

Indigenous Womanhood, Precarity and the Nation State: An Arts-based Performance that offers a New Pathway to Reconciliation

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Abstract: In 2017, Canada commemorated 150 years of nationhood. Omitted from the celebratory narratives was the state-perpetrated cultural genocide upon Indigenous communities. While the Canadian Federal Government initiated a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2008, outcomes have been fraught with controversy. Ongoing violence, particularly the epidemic of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women (MMIW), is evidence of this ongoing colonialism. Indigenous activist art in Canada seeks to keep the memories of these women in the political and collective imagination. One such performance, entitled ACHoRD, aimed to disrupt the legislative system while reclaiming women's voices, bodies and politics. This article will contextualize MMIW and ACHoRD within Judith Butler's concept of performativity and in particular, how precarity frames differing levels of privilege and state recognition in women as gendered and racialized bodies. There is a lack of research on how Indigenous-centered art making and discussions on performativity might lead to an active engagement with reconciliation and decolonization. ACHoRD provides valuable evidence for performance art to center the voices of those rendered most precarious and continue commitments to ongoing praxis of accountability.

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The Party

This is the story of a birthday party with too much cake and too many candles. It is a birthday party for a gluttonous child who can never get enough. The child is my nation. This is also the story of a nation built on the trauma of cultural genocide. Gender violence takes center stage in this drama to remind us that colonialism is not over. There is no post-colonialism in this narrative. Yet a third story exists, one of embodied activism through movement and dance. This story commemorates the true place of Indigenous women as powerful leaders, as resisters, as defenders, and as teachers. It is best identified by Lindsay Delaronde, Indigenous artist, mother, sister, friend, activist, who, when asked to self-identify, replies in Mohawk: "I am Onkwebonwe" ... I am the people.

In 2017, Canada celebrated a milestone: 150 years of nationhood. Yet a glaring incongruity exists between this commemoration and recent admissions by the state of cultural genocide against Indigenous communities. The irony, wrapped in glossy photos of Canadians posed to celebrate the "Great White North," lies in how this celebration of a nation's beginning masks the ongoing atrocities against Indigenous inhabitants. When I think about these images, I see rocky chasms in a snowy Canadian landscape left as open, bloody wounds that span past and present while the nation-state beams with brightly coloured flags of red and white.

A commemoration of "Canada 150" only served to reiterate the idea of *terra nullius*, no one's land, a colonial concept that proposed the inferiority of Indigenous peoples to justify the Crown's evaluation of their land as unoccupied (Asch 2002: 24). As my nation smugly celebrated its sesquicentennial, I reflected on political scientist Cynthia Weber's proposal that nation-states are not pre-given subjects, but rather subjects in process (1998: 90). This celebratory moment in Canada continued to enforce a nation supported by the inequality of colonialism; the consequence is a continued attempt to disappear Indigenous peoples, who have lived on the territory for thousands of years. The nation-state is a construction of power, and, as Helen Ting, professor with Institute of Malaysian and International Studies, argues, will reproduce mechanisms that favour "one group (in terms of interests and identities) at the expense of the claims of another" (Ting 2008: 453).

Governmental actors and polices have taken steps to highlight injustices done to Indigenous communities but fall short of action. Beginning in 2008, the Canadian government began to acknowledge past atrocities through the creation of a truth and reconciliation commission modelled closely on South Africa's. In June 2015, Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin of the Supreme Court of Canada publicly admitted that Indigenous peoples in Canada were victims of cultural genocide (Akhaven 2016: 244). Now that the inquiry is finished, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada "hopes to guide and inspire Aboriginal peoples and Canadians in a process of reconciliation and renewed relationships that are

based on mutual understanding and respect” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015: para. 5). This initiative seeks to inform Canadians about the trauma of residential schools as a tool of cultural genocide and to revitalize the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and Canadian society (ibid: para. 3). To the contrary, Indigenous communities and allies state how this proposal is contentious. Many believe that reconciliation and relationships based on mutual understanding and respect cannot be led by the state and that a state-led process only perpetuates imposed power and land control.

