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Territoriality and choreography in site-situated performance

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Introduction

How might an intertwining of territoriality and choreography affect the production of practice and knowledge in site-situated performance? Both concepts, territoriality and choreography, represent critical practices that explore inventions of space and time, and navigations within them. They privilege questions concerning the perception and inhabitation of a site. Intertwining the operations of territoriality and choreography opens a space of experimentation that expands habits of perceiving, belonging, and orientation. Implicit in these two concepts is the interrogation of movement's processuality—how the concepts of territoriality and choreography exist in a continual process of composition and decomposition.

If territoriality and choreography are understood as concepts that generate movement, intertwining them enables a comparison and analysis of different types and qualities of movement. In my research project, connecting the practices of choreography and territoriality occurs between artistic experimentation and material, social, economic, and political relations. Site-situated performance refers to an artistic process that begins and ends on-site, working within the specific conditions of a location.

In this dissertation, territoriality is thought through along with its political and somatic implications. As I began to work in a site-situated manner, territoriality emerged as a complex force, attuning to the historicity and agency of the site as an equal player in the performative encounter between audience and dancer, between the concreteness of the site and its performative potential.

Territoriality, as I consider it, is connected to the concept of the everyday as developed by philosopher Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), which concerns the social and relational dimension of spaces, and the question of how individuals appropriate daily situations for their own means and expression. According to de Certeau, this daily invention and reappropriation of language, objects, and actions is a way for people to resist institutional expectations and to live a creative life. de Certeau's concept of the everyday evokes the constraints within which I work. I intervene subtly in a given site; this intervention does not entail removing or altering what I find to a great degree. I do not install full-blown sets or fantasies, but instead insert myself gently into the ongoing movement of the site, and thus negotiate freedom and constraint in site-situated performance.

The concept of the everyday is a paradox in that, at once, it consists in spontaneous transformative action yet is limited to codified structures. As choreographer and theorist Elizabeth Dempster puts it; "The everyday is complex and contradictory; it has a negative aspect, representing all that is trivial and banal, the dreary unfolding of repetitious activity, of rote existence."¹ This double-capacity of the everyday—its possibility and its conforming fixity—informs and enriches my research. By taking into consideration the fluidity and unpredictability of the everyday, (dreary and splendid), I aim to keep available to the surprise of "un-masterable" conditions.

As a dancer and choreographer with an extensive practice in choreography for the stage, my practice evolved toward site-situated events for a variety of reasons. Initially it was simply an economic necessity for me, as an independent artist seeking resources and

¹ Dempster, "The Choreography of the Pedestrian," 25.

possibilities to develop the work. I started by working in the places I was living in. As I continued to develop performances, I began to value the durational and intimate qualities of working in residential spaces. As sites of social, economic, political, material, and cultural operations, residential spaces offered rich and complex relationships within which to move. Working this way allowed for an expanded use of the term *choreography*, not just for the dancing body but for all movement within the site, human and non-human (e.g., atmospheric, material, and architectural). Site-situated projects allowed me the opportunity to shift my practice and develop observational-somatic techniques to engage with how the site was already “in movement” even before I initiated new pathways of moving.

Choreography

Choreography is a compositional force within artistic experimental practice. Structuring movement across time and space produces qualities, sensations, and relations.

Choreographic practice recruits all the senses to invent new ways of creating, attending, and orienting in spaces. The term “choreography” fuses *choreo* (from the Greek *khoreia*, or “dancing in unison”) with *graphos* (“something drawn or written, mark-making”).

“Dancing in unison” is considered in this thesis as attunement, a manner of sensing and expressing the movement of oneself with others. The world is in movement; it is

“dancing in unison.”²

² Here, unison is not intended to indicate uniformity or a whole, but rather a simultaneity of a multiplicity of parts.

The Greek root-word *graphos* describes a compositional force, writing from an infinity of qualities and forming a singular creative sequence. *Choreo-graphos*, then, as I consider it in this thesis, is the simultaneous task of inventing ways of attuning to what is moving, with inventing ways of creating movement.

Importantly, creating movement involves asking of another (or of myself) to move in this or that way. This operation of command (of how movement may be predetermined, executed, resisted, or negotiated) across relations is a key concern in choreography's discursive process.

