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Territoriality and choreography in site-situated performance

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Conclusion

The thesis, positioned as a project in the field of artistic research, articulates the intricate relationship between a material practice and written, theoretical reflection. Articulation, as a mode of differentiation, is not considered solely as a capacity through written language, but as non-linguistic expressions made possible through movement and materials as well. Written reflection, then, as I consider it, is not simply a direct and transparent accounting of what has happened, but a specific mode of differentiating and organizing the world. The movements of bodies and materials are another such mode of differentiation, producing qualities and distinctions that writing may approximate but not reproduce.

Both modes of articulation, then, (material, artistic practices and written, theoretical reflection) produce different modes of meaning and value. One mode advances the other. Artistic research is expressed throughout the thesis as written reflection stimulated through practices, and practices stimulated through written reflection.

In the thesis, I have considered how intertwining the concepts and practices of territoriality and choreography may create new knowledge and practices in site-situated performance. The research has been largely organized through the creation and analysis of four performances in residential locations in Canada and the Netherlands. Site-situated

performance refers to research that develops on-site, through and across the specific constraints of a location.

Territoriality

The concept of territoriality has been explored in this dissertation in multiple ways. I have considered it through the expressions of the everyday, through the reciprocal relations of the guest, host, and site, as well as considered through territorializing forces. Accounting for how aesthetic, social, economic, and political circumstances of the modern Western nation-state have shaped the sites that I work with has been essential to creating and critically reflecting on the performances. Colonial and settler colonial conditions that have informed ways of sensing and moving have been the object of critical consideration.

I have expressed territoriality in site-situated performance, in part, through the relationality of guest, host, and site. This includes the territoriality of the everyday, a concept of Michel de Certeau, which approaches the everyday lived experience of social bodies in governed spaces as sites of creativity that are in excess of regulations. Furthermore, guest, host, and site are understood as contingent relations, erupting only in the moment of meeting, each element affecting the other. Guest, host, and site engage with territoriality as a concept constituted through relations.

The writings on territoriality by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have been central to the thesis. The philosophers define territoriality as that which is not static but composed of complex movement, of deterritorializing and reterritorializing forces. “The territory, and the functions performed within it, are products of territorialization.”¹⁵⁰ Thinking territoriality in terms of forces, movement and relation has been a fundamental orientation for this research in site-situated performance. It has facilitated a research focus on the qualitative expressions that create space.

Choreography

Choreography is broadly defined in the thesis as observing and organizing movement. Choreographic process in the thesis refers to a Western contemporary aesthetic practice of making dances and articulations that proceed through stages of preparation and planning, to the moment of an encounter with audience.

Observing movement is a process that involves configuring the body’s sense perceptions and proprioceptive capacities. Observing movement applies to both cultivating awareness of internal sensations within the body, as well as extending one’s observational capacities outward to the relations of which the body moves. Organizing movement is the act of composing, differentiating, arranging and orienting. Organizing movement is not limited to the movement of the body of the dancer, but applies also to the ways in which the audience and site may move.

¹⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 315.

The organizing of movement is of course outside of the choreographer's complete control, as it is not possible to capture movement. Movement moves beyond its (choreographic) predeterminations. Movement is constantly exceeding the actual, multiplying, and emerging. Organizing movement, then, as I consider it, is a process of that which organizes *along with* the emergence of movement.

Attunement(s)

“Attunements” refers to the ongoing, sensed connections between body and world. The bodies of the host-dancer and the audience-guest are considered in their capacities to select, intensify and respond to what is unfolding. Attunements craft sense perception to compose ways of attending. Attunements explode the boundary of the inside/ outside of the body, as the way of attending to one's body actively shapes the entire situation. Attention may be invented in multiple ways, through multiple configurations of sense perception and conceptual frameworks; through techniques that amplify certain selected dimensions of an experience. As the work of somatic scholar Nita Little Nelson reminds us, “sensing is active”,¹⁵¹ it means ways of attending simultaneously receive and extend a situation.

Material-Discursive Relations of the Guest, Host and Site

¹⁵¹ Nelson, “Articulating Presence,” 58.

