

Dance West Network Des Arts Dehors / Arts Outside
Vancouver Residency, June 23-25, 2023
Marie Béland, Julianne Decerf, Izo Dreamchaser, Jhoely Triana, Sarah Wong

Speaking with the Land

Alyssa Amarshi

Friday, June 23, 9am

The sky is sun filled and clear, unfurling into a beautiful hot morning in so-called “Vancouver.”

The artists of the Des Arts Dehors / Arts Outside 2023 cohort and a few other friendly faces from Dance West Network meet in front of Milano coffee to land with one another and grab a bit of morning fuel - coffee, tea, and snacks. After some introductions, and reacquainting, we walk over to “Stanley Park” to meet with Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish) storyteller, knowledge-keeper and artist Seraphine Lewis, whose ancestral name is Kwii Gee Iiwans.

Before arriving, there is an anticipatory buzzing, an earnest excitement beneath the catching up on our respective projects and artistic practices with one another. When we arrive at the meeting point, Seraphine greets us with a warm welcome and asks if we are the dancers. After an awkward chuckle that confirms we are with Dance West Network, Seraphine greets us with a “Happy Blue Sky Day.” Her presence is both calm and strong, and her eyes glint with generations of stories and knowledge that she is about to graciously share with us.

Seraphine leads us to the seawall where we gather around as she gives an introduction. She tells us her name, and how her family name “Lewis” came from the residential school system, and how her grandfather Chatlem came to have the name Norman. Her Grandfather could not pronounce the name Norman and thought the settlers had called him “No Man” along with giving him a number by which to reference him.

As we stand along the seawall looking out onto the waters, Seraphine tells us how the name Squamish (Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh) roughly means “Wind that breathes life into the Land and People.” She recounts that many Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh families were seasonal and many moved between two villages in the area, moving north and south based on the weather. The farthest village north is actually on Lewis Drive, named after Seraphine’s own family.

As we walk through the park, we stop to say hello and give some love to one of Seraphine’s favourite trees – a majestic red cedar. The Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh have over 7,000 plus years of history and kinship with The Cedar Trees. Seraphine says the technology of The Cedar took the Squamish Nation from surviving to thriving, as her ancestors and kin have used all aspects of the tree from art to housing to weaving and medicine. It is considered The Tree of Living; “giving and providing from the cradle to the grave.”

Seraphine continues to grace us with a plethora of both knowledge and story from the Land, as we pass skwtas7s (Deadman’s Island), papiyek (Brockton Point), and xwayxway (Lumberman’s arch). In addition to those Indigenous who lived in this area, we learn that

Native Hawaiians and Chinese were among the first settlers - not Indigenous to Turtle Island - who lived here in the late 18th century.

By the mid 1900s, however, everyone living in the now established “Stanley Park” were considered squatters, including the villages that had been there for thousands of years.

“Stanley Park” was established to entice middle class white settlers. There was no consideration of the People, non-human Kin, and all the stories and medicines of this Land. Villages were burned to the ground and the land was later used for parking lots. Old Growth was cleared to make way for a Tea House and a cricket lawn. Ecosystems were destroyed to make way for European ideals of manicured lawns and space for yachts.

Despite the violence inflicted on her People, Seraphine emphasized that it is important to recount these stories of hardship to others so that we can begin to learn more and change our perspectives - something that needs to shift before we can begin to dismantle Colonialism.

One of the biggest differences in perspective that I notice as a thread throughout Seraphine’s sharing is how she emphasized how the Skwxwú7mesh - and other Nations Indigenous to the areas surrounding the Salish Seas - value a culture of generosity and reciprocity. In contrast to late-stage capitalist modernity / colonial values of personal wealth accumulation and resource extraction above all, the Skwxwú7mesh (among other nations) saw their value on how much they could *give*. This was demonstrated through the culture of Potlatch where for weeks, the hosts would give gifts and nourish friends, relatives and even those from different Clans and Nations.

This sense of reciprocity in Skwxwú7mesh culture extends beyond humans to the Land, itself, with the rule of “seven” or the concept of “seven generations of healing.” If you take a resource from the Land you have to leave behind seven of that resource or at least enough for the seven generations of future ancestors.

I find myself deeply resonating with this sense of reciprocity and wondering how we can better incorporate this value in the larger sense of extractive capitalistic modernity and also in how it shows up in artistic spaces. In what ways are we perpetuating this in how much we expect ourselves and others to produce without giving back or even giving our own land bodies a chance to rest?

We end the tour, on a grassy hilltop, passing the three archways, representing the three host nations: xʷməθkʷəy̓əm , Skwxwú7mesh, and səliłwətał. The archways and welcome figures signify something immense for these host nations. After the establishment of “Stanley Park,” and the eradication of its stewards and settlers, the practicing of Salish art was also banned. When the Park decided to showcase “First Nations Art” in the 1960s, they decided to go with their own concept of what First Nations Art *should* look like. Instead of supporting and promoting the artists of the region, they decided to erect Totem Poles, representative of cultures further North. In this way, these institutions were acting in a purely performative way. It was not until 2008 that any Salish art even made its way to papiyek (Brockton Point). xʷməθkʷəy̓əm artist Susan Point is one Salish artist who is beginning the rebirth of traditional Salish art, a feat which speaks to the skill and resilience of this generation of artists. Artists who make work without access to any living mentors as so much culture and art were banned for generations.

