

REVOLUTIONARY FORMS:
UNSETTLING DANCE THROUGH SITE-RELATIONAL AND TRANSFORMATIVE
AESTHETICS

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A THESIS DRAFT SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN DANCE
YORK UNIVERSITY
TKARONTO, ONITARIO

May 2022

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Abstract

Reflecting on ways in which site-specificity in dance reproduces settler colonial logics, this thesis seeks to address questions about relationships of embodiment and land in screendance, remote interactive performance, and the proscenium theatre. Through close readings of work by Indigenous artists Dana Claxton and Michael Greyeyes, I consider ways in which these artworks enact decolonial aesthetics of embodiment and land. Through practice-led research creating short screendance works *House*, *Bed Effigy*, and *Garden*, I shift my improvisational approach from site-interactive to site-relational. Stretching or transforming aspects of the form, I develop ways to use screendance and online performance to account for my actual, emplaced location as a settler. I explore kinesthetic learning to help me to grasp and transform aspects of my choreographic process that reproduce settler colonial logics. Finally, through the production of a dance theatre work, *Golem*, I explore decolonial possibilities for dance in the proscenium theatre.

Dedication

To the pursuit of revolutionary, decolonial art
and accessible, transformative arts education.

To my mum Belinda Gorman—I value our time together over the past three years.
Thank you for having the stamina to survive, and for keeping your sense of humour.

To the next generation—Christian Gwozdz-Silveira, Logan Silveira, Sage Counsell,
Carlos Gorman, Chase Harry, Zithembe Timothy, Vivienne Christie, Zwakalile Timothy,
Miles Harry, Alastair Christie, Genevieve Harry, Abigail Harry, and Oísín Alderson.

Acknowledgements

Tracey Norman, thank you for being a choreographer's choreographer. Your questions encouraged me to stay true to my craft. I appreciate your timely support getting this project across the finish line.

Patrick Alcedo, you are a beacon as an artist-scholar who makes a difference in the world. I am grateful for your generous grounding in dance ethnography, and for your rigorous and intuitive reading of my work-in-progress.

Mark Chambers, thank you for reading this thesis with an ear for the music represented in these pages, and for your astute cross-disciplinary engagement with the work.

Freya Björg Olafson, your courses in choreography, screendance, and interactive performance were inclusive and transformative. As I continue in dance studies and arts education, I am both inspired by and indebted to you.

Susan Lee, it has been an honour and a privilege to work with the York Dance Ensemble under your expert guidance. Your passion, care and insight are gifts to the world.

Jennifer Jimenez, your lighting course was expansive and inspiring. It was a dream come true to sit with you as you designed the lights for *Golem*.

Don Sinclair, thank you for your beautiful videography and stills.

Susan Cash, thank you for your sage presence during the final days of filming *Golem*.

Deanne Kearney and Stacey Murchison, thank you for your keen eyes and generous studio support.

Bridget Cauthery, thank you for your collegiality and your Somatics Working Group.

Aaron Cain, thank you for being my right-hand man.

Melisa Harry, thank you for the beautiful costumes and for joining me on a mother-daughter theatre adventure!

Orev Reena Katz, thank you for making music that inspired my work for a second time.

Meera Kanageswaran, Ashvini Sunthoram, Jessica Stuart, and Yui Ugai, my comrades in this MFA adventure, I am inspired by your vision, creativity, energy, and artistry.

Collette Murray, thank you for joining me on our great escape to the Dance Department!

York Dance Ensemble members Sophia Abbas, Kelsey Bonvie, Gabriela June Brathwaite, Olivia Burling, Reece Caldwell, Sydney Cobham, Rayn Cook-Thomas, Nicole Faithfull, Bethany McMorine, Hannah Petrie, Abigail Richens, Blythe Russell, Jessica Saftu, Derek Souvannavong, Emily Williams, and Bayley Wyatt, you were a joy to work with. Zuri Skeete, thank you for your quiet grace as you wrangled the elements.

Thank you to the York University Faculty Association Educational Leave program for the two years of course release that made it possible for me to enroll in a full-time MFA program.

Thank you to School of Health Policy and Management Chair Marina Morrow, Faculty of Health Dean Paul McDonald, and my Critical Disability Studies colleagues for enthusiastically supporting my Educational Leave. Thank you to Faculty of Graduate Studies Dean Thomas Loebel for your work toward solving the conundrum of how a full-time Graduate Program Director could become a full-time graduate student!

Shahzad Arshadi, Khadija Baker, Gwynneth Gorman, Vicky Moufawad-Paul, Spirit Synott, Yasmeen Siddiqui, and Roberta Timothy, thank you for believing in the power of art.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	II
DEDICATION	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VI
LIST OF SUPPORT MATERIALS	VII
INTRODUCTION: UNSETTLING RESEARCH CREATION.....	1
REVOLUTION WHILE IN PLACE.....	1
FELT THEORY AND DECOLONIZING DANCE	5
POSTMODERN DANCE AS DISPLACED REVOLUTION.....	7
PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH AND THIS THESIS.....	10
CHAPTER 1—DECOLONIZING THE SITE: MICHAEL GREYEYES AND DANA CLAXTON	15
SHIFTING THE SETTLER-COLONIAL FRAME IN VIDEO DANCE	16
INDIGENOUS PHOTOGRAPHY AS VISUAL PRESENCING	18
EMBODIMENT AND NEUTRALITY	19
LIGHTING STRATEGIES AS DECOLONIAL TOOLS.....	24
CHAPTER 2—REVOLUTIONARY FORMS: GHOSTS IN THE COLONIAL ARCHIVE.....	30
UNSETTLING CHOREOGRAPHY	30
GHOSTS IN THE COLONIAL ARCHIVE	33
CHOREOGRAPHY WITHOUT BODIES?.....	37
THE GHOST AS EARTHY BODY	40
CHAPTER 3—REVOLUTION IN PLACE: UNSETTLING SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE	45
CAN THE SITE SPEAK?	47
THE SITE AS GHOST ON THE LAND.....	52
GROUNDING THE INTERIOR SITE.....	54
TOWARD A SITE-RELATIONAL PRACTICE	57
CHAPTER 4—BECOMING OTHERWISE HUMAN: TRANSFORMATION IN THE BLACK BOX	60
GOLEM AS OTHERWISE HUMAN	61
LESSONS FROM SKYWOMAN.....	65
POST-APOCALYPTIC NEWS	68
UNSETTLING THE BLACK BOX.....	69
CONCLUSION: YEAR FIVE OF THE REVOLUTION.....	75
ARTS-BASED RESEARCH AND KINETIC KNOWLEDGE	75
RESEARCH CREATION AND THE ANARCHIVE	79
FROM PRACTICE TO DECOLONIAL TECHNIQUE?	85
REVOLUTION AND AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY.....	87
WORKS CITED	90
APPENDIX.....	96

List of Support Materials

Creative works presented as part of the thesis

[House](#)

[Bed Effigy](#)

[Garden](#)

[Golem](#)

Sketches and collaborations in order of reference in the exegesis

[Signal](#)

[Water Rite](#)

[Contact](#)

[Contact Reprise](#)

[Tree](#)

[Tree Reprise](#)

[Walk](#)

[Macro](#)

Prior works in order of reference in the exegesis

[Shelter](#)

[Passing Dark](#)

[The Ghost](#)

[Pass](#)

[Transit](#)

[Courtyard Sketches](#)

[Waking the Living](#)

[Fall](#)

Introduction: Unsettling Research Creation

Revolution while in place

This thesis is not the project I came here to do. Yet, in many ways, this thesis reflects questions I have been grappling with throughout my choreographic career. I am most interested in the emotional content of revolutionary social movements. In my works, I have been chasing an aesthetic of catharsis as community transformation. I have focused on how we embody and perform collective grieving in relation to war, migration, and political violence. I have followed these themes from choreographic practice into performance art, and then into curating. My aesthetic commitments have been honed through years of collaborating with fellow queer, disabled, and transnational artists; and through the movements to centre contemporary Black and Indigenous arts praxes in artist-run spaces like *Fuse* magazine and *A Space* gallery. My research is compelled by the idea that grieving is at the heart of political analysis, and that futurism is central to resistance and collective struggle. Initially, I had planned to continue my project *Year Five of the Revolution* to collaborate with activists to create and film short movement phrases based on the prompt “It’s year five of the revolution. What is happening?”

Two things happened to change this research plan. In early July 2019 my mother had a massive stroke. As I sat uploading my MFA application in the hotel room near her hospital, my proposed project felt hollow, and my mind was blank. Based on a problem with my full-time work status at York, I was not able to start in September 2019, but I was granted an Educational Leave to start in September 2020. And then, COVID. For my sister and I, this was a time of being locked out of my mother’s hospital, and of doing whatever we could to negotiate safer long-term care for her. And for the world, it was a time of crisis and revolution. By the time I submitted my thesis proposal in August 2021, my MFA colleagues and I had completed our first

year and all our coursework entirely online. I made two collaborative dance films, advised on two online performances, and designed for a third dance film with colleagues whom I had not yet met in person! By necessity, everything has been site-specific, if we include the screen-as-site. Of course, everything always already was site-specific, but the politics of COVID and the greater public discourse on anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism have highlighted the coloniality of space in new ways, and made all that is familiar in dance strange, at least for a time.

In my training in dance improvisation and in much of my choreographic mentorship, I was taught to seek inspiration from the space I am dancing in. In Western modern and postmodern dance traditions, we approach space as fundamentally physical, and sometimes as transcendental, with metaphors that extend, expand, or enlarge aspects of our biological bodies (the cellular, energy), and metaphors that magnify forces (attraction, repulsion) between bodies. We explore space and bodies in space through visual, tactile, and narrative interaction. How does it feel to rebound off this wall? What does it feel like to roll on this floor? How are our movements as dancers framed by the height of the ceiling, or lit by the light from the windows?

In my repertoire training, I was tacitly taught to approach the black box theatre (or, similarly, the white box art gallery) as a liminal space, a doorway, or a weigh station between dreams or imaginary landscapes. The arts of lighting, costume, and set design are fundamentally about constructing a place and time, or no-time and no-place; about invoking the real, the surreal, or the imaginary. As an emerging choreographer, it was my impression that a quest for variety provided the impulse to create site-specific work in places other than the black box. It was also cheaper to rehearse and produce outdoor works, and often more accessible for audiences.

As I am sure has been the case for other emerging choreographers, as I made and staged more work, I came to think deeply about the relationship of the work to the performance space.

Not just in an instrumental way, like the first time I had to quickly translate something made in a square studio onto a rectangular stage. I also started to wonder ‘what are these characters doing here? What is their relationship to the space?’ I continued to think about these questions as I made work outside, work for festival commissions, and work to be performed in public parks. Not until 2007, as I watched Rebecca Belmore rub pigment on the rocky landscape (it was a performance to commemorate Bonnie Devine’s curation of a retrospective of Daphne Odjig’s work at the Art Gallery of Sudbury, just minutes from Devine’s home at Serpent River First Nation, and from Odjig’s home at Wikwemkoong Unceded Territory) did I realize that the *site* in my site-specific dance work was not *my* site.

This thesis, titled *Revolutionary Forms: Unsettling Dance through Site-Relational and Transformative Aesthetics*, seeks to address questions about coloniality in dance theatre, site-specific dance, screendance, and remote intermedial dance performance, in the context of the Canadian settler colony. The first set of questions relate to the *aesthetics of place* in dance: What approaches have Indigenous artists developed to decolonize the site in dance and in contemporary art? What are some of the ways in which settler colonial logics have shaped the embodied and emplaced aesthetics of modern and postmodern dance? What’s at stake when we engage in site-specific dance work? In what ways does site-specificity in dance reproduce settler colonial logics? How can I shift my improvisational approach from site-interactive to site-relational? What aspects of the form need to be stretched or transformed to accomplish site-relationality? What are some ways I can use screendance and online performance to account for my (actual, emplaced) location as a settler?

The second set of questions build on my learnings about site-relationality to explore a more relational *aesthetics of embodiment* in dance: How can I tap into my own intergenerational

embodied colonial/anti-colonial awareness? What is my embodied relationship to colonial archives and counter-archives? What techniques of kinetic learning can help me to grasp and transform aspects of my choreographic process that reproduce settler colonial logics? How can typically 'invisible' settler status be made transparent through dance performance? What possibilities emerge when we engage aspects of decolonial social transformation as prompts or exercises in the studio? What are some decolonial possibilities for dance in the theatre? For years I have approached decolonial possibilities in dance theatre from the perspective of representational and thematic transformation. After years of working with disabled, queer, and transnational themes and dancers, I embarked on a research-creation cycle with the York Dance Ensemble, the resident company of the Department of Dance at York University. How would my choreographic approach translate to working with pre-professional dancers in an undergraduate training program? Are there aspects of my *practice* that can become *technique*?

I engage with these two sets of questions through two sequential research-creation cycles. The first cycle, completed in stages throughout the fall 2020 and winter and summer of 2021, is an extended experiment in site-relationality that culminated with a site-relational video that was screened in an online interactive performance. For the second cycle, completed through the fall of 2021 and winter of 2022, I worked with the York Dance Ensemble to develop my in-studio collaborative practice and generate movement for a proscenium performance. My MFA colleagues and I presented work-in-progress in October and December; we developed design elements and filmed the works in the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theatre over multiple days in February; and we edited our pieces into screendance works that were presented as an online streamed performance on March 12 and 13, 2022. Both research-creation cycles were supported by iterative, reflexive investigations guided by the theory and methods outlined below.

The following sections outline the guiding theoretical approach that shapes this thesis. My overarching approach will be iterative, reflexive, and practice-led; however, I will be drawing on the concepts of *felt theory* from Indigenous studies; and *displaced revolution* from settler colonial studies. After outlining these, I will end this Introduction with an overview of the organization of the thesis, and a note on practice-based research.

Felt theory and decolonizing dance

Speaking about workshops she conducted in 1964-1965 after a period of making scores for audiences to perform throughout the city, Anna Halprin recalls the historic shift in her work:

Dancers studied movement. But movement is related to feeling, and we had no system for looking at those feelings that were embodied through movement.... [Body-mind-spirit are] In a single impulse. There is the mind working in terms of images which think faster than the linear verbal thinking process. But images are like dreams. They go instantaneously with the movement, with the impulse to move, and the feeling. (“In conversation” 55).

The excerpt itself represents Halprin's thinking from 1990, as she looks back on that period during an interview. The date of this quote struck me because it connects postmodern exploration to the time-period when I started dancing—it sheds light on the ideological investments of my aesthetic lineage. I learned dance improvisation for performance from Dave Wilson in 1999-2000. This quote gives me a sense of the context in which he would have learned dance improvisation. I find the idea of images bypassing the verbal and connecting directly to movement rings true to the way I was trained to do dance improvisation, especially the durational kind practiced by Dave Wilson's *Dream Dancers*, a company I was part of in 1999 and 2000 for two cycles of “90-Minute Improv” performances, plus training and demonstration workshops.

Anne Weiser Cornell & Barbara McGavin (2020) describe *felt sense* as

in touch with something they could feel at the bodily level, something more than thoughts alone. But this body-felt experience was also more than emotion. And although it was

experienced bodily, it was not merely physical or somatic. Felt senses are not the same as emotions or thoughts, and they are not mindless, autonomic, physical sensations. Felt senses are inherently meaningful. A felt sense is a fresh, immediate, here-and-now experience that is actually the organism forming its next step in a person's lived situation. A felt sense is experiencing forming itself, and it can be sensed. (31)

Halprin's description of the instantaneousness of images, dreams, the impulse to move, and the movement itself seems to me to be a dancer's description of the kind of felt sense that is described by feminist psychotherapists such as Cornell & McGavin, whose work is designed to validate the 'gut knowledge' that is contradicted by Western patriarchal-capitalist science and is hegemonic common sense for many.

Writing as an Indigenous feminist and therapist, Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million developed her concept of *felt theory* in her 2009 article "Felt theory: An Indigenous feminist approach to affect and history," and in her 2013 book *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*.

Indigenous women participated in creating new language for communities to address the real multilayered facets of their histories and concerns by insisting on the inclusion of our lived experience, rich with emotional knowledges, of what pain and grief and hope meant or mean now in our pasts and futures. It is also to underline again the importance of felt experiences as community knowledges that interactively inform our positions as Native scholars, particularly as Native women scholars. ("Felt theory" 54)

Million's work focuses on the significance of Indigenous women's felt theory in exposing state-sponsored genocide through residential school, against settler colonial suppression of this knowledge.

Compared to concepts of felt sense and feeling-moving described by the white women cited above, Million's framing of felt theory opens the possibility of an embodied archive of knowledge of the character of gendered, racial, genocidal colonial violence, the individual's experiences of these, and the pathways to surviving and resisting it.

Native scholars... understood their experience of individual and communal experiential pain as a point of analysis. They are backed by current work in sociology that recognizes

emotion as an embodied knowledge.... This subjective narrative, with its inappropriate pain, cannot be tested any more than the Native's own culturally positioned narrated oral history. The Native narrative cannot be "objective." But what is objective except Western science's own wet dream of detached corporeality? ("Felt theory" 71-73)

Million argues that in a colonial context in which no amount of evidence from residential school survivors and survivors of colonial/racist sexual violence is believed, Indigenous women's fiction and creative non-fiction provided powerful evidence and analysis.

Million's elaboration of felt theory invites the settler dancer to engage in decolonization by acknowledging our own embodied knowledge of settler colonialism *as settlers*. As a settler dancer/choreographer whose practice emerged through attending to a unity of sensing/feeling/thinking/moving, I believe I have a heightened responsibility to feel/listen to/attend to narrative and arts-based accounts of settler colonialism. As Million notes, "To 'decolonize' means to understand as fully as possible the forms colonialism takes in our own times" ("Felt theory" 55). I propose that such a project starts with learning from what Indigenous artists' works teach us about counter-hegemonic knowledge of the site. This learning, in turn, can help us recognize and articulate our own hegemonic settler ideologies. I may be able to learn to feel the site of my dance practice as settled land; even more—I may be able to acknowledge that the very feelings I have about the site (the *feeling with* the space that I have been trained to do) are products/artefacts of settler ideology.

