

Supporting Rural Artists in their Communities

Reflections on Dance West Network's Northern BC: Re-Centering/Margins Creative Residency

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I am writing this on the unceded territory of Kwakwaka'wakw Nation in my rural hometown of Port McNeill BC. Working remotely as Project Coordinator with Dance West Network, I feel very passionate about supporting artists in their own communities outside of Vancouver/the Lower Mainland.

Growing up in a rural area, I believed for a long time that I had to live in a large city centre to be an artist. I graduated from Simon Fraser University and first started working at Dance West Network as an intern in my final year. Throughout my time in Vancouver, this idea was strengthened but also challenged; the work of Dance West Network ultimately led me to question this early assumption, and I returned to my hometown to start my dance career. I felt I could focus more on my practice if I was living and making work in my hometown. By creating dance locally, I felt that people who might typically not engage with contemporary dance might feel more interested in supporting dance if they had a friend or neighbour, like myself, involved. It is also important to me to create my own work and not only support the careers of other artists; I wanted to play an active part in bringing more art to my community as a dance maker. Creating dance in my hometown might encourage more people to enjoy this artistic genre.

To create possibilities that support choices like mine to remain in more rural areas of BC and work as a dance artist, Dance West Network launched a new project. In Fall 2021, *Northern BC: Re-Centering/Margins Creative Residency*, was launched as a new extension of the annual Re-Centering / Margins residency based for the past three years on the traditional, ancestral and unceded Coast Salish territory of the Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and Səl̓ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) and x̣ẉməθkʷəỵəm (Musqueam) Nations (Vancouver).

The vision of Dance West Network is a province where dance is part of everyone's life. The network has long and historic connections in rural/remote BC through its network of theatres throughout the province as well as a group of local "dance champions," called Community Dance Connectors, who create additional opportunities for local communities to access dance.

To collaborate further with artists and organizations beyond the Lower Mainland, *Northern BC: Re-Centering/Margins Creative Residency* began as the first extensive residency that Dance West Network has produced to support rural/remote - based dance makers creating work in their own home communities. Supporting this

residency was part of my work as an intern before I was hired, and tracking its impacts is an exciting opportunity, and I predict they will surpass the conclusion of this project.

Northern BC: Re-Centering/Margins Creative Residency was produced in close collaboration with project partners: **Bulkley Valley Concert Association** (Witsuwit'en Territory, Smithers) and **Change Maker's Education Society** (Ts'msyen Łaxyuup, Prince Rupert). This residency engaged with IBPOC and/or LGBTQ2S+ emerging dance artists, and covered - among other expenses - artist honorariums, venue and studio rental fees, production costs, and over 50 arts worker contracts. These expenses were supported by the Canada Arts Presentation Fund Program, Support for Workers in Live Arts and Music Sector Fund and the British Columbia Arts Council.

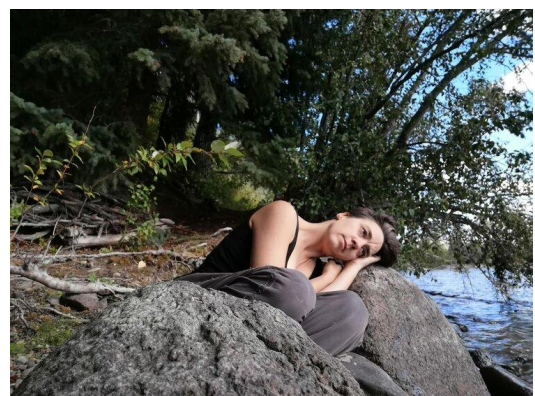
The primary artists participating in this residency include **Natu Bearwolf**, **Miriam Colvin**, **Robin Lough**, and **Fior Saoirse**. The first three artists reside on Witsuwit'en Territory (Smithers) and the fourth artist, Fior Saoirse, lives on Ts'msyen Łaxyuup Territory (Prince Rupert). In addition, **River Wilde** (Witsuwit'en Territory, Smithers) was also supported with a micro-residency for their dance explorations.