Despite the colonial inflicted violence on Seraphine’s people, culture, art, and land, she emphasizes that she does not hold onto any anger. Instead she channels and recycles the energy into something really beautiful - into her artistry and storytelling. As we sit on the hill,

and Seraphine pours us all home-brewed tea, I can feel the embodiment of the culture of generosity steeped within her Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh culture.

As we part ways with Seraphine and end our day sharing Banh Mi and other sustenance at some picnic tables, some of us reflect on the aspects of continuous living, on belonging and place, and how we relate to the Land. A sense of gratitude washes over me as I leave, still digesting all the gifts of story and nourishment.

Saturday, June 24

The artists seem to all trickle in at the same time to meet Dr. Jane Gabriels and the Artistic mentor and knowledge sharer for the day, Tsatassaya White. Tsatassaya and Jane are sitting on a bench overlooking the ocean, just beyond the Vancouver Maritime Museum. After a short greeting, we feel the rain and wind begin to dance around our skin, so Sarah Wong, one of the participating artists, offers a dry space just around the corner at the Museum of Vancouver where she works.

Once inside, the rain quickly lets up and we move back outside again, now perched on the steps in front of Alan Chung Hung's "Gate to the Northwest Passage."

Tsatassaya begins her introduction in Hul'q'umin'um, speaking very slowly with care and purpose. She introduces not just herself, but also her daughter, who has just left moments before. She tells us that introductions usually include Family and Place. She tells us how she comes from the Snuneymuxw First Nation (across the Salish Sea). However, despite having closer neighbouring Nations, Tsatassaya tells us about a particular kinship she has with the x̓wməθk̓wəy̓əm Nation, one of the Nations that have lived on and stewarded the area we now call "Kitsilano" since time immemorial. She believes the deep love and respect for the x̓wməθk̓wəy̓əm Nation comes from her time on their Ancestral Lands, having studied at the University of British Columbia, and also from the shared aspects of their languages: Hul'q'umin'um' (Snuneymuxw) AND həŋq̓əmiñəm (x̓wməθk̓wəy̓əm) respectively.

Tsatassaya sets the tone for the day with deep gratitude – for the land, the people, and the water. She welcomes us as she notes that there are no Welcome Figures here, juxtaposed with the fact that we are seated right under Alan Chung Hung's "Gate to the Northwest Passage, an art piece not Indigenous to Turtle Island. She notes some of the different oral stories from both the x̓wməθk̓wəy̓əm Sparrow Family and the Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh settlement. Kitsilano is, in fact, named after Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Chief X̓ats'alanexw (Khatsahlano – Man of the Lake). She recounts the story of 1913 when the government put the Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh residents on a barge and burned down all of their longhouses.

As we sit with this story, Tsatassaya eases us into how we can begin to think about Land Acknowledgements. She talks about the performative nature of some land acknowledgements and criticisms that some have with them. However, she emphasizes the importance of a land acknowledgment as a first step - because it is not just the people who can hear us, but also the land itself. In this way, we can take our first steps to RECON-CILI-ACTION. A land acknowledgement is a tangible step we can take that begins to open us up to different ways of being in relation to the land. In acknowledging the land, we can begin to see the Land as not just a thing to extract resources from, but as a living, breathing entity to

which we are connected and with which we are in relation. A land that also has Indigenous stewards that know its stories and medicines deeply.

Tsatassaya goes on to mention we are ALL in relation - meaning, not just to the land, but to the birds, and whales, and other beings, and to the ocean, and to one another. Once we see that we are all connected and related, reciprocity becomes embodied. We take care of one another because “we are all one.”

In speaking of embodiment, Tsatassaya gathers us in a circle where she shares an Energy Exercise, gifted from her Grandmother, Ellen White or Kwu'la'sul'wut (which means Many Stars). Tsatassaya facilitates a truly special round of energy work that grounds, opens up, and replenishes the spirit. Sarah Wong also notes how she personally relates to this energy movement as there is a similar practice in her Chinese Lineage of Qigong.