Postmodern dance as displaced revolution

In his 2007 essay "Choreography as Apparatus of Capture," dance scholar André Lepecki turns our attention to the movement inspiration of the white women who shape(d) modern and postmodern dance, as they liberated themselves from an artistic form that had been shaped in and by royal courts and the divine right of the kings who ruled them. Reading Lepecki's words a decade and a half later, the reader is struck that the acts of defiance of the founding (white)

women of modern dance emerge from settler and racial logics, which Lepecki refers to as ‘minoritarian’ in the text.

Under the Stately apparatus of capture, dance can be mobilized to the Stately war machine. Moreover, under the Judgment of God, choreographic power turns the body into a subordinate, a subjugated subject... No wonder the question of tyranny is so prevalent in the history of Western dance. And no wonder the liberation of dance from the choreographic apparatus of capture had to be initiated and carried through not only by women, but *by women who advocated for choreography a becoming-minoritarian—becoming woman, becoming black, becoming Indian, becoming child, becoming animal, molecular, imperceptible*. In this sense, there could be a whole new way of understanding Isadora Duncan’s attachment to children, Loie Fuller’s attachment to electricity, Martha Graham’s writings on the powers (pouissance) contained in [Indigenous] and [Black] dances—as each choreographer developed her own version of the choreographic, her own project of extracting dance from its participation with the choreographic apparatus of capture. (123, emphasis mine).

These preoccupations of the founding white women of modern dance should not be brushed aside as incidental to their work; rather, they are formative aspects of their aesthetic visions.

Edward Said and Toni Morrison have famously articulated *Orientalism* and *Africanism*, respectively, as Europe’s construction of itself over and against ‘the East,’ and White America’s positing of itself against its idea of the ‘African American.’ Armed with these theoretical interventions, we can surely make short work of Martha Graham’s writings. As for Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, Mel Chen’s *Animacies* unpacks the ways in which the white imaginary refracts normalcy and sexual propriety as delineating markers of race through imputed affects of ‘the animal’ and ‘the child.’ The material and ideological project of re-producing Europe and whiteness is undertaken by successive generations of artists and intellectuals who find themselves in a social universe that is bifurcated into light/dark, male/female, mind/body. Without uncovering and critiquing race-making itself, white liberals and progressives re-enforce, re-reproduce, and re-make race as they recover the negative side of the dialectic.

It is worth noting that in his essay, Lepecki follows social theory back in time to find the State, God, and Tyranny—and he finds the systematization and notation of choreography to be molded by the same. But we live in a colonial-capitalist social universe. It is true that the Stately apparatus of capture is a war machine, but it is a particular kind of war that constitutes our colonialist-capitalist world. Anti-colonial scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith have shown us the histories of anthropology, geography, and natural sciences as they became academic disciplines on the colonial ship. Christina Sharpe has traced actuarial sciences of human objectification from the slave ship to the modern photojournalist aesthetics of disaster.

I wonder whether the ‘choreographic turn’ in Western/European philosophy that Lepecki chronicles in his 2012 edited book *Dance* emerges from a similar white liberal/progressive impulse toward liberation that Lepecki ascribes to Martha Graham, Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan. Critical race studies scholars have traced similar impulses in white curatorial criticism and in white social theory. Perhaps the ‘choreographic turn’ in philosophy is fuelled by the novelty of finding liberation through embodiment. Dance that follows from this philosophical turn, or from the liberal theory driving post/modernism must contend with its role as part of a multi-disciplinary performance of whiteness.

What definitions of dance and choreography emerge when we think and move with anti-colonial philosophers and artists? In his 2021 book, *World Turned Inside Out*, settler colonial studies scholar Lorenzo Veracini traces the history of the ways in which various European radical, revolutionary, and reform movements used settler colonialism as a release valve; a blank slate or utopia to which they can withdraw as the alternative to making change in the place they find themselves; or the place to which they withdraw (or are sent) when their insurrection has failed. This idea of *displaced revolution* is a significant one if we are to grasp contradictory and

insidious ways in which liberal/progressive movements (like modern and postmodern dance) are often also settler colonial projects.

The Canadian dance policy and funding milieu is littered with settler artists who escape the oppressive practices of their primary artistic forms only to further eat into resources and space that, according to even the most mainstream of multicultural paradigms, should be reserved for BIPOC artists and artforms. In the spirit of Veracini's critique, I do not seek to 'purify' my own artistic practice by taking leave of postmodern dance to escape its settler colonial entanglements. But 'staying put' does not mean staying complacent. At the heart of Veracini's critique is the challenge to do the hard work of social (and aesthetic) transformation in the same location/social space in which the contradiction is being generated. Rather than displacing myself from postmodern dance (which, according to Veracini, would be a settler colonial move), I hope to develop site-relational and embodied practices informed by Indigenous critique.

My call to radically localize revolutionary struggles is not a call to delink them from transnational solidarity. Veracini's book narrates transnational struggles that are responding to conditions created by capitalist colonialism at imperial centres. Similarly, the settler colonial character of the Canadian state is the primary contradiction that we must contend with as dance artists in Turtle Island North. I hope to contribute work that fosters emplaced change.

Practice-led research and this thesis

Studying choreography during the pandemic has necessitated a turn toward dance in the *expanded field*. In my own practice, remote creation has led to a shift into new formal limits and possibilities. The shift to screendance (or, at least, dance through a screen) has allowed me to ask questions about what movement I am observing and what movement I am composing. Caroline Krauss coined the expanded field in 1979 essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field."

With regard to individual practice, it is easy to see that many of the artists in question have found themselves occupying, successively, different places within the expanded field. And though the experience of the field suggests that this continual relocation of one's energies is entirely logical, an art criticism still in the thrall of a modernist ethos has been largely suspicious of such movement, calling it eclectic. This suspicion of a career that moves continually and erratically beyond the domain of sculpture obviously derives from the modernist demand for the purity and separateness of the various mediums (and thus the necessary specialization of a practitioner within a given medium). But what appears as eclectic from one point of view can be seen as rigorously logical from another. For, within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium-sculpture-but rather *in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms*, for which any medium-photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself-might be used (42, emphasis mine).

If artistic practice is not defined in relation to a medium, but rather in relation to “logical operations on a set of cultural terms,” might the process of research-creation prompt a choreographer to abandon dance as a medium in order to follow their practice? When? How? Under what conditions? What's at stake?

William Forsythe's *Choreographic Objects* can be considered in the realm of dance *as a form*, but without dancers. Through his use of large scale programmable industrial robots as 'performers' installed in a gallery space, which nonetheless are still performing a duet through movement, Forsythe's work can be understood as an investigation of some of the key propositions of dance. In my own practice, I left the black cube of dance theatre for the white cube of the gallery space because I wanted to explore themes in my work that did not seem to easily fit into dance as a medium. However, this move also led to me also abandoning aspects of dance as a form—and the rules of performance art and curating came to replace the rules of dance. Rather than asking what formal aspects of dance limit my 'freedom' as a creator, it is worth asking what is being displaced when I move to the expanded field? If settler colonial aesthetics are already operating in my dance theatre and site-specific choreographic practice,

they surely follow me into livestream and remote performance, unless I (we) go through a rigorous process of unlearning and learning.

Natalie Loveless (2019) understands *research-creation* “as an approach to bringing academic and artistic tools together in more than disciplinary ways” (17). Loveless further claims “research-creation as the logical outcome of interdisciplinary, conceptual, and social-justice activist legacies in contemporary art” (9). From this perspective, as a socially engaged artist with a parallel life as an academic, this thesis will inevitably bear the marks of research-creation as its methodology. However, as Loveless points out throughout her book, the *research* term in research-creation is inevitably privileged in the academic context. From 1999-2004, when I was most prolific as choreographer, I was based in the community and in social movements; however, since completing my PhD in 2005, I have been a full-time academic—an academic who has always been a bit cranky about art-based research in the social sciences and humanities. I therefore refer to *practice-based* or *practice-led* research throughout this exegesis, to prioritize the question of “How does an *artist* do research-creation?”

The first cycle of this thesis project, an extended experiment in site-relationality, was a solo project completed in stages from September 2020 to June 2021. I created [House](#), a 1:30 minute screendance work exploring interior site-specificity and colonial hauntings, and [Bed Effigy](#), a 0:30 second screendance exploring the movement qualities of chronic illness. The cycle culminated with a site-relational video and online interactive performance. The video, [Garden](#), is a 12:00 minute screendance exploring the movement qualities of an overgrowing garden through the course of a spring season. These works were undertaken in conversation with my professors and my MFA colleagues. Freya Björg Olafson’s courses in Choreography, Video Dance, and Interactive Stage; Patrick Alcedo’s course in Dance Ethnography; and Susan Cash’s course

Issues in Canadian Dance gave me inspiration, ideas, and places to present and receive feedback on concepts, sketches, and completed work. The arc of the courses and the continuity of working with professors and colleagues allowed the connections between my choreographic experiments and my conceptual questions to spark and connect.

Parallel to this first cycle of work, I collaborated with two MFA colleagues on screendance projects that became part of the exploratory and reflexive process for the first research-creation cycle of this thesis project. I collaborated with Meera Kanageswaran and Yui Ugai to create [*Water Rite*](#), a 5:48 minute work set by Lake Ontario, at a cottage, and inside an apartment. The collaboration was a joyful process, and we shared exciting synergy about and *through* site-specificity. We also discussed language in relation to land and created the title credit in four languages including Ojibwe. I collaborated again with Meera Kanageswaran to create [*Signal*](#), a 5:14 minute work set where the Humber river flows into Lake Ontario, at the bottom of Carrying Place Trail, a major historic travel route for the Anishinaabek, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat; and at the Mies van der Rohe-designed TD building, which opened in 1967 on Canada's centenary as a signal of Toronto's emerging financial power.

For the second cycle, completed through the fall of 2021 and winter of 2022, I moved from solitary work and remote collaboration to working with the full York Dance Ensemble of seventeen dancers, working collaboratively through in-studio practice to generate movement for a proscenium production of [*Golem*](#). While this work was at first envisioned for a live audience, COVID restrictions shifted the MFA show from a live performance to a streamed event in March 2022. Consequently, at the design stage of the project, *Golem* was reimagined as a 16:00 minute screendance work. The work was shot in the proscenium theatre space of the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theatre, with lighting design by Jennifer Jimenez, costumes by Melisa Harry, and

music by Orev Reena Katz. This shift to screendance is serendipitous for reviewing the continuities and departures across the four works that I present as part of this thesis project.



Zuri Skeete and the York Dance Ensemble in Golem. Photo by Don Sinclair.

Chapter 1—Decolonizing the site: Michael Greyeyes and Dana Claxton

In my repertoire training, I was tacitly trained to approach the black box theatre as a liminal space. Later, as a curator I worked in the similarly ‘nowhere’ blank space of the white box art gallery. The fundamental starting point of contemporary theatre and art is the site as a null space, the *terra nullius* of settler colonialism in miniature. As a site-specific choreographer, I have worked to drawing the audience’s attention to who might be excluded from a particular space or purged from our consciousness about that space. I set [Shelter](#), a piece about queer youth homelessness in Alexander Parkette next to Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, and [Passing Dark](#), a piece featuring a dancer in a wheelchair in a drained wading pool in Dufferin Grove Park. Yet I still was not approaching the land as Indigenous land. Nor did I think about how my staging on the land could be complicit with or part of ongoing colonization.

Settler colonial assumptions about space in dance theatre and site-specific dance have only become more evident in our recent collective shift to livestream and remote dance performance. To attend to the ways in which settler colonial logics have shaped the *aesthetics of place* in modern and postmodern dance, this chapter offers an answer to the question: What approaches have Indigenous artists developed to decolonize the site in contemporary dance and art? A close reading of Michael Greyeyes’ use of site-specificity and embodied performance in his 2006 dance film *Triptych*, and Dana Claxton’s use of lighting strategies as “decolonial tools” in her *Made to Be Ready* exhibition, offers profound moments of learning and unlearning for me as a non-Indigenous artist. Contemplating these artists’ approaches to outdoor and indoor sites has directly shaped my approach to the screendance, video-based performance, dance theatre components of this thesis, which I discuss in the following chapters. Learning from Indigenous artists is a necessary step in transforming ourselves from settlers to guests on Turtle Island.

Shifting the settler-colonial frame in video dance

I first came across Michael Greyeyes' dance film [Triptych](#) a few years ago while I was preparing an introductory fine arts course for non-arts majors. I was immediately gripped and excited by it, and a little stunned that I had not seen it or heard of it before. It had been produced in 2007, the year after my own dance film [The Ghost](#) was produced. I was riveted by the clarity with which Greyeyes evoked and worked through the trauma of historical and present-day settler colonial violence. As a choreographer who has produced several site-specific dance works in downtown Toronto, I was astounded at the simplicity and elegance of using downtown Toronto as the site where we find Greyeye's central character, a homeless man who is struggling with flashbacks of abuse he experienced in residential school while experiencing ongoing violence of poverty and racism in the alleyways of the city. Greyeyes' work short-circuits Euro-American approaches to screendance and invites us to decolonize how land and 'the site' function in screendance and dance performance more broadly.

We first encounter Greyeye's character, who is called John Prophet in the [description posted](#) on the National Screen Institute's website, in a long shot of garbage-strewn dirt ground underneath an urban bridge. We encounter this bridge after several city shots, including shots of the Toronto streetcars and the CN Tower, so it is established that we are in Toronto, Canada's biggest city. From a distance we see four people sleeping on plastic and make-shift bedding. In a sequence of shots that come closer, there is only John Prophet, and he is alone.

While there's so much I could say about this twenty-four-minute work of screendance, I want to linger on my own moment of revelation when I realized that Greyeyes' work had overturned my understanding of site-specificity—the moment I realized that I had been making site-specific work as a settler. To describe one of several, in my early years as a choreographer, I

made a piece about queer homelessness and set it in Alexander Parkette timed to start as dance festival audiences exited Buddies' Theatre, in order to remind viewers that people sleep in parks. Despite my attempts to politicize the 'site' in site-specific, I had not grasped the fact that the land itself is colonized. *Triptych* made me realize on a visceral level that my work to that point had been complicit in the erasure of the ongoing colonization of Indigenous land. I realized that by staging stories on top of the land, I was distracting from the story *of* the land, and from stories of Indigenous struggle and sovereignty.

How do we approach screendance in a settler colony? If we interrogate site-specificity in Canadian screendance from an anti-settler-colonial lens, we can ask new questions about the genre. For example, I have always wondered: are their Indigenous kids at the boarding school featured in Francois Girard's celebrated 1991 screendance work *Le Dortoir*? In Nadia McLaren's video documentary *Muffins for Granny*, the title of the work recalls a story of cruelty committed by the non-Indigenous kids who were boarders at the residential school where McLaren's grandmother was sent. McLaren's work is a documentary looking at the impact of residential school on Indigenous Elders, done out of love for her grandmother, who is represented in the video in slow motion, doing a happy and funny dance. Indeed, notwithstanding so much dance that can be found in Indigenous video works not classified as screendance per se, Indigenous artists have also contributed significant full-length screendance interventions. Works that have much to say through and about screendance as a form. In addition to interventions on form, Kent Monkman and Michael Greyeyes' 1996 *A Nation is Coming*, and Michael Greyeyes' *Triptych* have much to teach us about colonial framings of queerness, madness, grieving, and Indigenous resurgence.

Centering Indigenous contributions to and use of dance in video and video art would necessarily shift our frame of screendance criticism; in particular, our colonial understandings of site-specificity and video-as-site. In order to shift the frame of screendance criticism, I turn to Indigenous methodologies for approaching land and narrative, and I consider what some of these methodologies might teach us about site-specific work in screen dance.

Indigenous photography as visual presencing

In her work on developing a photography-based Indigenous research methodology, Anishinabekwe researcher Celeste Pedro-Spade describes the collaborative process through which Elders ‘story’ the land, and how land is connected and enlivened through story, and how story is rooted in and part of the land. She described her family’s efforts

to use photography to articulate visual sovereignty and presence in our Anishinabek territory. We intentionally selected places not located on our designated reserve lands because we did not want to further perpetuate the colonial myth that has been internalized by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples—that is, ‘Indian land is only reserve land.’ (92)

Pedro-Spade emphasizes that sites are not discrete or cut off from each other, and that stories and life weave across location.

Initially, I thought that one or two stories would arise from being in each spot; however, that wasn’t the case. We could be at the old cabin, for example, and someone would talk about an event/experience at the day school. To use an analogy, it wasn’t like fishing with a rod and anchor, but with a huge net that resulted in a web of interrelated stories, connected to not one or two places independently, but each place in relationship to another. I chose to use the layering of photographs to reveal this, so most photographs you see are actually several images blended together. (92)

Pedro-Spade’s articulation of an Anishinabek approach to photographing/storying the land causes me to wonder whether the act of isolating (abstracting, disconnecting) a site in site-specific work may itself be an act of colonial violence.

In her 2010 essay on site-specific screendance, Kyra Norman comments that “not knowing too much about a place can allow us to see it, and ourselves, freshly” (19). This practical advice to makers about how to improvise with camera work and with movement creation echoes other texts on screendance and sets up a striking contrast with Indigenous approaches to storying and land. The idea (which I admit I have followed myself when creating site-specific dance work) that the ‘site’ in site-specific dance provides something ‘new’ and fresh seems to me now to be analogous to mining the land for an artistic advantage.

Norman articulates the way in which dance artists approach a site, as sensing, embodied subjects, focused on how the land affects us. This approach to reading land centres settler ways of interacting with an imaginary/empty landscape that is waiting for us to arrive and take it in.

Norman’s subject-sensing-land seems to be already constructed as a shared/universal humanity:

Whilst discourses around place may sometimes abstract issues around space, in witnessing screendance we read detail and specificity into the spaces we see, drawing on our personal embodied experience. In foregrounding place, I propose that screendance can speak to our shared humanity by articulating particularity and difference, in so doing, referring us back to our own bodies and our particular perceptions of space. It is through the sensuous world of the body, through our eyes, ears, skin, muscles, and organs, that we see, feel and respond to all that happens. The body is the ground from which all our knowing of the world begins (Norman, 20).

In this way, our articulation of ‘site’ is inextricably bound to the subject who finds themselves experiencing the site.

Embodiment and neutrality

The presupposition of the discrete individual of Western subjectivity, that is, the idea that the dancing subject is an autonomous individual who is available to gain fresh sensory input from ‘the site’ in a site-specific work echoes the observation made by dance artists of colour that white (North) American dance is based on the idea of a white dancing subject who is neutral and

universal. In this schema, Black and Indigenous bodies, and the bodies of people of colour, are produced as being (or are imagined to be) specific and local. As Gerald Casel argues,

One of the problems postmodern dance aesthetics (or White American Dance) is the idea that bodies can be read as neutral and that meaning can be extracted from movements that are understood as universal. As a dancer of color who has inherited the lineage of postmodern dance, it is impossible for me to subscribe to the concept that my body can be read as neutral. I am always/already/only read as a brown body that marks the space I occupy with histories of colonization, assumptions about my intelligence, and expectations that I fulfill the White imagination's exotic fantasies. This false universalism is pervasive in postmodernity – that bodies and objects can be devoid of their spirit and serve as repurposed tools that can deconstruct ideas and tropes to serve the visual aesthetic of the artist (para. 9).

Casel's observation about the neutral body in postmodern dance is important to unpack in the context of site-specific screendance. As Casel puts it, "White [passing] bodies are allowed to mimic any form since whiteness assumes a kind of unmarked-ness, while bodies of color are read through codes and metaphors that underscore racial phenomena which convey power and privilege only to certain groups" (para. 21). Let us consider, then, that the screendance audience waits to discern the meaning that imputed 'neutral' dancing bodies will take on in service of the visual aesthetic of the artist. The 'site' in the screendance work will similarly be interpreted as being in service of the aesthetic of the choreographer/director of the screendance.

In *Triptych*, Greyeyes short-circuits the colonial screendance gaze when he reveals in the first shot of John Prophet, an Indigenous man sleeping under a bridge in Toronto. In other words, if we follow Casel's analysis that John Prophet will be "always/already/only read as a brown body that marks the space [he] occup[ies] with histories of colonization," Greyeyes is inviting the viewer (recall that this work was produced in 2007, eight years before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action were issued in 2015) into conversations about how John Prophet comes to be sleeping under a bridge in downtown Toronto, and about what it's like to be an Indigenous man sleeping under a bridge in downtown Toronto.

The other three dancers cast in *Triptych* read as white. Perhaps if they appeared first without Greyeyes, the ‘site’ of the underside of a bridge may have remained open to interpretation. The litter on the ground serves as clues to the narrative; however, perhaps it could be an opening scene of a screendance about shape, architecture, or up and down. Or about ruggedness and resilience. In fact, I shot a sequence of myself under the Humber footbridge as part of [Signal](#), my collaborative work with Meera Kanageswaran about anti-capitalism and magic. As a light-skinned performer, my sequence evoked arcane spiritual knowledges, subtlety, conspiracy, and hiding in plain sight; but not, for example, criminality.

Screenshot from *Triptych*, Greyeyes & McKim, 2007



Chaleff points to ways in which whiteness in dance has been re-produced, tracing a through-line from European and Euro-American techniques to the postmodern ‘pedestrian’ body.

The aesthetics of US American postmodern dance preserved and perpetuated the whiteness of high modernism by twisting the trope of racial exclusion from a focus on trained bodies to a focus on ordinary bodies. The ideological, corporeal, and affective formations of ordinariness afforded by the unmarked whiteness of postmodern artists in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s fundamentally excluded implicitly racialized “extraordinary” and “spectacular” bodies from their movement(s) (72).

John Prophet and the three appearing and disappearing white chorus/white tormentors have a pedestrian movement quality, and an abstracted movement vocabulary that brings us into John Prophet’s nightmares. When we first see him, he is twitching in his sleep. As the chorus/tormentors appear and disappear, he double-takes, not sure if the nightmares are real or imaginary. We understand that these movement are telling us about the contents of his nightmares. In this way, Greyeyes’ also shuts down the possibility that the movement vocabulary is only a formal exploration. From the first shot, John Prophet is an Indigenous man sleeping under a bridge in Toronto, who is experiencing disturbing nightmares and who is haunted by white people.

In a 2014 article “Inside the Machine,” Greyeyes outlines his pedagogical work to decolonize physical theatre training as a theatre professor, highlighting the central role that embodiment and technique training play in the overall project of decolonizing theatre:

When I announced I’d no longer teach ballet, my colleagues questioned that choice, as ballet was a very good way to formalize our twenty-first century-students’ bodies for their work investigating Restoration drama, for example. It’s one pin connected to the next, one bolt holding up the strut on which five other things are built. Pull that one pin, that one connector, and the whole thing is imperiled (14).

As dance scholars and practitioners, we have only just begun the work of decolonizing conservatory dance training, contemporary concert dance, and related genres like screendance.

Greyeyes’ *Triptych* demands that we attend to the settler colonial politics of ‘site-specificity’ and the ‘neutral’ body in screendance. Yet these points only scratch the surface of the earth under the bridge, and only begin to dip into the dreams of John Prophet. *Triptych* also has

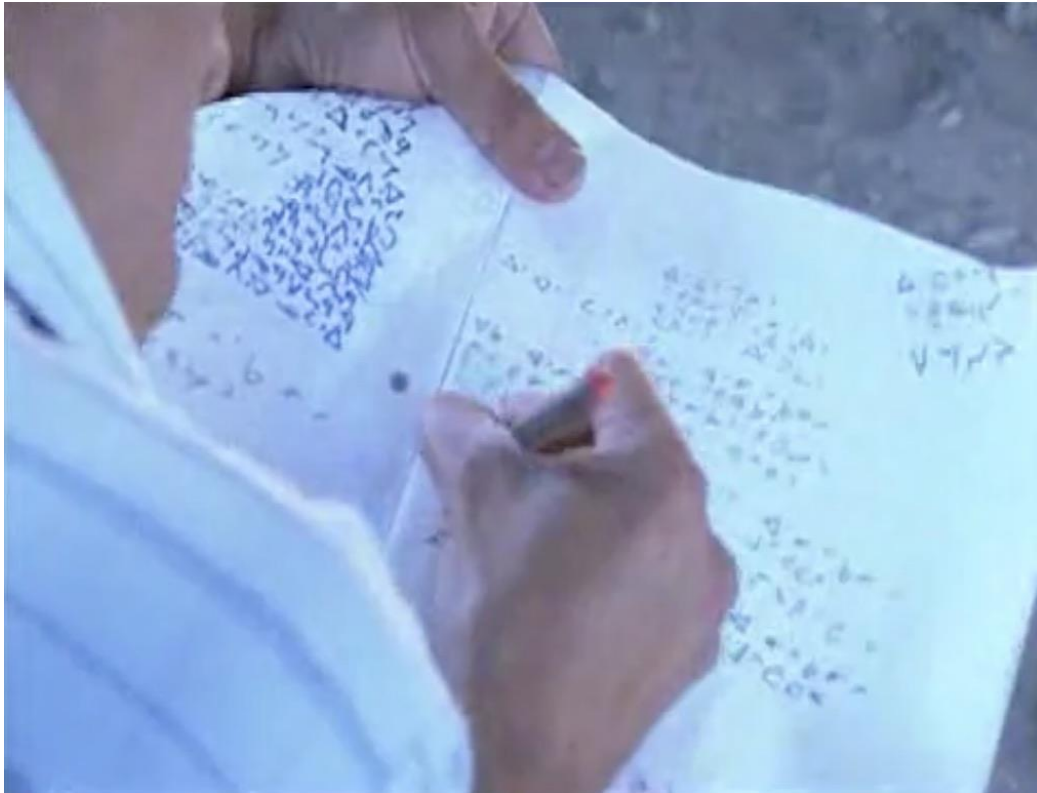
much to teach the broader field of video art, of which screendance is a sub- or overlapping field. In a 2010 article titled “Unfiltered,” Greyeyes hints at the ways in which an anti-colonial framework could be used to re-write tropes of Indigenous madness in theatre/literature. His discussion has important lessons for screendance and video art, which Rosalind Krauss described in 1976 as the condition of narcissism:

[V]ideo’s real medium is a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object—an Other—and invest it in the Self. Therefore, it is not just any psychological condition one is speaking of. Rather it is the condition of someone who has, in Freud’s words, “abandoned the investment of objects with libido and transformed object-libido into ego-libido.” And that is the specific condition of narcissism (57).

Elaborating her reference to Freudian psychotherapy in a footnote, Krauss conjures the untreatable/unreachable patient in the figure of the narcissist: “Freud’s pessimism about the prospects of treating the narcissistic character is based on his experience of the narcissist’s inherent inability to enter into the analytic situation” (57). John Prophet is an Indigenous man sleeping under a bridge in Toronto, who is living with a long-term psychiatric disability, and who is ‘hard to treat.’

At 7:30 into the 24:00 film, we see John Prophet writing frantically in a notebook. As we approach, we see scribbles—code writing? Definitely a trope for Mad people. And how many times have I seen a dancer mime frantic writing in an introspective or angsty contemporary dance piece? But the camera approaches yet closer, and we look over John’s shoulder. He is writing in Cree. Rather than looking to Freud to understand the trauma of settler colonialism that John Prophet has survived, we should look to Fanon. As Mad Studies scholar Femi Eromosele emphasizes, “Fanon’s interest in the relationship between madness, politics and psychiatry goes in many directions. In very broad outlines, his work not only exposes colonialism as a creator of

mental disorders, it emphasizes the complicity of psychiatry in the colonial enterprise” (169). In this way, *Triptych* short-circuits decolonizes ‘site,’ embodiment, and psychology of screendance.



Screenshot from
Triptych,
Greyeyes &
McKim, 2007

Lighting strategies as decolonial tools

Light figures broadly across Indigenous contemporary art of the past fifteen years, from artwork that is ‘made’ of light, as in Cheryl L’Hirondelle’s born-digital new media work; to the use of video projection and interactive sound that is activated when people move through an installation space, as in Julie Nagam’s sculptural and installation work. These prominent Indigenous artist/curators have theorized the use of new media and web-based work (L’Hirondelle, “Codetalkers”) and the use of digital sound files as “decolonial tools” (Nagam, “360 Binaural Microphone”) in contemporary Indigenous art. In this final section, I consider innovative uses of lighting as a way of decolonizing the white cube gallery in Dana Claxton’s exhibition *Made to Be Ready*, mounted in 2016 at the Audain Gallery in Vancouver. In this section, I place Claxton’s exhibition in the context of uses of technology in Indigenous

contemporary art, according to key arguments in Indigenous curatorial studies and art criticism on the significance of these innovations. I then highlight specifically decolonial uses of lighting in Claxton's exhibition. These learnings have shifted my understanding of indoor sites and black box theatre as I pursued my practice-based research process for this thesis.

Artist/curator Julie Nagam's work engages novel approaches to light. In *Where White Pines Lay Over the Water* (2013), Nagam uses video projection of sky and landscape onto the inside of white canvass structure to create an outdoor performative environment that the audience can enter in order to trigger storytelling. Beyond more sculptural and site-specific work, Nagam also uses lighting as a technique for resisting the colonial abstraction of land in the white cube gallery space. One reviewer of Nagam's solo show *The Future is in the Land*, at A Space Gallery in Toronto (2018) noted "there is very little, almost no light in the room and the details, that the artist intended to emphasize, has fluorescence paint on, glittering in the dark" (Cao). In *locating little heartbeats*, at the University of Winnipeg Art Gallery 1C03, Nagam installs lightboxes in a darkened gallery space and uses projected animation to bring drawings of flowers to life. In both exhibitions, lighting functions to disrupt the colonial gaze on the land and to encourage settlers to quiet ourselves and look in new ways, paralleling what Peltier outlines as the Mi'kmaq concept of 'Two-Eyed Seeing' in which one eye learns to see with the strengths of an Indigenous approach while the other eye sees with a Western approach.

In her essay on the productive contradictions that Indigenous uses of technology in art raise for colonial modes of thinking, Nagam argues that "the project of colonialism is tied to concepts of the civilized and the savage which are intrinsically bound to technology and the advancement of societies" ("Deciphering" 80). Despite the colonial refusal to acknowledge Indigenous technological expertise, "Indigenous people have always been fascinated by

technology; we have continued to evolve and manipulate media for thousands of years, and are at the forefront of defining and determining the relationship between cultural knowledge and language within the practice of new media and digital technologies” (80-81). In this way, Nagam argues that confronting and overturning colonial expectations of primitivism in Indigenous art serves to both unsettle the colonial gaze, and to connect directly with living Indigenous cultures.

Curator Wanda Nanibush traces the specific impact that these artistic strategies have on colonial artistic institutions like galleries and museums:

Indigenous art still poses a ‘problem’ for Western art history and institutions, and not necessarily just because of cultural difference.... These artists pose a problem because institutions do not want to acknowledge the ways in which they have been intervening in the development of art since colonialism. We are marginal by power, not by influence and action. There is no modernity without Indigenous peoples and their art. Once that is really accepted then the whole history, and the institutions that guide and govern that history, will change and its colonial legacy may end (6).

Nanibush’s observations about the ‘problem’ of Indigenous art hint at the importance of consciously engaging with the gallery as a context for showing Indigenous contemporary artworks. In this way, we could say that the importance of carefully considered lighting strategies are as important in the white box as they are in the black box.

Dramatic use of lighting is a central feature of Vancouver-based artist/critic of Hunkpapa Lakota descent Dana Claxton’s *Made to Be Ready*. Mounted in Simon Fraser University’s Audain Gallery, and curated by Amy Kazymierchuk, the exhibition consists of *Buffalo Woman 1 and 2* (2015) which are projected onto two vertical floor-to-ceiling silks hung in parallel in front of the uncovered store-front gallery windows so that both are simultaneously visible one behind the other; *Headdress* (2015) and *Cultural Belongings* (2015) which are backlit by LED fireboxes on either wall of the gallery across from and facing each other; and *Uplifting* (2015), a large-scale video projected onto the back wall of the gallery opposite the windows.



Dana Claxton: *Made To Be Ready*. Installation view, Audain Gallery, 2016. Photo: Blaine Campbell.

The use of daylight in the space is striking and creates a tension between the high-resolution photographs in the LED lightboxes, and the space outside the gallery which reveals some of the most visible impacts of Canadian settler colonialism. As one reviewer notes, in this exhibition “Indigenous cultural objects are presented dialectically with the aesthetics of their production” (Burnham, 107). Lighting, and the use of daylight specifically, is key to developing this tension within the space, where “you see a pair of silk banners hanging in front of the window... Behind, but also through, the images, one can see West Hastings Street in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES). The neighbourhood, that is, frames the images” (Burnham, 106). This ‘window on the world’ effect is intensified by the vanishing of the white cube space through the curator’s choice to paint the walls black.

The filtering of daylight through the silks creates a dramatic palette of natural light through which the two floor-to-ceiling images are viewed.

Buffalo Woman 1 and 2 cascade luxuriously from the gallery's ceiling. Two images printed on silk panels present a woman in an elegant gown holding a white crystal buffalo skull. In the first she presses the animal head to her face in meditative celebration. In the second the model thrusts the buffalo head to the sky, exultant. The layering of these two panels and the subtle difference between them creates a slow but deliberate movement central to this exhibition. The transparency of the silk achieves a lightness that is coupled by the tenacity of the subject. These works in combination portray a powerful narrative. (Doherty, para 13)

The two layered images have a third layer to them: the real-time moving image of DTES, which is positioned opposite from the projection of a moving image on the back wall. The use of natural light through the gallery windows turns the gallery into a site-specific installation that interacts directly with the space outside. A streetscape that is marked as a location of Indigenous decline is incorporated into the exhibition, allowing the projected images to intervene on this central pillar of settler colonial ideology.

The two backlit images in the LED fireboxes take up the resilience of Indigenous beauty and art in the face of voracious cultural appropriation. *Headdress* (2015), the transmounted photograph to the left when facing the window from inside the gallery, features the artist's own necklaces assembled into a screen that obscures the model's face. *Cultural Belongings* (2015), to the right, continues the themes of a specifically Indigenous approach to high fashion, luxury items, and craftsmanship. As one reviewer notes, "Claxton marries high art and high fashion... Playing off of the tropes of the fashion industry through the use of stylized apparel, glossy photographs and staged sets, Claxton represents contemporary Indigeneity in a precise synthesis of the contemporary and the traditional, the sacred and the secular" (Doherty, para 2). The LED fireboxes are key to invoking high fashion and elevating the model, Claxton's long-time collaborator Samaya Jardey, by illuminating "the punchy clarity, vivid palette, and the glossy,

high definition and resolution as well as the contemporary aesthetic of the photographic images” (Polyck-O’Neill, 129).

Uses of light, and innovative lighting strategies are key components of Claxton’s *Made to Be Ready*. In this exhibition, lighting emerges as a set of decolonial tools that support the work to comment on the ongoing cultural appropriation of Indigenous art objects by the fashion industry, while simultaneously elevating Indigenous aesthetics. LED fireboxes backlight the questions “What is indigenous beauty? What is THE indigenous gorgeous?” (Claxton quoted in Collins para. 14), while a window onto the outside world serves as a both metaphor and site-specific framing through which the viewer is confronted by the colonial context in which Indigenous women are ‘made to be ready’ to face racist, colonial violence. By displaying elements of Indigenous regalia as a kind of fashion armour, Claxton reframes ‘being seen’ as a strategy for survival and resistance.

Taken together, Greyeyes’ *Triptych* and Claxton’s *Made to Be Ready* offer profound lessons about how artworks can reveal relationships to land—relationships that are concealed and purged in the business-as-usual of settler colonialism, including in settler artworks. At the very least, these works implore that we attend to the settler colonial relations that lie directly under our feet and all around us. More than that, these artists show us new transformative possibilities for digital, theatrical, filmic, and curatorial tools that are the mainstays of our craft. I am in no way advocating for settlers to adopt these tools (thereby continuing the settler colonial tradition of appropriating the work of Indigenous artists). However, time spent reflecting on these artworks has taught me to rethink my own craft. Rather than using the tools of our craft to create imaginary settler ‘null spaces,’ we can use them to transform our understanding of ourselves, the land, and each other, and to imagine other, better futures.

Chapter 2—Revolutionary forms: Ghosts in the colonial archive

In this chapter, I take up questions about the role of the ‘neutral’ body in meaning-making about the choreography and the site. I describe the process of my practice-based investigation with two very short screendance works, [House](#) and [Bed Effigy](#). I extend the critique of the ‘neutral’ dancing body by querying dance vocabularies and forms that are read as neutral in the context of the overall meaning of the choreographic work, with special attention to how these contradictions have played out in my own past and concurrent choreographic works. A critique of the neutral body in dance also opens the possibility of querying the role of what Robert McRuer coined in 2006 as compulsory able-bodied-ness, in dance. I propose that the ideological functions of ‘neutral’ technique can become visible through a lens that is critical of settler colonialism. This realization opens new possibilities for meaning-making in dance.

As I argued in relation to Greyeyes’ work in Chapter One, when the neutral body is questioned, we look to the scenario or context to discern identity and meaning. Looking at formal approaches in performance art could be a productive resource to find techniques for engaging the objects that surround and interact with the body as a way of creating meaning-making in the work. Can some of these techniques be applied to making the coloniality of objects and built environments visible, or at least less taken for granted? This question has guided the thesis work I present in this chapter.

Unsettling choreography

Much of my scholarly writing has been about ideology and political consciousness. In the past I’ve asked questions about the relationships between art and social movements, and I’ve lived those relationships. However, my scholarship and my dance creation have run on separate tracks. While I have been able to bring the two together in my curatorial work, I began this MFA

with unanswered questions about ideology and the process and results of my dance creation. In thinking deliberately and carefully about the question of site-specificity in relation to settler colonialism, while simultaneously making two collaborative site-specific screendance works, I have been able to connect my process of investigating ideology to my process of dance-making.

Jêrome Bel provides an astute rebuttal to the pervasive assumption that dance is somehow free of ideology, and is therefore more truthful:

The presupposition of freedom and authenticity of the subject generally accepted by improvisers seems to me to show an extremely naive attitude... A choreographer, who shall remain nameless, said ‘The body does not lie’. Such a remark is based on that disgusting old modernist myth, bogged down in Judeo-Christianity. The body is not the sanctuary of truth, authenticity or uniqueness. It is deeply subjugated to culture, politics and history (2002:2012, 73-74).

The idea the body can evade the markings of culture, politics, and history surely arises from the Cartesian mind-body spilt—if mind and body are separate, the body can remain free of mental distortions. But how can we learn to read the ideology of the body?

My screendance research and my close reading of Michael Greyeyes’ *Triptych* has prompted me to think about the power of using a particular style of dance to *represent itself* and all its baggage. Through a remote collaboration with Meera Kanageswaran and Yui Ugai, we created [Water Rite](#), a 5:49 minute screendance on three separate sites that addressed our COVID lockdown-inspired desire to connect with land and water. Looking back at the finished work, I felt that my modern/postmodern movement vocabulary was generated through my own uncritical response to the land. Later, I worked remotely with Kanageswaran to create [Signal](#), a 5:14 minute screendance work that imagines dance gestures are signals that can be used to coordinate the overthrow of capitalism. While creating *Signal*, I made a conscious choice to use Horton technique-inspired movement vocabulary to express the very things that the technique conjures: strength, and multiracial solidarity.

In *Water Rite*, the narrative arc peaks at the point where I rundown a cottage path to a lake and perform a solo on a wooden dock. There are many important narratives to be told in relation to land; however, including a visible corner of a cottage and a cottage dock without further context or deconstruction puts *Water Rite* firmly in the category of settler ideology. I had already initiated conversations about settler colonialism while we were making this work, and we looked for ways to consciously locate ourselves, for example, by translating the title into Japanese, Portuguese, Tamil, and Anishnaabemowen. Despite this after-the-fact attempt to contextualize, the site I was filming on, my uncontextualized presence in the frame, and the postmodern style of my solo, all came together to reinforce a settler narrative arc.

Working on *Signal* provided a second opportunity to work with site-specificity in a more conscious and deliberate way. In creating *Signal*, Kanageswaran and I aligned our site choices with the overall narrative arc of anti-capitalist witchcraft. While working on this project, I tried to follow Greyeyes' example of supporting the *actual* meaning and context of the site within a video work. With its focus on two characters working synergistically, *Signal* moves between the iconic Mies van der Rohe building that spawned Toronto's financial district, and the mouth of the Humber River that anchored trade and commerce for Indigenous nations of this region.

Following a process of critique that starts with asking ourselves and each other what we see in a work has provided me with tools to critically engage with the imputed meanings of the appearance of a technique as itself. As MFA students, we are trained to start by naming what we see in a work. This has helped me to step back and say, in the example of *Water Rite*, "I see someone performing a postmodern-looking dance solo on a dock." This realization was extremely helpful in my research process for *Signal*. While I was trying to come up with my movement vocabulary, I made a conscious decision to work from Horton technique. This

technique has personal meaning for me, as I trained for several years with Debbie Wilson at her studio which was an inclusive space for Black dancers and dancers with disabilities. Beyond my personal associations with this technique, Horton-inspired movement also references the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. The slower pace and long lines serve as an interesting counterpoint to Kanageswaran's fast-paced Bharatanatyam movement vocabulary, while both of our performances center strength and determination. In this way, we reference multi-racial solidarity with our movement vocabulary, which supported our narrative arc.

The idea of a dance vocabulary that represents itself allows for the idea of a conscious, self-aware dancer, and pushes back against ideologies of the body as "brute soma and imminent truth," as Andrew Hewitt writes:

Experience is a category of consciousness, and consciousness becomes unconscious and irrational when the body is celebrated as at once brute soma and imminent truth. The operation of aesthetic ideology relies on the suppression of the contingencies that structure experience, and to ontologize the body itself as a minimal resting place of untrammelled, noncompromisable subjectivity is to engage in the worst form of aesthetic ideology. To counter such tendencies, a truly materialist analysis can only be a social and historical analysis, in which even the category of history itself cannot be granted immunity from critique ("Social choreography and the aesthetic," 18-19).

Following Greyeyes approach to choreography, performance, and site-specificity in *Triptych*, and learning from the process of critique in this course, perhaps the implications for my dance practice are obvious: I need not bypass the answers to the question "what do you see?"

Ghosts in the colonial archive

I approached [House](#), the first of the four works I am presenting as part of this thesis, through a series of scores. A score to compose the shots, a score to create the minimalist movement, and a score for editing. According to postmodern dance innovator Anna Halprin,

Scores can become a way of externalizing hidden feelings, attitudes and blocks which, because they are hidden and unconscious, cannot be altered or even used as a material for art experiences. Unconscious or hidden feelings become limitations rather than possible

creative resources. Scores can be used to bring these resources to the surface and to put them in some kind of context. Once performed, a perspective is gained, a valuation takes place, and change and growth can occur (Anna Halprin, 1969:2012, 211).

In my own choreographic practice, scores are the path away from choreographer's block, and a gateway to creative engagement. They provide the container in which I can improvise—no doubt in part because postmodern dance improvisation was foundational to my training.

I also approached *House* through and as an archive. Specifically, I decided to use my performance archive to create a score to help me approach the impossible task of archiving my mother's house—or more precisely, I used my performance archive to create a score that would help me create a work responding to my mother's house as an archive. In a sense, I was reading one archive through a second archive.

The first archive is my mother's house, which she was carried from after she had a stroke in July 2019. My mother had kept most of her things without throwing anything away. She had been limited as a housekeeper, and her health had been in decline for a long time. My sister and I spent a lot of time excavating the house. At the bottom layer of excavation, the house appears as it did when we used to spend time there. The house itself is an archive, and a time machine.

The second archive is a set of four white cardboard IKEA file boxes that sit on the top shelf of my bookcase. Each is labeled by a range of years between 1999 and 2017. These four boxes form the material archive of the shows I have created and curated. I received a Canada Council grant in 2017 to do research-creation for a new work; however, I workshopped but never produced the work, and so the gap from 2017 to 2020 weighs on me. The desire to fill this gap fueled my return to school to do my MFA, to dedicate time and learn new strategies for working. I have video documentation of most (but not all!) of my work, and video documentation of eight works are [on my website](#), which served as a third archive in creating the shot and movement

scores for *House*. Two of the last works I produced in the theatre had video projections. While I have video documentation of the performances themselves, I do not have an easy way to access, or view the video projections files.

To create a score for moving through the house, I decided to ‘appear’ in the house in similar ways that I ‘appeared’ in the video projection for my 2008 production *Pass*. In creating the footage for this video projection, I asked the videographer to do an in-camera edit by stopping the recording while the camera is on a tripod, and then restarting the recording once I have inserted myself into the frame. Learning to film and edit myself has allowed me to delve into this visual effect as a metaphor for ghosting. By watching the video documentation of *Pass*, I extracted images from the video projection for *Pass* to create a score for *House*. I spent some time taking screen shots of the archived performance video, trying to catch my body posture and position in the four different shots in the video projection behind the ‘live’ me, although I later realized that I had still images from the original digital video in my digital photo files.

Before arriving at the house, I prepared a score based on the four tasks represented in the video stills: walking across a horizontal plane; climbing a ladder-like structure; sitting behind a fence structure that frames me; and walking toward the camera from the distance to a close-up. My task inside the house was to find spots in the house that evoked these actions.

Once inside the house I turned my attention and my camera to the house itself as archive, and to the question of how to archive the archive. I attached my wide-angle lens to my phone, and after some consideration, I selected a camera location that viewed the room through open glass shelving full of collected objects, so that an ivory dragon, coral, a hide drum, and some silver pill boxes are in the foreground, filling the bottom right quadrant of the shot.

This became the opening shot for *House*, so that we view the room from between two glass shelves filled with colonial booty: items that were collected by my mother's father's British colonial family, and my mother's own touristic excursions. My mother's father was the son of a younger (non-inheriting) son of minor aristocracy. Father and son had both become engineers and worked building the British and other European empires, from Angola, to the Caribbean, to Canada. Items from my mother's mother's Jewish family are not on display. They were among the first Jewish settlers in Newfoundland. They came direct from Minsk, and trips to New York, Paris, and a vacation in Majorca was the extent of their travels. While they were proud subjects of the British empire (as Newfoundlanders), they were not part of the global British colonizing architecture in the same way my British ancestors were. They did not collect colonial booty.

After spending some time filming in the house and catching the low angle of afternoon light coming in through the west-facing dining-room window, I stepped outside with some thoughts of capturing the outdoor space, and to clear my head. Just then the birds started chirping very loudly, so I pressed record. I now had the archival material (video and sound recordings) from which to make the work, but how to structure it? How to edit? I had no interest in looking at me pacing around an uninhabited house. I left London dejected.

To edit the video material, I decided to turn to the source material for my 2008 work *Pass*. The overall aesthetic for the piece and character I was performing was inspired by the 1998 film *Ringu*, or more specifically, inspired by the film within the film, in which Sadako the child-spirit emerges from the well. In the original film, the sequence of the child walking toward the camera was filmed with the actor walking backwards and was then reversed to have her appear to be walking eerily forwards. With the aesthetic of the original source material for the 2008 work as my guide, I created the short screendance through editing techniques.

Sadako emerges from the well, *Ringu*, 1998



The effect of the ghostly figure in the house

unsettles time by suggesting history and impermanence. The outdoor sounds interrupt the sense of containment of the suburban house, again, suggesting impermanence on the land. The camera perspective drawing attention to the archived objects introduces the idea of the suburban house as serving a particular purpose in relation to reproducing historical narrative, and as a repository of colonial material wealth. The movement score served as a mechanism to keep me from becoming engulfed in my personal and

family memories. By keeping a critical and creative distance, I was able to remain attentive to the settler colonial dimensions of the site, its contextualizing contents, and my relationship to both as a moving subject.

Choreography without bodies?

In the previous two sections, I challenged the idea of ‘neutral’ movement vocabulary, and ‘neutral’ sites, and advanced possibilities for clarifying the meaning these take on in the overall work. In this section, I extend the critique of the ‘neutral’ body by interrogating the aesthetic role of the body in choreography as a form. Through an analysis of 3:00 minute sketch [Contact](#) and 0:30 second [Contact Reprise](#), I argue that attempts to remove the human body from choreography still rely on the shadow of somatic embodiment for meaning-making. I further argue that meaning-making through somatic embodiment requires a vulnerable body.

I was first introduced to the idea of choreographing objects in a 2013 choreographic workshop with Canadian choreographer Christopher House, where we created miniature

tableaux of small everyday items, and took turns creating the next move in each other's tiny sculptures. *Contact* and *Contact Reprise* were created for Freya Björg Olafson's choreography course, in response to a prompt to choreograph objects. To Willian Forsythe, choreographing objects provides an opportunity to demonstrate 'physical thinking':

Denigrated by centuries of ideological assault, the body in motion, the obvious miracle of existence, is still subtly relegated to the domain of raw sense: precognitive, illiterate. Fortunately, choreographic thinking, being what it is, proves useful in mobilizing language to dismantle the constraints of this degraded station by imagining other physical models of thought that circumvent this misconception. What else, besides the body, could physical thinking look like? (2008:2012, 202)

Forsythe's critique of the idea of the "precognitive, illiterate" body resonates with Jérôme Bel's critique of 'body-as-immanent-truth.'

As a contact improvisation-based choreographer during a time of remote learning, I was happy to have objects stand in for a missing dance partner. I chose objects specifically for the ways that they would inform my movement and movement quality. Two beanbag chairs give me something to move with that required a certain level of effort. They had enough weight that I could work with their momentum by building up some speed using contact improvisation methods. When choosing the objects for the assignment, I was unable to let go of an idea to use a little wind-up jumping chick, and so I felt compelled to create a short bonus clip of the chick hopping along the wooden fence surrounding my rooftop deck. The neighbours' rooftop visible in the background lends a sense of comedic danger.

My use of the jumping chick was inspired by Geumhyung Jeong's 2017 work *7ways*, which features objects being moved around on a vacuum cleaner robot. My use of the beanbag chairs was inspired by Mette Ingvarsen's 2012 *Artificial Nature* project, which features sections of movement created by distinctive physical properties of different materials. Finally, William

Forsythe's 2017 *Choreographic Objects* is a striking piece as a touchpoint for thinking about distinctions between choreography and dance.

For me, the choreographic process has two main phases or tasks: finding movement vocabulary; and organizing that vocabulary into an arc from beginning to end. I applied these two phases to this creation process. First, I played with the beanbag chairs to find different and interesting movement vocabulary, by exploring the way the beanbags moved with me and the way I moved with the beanbags. I then wrote down these different elements using my little stick figure way of doing dance notation and set about composing an order that considered movement across the space as viewed from the place where I was setting up the camera and tripod. I looked for ways to cross the space on diagonals, ways to take advantage of the sunlight filling the downstage left area, and ways to move closer to the camera. I also looked for a way to draw the audience into the movement, an element of surprise, an interesting peak or climax to the movement, and a way for the dance to end. Looking at the movements I had annotated, it was easy for me to see which movements lent themselves to each of these requirements. I discarded one or two movement ideas that seemed less interesting or that did not fit into this arc. The sections where I am manipulating the weight of the bean bag chairs through recognizable contact improvisation technique is the most dynamic.

One accidental (although not unexpected) thing that happened during the process was I felt a sharp twinge in my lower back while I was twisting with the beanbag. Because I try to work intentionally from the inside out in relation to disability and changing physical capacity, I was disappointed in myself for not being more conscious of my physical limitations that day. I literally got carried away by the momentum of the beanbag as it was swinging. I was thinking of re-doing the run—I had recorded the first full run of me executing the tasks in the order that I

had set them in the score—but when I watched the recording, I noticed a wince on my face at the moment I got hurt. My first thought was that this was my second ‘error’ of the day—the fact that I had allowed pain to show in my face. Querying my impulse to discard the shot, I decided to stick with that version and explore my discomfort with my facial expression.

The humour of *Contact Reprise* is based on the referred vulnerability of the chick balancing on a fence, and the concern on my face. Placing the jumping windup toy on a four-foot-high fence caused me to have tense, light, jerky movements as I hovered my hands around the chick, ready to prevent it from falling. My intentional camera angle allows the viewer to track the tension and concern that was legible in my face. In the next section I discuss work presented as part of this thesis that takes movement related to somatic vulnerability as its focus.

The ghost as earthy body

What does it mean to introduce the idea of a fallible and vulnerable body? While dance as a broader form relies heavily on virtuosic physical ability and capacity, the socially-situated vulnerable and affectable body is central in performance art, especially feminist performance art. We can think of these contradictions between the extra-able dancing body and the affectable performance art body as being spatially contained and mediated—feminist performance art lives in the white cube, and dance theatre lives in the black box. For example, two of my works were created during a period of research on mixed-race identity and childhood disability. In *Transit*, a performance art piece set in a gallery, I invite audience members to sift through incriminating items in my open suitcase. My vulnerability is the focus of the work, and contextualizing objects bring suspicion and intensify my vulnerability. In *Pass*, I used structured improvisation techniques to attempt to recover my childhood movement vocabulary that emerged as I both resisted and internalized psychiatric, disability, gender deviance, and delinquency labels. I chose

to perform this in a proscenium theatre with video projections. In the context of the formal conventions of dance theatre, this work was more difficult to anchor.

Working in screendance opened many more possibilities for exploring the minute, the personal, and the idiosyncratic. In his book *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image*, Douglas Rosenberg discusses this difference:

In the presence of the camera, dance often becomes less kinesthetic and more concerned with nuance, minutiae, and a kind of exploration of tactility and surface. The ritual of production often manifests itself as a kind of self-imposed slow motion, in which the dancer enters a state of self-awareness catalyzed by the camera's presence. This translates to the visual equivalent of a meditation on movement itself, often conflicting with the kinesthetic possibilities of the space of the screen (Rosenberg, 2012, 161).

Although Rosenberg notes this shift as a potential limit to the kinesthetic possibilities, I approach screendance with a curatorial history with feminist video art. Material that is not successful on the proscenium stage may work very well in feminist video art.

Bed Effigy is a 30-second movement sequence using editing-based choreographic techniques to highlight the minimalist movement qualities related to my chronic illness. The work also evokes the iconography of effigy monuments, and tactility through screendance. I created it in response to Susan Cash's prompt to write a description of 30 seconds of movement from our research. When I showed this excerpt in class, Ashvini Sunthoram used an evocative image to describe it. She said watching the piece gave her the feeling that she was watching my body do what it wanted to, or what my body would do if it was not being directed by a mind. With the editing technique I used to vanish and reappear in *House*, *Bed Effigy* references the figure of the golem, which becomes the central motif of my proscenium work *Golem*.