My conceptualizations of and experimentations with guest, host and site dynamics evolved throughout the thesis. With each of the four performances discussed, I probed a new choreography of attunements, exploring ways of intensifying and inventing connections and differences between the guest, host, and site. I refer to the work of physicist and philosopher Karen Barad, who examines how boundaries and differences are matters of practice, and not inherently given. Barad's term "intra-action" proposes the inseparability between material and discursive agency to create meaning. Instead of conceptualizing the guest, host, and site as pre-given entities who then "interact" with each other, the notion of "intra-action" suggests each element comes into existence through and across a practice of making and observing differences, assemblages, and boundaries. The notion intra-action moves the understanding of guest, host, site out of a representational register of generalities, and explores the agency and becoming of each element as deeply entangled. Barad writes "phenomena are contingent configurations of mattering."¹⁵² Guest, host, and site are considered as coming into existence through intra-actions.

Throughout the course of the research, I developed experience and articulated my perspective as a settler (Canadian) scholar and artist, engaged in identifying "entrenched colonial attitudes."¹⁵³ One of the primary ways in which I critically engage colonial attitudes is to examine how the understandings of a modernist, colonial notion of embodiment endures as a vestige of Cartesian practice, separating out inner processes (mental, vital) from the external feedback of an environment. To counter this tendency, I

¹⁵² Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness?*, 7.

¹⁵³ Decter and Taunton, "Addressing the Settler Problem," 33.

engage in an approach to embodiment that is material-discursive, addressing the continuity and inter-connectedness of the human body to the world, the one animating the other. It is a way of conceptualizing that disrupts a Cartesian habit of separating the two. Materiality is considered as the expressions and agency of the movement of matter, conceptualizing matter as force rather than as something inert. Discursivity refers to how the relations of power are expressed, from macro-political structures to micro-encounters. Material-discursive understandings of embodiment, then, do not separate out the form(ing)s of matter from forces. A body understood in a material-discursive framework is a body in process, taking multiple form(s) continuously, as a body-room, a body-house, a body-guest, a body-settler-dancer, a body-settler-dancer-room, etc.

A material-discursive approach to choreography is not seeking a mastery or control of bodies. It considers organizing movement as a probing of how agency might erupt across the planes of body-site-context, erupting across the guest-host-site dynamic. Attuning to diverse connections and configurations of sense perception and expressions of power, the aim of a material-discursive choreographic process is to compose and differentiate new relations and forms.

Site-Situated Performance

In chapter one, with the dance event *Fear of Losing the details*, I describe a series of experimental embodied ways to look, to seek the details of habitual perceptions. In this chapter I begin to articulate research as encounter, acknowledging how I am indebted

to the presence of the site and of my audience for an engagement in trans-individual research.

I express how Michel de Certeau's concept of the everyday provides a register of meaning and history through which I might respond. It provides an understanding of residential spaces as a practice that participates in the broader political structures of society, and yet is the realm of resistance and creativity. Constraints of each everyday location allow for contextual meanings to emerge, and to illuminate how the potentials to move are always more complex than a dancer's will.

The dance event reveals, in a manner of speaking, a blindness; my guests are confused about the exact edges of the house and the artistic installation, and my own blindness is revealed in my assuming that the edges and rationales of the event would be evident. This confusion became productive, allowing me to experientially understand how acts of looking and seeing produce all kinds of subjective tendencies and (mis-)classifications. It allows me to critically reflect on a colonial tendency of looking through a representational register, objectively identifying things by marking out their differences from others.

A dance event as an inquiry into the intertwining of the concepts territoriality and choreography facilitated the emergence of the hybrid roles which I then carried throughout the whole project; my dancing body becomes a host-dancer, and my audience becomes an audience-guest.

In chapter two, I engage in a somatic and critical process of exploring my role as a guest in a sublet in Amsterdam. I define how choreography may be a process of articulating the circumstances. In articulating the circumstances, new configurations may emerge. Through a choreography of touching, sensing, and moving, I describe the aim of troubling the boundary making practices of inside/ outside. I aim to transport myself out of a Cartesian configuration of distinct subject and object, of considering space as object, and move into a relational engagement.