The practices of Western contemporary dance are ever-evolving: a mode of production of dancing human bodies in the black-box theatre, as well as a cross-disciplinary questioning of how to attend to movement. To expand these practices from their orientation around the dancer's technical virtuosity toward broader concepts of performance demonstrates, as contemporary performance scholars Ric Allsopp and André Lepecki have proposed, a "shift of thinking, away from the humanistic toward the movement of objects, of systems, not as a rejection of bodies and their possibilities, but as a view that might conceptualize choreography as an 'equivalence' of anything ... system, body, mechanism, organism – that might produce movement."³

Attunement(s)

In this thesis, the dancer's body is considered as a processual body, a body always in process, a body whose relational capacities are not predetermined but in movement.

³ Allsopp and Lepecki, "Editorial: On Choreography," 5.

“Movement,” as philosopher Laura Potrović theorizes, “makes the body, or, more precisely, it continuously creates new possibilities of a body.”⁴

I employ the term *somatic* in reference to the processual body and to the field of sensorial and experiential research with which contemporary dance studies are intrinsically linked. A term popularized by philosopher and founder of Clinical Somatic Education, Thomas Hanna, somatic practices develop the awareness of the living processes of the human organism and concern themselves with the continuous, changing nature of somatic experience. Somatic practice is at once the awareness of internal sensations and of extending awareness outward to the complex ecologies amidst which the body moves. Internal and external stimuli are experienced by the body as reciprocal, as continuous feedback. Somatic awareness is explored through processes of attunement, which enliven and question the seemingly clear border between a body and its environment, the ever-moving edge of the internal/external body-world. Attunement, considered as movement, actively shapes experience, actively informs what may unfold, for, as Hanna puts it, “reciprocity between sensing and moving is at the heart of the somatic process.”⁵

As opposed to spectacle-based work, which mostly organizes the spectator’s experience from a seated point of view, my audience-guests walk in through the door of the site and inevitably begin to touch things, to wander about, to take up space. Making performances that enable the visitor to enter into and navigate the site immediately opens up potential for crafting processes of attunement—specifically attunement to relations entailed by moving with sensing, sensing with moving.

A somatic awareness in my choreographic practice emphasizes the processes of

⁴ Laura Potrović, “What a Body Can Become,” 107.

⁵ Hanna, “What Is Somatics?,” 6.

attunement, those of dancer and audience alike. The choreographic concern here is not only with how the dancer is moving and sensing, but also with how the audience is moving and sensing. This is not to aim for precision or control, but to follow the process of sensing wherever the movement may lead, and the process of moving wherever the sensing may lead. It is to become sensitive to the live encounter of performance.

Territoriality

For philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their celebrated work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), territory is actively constituted through relations, expressions, and practices traversing entities. A territory is not a pregiven quantity but is expressed in movement.

Territoriality, following Deleuze and Guattari, is thus relational, and relations are never still. In their chapter *1837: Of the Refrain*,⁶ territory is referred to as continuously composed through processes of the undoing and reconstituting of elements, or *detrterritorializations* and *reterritorializations*.

Deterritorialization and reterritorialization may be broadly understood as the movements that constitute territory. “Deterritorialization inheres in a territory as its transformative vector, hence, it is tied to the very possibility of change immanent to a given territory.”⁷ Territory possesses the constant potential to shift and transform.

A way of moving and observing is also a way of territorializing—one way of territorializing, that is to say, among infinite ways. In this sense, performance may

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 310-350.

⁷ Adrian Parr, ed., *The Deleuze Dictionary*, 67.

deterritorialize a site, assembling new elements and dynamics that animate a new territory, however temporarily.

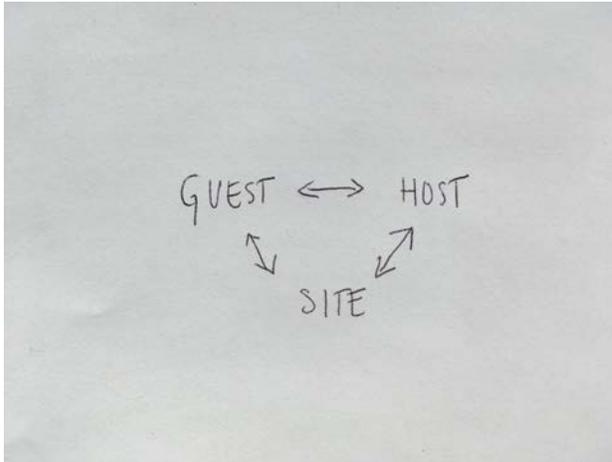
The link between territoriality and observational practices is significant to the intertwining of territoriality with choreography, in the sense that one's capacity to observe and express affects how one enters into composition with territorializing/deterritorializing movement. If something is not first observed, then it cannot be engaged with.