In this work, I borrow from filmic movement typical of contemporary white box gallery installations; movement that is evocative without pulling attention from the work as a whole. Techniques that I have embraced include living tableaux—images that seem like a still life, and

as you stop focusing on it, a subtle movement draws your eye back; and using editing techniques to make movement seem uncanny, ghostlike, or otherworldly. Alongside the rise in access to video recording devices, horror as a genre has developed motifs around ‘scary things caught on camera.’ *Ringu* (Nakata & Suzuki, 1998) is an influential Japanese horror film centering on a recorded image of a girl climbing out of a well to avenge her own murder. One of the ways the movement in the recording is made uncanny is through editing out sections from a continuous shot of movement. I used a *Ringu*-inspired editing technique to create *Bed Effigy* by removing sections from a two-minute recording of continuous movement, to produce a 30 second piece.

Sadako appears, *Ringu*, 1998



Bed Effigy begins with me lying on my back, in profile to the camera. The underside of my outstretched right arm is facing the ceiling, hand draped over the edge of the bed, palm facing the camera. My hair forms long

stapicky spikes that blindfold and chokehold my resting figure and creep toward the camera and off the edge of the bed. My knees are bent and pointing toward the ceiling, my feet rest on a low wooden footboard. My feet feel their way up and over the footboard and my legs follow until my knees are hyper-extended and my ankles rest awkwardly on the wooden footboard. Tensionless, my body is sunk into the mattress. I look like a corpse in rigor mortis laid out for viewing.

Through a series of cut edits, my body is pulled down to the floor. In my rapid and silent descent to the floor, most of my hair remains trapped under my right arm, still on the edge of the

bed. My hair forms a dark amorphous rectangle against the off-white bedspread and my white T-shirt, concealing my head and its line of motion from the bed to the floor. Another cut edit and I am lying on my back on the floor, right arm extended toward the camera and out of the frame, knees bent upward in the same position that I started in on top of the bed, hair crossing my face and extended toward the camera. My concealed face is in profile against and touching the bottom edge of the bedspread. As I remain face up, isolated alternating movements of my hips and shoulders walk me under the bed and away from the camera, leaving my right arm and hair to trail behind, until my body is under the bed and my head is concealed behind the bedspread.



Cadaver monument of [John FitzAlan, 7th Earl of Arundel](#), [Arundel Castle](#), Sussex

In my final gesture, I slide my right hand down the length of my body freeing the bedspread that has been pulled under the bed along with my body. In this final motion, the top half of the profile of my

body disappears behind the bedspread. The dark amorphous mass is still visible around the place where my head and neck should be, a few wisps of hair still stretch toward the camera. Part of my right arm is visible, blending with the browns of the furniture and the yellows of the floor. My feet stick out below the bottom of the bed. I have translocated myself directly below, and I am in the same position I was in at the beginning of the excerpt when my ankles were resting on

the footboard. The scene is reminiscent of a cadaver monument, with my body serving as the tomb effigy—the representation of me in life on top of the bed, and my corpse underneath.

Created during a flare-up that began in 2021, I generated this movement by focusing on my embodied feelings and movement preferences while I am sick. My primary movement prompt was to remain connected to the feeling of utter fatigue, which is one of a range of embodied feelings that I associate with my chronic illness. Another is feeling so weak that it is not worth expending the energy it will take to become more comfortable. My approach to editing, and being too tired to tie my hair back, both contributed to the sense of a *golem*—an undead body, or zombie; a supernatural embodied form without a separate conscious mind.

The ‘sick bed’ travels as a motif across media in feminist and disability visual art—most emblematically in the work of Tracy Emin and Frida Kahlo. Kahlo’s 1940 *The Dream* and her 1932 *Henry Ford Hospital* exemplify the ways in which Kahlo’s bed serves as a portal connecting intensely solitary experiences of pain and disability to the global unfolding of neocolonialism, capitalism, and climate devastation. While Kahlo’s bed paintings evoke the dreams and nightmares that accompany the artist’s bouts of illness, and Emin’s work *My Bed* preserves a trace of the artist’s movements through what she leaves behind in her installation, these are visual artists working in painting and installation, respectively. They are not working in or through quality of movement. *Bed Effigy* is both a movement sequence and a moving image that is mediated by the screen. Moving beyond choreography into screendance creates possibilities for me to pursue a subtle and minimalist *quality of movement* regarding chronic illness. When I am working live and unmediated by video, I am working with an entirely different level of articulation, and intentional energy, based on the imperative to be in communication with, and legible to, my fellow dancers and audience members.

Chapter 3—Revolution in place: Unsettling site-specific performance

In this chapter, I ask whether and how I can use screendance and online performance to account for my actual, emplaced location as a settler. I describe my practice-based investigation in creating the interactive online screening of [Garden](#), a 12:00 minute video that tracks the spring leading up to the solstice in the overgrown garden behind my mother’s house. I also return to [House](#) and [Bed Effigy](#) to explore the relationship of these works to the indoor space *as site*. I problematize my previous site-specific works *Courtyard Sketches* and [Shelter](#) to track my site-relationality over time. I reflect on the continuities and ruptures that emerge in my work when I move from creating live dance performance and performance art to creating online screendance and performance. To guide my practice-based research, I ask: What new accessibility barriers and opportunities arise in online performance? How can I shift my improvisational approach from site-interactive to site-relational? What aspects of the form need to be stretched or transformed to accomplish site-relationality?

Working during COVID provided an opportunity to make the familiar strange and see things anew. During lockdown, everything became de facto site-specific. Electronically mediated performance became the norm, and screendance itself was underscored as “a site-specific practice, that site being video itself” (Rosenberg, 2000, p. 275). These shifts have uneven effects across dance communities, and they happen unevenly even for individual artists. Having the privilege of starting my MFA program in September 2020, and the good fortune of working with Freya Björg Olafson, meant that I had immediate access to exceptional training in video making and online performance. These facts mediated the impact of COVID on my own practice. After training in the concepts, history, and basic techniques of video dance creation I was able to

embrace screendance. I was able to adopt this medium because video has always figured in my creation and archiving process, and I have used video projection in my live performances.

At the same time, and despite access to a similarly high caliber of training, I was unable to make sense of online and electronically mediated performance as modes or means of creation. I had great difficulty with running the lighting and interactive stage programs from my laptop while learning via a video conferencing program on the same screen. Although the process for learning video editing software was similar, I found video editing manageable because the artistic *product* was a video. While we were studying lighting remotely, the product was a computer simulation of lighting in the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theatre. While studying the interactive stage, we ran mock-ups of projections and effects for the stage on our computer screen. These lighting and media cueing programs designed for the theatre became too abstract for me to grasp when they were applied and shared in the online environment only.

The move from live performance to screendance raised questions for me about the aesthetic techniques I needed to make the shift. As someone living with chronic illness, screendance and online performance open new worlds of accessibility for me; yet I also have a visual processing disorder, and so new barriers emerge in the online performance environment. I wondered whether the dancing body would still be the focus. I wondered how possibilities for approaching the sensual/sensory in screendance differ from those of the broader field of cinema. How is sensual presence transformed for performers and audience members? I wondered what the shift to online and electronically mediated performance as modes of creation would mean for sensory accessibility (my own, and my audience's). Could I find ways of applying screendance techniques that can enhance sensory/sensual access? As I explored ways of connecting to the

sensory/sensual at the site, I wondered about ways of expanding or conveying that connection through the screen.

Equally, the move from live performance to screendance raised questions for me about the colonality of the site. As I dug into the second term of our newly remote program, I wondered whether practice-based investigation into the colonality of site-specific dance might help to elucidate broader colonial practices in dance. Up to that point, I had learned about the colonality of site-specificity by attending to work by Indigenous artists. As I discussed in Chapter One, Indigenous artists have innovated decolonized approaches to site/place/land in screendance, site-specific dance, and gallery spaces. What techniques and processes might support settler dance artists to make site-relational dance? In working through this critical reflection on my research-creation process, it is my hope to contribute to critical practice in site-specific dance, paying specific attention to the screen as a site and the site that is screened. I also hope to contribute to settler-colonial studies by elucidating ways in which site-specificity in dance and screendance reproduce colonial epistemologies of land.

Can the site speak?

In 2000 I created my first two site-specific works. Rennie Kai-Yun Tang and I co-choreographed *Courtyard Sketches*, which was part of a Toronto Arts Council funded site-specific inter-arts collaboration by a BIPOC collective of visual, sound, and dance artists. The work was created and presented in the courtyard of Saint George the Martyr Church in downtown Toronto. Our movement vocabulary and our costume design were inspired by the columns in the courtyard, and the colonnade down the side of the building, which was connected to the courtyard garden by a few stone steps. Our solo work included standing on columns as plinths and emerging from convertible costume pieces that made us look like continuations of the

column. Our duet work, based in the weight sharing physics of contact improvisation, emulated the strength and permanence of rock columns. We also had sections in which we rolled down the colonnade like columns turned on their sides and perched as living archways with our hands and feet pressed to the stone.

The work was beautifully lit, the costumes were evocative, and the multiracial collective of artists stood out in the overwhelmingly white dance scene that was Toronto in 2000. Our work was solely inspired by the physical characteristics of the space and the time: it was summer, we were under a beautiful night sky (I do not recall rain on any of the nights of our run), we were dancing in a beautiful stone courtyard on the grass and on the columns. Audience members were free to circulate around us and experience the same night air, the feeling of the grass, the touch of the stone. At no point in that production—not in its creation, not in its performance, and not in the program notes—did we address historical or colonial context of the church.





Rachel Gorman and Kai-Yun Tang in *Courtyard Sketches*. Photos by David Hou.

That same year I also produced another duet, [*Shelter*](#), as part of fFIDA (the Fringe Festival of Independent Dance Artists, which later evolved into the Toronto International Dance Festival). Working with another queer youth in my community, Alana Ferguson, I choreographed a dance about housing insecurity. Our approach to site-specificity felt qualitatively different. We came up with the idea to create a dance together during a time that we were housemates. I had lost my housing in the east end of Toronto when my ex-partner (whom I was still living with due to lack of housing options) had become violent. Ferguson was renting a room in the family of Lucas Silveira, whom I was dating at the time. Silveira's parents had moved back to the Azores, and they were planning to sell the house. The house was in Mississauga, which felt like a novelty after years of surviving the Toronto rental market. During summer evenings a group of us would sit outside drinking, with Lucas playing the guitar and singing. Ferguson and I (who both became similarly energized when drinking) would do stunts

on the lawn. A modified version of “airplane,” Ferguson would lie on her back with her feet in the air and I would run at her from across the yard, plant my hips on her feet, Ferguson’s legs would recoil under my weight, and she would launch me up into the air—sometimes forward (a bit more dangerous, involving me tucking and rolling), and sometimes back in the direction I came from.

Ferguson asked to be in my work. I proposed *Shelter* in an application to fFIDA and was accepted. Ferguson had some (mostly negative) experience in ballet class as a child, and some martial arts training. I used stage combat and weight throwing and sharing techniques to create a ten-minute work with repeating loops that was one long struggle. By then the house in Mississauga had been sold, and we were living downtown in Little Portugal (these were the days before gentrification). Ferguson lived in an apartment with three other queer youth on Ossington Ave, Silveira and I lived in a rented flat on Rusholme Drive. We had housing but not studio space. I cannot recall how it came about, possibly in conversation after one of Silveira’s gigs; the owner of Tango offered Ferguson and I daytime use of the bar as our rehearsal space. We emerged after our first rehearsal covered in cigarette butts. I bought a large blue tarp from Canadian Tire to lay on the floor before rehearsal. The metal floor was not kind. We moved to Trinity Bellwoods Park. We were used to rehearsing on grass, but in the pre-gentrification days of the park, sometimes we ended up rolling through feces, both canine and human.

For the performance site of *Shelter*, I chose Alexander Street Parkette, the grass rectangle adjacent to Buddies in Bad Times Theatre on the east side. Buddies was the main stage of fFIDA. I was conscious of the meaning of the site. It was the place where we were turned out after a night of drinking at Tallulah's Cabaret, the bar inside the theatre. To me, Alexander Parkette signified queer youth. It was the venue for the *Fruit Loopz* queer youth cabaret at the

annual pride festival. I also used to think about how that park and other parks in downtown Toronto served as a place to sleep for unhoused people.

In both productions, the movement vocabulary was built from the physical space—shapes inspired by columns in *Courtyard Sketches*, the feeling of rebounding and rolling in grass in *Shelter*.

In *Shelter*, the social context of the site was an intentional component of the production. I timed *Shelter* to begin just as the audience was leaving at the end of a fFIDA program inside the theatre. I created a set with upturned dining room chairs, one of which was a prop in the piece. The dancers were lit by an upturned table lamp. Silveira sat nearby on top of his amplifier with his electric guitar, creating the live soundtrack.

In *Courtyard Sketches*, the dancers beautified the space. If anything confronted the historically white middle class dance audience, it may have been the multiracial casting. Toronto was well into marketing itself as the multicultural destination at that time, and so any overall meaning extracted from that production would likely have been palliative. In *Shelter*, the audience was confronted with youth out of place and out of doors. The site related directly to the content of the work.

Addressing the specificity of the site, and letting the work be about that site, can be a powerfully evocative tool, which can be deployed for liberal and/or transformative purposes. *Courtyard Sketches* was a celebration of Toronto as becoming—becoming post-racial, becoming neoliberal, becoming a creative city. *Shelter* confronted the becoming-global queer scene in Toronto, which welcomed World Pride four short years later. Neither of these works in any way addressed the coloniality of the site. In the end, St. George the Martyr and Alexander Parkette are both *sites*, built colonial environments that are impositions on colonized *land*.

The site as ghost on the land

Both of the works created at my mother's house—[House](#) and [Garden](#)—play with ideas of being ghosted, and with being present and not present over time. I achieve the effect by editing so that my image abruptly appears and disappears. As I note in Chapter Two, the first time I used this technique was for video projection created for a scrim behind my live performance in the 2008 solo work [Pass](#). The video is a series of four long, still shots taken with a camera on a tripod. Editing in camera, we would stop filming so that I could enter the frame, and then start filming again, to create the illusion that I had simply appeared. All four shots are of outdoor locations on a chilly November day in West Toronto by the lake. For the live performance component of *Pass*, I took my movement inspiration from what I could remember of my childhood hyperactive behavior (as I was labeled at the time). I attempted to retrieve somatic memories of the time, rather than acting out an abstracted performance of a bad child. My filmic appearance and disappearance in the projection behind my live moving body was a visual metaphor for my feelings of detachment, separation, the feeling of floating above or outside of oneself, and the desire to disappear from the situation.

When it came time to develop a second or more extended work interacting with my mother's house (the work which would become *Garden*), I thought of continuing to work inside the house. I had already been drawn outside while making *House*, by a cacophony of birds announcing the approaching sunset. On impulse, I stepped outside to record them. I used this recording as an added soundtrack for the second half of the short video. This bird soundtrack is mirrored in [Bed Effigy](#). While the visual shot takes place inside a room, the camera is positioned at an open window, so the microphone attachment captured the bird sounds that accompany the movement in doors.

I also use visual elements to make shots of the indoor site ‘about’ the outdoor site. In the first shot of *House*, nothing moves, except for the shadows and light moving across the furniture and the floor, and the subtle changes in colour coming from the wind moving the clouds across the sun outside. In the final shot, the dining room table is lit up by the low late afternoon sun. Shadows of leaves and branches waving in the breeze are in sharp focus on the dining room table, while we can hear the cacophony of evening birds, the sounds I had recorded just outside that room and overlaid on the scene. I include my own movement in *House*, my own score-based improvisation that responds to the space in those moments, but it’s subtle—I appear and vanish within the frame before my movement phrase is complete.

Combined, these techniques—the fleeting appearance and disappearance of a human occupant, and the cacophony of birds, give the built environment a sense of impermanence. The ghosting figure evokes the passage of time, while the focus on the outside coming inside, through the dancing silhouettes of trees and the sound of birds, draws our attention to the land.

House was completed in the fall of 2020. By the time I started to work on *Garden*, it was spring. The trees in blossom prompted me to start filming outside, and the robin song prompted me to continue. I have taken to approaching video-making in the way I approach choreography. I keep shooting until I see movement that I like—and that I am satisfied with—in the frame. As I edit, I compose the movement and pacing until I am happy with it as a dance. While creating *Garden*, I was thinking about animate movement as being different than my work with inanimate movement that was the focus of *Contact*, described in Chapter Two. Sketches created in the fall of 2020 for Freya Björg Olafson’s video class had given me the opportunity to work with movement in the natural environment as the subject of my videos. For example, [Tree](#) was a 0:58 second one-shot fixed-camera study of movement in relation to the same tree that is a focus in

Garden. [Tree Reprise](#) is a 1:08 minute one-shot moving-camera study of the shadows of tree branches as a way of tracing the tree's growth as movement. And [Walk](#) is a 1:50 minute study of the movement of a child, trees, birds, and clouds. By the end of the process of making *Garden*, I was thinking of the land as the dancer.

Grounding the interior site

On its own, the image of me on and under my bed in [Bed Effigy](#) runs the risk of extracting the disabled body from the social and spatial context. I have been critical of this tendency in both mainstream and disability arts; nevertheless, it can be difficult to convey social and political context of a body when the performing body is the focus of the artwork. I shot the movement sequence at my house in Toronto. I chose the location, ironically (or contradictorily?) because it was 'neutral' in appearance. There are no pictures on the wall or other ornaments visible in the shot angle. Just a bed with a wooden frame, the edge of a wooden dresser, and a door with stairs descending in the background. The bedspread and the walls are a light cream colour. The scene is 'neutral' in the way a real estate agent stages a house; in that there is nothing personally identifying in the shot.