Natu Bearwolf is Wet'suwet'en and was born into the Gidim't'en clan. She is a second-generation 60's scoop survivor and was not born or raised on her home territory. In Natu's words, it has been a long and difficult journey, but now she lives, works and creates on her homeland. During her healing journey, there have been many chapters and she feels that dance is the next chapter. Natu is creating a work titled *daughters*, which centres around the grief that she has experienced throughout her life and intergenerational trauma. While the piece tackles this heavy topic, light has flourished - with space for resilience, growth and healing through adversity. *daughters* is creative work that needed to be created on this land, Wet'suwet'en

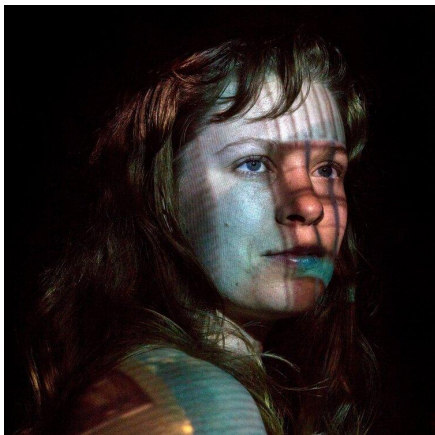
territory.

Miriam Colvin is a settler living on Wet'suwet'en territory. Miriam's creative work focuses on the geography of the land in this remote community, and her new work *Unfolding* (working title) is no different. This creative piece holds her relationship with this location at its core. Miriam's explorations are woven with



questions about her connection to the Wet'suwet'en territory where she lives, her positionality in community, the landscapes of the folds and extensions of her body and the lens with which she composes and views movement. *Unfolding* explores what it means for the body to be land, with land, and on land.

Similar to Natu's work Miriam's piece has a profound connection to Wet'suwet'en territories, although for completely different reasons. In both works, land and the personal immersion into the landscape played an important role. Rather than only travelling through an area that is recalled in memory, these artists have small moments in their everyday life that spark new inspirations and questions. Through this residency, the artists felt that they were given unofficial permission to shift priorities to bring their art practices to the forefront of their everyday activities. This is a very valuable gift, especially when life is extremely busy.



Robin Lough is the third artist in this project located on Wet'suwet'en territory. Their work is currently untitled. Instead of the land being the focus, Robin's work holds collaboration and creative process as the foundation. Robin is working with two collaborators on this project: Brennan McKinnon (musician) and Kathryn Wadel (visual artist). In this work, Robin's vision is to hold all aspects and collaborators in the piece in equal value to the creation; the sound was created as a reaction to the movement created by Robin and visual elements created by Kathryn.

Kathryn in turn created visual elements based on Robin's movement patterns in the studio. While movement is the basis of the work, it is not held above the other contributions through any hierarchical arrangement; an impressive accomplishment that speaks strongly to their collaborative process.

Fior Saoirse currently lives on the traditional unceded territory of the Ts'msyen People (Prince Rupert). This piece holds personal reflection and social commentary in equal parts, providing Fior with enough structure to produce personally vulnerable work which also remains community engaged. There are contrasting themes that surface throughout the piece, such as fear and wonder, isolation and emergence, being pulled back and propelled forward. Tools such as mirroring, layering and spiralling are embedded through the duration of the piece to unify the themes and story. Fior feels much honour and privilege to be able to have this space to explore their story. Similar to



Miriam's reflection about the value of being able to create work at home, Fior said: "The most impactful part of the residency for me has been to have the opportunity; it gave me the permission to explore my creative process which I may not have granted myself."

When I was talking to the artists a recurring theme emerged regarding the benefit to the local community. When living in a rural area, it is easy at times to feel isolated from the larger dance community and events that happen in the city. However, being in an artist cohort seemed to have eased that feeling of isolation. The artists also took it upon themselves to develop a more interactive experience with one another through scheduling meet-ups - both in and out of the studio - asking questions, and providing support to each other. The artists said that these connections which they developed amongst themselves enriched their practice and creations. My hope for the artists is that - through this small support network developed through this program - is that it will continue growing beyond this year's *Northern BC: Re-Centering/Margins Creative Residency*.

This residency in Northern BC is an important step for Dance West Network as the organization continues developing more programs and support developed specifically for artists living outside the Lower Mainland - whether live and/or utilizing technology - to bridge gaps between urban and rural communities. As these programs develop with network support, they will strengthen and become even more aligned with the specific needs of rural artists. While dance artists share similar struggles - no matter where they are - differences remain between the needs of artists in rural and urban locations.

I can't wait to see how these kinds of residency projects impact dance artists in the province and look forward to learning more about the work of Miriam, Robin, Natu and Fior as they continue their creative journeys surrounded by the beauty of mountains, the sea, and rivers.