In other words, *how* one observes actively shapes relations. The shaping of relations is the creation of territories; it is the engagement with the potential of matter to be reformatted, rearranged, de-/reterritorialized into new meanings, uses, responsibilities, and values. "The territory implies the emergence of pure sensory qualities, of sensibilia that cease to be merely functional and become expressive features, making possible a transformation of function."⁸

Territoriality in site-situated performance is expressed, in part, through the collaborative dynamic of guest, host, and site. As I developed my work, the initial configuration of dancer/audience stretched into the hybrid roles of host-dancer, audience-guest, and performance-site. The audience member walked into a space that I was responsible for, immediately expanded into the role of audience-guest, and became co-responsible for the situation. This seemingly simple act had far-reaching consequences for my concerns—there was no longer solely a focus on the dynamic between audience and performer, but also on how the forces of the site had extended the meaning of our movement into registers of hosting and guesing.

⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 183.

The site is considered as a force that shapes a territory, that forms the guest and the host; in turn, the articulations and perceptions of both guest and host shape the site.



In this complex of forces, “expressive qualities or matters of expression enter shifting relations with one another that ‘express’ the relation of the territory they draw to the interior milieu of impulses and exterior milieu of circumstances.”⁹

Physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad’s research into the material-discursive forces of phenomena, the inseparability between material and discursive agency to create meaning, has guided my understanding of the guest-host-site relation in site-situated performance. Engaging notions of materiality takes on the relations between form and movement of matter, and discursive relations involve examining the workings of power.

Barad’s work moves away from a representational register for ordering the universe (one that would assign pre-given differences to the guest, host, and site), and

⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 317.

instead examines how boundaries and differences are continually produced through various kinds of practices.

As I host, I practice an engagement with the site; it is through this entanglement I become a host. My hosting is positioned at the intersection between my body and the site. This intersection is an instance of embodiment, where embodiment takes on a form that erupts and traverses the planes of both myself and the site, the exact boundary between my body and the site becoming unclear.

Barad's neologism *intra-action* suggests that distinctions and meanings erupt from within (intra) a context and not between (inter) predetermined entities.¹⁰ How matter is "observed" is inseparable from the observer. "The notion of intra-action (in contrast to the commonly used term "interaction," which presumes the prior existence of independent entities or relata) represents a profound conceptual shift. It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the "components" of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful."¹¹

Barad's conceptualization of intra-activity has assisted my awareness of how the site possesses agency, and how guest and host take form in the moment of encounter. It has reconfigured my research and propelled my understanding of hosting-dancing as a practice of engagement that is inseparable and indebted to the terrain and to others, and in so doing has expanded my understanding of embodiment as a process that takes place across the planes of both body and site. Through and beyond self-oriented practice and

¹⁰ Barad elaborates regarding the boundaries of entities: "matter is not a fixed essence; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency." Barad, "Posthuman Performativity," 828.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 815.

toward engagements with others, embodiment is considered not as a predetermined, stable body with a fixed edge, but as an unfolding of the body *as* an entire situation. Embodiment, considered in this way, is a means of actively observing and taking on multiple forms through the emergence of relational capacities.

Modes of Vision

One of the key threads of the thesis project is a theoretical and practical examination of the ways of seeing and looking that operate within a territory. In order to move in sensitive, meaningful ways, or even to begin to move critically through pre-given territorializations, I needed to understand how vision operates discursively—as an envisioning process—how visual practices influence political and social relations. I engage with processes of vision as not pre-cultural, but as social-political practices.

I employ the terms seeing and looking throughout - - I assign *looking* to a desire to find something with one's eyes, something already recognizable, whereas *seeing* I assign to ways of knowing, engaging in a desire to understand or to learn with one's eyes.

Vision, in the West, is linked with the core value of critical distance, a distance that performs a rational, objective concept of space. As Michel de Certeau observes, space is mastered through sight: “The division of space makes possible a panoptic practice proceeding from a place whence the eye can transform foreign forms into objects that can be observed and measured, and thus control and ‘include’ them within its scope of vision.”¹² Mastery of space is mastery of objective space.