According to Indigenous scholar Taiaiake Alfred, Indigenous peoples do not need to reconcile with colonialism; instead, Canadians need to establish “how to use restitution as the first step towards creating justice and a moral society” (2009: 182). Scholars of settler colonial studies emphasize that as long as colonialism continues in Canada, Indigenous peoples remain in a state of irreconcilability, asked to “embrace discourses of reconciliation while relinquishing claims to land and cultural resurgence” (Hill & Gabrielle 2015: 13). For true justice to happen in Canada, Decolonial scholar Lynne Davis and colleagues argue, settler (non-Indigenous) communities must recognize and acknowledge an alternative narrative of Canada’s past and present that reveals themselves “as occupiers of Indigenous homelands, perpetrators of cultural genocide and sustainers of settler colonial practices in the present” (Davis et al. 2017: 399).

The consequences of this ongoing colonial agenda are most evident in gendered violence against Indigenous women. In Canada, thousands of Indigenous women have gone missing or have been murdered (Tasker 2016: 2). Critiques argue that while the numbers of these tragedies may have been formally documented in the past 50 years, a true statistical representation must start in the historical context of colonialism (Brant 2017: para. 5; Brammer 2016: para. 7). After years of denial, in 2016 the Federal Government finally conceded to estimates that more than 4,000 women have been murdered or are still missing (Baum & Grant 2016: para. 3; Tasker 2017: para. 1). From the efforts of Indigenous organizations, the phrase “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women” (MMIW) has been pushed into the popular lexicon in Canada, and in 2015, the Federal Government bowed to pressure and agreed to launch an inquiry. Yet, according to the organization who called for this inquiry, the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC), this initiative has dismally failed women and communities (Galloway 2017: para. 2). The NWAC cites a lack of accountability to families through poor communication, missing deadlines and progress reports.

In my eyes, the MMIW label is tossed around with a triviality that jars against the gravity of so many women and girls who continue to be found in rivers, snow banks, back alleys, or not at all. Indigenous women’s bodies, presented in law and media as faceless and without history, have come to symbolize state denial of Indigenous rights to existence (Lugones 2008: 10). In response, the pictures of

missing and murdered women brought forward by Indigenous communities create a complex quilt of grief (see Troian 2013: 14). With every photo comes a story of a woman's humanity and a web of grieving relatives. In consideration of the celebratory commemoration for 150 years of nationhood, and given Canada's promise to address genocide and provide a platform for reconciliation, I ask: why does state inertia continue as Indigenous women disappear and are murdered?

While Indigenous women have been victimized, scholars like Sandrina de Finney (2014: 10) urge researchers not to focus on victimization but to notice their bravery and creativity in navigating colonial traumas. To this affect, Lindsay Delaronde, a member of the Mohawk First Nation and artist in residence for the city of Victoria, British Columbia, where I live, believes that reconciliation can only be considered when action is taken to stop the brutality and violence done to Indigenous women. As part of Canada's 150th birthday celebrations, Delaronde offered an approach to reconciliation that held up the resilience of Indigenous women as the primary creators and keepers of Indigenous culture through the performance piece *ACHoRD*. Delaronde's intent was to "dismantle existing hypocrisies and injustices in the colonial legislative system while proposing new partnerships to reclaim women's voices, bodies and politics" (personal communication, March 2017).

As I will describe later in this article, the process to create *ACHoRD* took place over three months and involved 14 Indigenous and Non-Indigenous women. The performance took place on the steps of Victoria's legislature buildings on June 25 2017. Following de Finney's proposal (2014: 10), in this article I present *ACHoRD* as a model of resurgence for Indigenous womanhood which concurrently offers the potential for Non-Indigenous women to work as allies in authentic reconciliatory relationships. To begin, I contextualize how the nation-state performativity of Canada has profited by creating a condition of precarity for Indigenous women. Next, I draw attention to the potential of process in art making to open up spaces for activism and relationship building. Following this theoretical discussion, I describe the process of creating *ACHoRD* from my experience as a Non-Indigenous woman in this arts-based project.

Disrupting Occupancy by the Canadian Nation-state

Performances and activist art initiatives led by Indigenous women have challenged the Canadian landscape before, recorded as far back as prolific Mohawk poet and performer Pauline Johnson in the 19th century (Deerchild 2016: para. 3). However, *ACHoRD* was unusual because Delaronde invited both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women to work together to create and perform the piece. