

Reflections on Digital Dance Projects and Audiences in Rural BC: Dance West Network's PIVOT: Digital Collaborations

Dawn Briscoe



*Port McNeill, located on the traditional, unceded lands of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation.
Photo by: Rolf Hicker*

I grew up in a rural community, Port McNeill, located on the traditional, unceded lands of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation. Exposure to professional dance performances and interactions was non-existent when I was younger. Dance was viewed as something that could exist only in large city centers. In Summer 2015, Project20 came in for a two-week dance residency in Sointula, a small island just off of Port McNeill. At that moment, I realized that dance could exist anywhere; it just requires someone to be mindful and consider all possible options of where dance could be presented. Now, it is my passion to bring dance to remote communities. This intention - along with my recent graduation from Simon Fraser University's Dance Department - led to my internship with *Dance West Network: connecting artists and communities in motion*.

In 2021, Dance West Network launched PIVOT: Digital Collaborations project. This digital work was a follow-up to collaborating with the presenter network to offer digital dance options in 2020 via the Vancouver Foundation. This current program, funded by the BC Arts Council, supports artists of colour in their efforts to discover and engage with their work in different digital formats and connect with more BC residents.

For dance performances, digital spaces are a recent and exciting new place. I find that this excitement can lead to work that seems to float digitally in space, without any tethering to earth. While not every digital work wants or requires a tether it needs to be a choice, especially when considering the viewers. I feel that large city centres, which are well versed in dance, can

appreciate and digest “digitally floating” work. However, when the work is being viewed in smaller communities with limited exposure to dance, the appreciation is not the same. The separation from a specific location creates a wall between the viewers and can make the digital dance content harder to digest.

For the PIVOT program, Dance West Network partnered with cultural and community sites located in three rural sites: Secwepemc (Secwepemcul’ewc), Ktunaxa, Sinixt Territory/Revelstoke; Lamalcha, Penelakut, and Huitson First Nations/Galiano Island, and; Haida Nation Territory/Haida Gwaii. Specifically, the collaborating project partners - all part of Dance West Network - included: Arts Revelstoke/LUNA Festival, LEÑA Artist Research and Residency Centre & Active / Passive Performance Society, and Hiit’aGan.iina Kuuyas Naay – Skidegate Youth Centre.



Photos L-R: Shion Skye Carter, photo: Bee Kent, Lindsay Delaronde, photo: Peuzzo, Simran Sachar, photo: Evan Morash

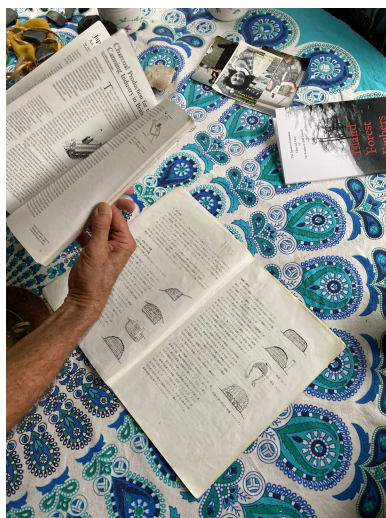
During the application process, dance artists pitched their idea for a digital project that connected to one of the three communities. The three artists whose proposals were selected for the PIVOT project included: Shion Skye Carter, Lindsay Katsitsakatste Delaronde, and Simran Sachar.

Shion proposed to work with LEÑA Artist Research and Residency Centre & Active / Passive Performance Society. Lindsay proposed to work with Hiit’aGan.iina Kuuyas Naay – Skidegate Youth Centre, and Simran proposed to work with Arts Revelstoke. Each artist engaged with their community in a uniquely specific way. I will now go into each project providing a summary of the process/project and then into some of my personal questions/insights.

Shion Skye Carter worked with the LEÑA Artist Research and Residency Centre and Active/Passive Performance, located on traditional unceded territories of Lamalcha, Penelakut, and Huitson First Nations (Galiano Island). Shion's collaborators, Brenda Kent Colina (Film) and Prince Shima (Music) accompanied her to Galiano for this residency. Shion's project titled *The Kiln Project* is centred around the almost forgotten Japanese charcoal pit kilns that reside on the island. All elements to this film, sound, movement and images encompass the essence and elements of the Japanese kilns.

During their time at LEÑA, the group was able to spend a day with a local individual, Steve Nemtin, who is responsible for recovering and persevering the kilns and contributed to a published book, *Island Forest Embers – The Japanese Canadian Charcoal Kilns of the Southern Gulf Islands*. This interaction provided the artists with more information and a story connected to lived experiences and emotions. This storytelling reveals deeper connections and more impactful information. This personal experience not only added depth to the work but created another element to the project. After the dance section of the film, a documentary component was added to capture the artists' time with Steve.