Being opened up to each other and to the land in this way, we spend some time in a circle, in reflection. Jhoely opens the discussion speaking of how the Energy Work made her think of Reaching for the Ancestors through the hand gestures in Flamenco (with roots in Indian/Romani Culture). Izo speaks of how the impacts of colonialism affect his own culture and language, as he speaks French over Kinyarwanda, one of the indigenous languages to his homeland. He also speaks of the desire to share culture instead of self aggrandizing through gatekeeping, which he reflects is also a result of colonialist structures. Sarah touches on the themes of migration and language and tradition through her family that has roots in China and Peru, and also assimilation to western notions. She reflects on what it might mean to reclaim food and language in a process that still honours slowness. Julianne speaks of the musicality of different languages and how she deeply relates to Tsatassaya's sharing of “WE ARE ALL ONE.” Jane's excitement perks as she thinks about stories from her background while recognizing that her ancestors are new to Turtle Island, and have only been here a “quick second.” Marie feels into the idea of RE-CON-CILI-ACTION, putting action behind words. She speaks of how she is sitting with different thoughts and frameworks and still digesting all the knowledge that we have received. I share how I think of storytelling as both human and non-human, the idea of how we are all symbiotically connected, and excited to uncover and learn more stories from the soil.

We end the day in a communal movement circle, each of us sharing a movement to co-create a sequence that lets us have another moment of embodiment and allowance for all the gifts of knowledge and energy of the day to seep into our fascia, skin and bones.

Sunday, June 25

It is a morning of beautiful sunshine, and a few of us meet at David Lam Park. We begin in gentle reflection of the plethora of information and knowledge we have received over the weekend. We find out what each of us is needing for the day and the artistic sharing that will happen later in the day. After a group meditation, Jhoely situates us in the history of the park, noting how some of the grassy lawns that we are currently sitting on used to be important waterways and food forests. However, the construction of the Railroad (with the nearby Round House as a stop) along with deforestation drastically changed the landscape as we know it.

We break off to have a moment to stretch, meditate, eat, write and reflect individually before coming together for a final gathering and presentation.

We find a beautiful new location in a shaded area with raised cement platforms. The videographer Shawn Muys and photographer Lula-Belle Jedynak set up.

Jhoely is the first to share. She explains her piece is called *Arboles* meaning “Trees” in Spanish. It is a movement exploring the metaphorical and physical connections to trees. Jhoely begins on a cement platform lying in a lush full green skirt. As the piece progresses, she pulls the voluminous skirt upwards with her limbs outstretched, reaching out to the ancestors. She performs her emotive Flamenco piece between the trees, almost as if a tree herself.

Next is Marie’s turn to share. Marie recounts her work through storytelling. She explains she is a French speaking dance artist from Montreal with a masters in dance and a particular interest in theory, especially that which begs the questions “what is a show?” and “how can we as artists consider contact with audiences?” In 2008, Mari created “Les Précédents” an outdoor theatre piece in Montreal that takes advantage of what people are already doing in public spaces. The dance “slips into the existing architecture” using performance to reveal and make certain spaces more visible. During the pandemic, she felt a call to journey back into the piece and is currently sitting with the questions of dance memory and how dance can present itself in the territories on which she creates.

Sarah situates herself in introduction with both self, family, and land of origin. Sarah uses she/ her pronouns. Her mom immigrated by way of China to Peru to Vancouver, while her dad immigrated from China to Saskatoon to Vancouver. Her art practice holds questions of migration and lineage and how they shape identity. With her collaborator Ileanna Cheladyn, Sarah has created a Rock Garden, an installation of pillows inspired by rest as resistance and resilience. Sarah facilitates a Rock Score in which she gives each of us a rock to hold and witness. She leads us through listening to the rocks stories and embodying a relationship with our chosen rock. The score is so loving and gentle yet powerful. For me, personally, it brings up memories of a beautiful late mutual friend, Zahra Shahab, and I am moved to tears. The allowance for grief and rest is a gracious gift and I cannot thank Sarah enough for this gift.

After a deep collective breath, Julianne begins to share. She also situates herself on this land through the story of her lineage. Her grandmother came from Tunisia and was raised near Paris while her grandfather came from Belgium. She now lives in Montreal (Tiotia’ke). She speaks of her curiosities in her dance exploration with her collaborator Camil Bellefleur. She hopes to dive deeper into the movement inquiry of “what exists between 2 poles?” and “what lives beyond binaries?” She thinks of nature as a queer space and is feeling into the land of paradox and complexity through her artistry.

Finishing the sharing is Isaac/Izo and the dancers of Afrobeats Van. He shares how he came to the name “Dreamchaser” as dance was not considered a viable career in his homeland. In chasing his dreams, he hopes to break the stigmas around dance and create spaces for people to joyously express in order to deal with hardships. His piece relates to drug addiction and using dance as a way to cope and escape. He invites his dancers up to share and we break our circle to become witnessing audience members. One of his collaborators begins the piece with bottle in hand and as the others join, they take the bottle - representing alcohol addiction - away and begin an upbeat intricate Afrobeats choreography. Izo is beaming as he and his collaborators take a bow, the artists collectively representing all different cultures and lineages.

We end the day with a beautiful discussion about land, embodiment, the unresolved complexities and questions that have bubbled up for all of us over the weekend. We talk of slowness and disability and rest. We talk of decolonial dreams and lineage and privilege. We end with breath and gratitude and knowledge that we will continue to carry with us in mind, body, and art.