I foreground my experience of touch inside the sublet. As I begin to touch and to move inside the sublet, I become a guest who dances, a guest-dancer. Touching, a sense perception that may not directly and immediately produce a clear representation, produces a connective sensation that is difficult to seize or measure. Touch involves engaging with the unknowability of what one is touching.¹⁵⁴ It involves an uncertain quality, of not knowing exactly what is being exchanged.

Touch in the sublet becomes more than an act of sense perception. It is a plane of experience that expresses new boundaries. Touch territorializes. In doing so, it experientially troubles presuppositions of embodiment and subjectivity in modernity.

I refer to modern subjectivity broadly defined as the Western social and legal production of the subject, a coherent unified sense of identity. I refer to modern

¹⁵⁴ “What I touch is an intouchability.” Manning, *Politics of Touch*, 11.

embodiment broadly described as the creation of the figure of the individual. These principles, set in motion, reinforce an I-it separation between mind and body, and a I-world separation between body and world.

I describe the sublet experience as that which articulates the multiple connections and continuities between myself and the space. The sublet territorializes my dancing body, and I territorialize the space. The experience enables a multiplicity to arise; moving and sensing differently produces multiple subjectivities and embodiments, multiple expressions of the entanglement between the sublet and myself.

In chapter three, I analyze the site-situated performance *Surface Rising*, a silent choreography for one audience-guest at a time in my apartment in Montreal. The performance asks of an audience-guest to step into my apartment, and to be willing to let go of a discerning critical distance. The choreography aims to stimulate the audience-guests' capacity and habits of receiving—towards a mutual implication. It investigates how the embodiment of reciprocity and incertitude might be expressed. The performance attends to the apartment with questions of access, position, and incompleteness. With my hosting-dancing body, I foreground how attention is creative, not pre-given, and that it builds rhythms, textures and sensations. I aim to build a “field of attention”:¹⁵⁵ a field of possibilities, where one does not demand a precision of exactly what is, but that, guest and host attend together to what may unfold.

¹⁵⁵ Nita Little Nelson and Joseph Dumit, “Articulating Presence: Attention is Tactile,” in *Thinking Touch in Partnering and Contact Improvisation* (forthcoming, 2020), 2.

The performance weaves the dimensions of the visible into the not-yet-visible, and probes the question of what was intended and not intended to be seen. It offers, withholds, covers and uncovers the everyday contents of my domestic space. The performance produces multiple modes and positions of looking, listening, holding, and touching. It is a mode of looking that I describe as glimpsing emerges - the audience-guest engaged in a form of navigation.

The relationship between sensing and moving,¹⁵⁶ the question of how one affects the other, is the ongoing study of somatic experience as described by Clinical Somatic Education founder Thomas Hanna. This key fluctuating relationship to one's embodiment is proposed as a way of conceptualizing hosting and guesting, forms that continual shift along an ebb and flow of offering and receiving.

I extend the analysis of the performance into two short pull out texts. In the first, I address the material-discursive forces that run through the guest and the host at a moment in the performance where, as the host-dancer, I exit the room and leave the audience-guest alone for some minutes. In this moment, I am experimenting with the forces of hosting and guesting as sensations that linger in the space as I exit.

In the second short pull out text, I explore philosopher Jacques Derrida's definitions of conditional and absolute hospitality as it plays out between host-dancer and audience-guest in the very particular circumstances of performing a summersault for the

¹⁵⁶ "Reciprocity between sensing and moving is at the heart of the somatic process." Hanna, "What Is Somatics?", 6.

audience-guest. As I summersault, the momentum briefly pushes my body into an unknown form, a moment where I acknowledge a transformation, my own capacity of “becoming strange” to myself. The experience of “becoming strange” is the exercise of placing unknowability (of the guest, of the host, of the site) as the central ethic of any act of hospitality. Giving place to unknowability is giving place to the unknowable movement yet to be realized.

In chapter four, I re-perform *Surface Rising* in very different circumstances, which allows me to reflect on the specificity of site-situated performance. In a borrowed apartment, I re-explore the performance, allowing significant shifts to occur in order to make meaning and intensify the circumstances within which I find myself in. I describe the act of borrowing as choreographic practice, the observing and organizing of movement. The operation “assemblage”, from Deleuze and Guattari, becomes a key concept to understanding the choreography of the act of borrowing as a dynamism that produces unexpected connections. I explore how economic, material and social forces thread through the borrowed apartment, and how my dancing-hosting manifests in relation. I conclude the chapter with an understanding that I was not simply borrowing an apartment conceived of as inert matter, but that I was engaging in a field of relations and forces.