This notion of objective space is essential to the notion of a territory in the Western

¹² de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 36.

modern world. It is space considered as homogenous and rational. Rationalization, a way of acting with the belief that one may master all things by calculation, is a key operation in a territorial state. It routinizes human action, making it ‘calculating, instrumentalist, and predictable.’¹³ Space is not understood as being produced through relations but is proposed to be “out there” in an objective, quantifiable manner. Cartesian¹⁴ abstraction, a manner of looking oriented towards achieving a discerning distance, facilitates the image of territory as distinct from the subject.¹⁵

A process of vision that enacts a notion of objective space, space as distinct from the subject, is the dominant cultural practice in the West. It enhances a calculating character to ways of seeing. It diminishes a reciprocal dimension to acts of seeing (between the observer and the observed). With my site-situated performances, I study this dominant mode of vision and seek to disrupt, challenge, and choreograph multiple modes in response.

Settler-Colonial/Colonial Context

Shifting my focus to site-situated performance within choreographic practice necessitated understanding conceptions of the territorial nation-state in modernity, specifically the spatial and embodiment discourses that produced the concept of the territorial state. This

¹³ Wolin, “Max Weber,” 297, quoted in Larkins, “The Idea of the Territorial State,” 34.

¹⁴ French Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes developed numerical coordinates by which to calculate space. Cartesian space is conceptualized as an abstract spatial system measured from a point of view exterior to it.

¹⁵ Descartes’ famously cut the world up with his tabulation of two substances; *res cogitans* (thinking) *res extensa* (matter). The world is cut into the subjective world of thought, and the objective world of matter. A distance is formed between the experiencing subject and the experienced world. Writes Sabisch, “the Cartesian epistemological model of the clear and the distinct does not account for movement and production.” Sabisch, *Choreographing Relations*, 54.

entailed contextualizing my site-situated performances through the broader forces of the modern nation-state, including its colonial and settler-colonial conditions.

Canada and the Netherlands, the two countries within which my research takes place, are Western territorial nation-states that configure territory as a nexus of space, knowledge, and power. Territory is not just a “geographical notion” but, borrowing from Foucault, a “juridico-political one: the area controlled by a certain kind of power.”¹⁶ Space is organized through central control, and a firm boundary is expressed dividing an inside (domestic) from an outside (foreign), and is governed by “only one definite national legal order ... authorized to prescribe coercive acts”¹⁷ in the state’s interests. The unified legal order operates from a central point for governance. In modern Western practice, the state coincides with the territory, a territory formed through power.

Throughout my research project, I carry an awareness of working as a settler artist in colonial and settler-colonial contexts; therefore, in my ongoing practice of engagement, I seek to demand of myself accountability and awareness.¹⁸

As such, some definitions are necessary. “Colonialism,” as settler colonial and Indigenous studies scholar Victoria Freeman defines it, “can be described as a practice of domination of one people over another; it involves the establishing of colonies in one people’s territory by people from another. Settler colonialism involves the transfer of large numbers of permanent settlers from the metropole to the colony, where they claim the land and alter the territory’s social structure, government, and economy.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Foucault, “Questions on Geography,” 68, quoted in Larkins, “The Idea of the Territorial State,” 42.

¹⁷ Kelsen, *General Theory of Law and State*, 210. Quoted in Larkins, “The Idea of the Territorial State,” 25.

¹⁸ The term “settler artist” entails the recognition of settler colonialism as a historic and ongoing process of violence toward Indigenous peoples, and the call for a “transformation of the symbolic and material conditions that have contributed to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples.” Taschereau Mamers, “Settler Colonial Ways of Seeing,” 28.

¹⁹ Freeman, ““Toronto Has No History!””, 2.

The settler colonial and colonial projects possess an inherent violence in their hierarchical classification of the world. The systematic structuring of the world through Euro-modern operations of categorization became the basis for physical and symbolic violence towards others. A colonial worldview classified European white peoples as the superior living beings while all others were considered with “various degrees of inferiority beneath them.”²⁰ This inheritance of a categorized world in the West has sharply demarcated modes of perception and value.