On my many drives to London, Ontario I thought about possibilities for placing movement sequences inside my mother's house, specifically upstairs in the bedrooms, but I could not come up with anything that felt right. Reflecting on it now, I have not slept in that house in twenty-five years, and even then, it was only as guest. I have not lived in the house since I was ten. Because I was preoccupied with a flare-up in my condition, most of the movement ideas that occurred to me were related to chronic illness, and I was not comfortable channeling my mother's experience of illness, or my grandparents' frailty while they lived there with my mother in their later years. When I saw them, it was downstairs, and so that continued to

be the only place inside the house where I was comfortable filming. The choice to refuse visual access to the bedrooms was also a way of retaining privacy in the context of work conveying a level of intimacy.

I did sleep in the house for a few nights while my sister and I excavated the layers of material that had built up over the twenty-five years that my mother lived there alone. My sister had stayed there periodically when she would visit from Montréal. While she was there, she had taken to holing up in the room that used to be mine, as it was the only room that had not been filled with items my mother collected over the years. I slept in what used to be my sister's room. We worked on that room first so I would have a place to sleep. We dug down until we revealed my sister's teenaged bedroom. A single bed, a vanity and mirror, magazine images of models and cat posters taped to the wall. That room and its single bed would have been an interesting location for a movement sequence. But ultimately, I could find no way of giving the viewer the context that I just outlined in this paragraph, without turning to text.

Tracy Emin's *My Bed* stages a bed without a body to give us that context. First exhibited at the Tate Gallery in 1999, it was remounted at a 2017 exhibition at Turner Contemporary in Margate, England. One can think of the installation as a remainder of performance with the artist's bed and paraphernalia surrounding it on display. Although the artist herself is not present, the observer imagines her movement based on the indent in the mattress, the crumpling of the sheets, and litter on the ground right next to the bed. These physical traces suggest long periods of heavy sleep, in relative stillness; abrupt periods of thrashing off covers; and an upper body twisting and bending to rummage on the floor for cigarettes. Movements of the bedbound. Skye Sherwin writes that *My Bed* is "a violent mess of sex and death. Amid the yellowing sheets there are condoms, a tampon, a pregnancy test, discarded knickers and a lot of vodka bottles. It's also

very kitchen sink. That blue slab of carpet speaks of lonely rented rooms” (para. 1). In this way Emin gives us the clues we need to decode the context. In the absence of a body, we look to the objects remaining in the scene to discern the narrative.



My Bed by Tracey Emin.
Photograph: Prudence Cuming
Associates/Tracey
Emin/Saatchi Gallery

Erica Lord's
performance *Artifact
Piece, Revisited*,
references the colonial
project of mythicizing

and essentializing Indigenous cultures as remnants of a no-longer-existing distant past.

Presenting herself as a living artifact allows Lord to confront the objectification of Indigenous people and the exploitation of Indigenous lands. Like Emin's *My Bed*, Lord's *Artifact Piece, Revisited* exists in the gallery space as the remnants of a performance. We see an empty display case with objects arranged on either end. On one end, intricately beaded moccasins and shirt, and family photos; on the other end, an old camera, a blond wig, hoop earrings, a Clash CD, and a copy of Obama's *Dreams of My Father*. These offerings of personal/cultural objects on either side of the display case remind us that "colonialism was not just about collection. It was also about re-arrangement, re-presentation, and re-distribution" (Tuhiwai Smith, 65).



Erica Lord, *Artefact Piece, Revisited*. A Space Gallery

Toward a site-relational practice

Throughout the months that I worked at my mother's house and in her garden, I followed my self-imposed dogma of responding directly to the site itself. Any movement I created for or captured with the camera was improvised in response to the space in the moment. For me, the space is saturated with somatic time, memory, history, and emotion; to the viewer, the site seems specific, not neutral. While I arrived on site each visit with ideas for filming angles, my camera work and the timing of my editing were based on movement that arose in the space. For example, the way light moved across the grass because of cloud formations above. While I was filming [Garden](#), the length of the shots was based on waiting for the end of a phrase that the robin was singing. While I was editing *Garden*, I also took care to use the sound as it was in the video. I cut a lot of good visual material because a car passed, or the neighbor turned up his radio. I followed this process strictly, as a technique for practicing site-relationality.

There were only two instances that I changed the audio. First, in *House*, I overlaid the cacophony of birds. Second, while editing the last day of filming for *Garden*, I detached and replaced the audio on a close-up shot of berries. I had returned for my last day of filming on the summer solstice. As the blossoms on the tree had now turned into berries, I felt it would be a good ending to complete the cycle of the spring season in the garden. The next-door neighbors

were having a noisy pool party. Working around the noise pushed me to film the section of garden at the other side of the house, and to leave the camera running for several minutes to find interesting moments that coincided with lulls in the noise. These long takes allowed me to catch a moment when the robin, whose singing had guided so much of my process, finally entered the frame. The berries and the robin are the final shots in *Garden*.

As I created the video, I looked for ways of applying screendance techniques to enhance sensory/sensual access. I explored ways of connecting to and translating the sensory. I experimented with wide angle and macro lenses; built-in and external microphones and windscreens; and sounds of the lens on the trees. I approached editing as ways of creating site-interactive visual and sound texture. As I prepared for the interactive online performance, I looked for ways to create sensory intimacy with the site through watching the video and listening to sounds recorded at the site alongside stories about the site (see appendix one for the spoken text and the instructions for the interactive component). The resulting online interactive screening of *Garden* connects with broader post-COVID-onset discussions about ‘liveness’ in performance and is an experiment in creating site-relational, decolonial performance. I describe the results of the audience interaction with my screening in more detail in the Conclusion.

During Freya Björg Olafson’s Interactive Stage course, I piloted my interactive approach of having audience members speak words as they are evoked for them by the video. Part of my motivation was to explore accessibility in online performance by creating visual and aural texture so that people with visual or hearing impairments could participate in and access something in the work. The work started with a simple investigation of accessibility in online performance, borne out of my own frustration as an artist with a visual processing disorder trying to navigate a visually abstracted environment. [Macro](#) is a 2:03 minute moving-camera one-shot

sketch with a macro lens. Before playing the video, I gave class members six words—tongue, dust, grass, cell, vein, and seed—that were evoked by macro images and sounds created by the lens diffuser hood moving through dried flowers. I asked them to write the words down in order of their preference for the individual words. While the video was playing, they were to read the first word on their list when something in the visuals and/or sounds resonated with that word. Then they were to move to the next word and repeat the process. One accessibility-related finding was that the live transcription feature in the video conferencing software was unable to make out individual words, especially when there were multiple simultaneous speakers.

Garden was prompted by my ongoing investigation of site-specificity, but it quickly expanded into an investigation of sensory and sensual translation, and accessibility in a time when live performance is mediated by video conferencing software. Investigating site-specificity from the perspective of sensuality created much more depth for me as an artist. I believe this approach may have provided me with a bridge for grasping ‘land’ as living earth. In the next chapter, I explore whether and how I can find techniques to bring a more expansive sense of ‘liveness’ and relationship to living earth into the black box theatre.

Chapter 4—Becoming Otherwise Human: Transformation in the black box

While making *Garden*, I had been focusing on land, because of the necessity and opportunity of working site-specifically throughout our first year of the MFA program. With *Golem*, nagging questions returned about whether and how we can decolonize the black box theatre space. Past works I have produced for the black box theatre have often had anti-colonial themes. For example, *The Ghost* is a 29:00-minute work based on stories of Kurdish political prisoners and former combatants. The narrative arc addresses state violence and collective grieving. *Waking the Living* is a 17:00 minute work responding to the US invasion of Iraq. Yet as I described with my site-specific work, these productions do not reference the colonization of the land on which they take place. As we went back into the studio, I struggled to imagine how I could bring this centering of land-based relationships forward into my work. Re-reading Sylvia Wynter's *On Being Human as Praxis* helped me to centre embodiment in settler colonialism. If it is possible to transform site-specific work into a decolonial project through attending to land-based relationships, then perhaps it is also possible to transform staged embodiment by highlighting the transformation to come: the process of becoming *otherwise* human.

In this chapter I trace the ways in which learnings from my site-specific works *House*, *Bed Effigy*, and *Garden* informed my process as I created *Golem*, an ensemble work produced and filmed on the proscenium stage and edited to become a screendance. In my research for *Golem*, I turned to the 16th century Jewish myth that tells of a rabbi who creates a being out of mud, and tasks it with hard work and protecting the community. *Golem* is a work created with the York Dance Ensemble, featuring a sixteen-dancer ensemble and a soloist who represents a sage, magician, or rabbi. Through the sixteen-minute piece, we see the sage conjure elemental and organic energies to lead the ensemble through a collective transformation.

Golem is about the transformation of humans, in a not-so-distant future, from *homo economicus* into *homo environmentalus*. *Homo economicus* was coined by Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter to trace how the European enlightenment version of Man came to stand for *the* way of being human. The over-representation of Man poses a problem for (re)imagining other ways of being human, while it continues to represent colonized (and formerly colonized) peoples as less than human. I wondered if the golem could be a symbol for the *otherwise* human. In making work for the proscenium stage, I turn my attention from decolonizing the site to decolonizing the human. Since our understanding of the human is shaped by colonization, what are some alternative conceptualizations? How can we address site-specificity and the coloniality of the site in a black box theatre, a space which is created to be “no place”?

Golem as otherwise human

Several details drew me to the golem myth as a device for exploring decolonization in dance. First, and foremost, the golem allowed me to carry forward my study of movement of nonhuman “animate” matter. A man made of mud seemed like an inevitable next step after my focus in *Garden*. It would also be the perfect vehicle for developing the Sadako-like uncanny movement I had been exploring. Second, the golem resonates with other culturally-specific narratives of undead animated figures, including African diasporic Obeah. And the idea of a man made from mud recalls origin myths from many cultures that feature humans being created from mud by the gods. Choosing a specific cultural reference from my own heritage, which also resonates cross-culturally, can lead to engaging and accessible theatre-based work. Third, I am fascinated by the role of written language in this narrative, especially when trying to think this story alongside histories of colonialism.

In the myth, the rabbi animates the golem by writing “truth” in Hebrew across its forehead. He deactivates it by erasing the first letter aleph (א) so Emet (אמת) “truth” becomes Met (מת) “death.” In some versions of the myth, the word is written on a piece of paper and held in the golem’s mouth. The myth is Ashkenazi, from a people who spoke Yiddish in daily life, but the word is written in Hebrew. The written word represents the central importance of reading and writing in Jewish life, and of learning to read the Torah in Hebrew. However, many Ashkenazim also became settlers, notably, like my ancestors, in Canada and the United States. Ashkenazim became the architects of settler colonialism in Israel. In all these contexts, the power to label and name has been a major technique of colonial power. In Canada, land has been renamed to reflect British and French ideas and values, and Indigenous names have been appropriated by the colonizers. In Israel, Palestinian names in Arabic script have been replaced by Hebrew, and Palestinian cuisine and music have been appropriated as Israeli culture.

The choice to work with music by Orev Reena Katz cemented my decision to ground this second cycle of decolonial inquiry in my own Jewish settler family history. Katz and I share a queer feminist anti-Zionist approach to Jewish history, spirituality, and aesthetics. We worked together in a Jewish feminist Palestine solidarity collective during the 2000s, and I worked with tracks from their 2001 *Needletrade* album when I created my 2009 dance theatre duet *Fall*. For Golem, I selected five tracks, which can be accessed by scrolling to the bottom of Katz’s [Sound Compositions page](#): “Jap Lament” (2:08, 2009), “Kitchen Shekinah” (3:12, 2008), “Mollie’s Fill” (1:14, 2008), “Down with Astarte” (3:36, 2010), and “Night Beam” (3:54, 2007). There was resonance between the themes I pursue in *Golem* and this cycle of Katz’s sound compositions. Significantly, Katz created a live soundtrack “Shtiller: Der Golem” (3:06 excerpt) in 2005 for a silent film screening. This was the first track I introduced to the ensemble during our rehearsal

process. Liturgic Dirgic (2:20, 2008) was another track that resonates with the ritualistic dimensions of the work. Katz herself is an ordained Hebrew priestess and chaplain.

Sadako was another inspiration to focus on the golem myth, as a next step in the development of my Sadako-inspired movement vocabulary. Sadako's odd, choppy gait draws attention to compulsory able-bodied movement; it also references the "uncanny" and otherwise human. Sadako is an earthy ghost; she appears as the earth retuning. Sadako is the repressed dimension of our humanness, as well as the rage that fuels survival and resistance in a colonial world. Unlike disembodied spirits, which are a staple of ghost stories, creatures made of earth conjure decaying bodies and the un-dead, or bodies returning to life. Reflecting on the human as a being of the earth, brings to mind our bodies as biomes of microbes, and our DNA and mitochondria as part of the eons-old biochemical chain of earthly life. While creating *Golem*, I turned to movement that depicts the live-ness of bodies, but not rational human movement.

One of the early exercises I did during rehearsals with the York Dance Ensemble was based on the idea of watching crabs drag an acquired shell; the engine that drags the body is not where one expects it to be based on the morphology of the object. For example, the dancers tried to find ways to locomote by dragging their bodies across the floor with their hips leading. This idea evolved into the "fish out of water" sequence when the ensemble falls to the ground and locomotes using only their hips and shoulders, and the "snail trail" sequence when the ensemble lying face down drag themselves upstage by moving only their arms. The first choreographic image that came to me was an ancient underwater pyramid of seaweed, out of which emerges a line of creatures that move like salamanders. These beings eventually rise to standing, but their heads hang forward on their chests. The bodies do not appear to be directed by their heads. This sequence appears in the final half of the piece, signifying the start of their transformation.

Like the unruly overgrowth I chronicle in *Garden*, the live-ness of the creatures in Golem cannot be managed or directed by enlightenment Man, it can only be repressed or banished. In the narrative arc of *Golem*, these otherwise humans can emerge only when their connection to the earth is restored. In this way, the rituals performed by the rabbi/magician/priestess guide the ensemble in a process of decolonizing embodiment and decolonizing the human.

For the first four rehearsals, I focused on the figure of the golem as a meditation on our ‘enfleshment.’ In 2014, I took part as a faculty member in the Critical Ethnic Studies Association’s Summer Institute at the University of Maryland. I remember Denise Ferreira da Silva presenting a striking example of the ideological bifurcation of land/soil and body/flesh. Ferreira da Silva showed us images she found through a google search of ‘land.’ She scrolled through image after image of aerial shots of farmland. A patchwork quilt of greens and browns and yellows, each area with clear sharp edges, in geometric shapes that were overlaid on the land. This ‘land’ is known to us through the colonial technologies of mapping. Next, she showed us images she found through a google search of ‘soil.’ These images were close-ups of rich dark brown earth, with worms and organic matter clearly visible.

Reflecting on this bifurcation between colonized land and living soil as a model can help us to think in new ways about the bifurcation of body/flesh. We can start to perceive ‘body’ as something that is re-presented back to us through the colonial technologies of embodiment. Writing about modern European civilization, Michel Foucault calls these technologies ‘biopolitics’—the politics of life itself. Writing about the dispossession and disposability of the postcolonial world, Achille Mbembe calls these technologies ‘necropolitics’—the politics of slow death. Starting my process with the golem—a man made of earth—provided a way for me to invite both soil and flesh into the work. In my process, I do not usually grasp the full semiotic

weight of an image until later in the process. Symbols, metaphors, and narratives have myriad meanings, which is why they are powerful. I believe it would overwhelm the work to unpack things before the movement has been generated. It would risk generating didactic movement.

Lessons from Skywoman

When I started working on *Golem*, I was conceptualizing the rabbi as a representative of rationality and masculinity. The Jewish feminist tradition, which is part of both my history and the composer's, has been critical of patriarchal aspects of Judaism, and has worked to excavate feminine figures in Jewish mythology. Early in the process, it was my plan to have the golems represent a feminine element, in keeping with the attribution of earth with feminine characteristics. I thought a lot about the significance of the word in bringing the golem to life. In the myth, the rabbi has the power to activate or deactivate the golem because the rabbi has the power of the word. I thought about various ways for the golems to take back their own words, thereby overriding or escaping from the rabbi's power.

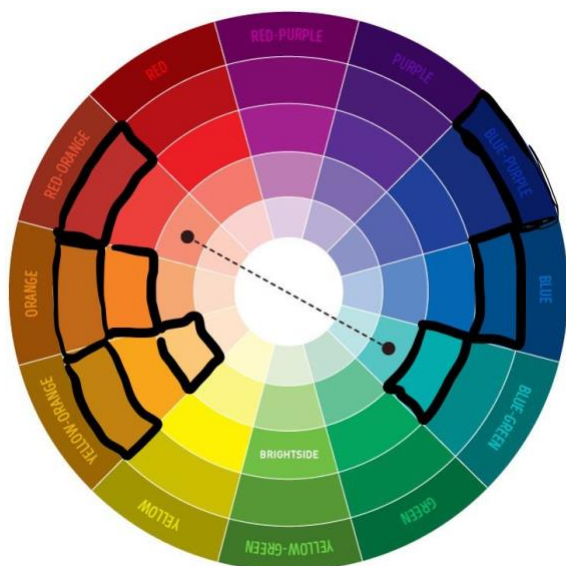
We did a word exercise as a group. I asked the dancers to write down as many four-letter words as they could think of. I asked them to do it quickly and without judging the words they were writing down. From their list I asked them to circle their favorite words, and to look for words that reference the environment. Next, I asked them to go down their list and circle as many three-letter words inside their four-letter words as they could find. Each dancer eventually took on one of their word pairs—a four-letter word with a three-letter word inside it. Up until the point that we were designing the costumes, I played with the idea of having each dancer write their four-letter word on their forehead with an eyeliner pencil. When we were planning for a live proscenium production, I intended to incorporate movement that allowed each dancer to erase one of their letters to make the three-letter word appear. In this feminist version of the

myth, instead of the rabbi deactivating the golem by erasing one letter, I would have the golems become self-actualizing and free of the rabbi by erasing one of their letters themselves. Later, when we were planning to film the production instead of having a live audience, I planned to shoot close-ups of their faces showing them erasing their letters.

I realized that this Jewish feminist detail was too subtle for the narrative arc that was developing. It was also clear that the dancers were going to need to wear masks, and any additional marking on their faces would be visually distracting. This play with words was important to me because the obsession with the written word in the Abrahamic religions has fuelled the devaluing of Indigenous oral knowledges in colonizing campaigns throughout the world. Subverting the primacy of writing, I opted to have the dancers speak their words instead.

