indigenous performers included *somatic blood knowledge activation* and is essential. Within my own practice I have activated such knowledges, aiming to work through the violence of removal that Rulan Tangen discusses in *Seeds*. This can happen through hoop dance, when knowledges open themselves when teaching, a new idea forms about relationship, or environment, or through IMoI by dreaming new dance routines.

Following impulse in improvisation or choreography for me has always been after ritual¹³ and thus open to the timeless ancestral opening that so many dancers and choreographers have written about. (Manossa, Olson, Favel, Muranko, Mojica, Tangen) As so many have written about this process, it is thus an essential component of creation that I too follow. In my work, *Untitled* (Figure A.1.) I started the creation process with a strong land connection to East Hastings. For a while I had been feeling a forcefulness to start sharing the story of my Trans* auntie who died in Vancouver. As I started this solo I was shaking, not much unlike Mojica in her process of “*I Am Sad Still*” (113) While all of these elements (land connection, somatic blood knowledge activation, relation) were visible in the beginning stage of the choreography, the final product did not show literal connections, but rather had these elements as the ‘embers’ of creation.

Culturally specific ethics also guided my work, as I was working with an old-style fancy dance shawl. There are many protocols surrounding powwow dance regalia.¹⁴ One of the biggest protocols was to not let your regalia fall to the ground. This is out of respect for yourself, and for the spirit that is the shawl itself. In *Untitled* I let my shawl fall to the ground over the course of the 4 minutes, and slowly picked it back up again. I worked with Indigenous dance knowledge-keeper Michelle Olson through the solo-development and discussions around cultural ethics took place, specifically around my decision to let my shawl fall to the ground.

Navigating through this decision also meant to delve deep inside of myself to find a path to follow. These dance works are navigating new spaces. (Favel, Manossa) Finding ethical guidelines much like Patricia Steinhauer did in her research involved thinking about care and accountability. At the end of the evening performance, my choice to drop the shawl was well- met by other Indigenous dancers, performers and choreographers, none had expressed concern over this choice, but rather found a beauty and sadness through story-telling of this moment.

¹³ I will not discuss “ritual” or ceremonial practices in this research paper. I do acknowledge that these practices are essential to Indigenous creation practices. However, as Floyd Favel writes: “This is not for show, do not sell this.”

¹⁴ These cultural protocols were taught and engrained in me starting at age 13 when I started powwow dancing.

Conclusion



Figure A.2. “Too Good; That MAY Be”. Photo still, Urban Shaman Gallery,

Untitled utilized all four elements of Indigenous research while also having the four foundations to Indigenous creation method: land, *positionality*, *relation*, and ‘reductionism’. As I look back at my emerging body of contemporary performance work, all three of my solos and one collaboration embody these components. Figure A.2 shows a photo still of the end of *Too Good; That MAY Be*, a solo work that was commissioned by the Urban Shaman Gallery around the ‘60’s scoop. Land connection is more literal, and *positionality*, *relation*, and ‘reductionism’ are subtler in this piece. The audience themselves created a container of unknown relation by sitting in a circle, completely enclosing me in the performing area. The research process for this work also followed the four elements.

These components do not together make an exhaustive nor rigid set of guidelines of Indigenous performance creation, but an offering of an academic framework for other Indigenous creators. I may not have answered the questions raised in the beginning of this paper, and perhaps there are even more questions now than ever, but I do hope that this paper offers a new path into Indigenous performance

creation, following the beginning steps by Floyd Favel Starr. From this framework, I will continue in my work to finish sewing all the *knowledge-beads* down in this beautiful *bead-design*, and the intended outcome will be an MFA Thesis performance, thoroughly grounded in land, *positionality*, *relation*, and 'reductionism'

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Appendix B.

Video Documentation of Live Performance 1

Videographer:

Chris Randle

Description:

This is the video documentation from the live performance of *iihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin* at Simon Fraser University, Studio 4650, February 24th at 1:00pm. This video presents the work in its entirety.

File Name:

*iihksiisiinatsiistostiimaonipaitapiitsiin*ChrisRandle.mp4

Appendix C.

Video Documentation of Live Performance 2

Videographer:

Amir El Ezaby

Description:

This is the video documentation from the live performance of *iihksiisiinatsiistostiimao nipaitapiitsiin* at Simon Fraser University, Studio 4650, February 24th at 3:00pm. This video presents the work in its entirety.

File Name:

iihksiisiinatsiistostiimaonipaitapiitsiinAmirEIEzaby.mov