I acknowledge in the thesis the impossibility of an artistic practice to even approach a resolution to the violence that settler colonial and colonial society has engendered towards Indigenous peoples and the land that sustains all. The aim is to carry and articulate that impossibility across the works, to never let it go, in order that it can inform choreographic practice towards modes of attunement and accountability.²¹ I cannot, of course, speak to or in the position of the Indigenous experience of suffering, resistance, and “survance”, both historic and ongoing with the settler colonial context. This is beyond the scope of this thesis. “Survance” as Indigenous Anishinaabe cultural scholar Gerald Vizenor writes, “is the continuance of native stories, ‘more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survance are an active presence.’”²²

²⁰ Carter, *Aboriginal People and Colonizers of Western Canada to 1900*, 79, quoted in Taschereau Mamers, “Settler Colonial Ways of Seeing”, 13.

²¹ “We need a wide range of diverse actions, each can play a part in the broader project of achieving justice. For that reason, we maintain a belief that even small, symbolic and everyday actions are significant and therefore need to be thought through carefully. While focusing on small actions makes us in danger of feeling that we have “done enough” (thereby avoiding the larger decolonizing actions that need to take place) discounting them not only risks creating a sense of powerlessness and despair, but also missed the potential of micro-actions to ripple, erode, and to subtly shift.” Robinson and Martin, eds., *Arts of Engagement*, 2.

²² Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Post-Indian Warriors of Survance*, 15.

My research is focused on a critical engagement of how territorial powers influence individual and collective modes of perception, and the invention towards envisioning otherwise. By understanding choreographic practices as the practicing of new values and new relations, I attend to how sites may be territorialized otherwise, not by dismissing colonial and settler colonial conditions, but by engaging how these conditions permeate my habits of perception, values, and my conceptions of movement and body. In “Lie of the Land”, colonial historian Paul Carter proposes that what sustains colonialism is the creation of a subjectivity “without an attachment of the land,”²³ a profound disengagement of one’s body from the ground. This has particular import for choreographic practice in the West, a lineage that has blotted out specific connections to land, to animals, and to other life forms, and instead proposed and made use of a smooth, black-box space and of a human fantasy of self-sufficient movement.

To sustain an engagement of a site as a settler artist, is to demonstrate not just an agility and responsiveness, but equally to explore limitations, tress-pass and blind spots. In attending to how moving in site-situated performance produce difficulties as well as potentials, the research becomes oriented not through the smooth surface of a non-place, but the relational friction amidst territorial forces.

I write about four performance works located in different sites: my childhood home (Toronto), a sublet (Amsterdam), my current apartment (Tiohtià:ke/Montreal), and a borrowed apartment (Amsterdam). I include an epilogue, in which I describe a return to Toronto for a performance exhibition in a publicly funded art institution.

²³ Carter, *The Lie of the Land*, 294, quoted in Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 100.

In the first chapter, I elaborate on the choreographic practice of opening—in this case, opening my house to a dance performance. I elaborate on how the settler-colonial context enters into choreographic choices upon a very personal terrain. I engage with how the house I grew up in is/was embedded in colonial ways of seeing and organizing, and how my trajectory is thus entangled with these forces.

In the second chapter, I examine a sublet experience in Amsterdam. In this context, I examine entangled space and consider how touch, territoriality, and partitions resonate between host, guest, and site.

In the third chapter, I consider the intricate movements of guest and host relations in a silent, durational choreography for one spectator at a time in my apartment in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal. This chapter links to two supplementary texts: the first, an elaboration on the intricate reciprocity of guesting and hosting; and the second, a response to Jacques Derrida’s articulations of hospitality in his conversation with Anne Dufourmantelle.²⁴ In the fourth chapter, I reflect on the notion of borrowing as choreography, employing Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “assemblage”. Borrowing considered as choreographic practice that unfolds a micro-world of relations within broader territorializations.

In the epilogue, I describe the development of a technique that I name “visiting”, which involves visiting the work of fellow artists. I elaborate on a how the technique of “visiting” loosens fixed boundaries, in the pursuit of new aesthetic and ethical modes of offering and receiving.

²⁴ Derrida, Jacques, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

How may an intertwining of territoriality and choreography affect the production of practice and knowledge in site-situated performance? The research aims for one concept to animate the other. A configuration of elements, attunements, and encounters, aligning both concepts towards a heightened reciprocity of relations.