During their visit to Galiano Island, the artists stayed at the LEÑA Artist Research and Residency Centre. Dayna Szyndrowski, who runs LEÑA, mentioned that having a dance film created on Galiano about the history of the island provides the locals with an "easy-in" to the work. In my experience, I haven't found the subject of how audiences might be brought into the work discussed. I feel that it's an important consideration, especially when engaging with rural communities, and as I move forward with my own work, I will be thinking about how I create these invitations to the public. In communities where dance films are not a typical activity, this "easy-in", that Dayna brought to light, lessens barriers and offers locals a direct way to engage with the work made where they live. In Shion's work, she showcases an aspect of the island's history in a new light. This also carries the potential to attract different audiences, perhaps ones that wouldn't typically attend a dance film screening. This dance film premiered on December 10, 2021, on the Active/Passive youtube channel and the film was also screened on Galiano. After the screening, some of the local audience provided their reactions: "This was so beautiful to watch!" and "touching - thanks, first time seeing a film from my backyard." This comment about the film really stands out to me.



Lindsay Katsitsakatste Delaronde's project, *We are the Land & the Land is Us*, took place on Haida Gwaii and involved the Hiit'aGan.iina Kuuyas Naay – Skidegate Youth Centre, and the connective work of Julia Weder, Youth Engagement Coordinator. Lindsay had a residency at Haida Gwaii as part of another project with Dance West Network in Summer 2021 and brought a videographer, Cameron Watts. With this digital project, PIVOT, she collaborated with the community members in Haida Gwaii, and the videographer to create a unique digital documentary that will also be showcased on a website designed by Deanna Peters. Although this digital component wasn't part of the initial plan for the residency, Lindsay said that it felt natural to the creative process of her work there and to bring it forward.



We are the Land & the Land is Us was constructed around four pillars: art, land, protocols and community voices. These pillars were part of Lindsay's process and became clarified in her time on Haida Gwaii. They also acted as “real-time” tethers for the work in the digital space. Lindsay worked with seven community members on this project. They created movement gestures together that specifically involved the land and tried different exercises during their first day together. At the end of the creation period, their work was filmed and edited into a short documentary film. All the community members gave consent for their work to be included. Once Covid restrictions allow, there are plans to present the film at the Haida Gwaii Museum. The project itself is contemporary however, through the pillars that Lindsay created, a strong Haida presence and aesthetic was able to come through. From Lindsay's approach, I learned that before being a creative process with a community, a strong set of parameters can help guide the project for all involved.



The third artist, Simran Sachar created BETA बेटा in partnership with Arts Revelstoke. BETA बेटा follows the journey of a young woman dealing with the heavy grief following the death of her dadoo (grandfather) in different spaces until she finds herself in a different dimension searching for him. Through this project, Simran worked with animation and volumetric elements, mediums that she hadn't fully explored before. With these digital techniques, Simran formed new collaborations with Nancy Lee, Kiran Bhumber, Omar Rivero (Driftnote) and Alinar Dapilos. This is also phase one of BETA बेटा as Simran will continue developing this work with more dance artists along with additional volumetric and animations.

BETA बेटा was specifically created for Revelstoke and premiered during the annual LUNA Festival. The first iteration of this film was projected on the side of a building in Revelstoke for about 5000 viewers over four days.



For her project proposal, Simran researched the location and the demographics of Revelstoke before she began creating the work. Her research showed that around 23% of Revelstoke's population is composed of South Asians. Miriam Manley, Artistic & Executive Director of Art Revelstoke, was impressed with this grounded research that Simran brought to

her work. With this information, Simran was able to touch on topics that were specific to South Asian culture and experiences. Due to Covid, Simran wasn't able to attend the screening in person, however, several Revelstoke residents, all strangers to her, reached out to Simran via social media to send her pictures and video, along with their condolences, and shared stories and thanked Simran for her work. This kind of response to South Asian culture in contemporary art shows its impact and necessity. I haven't seen specific communities in rural BC highlighted like this nearly enough, and the response that Simran received proves its need and importance



All of the PIVOT projects engaged with specific communities and/or land, which brought the projects to connect with something bigger than only these individual artist voices. The artists were not just doing their own thing and leaving. Hopefully, these ideas of “easy-in” will gain more traction throughout the dance scene, and stronger relationships will be created between audiences and the work.

There could be limitations to this approach in that these digital works may not be able to connect everywhere and/or might require audiences of a specific demographic/audience. I don't see this as a negative, as the audience that it is created for will have a deeper connection to the work. On the other hand, work that is created for a specific community/site might also be able to connect anywhere because the attention to detail could expand the work to connect even more universally.

For Dance West Network to connect with more BC residents, these considerations of accessibility and invitation to the public are an important part of the work. With PIVOT: Digital Collaborations, the artists brought a thoughtfulness that could spark more possibilities for future projects. I look forward to other communities and generations connecting and welcoming dance and digital works in their home rural communities.

To learn more about this project, please visit:
<https://dancewest.net/projects/pivot-digital-collaborations>



Dawn Briscoe (She/Her) is an emerging dance artist. She has recently completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with honours in Dance from Simon Fraser University. During her time at SFU, she had the opportunity to interpret works from Rob Kitsos, Noam Gagnon and Mahaila Patterson O'Brien. She has moved back to a hometown that is located on the unceded territory of Kwakwaka'wakw Nation (Port McNeill BC) to start her career. As she grew up in a rural community, Dawn has a passion for bringing more dance and creating opportunities for community engagement in remote areas. Dawn is also the Vice President for the Vancouver Island Youth Dance Theatre Association board which supports Dancestreams Youth Dance Company and is Project Coordinator: Youth Project Rural/Remote BC, Promotional and Admin Support at Dance West Network.