Once I moved from workshopping different scenes to building the narrative arc of the whole piece, I started to contend with the significance of having cast a Black woman in the rabbi's role. Considering patriarchy and anti-Black racism within the Ashkenazi Jewish culture, I decided that transforming the identity of the rabbi would build a more transformative narrative, and I dispensed with my framing ideas about the golems subverting a patriarchal rabbi.

As I developed the colour scheme for the costumes, I realized I would need to dress Zuri Skeete, the dancer whom I had cast in the role of the rabbi, in complementary colours so that she



would be visible moving among the other dancers.

I chose burnt oranges to red browns for the golems to wear. Following the colour wheel, that meant that Zuri would be dressed in sky blue, ocean blue, and blue-purple.

As soon as I saw the colours, I was reminded of Robin Wall Kimmerer's 2013 work on Indigenous sciences and the teachings of plants.

She begins her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* with the Anishinaabe creation story of Skywoman:



She felt like a Maple seed, pirouetting on an autumn breeze. A column of light streamed from a hole in the Skyworld, marking her path where only darkness had been before.... [The geese break her fall, and the animals gather]. A great turtle floated in their mist and offered his back for her to rest upon.... The others understood that she needed land for her home and discussed how they might serve her need. The deep divers among them had heard of mud at the bottom of the water and agreed to go find some. (pp. 3-4)

Many animals tried, and some died, before muskrat's limp body floats to the surface, with a small handful of mud clenched in his paw. On witnessing muskrat's sacrifice, and "moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals, she sang in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth. The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on Turtle's back until the whole earth was made" (p. 4).

Post-apocalyptic news

When I started the creation process for [Golem](#), I wanted to work collaboratively with the dancers to generate material. The York Dance Ensemble would be a much larger group (seventeen dancers) than I had worked with in the past (usually four dancers, some duets and solo work). During the creation process for past dance theatre works, I generated movement vocabulary by choreographing both ‘onto’ and with my dancers. I often brought ideas for movement fragments or shapes into the studio, and I worked collaboratively with the dancers to generate the material. Working with dancers of diverse sizes, shapes and abilities meant that my movement ideas had to be negotiated and improvised with the active participation of the dancers. The collaborative character of the process was such that I could not imagine recasting the works. Working with pre-professional dancers who have been trained to generate movement through improvisation took the collaborative process to a new level for me.

Considering that *Golem* centres on questions about human transformation, and shifting our consciousness about settler colonialism, I felt it was important to work with ideas and images that came from the group, and not only from me. In past creative processes, I educated the dancers about the content, but I did not ask the dancers to generate their own movement vocabulary or material. For example, when I created [The Ghost](#), I shared my research on Kurdish political prisoners and state violence with my dancers, so they were well informed about who they were playing and could expertly inhabit the roles; however, I generated the material from interviews and participant observation. When I created [Waking the Living](#), I based it on my own experience with anti-war and anti-occupation activism.

The collaborative creation process was an opportunity for me to try creative exercises from my fine arts breadth course in a pre-professional dance training context. In the first

material-generating exercise, which I describe above, ensemble members choose a double word that animates and deactivates them by generating four-letter words with embedded three-letter words. In a second exercise that stands out for me, I asked ensemble members to imagine that we are in year five of the revolution—five years past some epochal change, which they can imagine as a world-changing event, environmental catastrophe, positive revolutionary change, or any combination of these. In the context that they visualize, what is their greatest fear, and what is their greatest hope? Indigenous ensemble member Rayn Cook-Thomas said “If there is an environmental apocalypse, I worry about where the stories will go. Do they go into the plants and earth? Are we walking on our ancestors’ stories?”

A third exercise I used was a revolutionary radio exercise. Groups of four imagined year five of their post-apocalyptic and/or post-revolutionary futures, and then created and recorded radio news items from this imagined future. This was my first time trying this exercise in our post-COVID-onset world. It had been a rough week in world news, and, interestingly, everyone decided to go for comic relief by creating bizarre and hilarious news items that are reminiscent of the ‘fake news’ that currently has so much power in contemporary world events. This exercise ended up yielding a wealth of material, which appears in the piece as lines being spoken by the crowd at the beginning, and in the surreal scenarios that are acted out in the opening sequence.

Unsettling the black box

Sound was a formal/technical dimension that I carried from my work on *House*, *Bed Effigy*, and *Garden* into my work on *Golem*. The three screendance works all feature the sound of birds. For the two works set indoors, [House](#) and [Bed Effigy](#), the cacophony of birds disrupts the idea of a space that can be sealed off from the land. The house is part of and inside the

natural domain. In *Garden*, the phrasing of the robin's song guides the choreography of the edit and defines the time between cuts.

In the planning stages for *Golem*, I considered working with robin song in the soundtrack, as a way of bringing the land into the theatre space; however, the realism that can be achieved in video and in video- and audio-based gallery installations does not work aesthetically in the same way in a theatre space. In my experience, audio recordings (of voice, or natural sounds) seem to come from the outside in, conjuring a dreamlike or memory-like quality that reinforces the separateness of the black box space. I could have gone in the direction of video projection of nature onto the scrim; however, this move would recreate the formal components of a gallery installation, wherein the 'real' (non-virtual) bodies in the space are the spectators. In the gallery setting, performance art that draws spectators' attention to bodies in the space often happens in an area where the white box provides the backdrop. To me, video projection in the black box similarly conjures a dreamlike or memory-like quality when it is the backdrop to live dancers. Since a goal for this project is to situate the black box theatre in relation to settler colonialism and the land, I decided against design elements that might reinforce the land as being elsewhere from the black box space.

One way to avoid creating a here/elsewhere dichotomy in the black box space, is to lean into the black box as a separate, suspended 'anyplace.' On the surface, this move would seem counter to the goal of grounding a work in the land and the settler colonial context. Formally, however, setting the narrative frame as a separate space supports fantasy, science fiction, and futurism—genres that create realms of allegory for the place we are.

Rather than bringing in natural sounds from outside the black box, I relied on sound generated by the dancers within the space. The stage was set up with microphones that were

connected to sound input on the video recorder so that the sounds of dancers moving on stage were prominent in the video. Instead of pairing Katz's music with robin song, I paired the music with the sound of footfalls, the swish of bodies sliding on the ground, and the squeak of feet turning on the spot. As I note below regarding the visual effects, the piece seemed to happen at



The pyramid/waterfall/salamander crawl from *Golem*. Photos by Don Sinclair.



night, so bird song would not have worked, unless I had found nocturnal bird sounds. The underwater pyramid section that I described above has the visual effect of seaweed shifting in an underwater current. As the dancers salamander-crawl out of that formation, the sound of bodies swishing on the floor is reminiscent of water. The pyramid empties line by line, with each line cascading downward until the dancers reach the floor, so the visual waterfall effect is reinforced by the sound of water.

Sound is a major element in the opening sequence of *Golem*. We hear the voices of the sixteen ensemble members all speaking at once, first quietly, then increasingly loudly, as the rabbi/sage/magician conjures a hurricane. As the ensemble is pulled into the vortex, their running feet striking the stage sound like driving rain from the hurricane. This effect is repeated halfway through the piece. This time rabbi/sage/magician claps her hands, and they fall to the floor, flopping like fish out of water. The sounds of running feet and slapping bodies reinforce the visual images.

Zuri Skeete in the eye of the storm, scene from *Golem*. Photo by Don Sinclair.



In *House*, *Bed Effigy*, and *Garden*, my movement vocabulary was uncanny and suggested ghosts or otherworldly creature. The movement itself was subtle, and it appeared sparingly in *House* and *Garden*, and did not detract from the focus on the site. Bringing the movement vocabulary into the theatre affected my design choices. In *House* and *Garden*, I appeared only fleetingly in the frame. The movement focus was light and shadow moving on a dining room table or leaves and blossoms blowing in a breeze. Shifting into a theatre space for *Golem* with a cast of seventeen dancers put the emphasis back on human movement. The black box amplifies the focus on the performers, and the sheer size of the cast also amplifies the movement. I should confess that by September 2021 I was so excited by the opportunity to work with a large cast for in-person dance creation, that I jumped at the chance to cast the entire ensemble.

Uncanny human movement as a focus brings us into the realm of fantasy, science fiction, and futurism. The visual design for *Golem* included costumes (described above) and lighting in the first instance, and videography and editing in the second, as we streamed our work as screendance instead of performing live due to the Omicron variant surge of COVID. Jennifer Jimenez' high contrast lighting made the earthy costume colours glow, while the space receded in the darkness. Throughout my creation process I thought of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which is a powerful critique of Western scientific rationalism. My use of the lightning as the element that animates the golems references *Frankenstein*. The creation of the unnamed monster from dead flesh dug up from graveyards parallels the golem's creation story. Jimenez' lighting brought me to those graveyards, and the feeling of suspense and wonder.

Black and Indigenous authors and artists have used science fiction and Afrofuturism to unpack settler colonialism. Camille Turner's [Final Frontier](#) series follows African Space travelers who are descendants of the Dogon people of West Africa as they explore parts of the

Canadian landscape. Mi'kmaq writer and director Jeff Barnaby's 2019 film *Blood Quantum* is set during a zombie apocalypse from which people with Indigenous blood are immune. An anti-colonial strength of these artworks is the conceptual power of the idea or image they convey—the “what if...” premises on which the works are built. Esie Mensah's 2020 [*Revolution of Love*](#), a dance film featuring fifteen Black women in Afro-futurist attire at the Fork York national historic site in downtown Toronto, literally repurposes and re-orientates the British colonial site. The strength of the images are themselves transformative, including shots of the women commanding the battlements, and dancing in fierce formation. It is work that is propelled by “what if...”

There are aesthetic continuities and differences across *House*, *Bed Effigy*, *Garden*, and *Golem*; however, all of them are emerged through a research-creation process that asks a decolonial “what if” question. At the beginning of the creation process for *Golem*, I thought the golems would be the protagonists, representing the earth rising up to resist the logocentric patriarchal rabbi. However, as the work developed, I thought about the golem as the transformed human, and my mind turned toward imagining the social movement leaders who shepherd us through transformation. As I moved from the phase of exploratory exercises toward a narrative arc to be viewed by an audience, the question “what do you see?” became the organizing principle. In *Golem*, I ask “what if we accept the wisdom and leadership of Black women? What if we allow ourselves to be transformed, individually and collectively?”

Conclusion: Year Five of the Revolution

Years ago, during a break in a Laban workshop she was leading, choreographer and dance teacher Miriam Rother asked me if I was interested in choreographing on people who were *not* disabled. She told me she was asking the question to help me ascertain whether I wanted to be a choreographer, or whether I wanted to be involved in disability arts. Her point, that professional choreographers did not focus so much on working with diverse dancers—or the converse, choreographers who focus on working with diverse dancers will not be taken seriously as professionals—was all too true at the time Rother asked me that question. I did not know how to answer her because I wanted to continue to do—to *be*—both. As I come to the end of this MFA research-creation process, I find myself asking what, if anything, has changed about my process, my aesthetics, my craft? What are the differences between the dance theatre and performance-based work I produced as part of this thesis, and my earlier dance theatre and performance-based works?

Arts-based research and kinetic knowledge

In their 2019 chronology of arts-based research, Visse et al. describe “a new [methodological] turn: from knowing to the praxis of life itself” (3). Their framework for arts-based research provides a useful way of tracking the analytic moves involved in research-creation. Visse et al. describe four analytic modes: *ontic*, *ontological (linguistic)*, *pre-linguistic (being)*, and *praxis (event)*. I find this schema of analytic modes helpful, as a way of unifying the aspects of research creation work that often feel separate. In this thesis project I have engaged in theoretical (which in this schema would be ontological/linguistic), visual (pre-linguistic/being), and movement (praxis/event) based work. As an academic and an artist, my work has been nourished by the same experiences, learnings, and practices yet social research and dance

creation have felt like parallel lines that never intersect. The resulting products—academic articles, dance productions, curatorial essays exist as though they are in parallel universes; they do not interact or speak directly to each other. In my past projects, I have not felt equipped to start a project in one analytic mode and then switch to another. For me, one of the draws of doing an MFA project is that it requires me to do so!

During my online interactive screening of [Garden](#), I had a profound sense of shifting across and between these analytic modes. The script I read, as I screened sounds and images of the overgrown garden, narrated the site in relation to personal memory, the surrounding land, settler colonial violence, and Indigenous sovereignty (see Appendix One). When asked to write down and then perform (speak) words that stood out for them from the narrative, audience members offered poetic phrases that were built out of words I had said, but that expressed their embodied experience of interacting with the immersive sounds and images of the site. In this way, the online performance incorporated *ontic* and *ontological* analytic modes through narrative; *pre-linguistic* being through the immersion in sounds and visuals from the site; and *praxis* through selecting words and performing them in response to the sights, sounds, and meanings of the site.

Several of the participants went beyond individual words and offered poetic phrases that were built from my narrative, that expressed their embodied experience of interacting with the immersive sounds and images of the site. Dance artist and audience member Jessica Runge composed a short poem in the chat feature and sent it to me by direct message.

bird song
 petal stone
 foundations collapsing into the ground. 1961. a stream ran through it
 the giant trembling Aspen had been drinking from the stream

Near the end of the video, during a shot of the tops of trees in the sky, dance artist and professor Susan Lee repeated the phrase “the trembling ash had been drinking from the underground stream.” In this way, the interactive performance both deepened and collectivized my sense of relationship to the site, and my sense of being implicated in settler colonialism. The audio became a poetic parallel to the video, rather than simply providing a factual description. In terms of accessibility, the interactive work came much closer to a “universal design,” in that people can find different sensory entry points to the work, rather than relying on a separate post-creation process of translation or transcription.

I lead a similar sound art exercise in my introductory arts course for first year undergraduates. I ask them to circle ten words or phrases in an assigned article on social theory related to the theme of that week’s lecture. I then ask them to divide into groups of five and sit in a circle, placing a phone with a sound recording app at the centre. Each goes through their list of words or phrases, saying each one when they feel the urge to do so, allowing overlaps between speakers to happen naturally. The result is a collective piece of sound art. I adapted the process for *Macro* in my Interactive Stage course with Freya Björg Olafson (described in Chapter Three) after supplying participants with six words related to the video images and sounds. For *Garden*, I asked participants to write down five words that stood out for them from the narrative. I left three minutes of additional video and audio that continued playing after my short story was finished. This time was enough for audience members to say their words, and for some to begin improvising phrases in the moment.

The level of creative *praxis* that was achieved by the group during the interactive screening caused me to think about the high level of creativity in dance audiences. Robert Wechsler, writing in 2006 on the “Artistic Considerations in the Use of Motion Tracking with

Live Performers: a Practical Guide” notes that “in all cases, interactivity depends on a certain degree of looseness, or openness in the artistic material, which allows for a convincing exchange to take place” (5). Although my experience/experiment with online interactive screening of *Garden* involved a video conferencing program rather than motion tracking, I found Wechsler’s idea of “openness... which allows for convincing exchange” was borne out of the process. From my practice-based research experience, it seems that a process in which the participants are provided with more narrative context; given more creative licence; and invited to use their arts-based capacity, can lead to a more accessible, lively, and site-interactive experience.

Practical limitations of Zoom and other video conferencing applications prevent more than one word from being heard, so overlapping comments and sounds are not audible. As background noise cancellation features are a function of application-specific proprietary algorithms, it would be worth exploring the creation of a patch to allow for overlapping words, through Isadora or a comparable open-source software. Another option would be to give audience members the option of writing down phrases that struck them (rather than words), as longer sound bites work better with the noise cancellation and audio transcription features.

While arts-based research as a field has been struggling toward what Visse et al. term “the unsayable,” *dance ethnography* has developed a sophisticated approach to kinetic knowledge and inherent, or phenomenological meaning, which in Visse et al.’s schema would be considered the pre-linguistic (being), and praxis (event) analytic modes. In her 2000 review of dance ethnography, Deirdre Sklar traces two trajectories in dance ethnography scholarship: the sociopolitical (via cultural studies) and the kinesthetic (70). Sklar notes that “unlike the sociopolitical trajectory, which drew theory from a large literature external to dance, the

kinesthetic trajectory grew internally, out of dance methodology. Labananalysis opened the way for exploring the sociocultural significance of qualitative, felt bodily knowledge” (70).

Growing out of dance studies as it did, this kinesthetic trajectory has the potential to “incorporate felt kinetic knowledge [into ethnographic studies] to address the cultural meanings inherent in movement” (71).

In Sklar’s assessment, ground-breaking dance ethnographers “treat movement as emergent, felt experience that works conceptually and metaphorically in relation to larger patterns of social meaning.” (74). Sklar describes a process in which “dipping into memory from a space of somatic attention, one can allow the permutations of ‘thoughtforms,’ including kinetic sensations, to take form as words (or pictures, or choreography)” (74). The kinesthetic strand of dance ethnography offers a robust description of how phenomenological experience might become more accessible to linguistic analytic modes through the poetic, pictorial, or choreographic.

Site-relational research-creation projects provide potent opportunities for creating kinesthetic ‘anarchives’ whereby collaborating artists, co-creators, participants, and audiences can *feel with* knowledges and experiences of colonization and decolonization as contemporary processes unfolding here and now. Based on my experience with *Garden*, I believe that kinesthetic knowledge is a necessary part of a project that seeks to *feel with* while also cultivating reflexive *awareness of* settler colonial tendencies.

Research creation and the anarchival

One of the reasons I was drawn to joining the curatorial committee at A Space Gallery in 2009 was the opportunity to view hundreds of submissions of new work, to see what trends were emerging in the moment, and to connect artworks to transnational histories and developments in

politically and socially informed contemporary art. That kind of wide-angle view had not been possible for me for a long time in dance, not since around the time I started choreographing. I remember in the summer of 1999 buying a festival pass to fFIDA and watching every show. I remember how helpful that was for my own process. I also remember attending a screendance festival in the early 2000s and being blown away by the possibilities for movement on screen. When I was creating new work, I could review my material in my mini DV viewfinder, but I could not revisit other works on video. Even reviewing my own shows was difficult, as it involved chasing down videographers for tapes.

All of this has changed with the full-fledged emergence of screendance and online access. We have collective access to a vast archive of movement styles; however, the coloniality of that archive remains, including gaps in the historical record of Black, Indigenous, transnational, queer, trans, and disabled art and dance.

Research-creation scholar Stephanie Springgay and colleagues recount *counter-archiving* as a practice emerging from queer of colour critique as a response that can simultaneously address the coloniality of the archive and its erasure of queer and trans communities.

Unlike static, stable, and linear colonial archives, counter-archives are grounded in accountability and reciprocity. They often emerge from community-based and collaborative processes. Counter-archives build on struggles from the past that continue to impact lives in the present. Furthermore, counter-archives include what is traditionally understood as non-archivable—affects, bodies, performances, and embodied events—that which is ephemeral and fleeting. (2019, 1)

The counter-archive has been a methodological approach in cultural studies that allows for the analysis of other (kinds of) texts. While the counter-archive implies a repository or recounting of things that have been elided from or misappropriated by the colonial archive, the *anarchive* functions as a mode of attending to the embodied and non-textual, through a focus on process.

Springgay et al. propose *anarchiving* as a research-creation practice.

Anarchiving is excessive potential, or that which exceeds the archive... If the archive functions as a repository and operates to uphold state narratives, the anarchiving is concerned with what it can do in the present-future. This can be done through disruption, or departures in established techniques and procedures. As such, anarchiving is less a thing, than a process or an action.... committed to queer, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial frameworks and ways of being and doing (2-3)

As an action-oriented process that is modelled after a methodology that includes “affects, bodies, performances, and embodied events,” *anarchiving* lends itself to embodied research. “Counter-archival practice acknowledges the body itself as a repository of memory and trauma. Not simply a matter of resurrecting forgotten or erased texts, counter-archival practice is located in the act of bringing forth and honoring embodied feelings and experiences that were often traumatically hidden and even criminalized” (5). Developed in relation to trauma and performance studies, Springgay and colleagues’ work provides a bridge back to Dian Million’s concept of felt theory, which I reviewed in the Introduction. Million’s framing of felt theory opens the possibility of an embodied archive of diverse experiences of survivance, resistance, complicity, and solidarity.

In my own work, the device of appearing and disappearing from the frame that I initiated in *Pass* and developed in [House](#) and *Garden* was a metaphor for an embodied state I experienced as a child, which emerged from my kinesthetic memories of childhood. I researched these through my movement development process for *Pass*. I used in-studio solo improvisation work guided by scores as a way of guiding me back through traumatic embodied memories. Creating the screendance work and developing the text for *Garden* were both opportunities to create anti-colonial counter-archives of my kinesthetic knowledge of the land around my mother’s house.

Since fall of 2020, when I first began using my mother’s house a site for filming class projects, two stories had been sitting with me. One was the story of a lost forest that I used to visit as a child. I used to walk through the forest until I came to a stream deep in the woods. I first explored the forest with a friend who lived at the edge of a field beside the forest. Later I

would enter the forest myself and try to way-find. I learned many different routes to the stream, which marked the edge of my travels. After my mother's stroke, when I started looking after her house, I wanted to bring my son there and show him the forest. I kept looking on my phone's map application, but I did not see the forest where it was supposed to be, though there was a small greenspace several blocks north of where the southern edge of the forest should have been.

Carlos and I set out to find it. We walked for blocks and blocks through a subdivision of ugly



Carlos crossing the stream on a tree felled by a beaver

1990s houses. Eventually, we came to a small patch of green at the side of the road, marked with a provincial conservation sign. Carlos and I entered and started walking down the path. After some time, we came to a culvert with a trickle of water flowing through it. We followed it until it joined a tributary of the Deshkan Ziibi (the Thames River). The part of the forest I knew had been levelled to build the subdivision, and the culvert carried what was left of the stream.

While I was preparing material for the interactive screening of *Garden*, one of my graduate students, Sukaina Dada, texted me a news link that a white supremacist, Islamophobic driver had intentionally driven into a Muslim family, killing a grandparent, parents, and their daughter, and injuring their nine-year-old son, at the intersection of Hyde Park Road and South

Carriage Road in London, Ontario. On reading the headline, I immediately opened my map application to see where the murders had taken place. Two and a half kilometres from my mother's house, just north of the subdivision that was built over the forest. As I, along with my non-Muslim colleagues and students, struggled with collective accountability for Islamophobia and the conditions that enabled these murders, I also saw the clear lines between the suburban site and white supremacy. I zoomed in and out on my map function trying to capture the context of the neighborhood—the proximity of the bog, the golf course, the mall, the train tracks, the river. As I switched from map to satellite mode, I contemplated the difference between representing a place kinaesthetically, through images and sounds of trees, birds and water; and representing it on a map—a practice which has long been critiqued as a technology of colonialism.



Satellite view of the site. My mother's house is on the south edge of the pentagon of green at the bottom right. The bog is south of the main road just visible in the bottom right corner. The top right quadrant of the image is the new suburb built on the bulldozed forest. Along the sidewalk 500m north of the T intersection in the top right corner of the image, five members of the Afzaal family were murdered by a white supremacist driving a pick-up truck.

Describing her photography-based methodology for storying her traditional lands, Pedro-Spade talks about how the stories shared by the Elders in her family emerged as they walked through the land. They might begin a story while standing on one part of the land, and that story would also connect to other parts of the land. Their memories were land-based, kinesthetic, and interconnected. I did not intend to appropriate or replicate Pedro-Spade's process as I prepared my material for the interactive screening of *Garden*. I had, however, read her work and included her writing in my course syllabus. In preparing for the performance, I contemplated the day I took my son to find the river in the forest that I used to visit as a child, only to realize it has been buried by a new housing development in the 1990s. As I tried, and failed, to write the story and

to explain the *significance* of the story, perhaps I glimpsed the kinesthetic and inter-connected nature of land-based memories that Pedro-Spade discusses. My process of being on the land, using satellite images to trace the watershed, reading the news of the attack, and using my computer's map application to reflect on the built settler environment overlaying the land allowed me to access more contextualizing memories.

From practice to decolonial technique?

Dance studies scholars have been central contributors to the development of embodied research; and dance itself continues to be an exemplary focus. In contrast to embodied research rooted in somatic strands of psychotherapy and psychology, which focus on measuring ways in which the previously bifurcated notion of 'mind' can be measured in the body (see Tantia, 2020), embodied research in dance studies asks "What can bodies do?" (Spatz, 5). Dance scholar Ben Spatz (2017) provides a helpful distinction between *practice*, which he defines as "actual concrete examples drawn from human life and activity [...] located in a specific time and place and enacted by particular individuals or groups"; and *technique*, which "refers to the knowledge that links one practice to another." He advises "when distinguishing technique from practice, a key question to ask is whether something can be taught" (7-8).

For Spatz, technique emerges *in and through* processes of social organization. Technique is more than codified and ossified practices that are passed down; what dancers (and other artists) refer to as practice is, by this way of thinking, also living/lived technique. Reflecting on the dialectical unity of technique/practice can serve as a methodological entry point for tracing *which* social possibilities I am rehearsing and performing. How else can I unravel the tightly wound tangle of dance practices I have inherited; dance practices I have modified (in the past, and in my investigations for this project); and problematic relations/aesthetics that I have

reproduced, even as I have tried to make less colonial work. Spatz's differentiation of practice and technique can serve as a lifeline for navigating my research-creation work with the York Dance Ensemble. Was my in-studio choreographic process making *Golem* altered or enriched by my practice-based research in *House*, *Bed Effigy*, and *Garden*? Did I transfer any learnings from a deep and solitary engagement with a specific place and set of embodied histories, to the group of pre-professional dancers as we worked to create for the theatre, and in turn for the camera? Did I transfer those learnings to other collaborating artists and outside eyes? Did I transfer those kinesthetic learnings to the audience?

I know that in *House*, *Bed Effigy*, and *Garden*, I developed the source material for the movement vocabulary, the themes, and the narrative arc of human transformation through reconnection with nature. For *Golem*, beyond content, did anything change about how I created the work? My sense is that the two research-creation cycles both expanded and clarified my ethos and process for creating work. This expansion of my research-creation process started seven years ago when I re-designed a first-year breadth course to be studio-based. I discussed some of the exercises I developed for that course in Chapters Three and Four, as I brought them to the York Dance Ensemble during the development of *Golem*, and to my York Dance Department audiences for the interactive screenings of *Macro* and *Garden*. After teaching that course during the winters of 2015, 2016, 2019 and 2020, the biggest take away for me as an artist was the reminder that art is a process, and a perpetual experiment. The process can be beautiful, unique, and enriching but it is not precious. I brought this expansive willingness to *experiment* to an MFA program that has rigorously developed my research-creation process.

As I lead the ensemble of dancers through exercises and score-based improvisation that emerged from my solo research-creation cycle, am I sharing practice? Am I on my way to

developing a technique that “can be taught”? In the process of creating *Golem*, I placed as much importance on the development of the dancers’ practice as creators, as I placed on finding techniques that I can apply in my choreographic work going forward. I engaged the ensemble in many discussions and improvisations about transforming human relationships with land and with each other. I also remained alive to the possibility that the research-creation experiment would not work—or that it would work in some ways and not in others.

Revolution and aesthetic ideology

From the beginning, my choreographic process has been very much an in-studio, in-the-moment practice, involving shapes and gestures, and real-time verbal translation of emergent shape-feeling-thought. I have been lucky enough to work with dancers who trusted me and who have been willing to listen to me use snippets of image, metaphor, description, and scenario to verbally approximate what I am asking them to do. We work this way until I see what I am looking for. I have always had a decisive sense of ‘knowing what I see’ and ‘knowing when I see it as a guide for in-studio creation. This sense has been good for creating and completing work, but it is also something that I need to query from time to time, especially when I am trying to engage in decolonial and antiracist accountability.

During the time when I was most active casting dancers other than myself in my work, I followed an ethos that I rarely spoke out loud, but one that resonates with what Lloyd Newson said about his approach to creation with his company DV8. I did not find this quote until during my MFA coursework; however, it is contemporaneous to when I was working:

I have regularly challenged what is traditionally defined as dance, i.e. who can dance in terms of shape, size, age, and what dance can talk about.... Our work delves into how individuals can relate to one another, emotionally and intellectually, rather than being about movement or design patterns per se; exploring the individual’s actions, and looking at how these in turn reflect political and social issues (Lloyd Newson, 1998:2012, 81).

When I was casting, I was aware of what the audience would consciously ‘see;’ for example, I have had reviewers remark on my casting of a petite white woman in a wheelchair (Spirit Synott) alongside a tall physically able Black man (Perry Augustine). Yet I did not frame my practice as ‘integrated dance’ or ‘alternative casting.’ I consciously refused these framings, as I did not like the work presented under these rubrics, just as the few integrated dance projects of that time did not engage with my work.

In his 2007 book *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*, Andrew Hewitt seeks to avoid dialectical traps in which analysis of dance is collapsed into either brute soma or discursive construct (14). He attempts to connect to a more “radical sense of the *aesthetic* as something rooted in bodily experience... [and]... not purely superstructural or purely ideological” (2). Hewitt develops an approach to the aesthetic that functions “neither as a quasi-metaphysical realm separate from the sociohistorical nor as a practice that can be fully explained in terms of socio historical analysis. The aesthetic will function... as space in which social possibilities are both rehearsed and performed” (4). The idea of dance as something with the power to rehearse and perform social possibilities resonates for me. I doubt I ever articulated it this way, but this sounds like a reason I might have given if someone had asked me why I do what I do at the height of my choreographic productivity. This definition of aesthetic also provides a potential ontic/ontological check-in during the process of making dance. One could ask: ‘What social possibilities am I rehearsing and performing?’

Hewitt’s definition of ideology is especially helpful in dance studies. In critical social theory, including cultural studies, the concept of ideology is all too often presented as something conceptual that is applied to a non-thinking body (the cartesian mind/body split is as pervasive in European Marxist theory as it is in the rest of Western social theory). Hewitt frequently reminds

his reader that he is not using dance or choreography as metaphors for something else. He notes “when we talk of an ‘aesthetic ideology’ we talk not of an ideology *of* the aesthetic but refer instead to the intrinsic aesthetic component of any ideology that seeks to structure itself in narrative form. Thus, the aesthetic component of ideology is the utopian lure that enables the ideology to operate in a hegemonic rather than a simply coercive fashion” (6, emphasis in original). When we look for the social possibilities that are being rehearsed and performed (i.e., the aesthetic as defined above) in dance, we are looking at the dance itself. We are not trying to decode, translate or extract meaning beyond the terms of the dance, neither are we tearing the dance from its sociopolitical-historical context.

When theatre (including dance theatre) does its job, it conveys a narrative arc through visual and aural effects. Even after an intensive collaborative development process, I am responsible, as the choreographer, to assemble the material into a narrative of social possibility. In *Golem*, the audience sees a Black woman who is at first almost overcome by a crowd of people with nonsensical preoccupations and beliefs. Even though they are only physically occupying a corner of the space, they are dominating it. She gathers her strength from the elements and works to interrupt, re-orient, and re-organize the crowd. Channelling the power of water, air, earth, and lightning, she transforms the crowd from individually-focused beings to beings who are connected to the earth and to each other. Through witnessing collective struggle and transformation, and the array of individual and group articulations available with a cast of seventeen, the audience can *feel with* the struggle of the preoccupied beings to connect and to be heard; the struggle of the soloist to intervene; and the catharsis of transformation.

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Appendix

What follows is the text for the online interactive performance of *Garden*. During the screening, I shared some instructions with the audience explaining how to participate in the collective performance. Then I read the narrative text about the history and context of the site.

Instructions to the participants

- Get pencil & paper
- Turn camera off
- Go into speaker view, minimize me
- While you watch and listen, write down five words or phrases that come to you
- We will watch 7 minutes of video with narrative
- After that the video will keep going, and you can add your words
- Use the unmute button
- Say the first word or phrase on your list when you feel the urge to do so
- If more than one person speaks, it's OK, finish your word
- Wait until you feel the urge to say the next word
- Continue until you've said all five words or phrases
- When everyone has said all five words, we're done

Narrative I read while the video was playing

I am sitting in Tkaronto, on Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabek, and Huron Wendat territory. The Toronto Purchase of 1787 and Treaty 13 of 1805 was negotiated with the Mississauga of the Credit but was not honoured by the British Crown. The land claim wasn't settled until 2010.

I am sharing images and sound recorded in London, Ontario.

London is on Attawandaron, Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, and Lunaapeewak (Lenapowuk) territory. London Township Treaty, Treaty 6 of 1796, was negotiated with the ancestors of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation, Caldwell First Nation, Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Kettle & Stony Point First Nation, and Walpole Island First Nation.

I acknowledge the Muslim community of London Ontario, and throughout Ontario and Canada, in the wake of the terrorist attack that claimed the lives of five members of the Afzaal family.

This is the backyard of my mother's house. My mother had a stroke and she now lives in a long-term care home nearby. Throughout most of the lockdown, this is a place I visited weekly. I would check on the house before or after visiting my mother.

I lived in the house for three years during my childhood. My mother's parents lived here when they were in their nineties and my mother was caring for them. My mother lived here alone for 24 years.

Visiting the house makes me think about haunting, and the suspension of time.

Visiting the garden feels a bit post-apocalyptic, because it keeps growing when no one's there. It makes me think about the colonial present and allows me to imagine decolonial futures.

The last time I filmed in the garden was June 5. On June 6, five members of the same family were murdered in a racist, Islamophobic attack, 3km NNW of this garden.

I am looking at the map program on my computer. I am looking for this garden on the map. I see gray, and thin black lines outlining tiny ribbons of white road. There is no green marking the place where this garden is.

The neighbourhood is marked with colonial names: Queen Mary Crescent, Regency Road, Indian Road.

The map shows a pentagon of green across the street from where this garden isn't marked. It's a park. There is another large patch of green, 200 metres south of the garden, cut off by a fast moving four-lane major street that cuts across the city. That green patch is the bog.

To the east of the neighbourhood, another sickly green patch is marked—a golf course. Another unmarked green patch continues to the north. At the edge, 2 km from the garden, a ribbon of blue.

I switch my map to satellite view. Now colonial space becomes land. Sickly yellow greens become beautiful forests. Grey squares and white streets become impositions on the green land. The shopping malls and its parking lot is a wasteland.

I find the beautiful tree-lined river and follow it with my eyes. It snakes from the southeast below the bog, and turns north, passing along the west side of the neighbourhood before winding southwest.

The river is *Deshkan Ziibi* in Ojibwe. That translates as Antler River in English. The river's colonial name is the Thames. The city that was built on Treaty 6 land is called London.

I zoom out, still in satellite view, so I can trace the river as it winds southwest through a patchwork of colonial farms. My eyes move in gentle spirals and turns... down to where the *Deshkan Ziibi* flows into *Waawiyaataanong* (Why-we-a-tan), which translates as the

Curved Shores. It's colonial name, Lac Sainte-Claire, came from a French fur trader in 1679.

I imagine the water running in a great semi-circle. It flows past this garden, winding Southwest to join the great lake waters; it rushes west and south through the Detroit River; then it drifts slowly back toward the northeast again—through Lake Erie, north up the Niagara River, over the falls, and into Lake Ontario, until it drifts past me where I am sitting now.

There used to be a tree here in the Northwest corner of the garden. My dad built the fence on either side of its giant trunk. It was a trembling aspen. Its leaves rustled with the slightest breeze. As the volume of the wind increased, the sound of the leaves would swell in depth and intensity. Even in a strong wind I could still hear the individual leaves in the symphony of the tree. It was such a big tree; I didn't learn to climb it till I was around nine or ten. I had to scale the fence first to reach the bottom branch.

My dad cut the tree down. Its roots were pulling the water from the soil under the house, and the foundations of the garage were collapsing down into the ground, as the soil shifted and settled.

Last summer a neighbour told my sister that this street was built in 1961 as the subdivision was being carved and hacked out of forest and earth. Each house on the street was built by a different architect and prospective buyers would choose which type of house they wanted. They built the houses along the streets with colonial names: Queen Mary Crescent, Regency Road, Indian Road.

The neighbour said that before 1961, a stream ran through the place where the front yard is. It started to the northeast and ran down the hill and through what is now the park, and on... 200 more metres through what is now a street and main road. The stream ended in the bog.

The giant trembling aspen had been drinking from the underground stream. You can still see the dent where the stream runs, underground now, across the park and through the front yard.