In the epilogue, I address the most recent manifestation of intertwining territoriality and choreography of the research project. *Visiting Hours*, the performance exhibition that took place in Toronto in 2019, explores the technique of visiting,

specifically of visiting a single image from another artist's work. The process was one of embracing constraints. The work was to decenter the notion of an image itself as the thing-that-makes-meaning, but to choreograph a way of looking at the image. Putting attention to a process of looking foregrounds the relationship of guest and host between two artists. The image becomes a site to consider hospitality, access, and difference.

I keep catching myself making the error over and over again that the "sites" to which I arrive are self-contained, fixed, and already-there. Re-writing and re-practicing the key value that observation territorializes, means shifting this fundamental assumption at each arrival. The "site" becomes (becomes different) the moment I arrive. If territoriality, as I consider it in this thesis, is a process of material-discursive movements, forming and (un)forming, then there is no site "itself", but site-as- infinite manners in which to engage, for site to become. The notion of site in site-situated performance then, turns and folds back onto my own subjectivity and embodiment, to my capacities to receive. The "site" in site-situated performance, in my case, turns out to be how I move and move with what I perceive.

The experiences outlined in this research project have been one of a profound fluidity between modes of guesting and hosting. The ways in which these modes of moving have influenced my capacities to observe, receive and transform have been powerful. The experiences have opened up dynamizing connections between embodiment and territory.

Decolonization

I articulate in the thesis a sense of impossibility in regards to, how, from someone in my position as settler, my artistic research may contribute to the greater and necessary project of decolonization. I keep this notion of impossibility as deeply inscribed to my way of observing myself and the way I move. I acknowledge that artistic practices cannot even approach the broader ongoing and historic injustices of colonialism and settler colonialism, and yet I articulate this impossibility in order to problematize it further.

The project of de-colonization concerns Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination, the fundamental core of decolonizing acts. I am careful to not position settler narratives as central to this priority of focus, and yet, to probe how, as a settler, I may participate in this project. As settler colonial artist Carla Taunton suggests: “A fundamental component in the mobilisation of processes of decolonisation is for settler societies to engage in, commit to, and take responsibility for learning colonial histories and understanding contemporary legacies that support and maintain white-settler privilege on stolen Indigenous lands.”¹⁵⁷

By situating choreographic practices as expressed through the figures of host-dancer, audience-guest and performance-site, I have proposed that an engagement with colonial histories is being practiced. I have examined settler colonial and colonial operations that have entailed emptying the ground of relations, the creation of a *terra*

¹⁵⁷ Taunton, “Performing Resistance/Negotiating Sovereignty: Aboriginal Women’s Performance Art in Canada,” 75–76, quoted in Igloliorte, *Decolonize Me/Décolonisez-moi*, 22.

nullius, self-sufficiency of the individual, and modes of looking at “objective space” from a critical distance.

Attuning to questions of how to be a guest, or how to be a host that is foremost a guest, are profound trajectories through which to question a settler colonial heritage that has erased the historicity of settler-as-in-fact-guest. Choreographing modes of hosting and guesting have been ways to interrogate indebtedness and acts of reciprocity.

As Métis artist and scholar David Garneau writes in his essay “Extra-Rational Aesthetic Action and Cultural Decolonization”: “Cultural decolonization is the perpetual struggle to make both Indigenous and settler peoples aware of the complexity of our shared colonial condition, and how this legacy informs every person and institution in these territories.”¹⁵⁸ I attempt to take up Garneau’s call through the engagements I choreograph.

How may an intertwining of territoriality and choreography affect the production of practice and knowledge in site-situated performance? Intertwining territoriality and choreography in site-situated performance produces “a mode of engagement” at the intersection of political, social and artistic practices. It is an (ongoing) process of taking into account and inventing modes of moving.

¹⁵⁸ Garneau, “Extra-Rational Aesthetic Action and Cultural Decolonization,” 15.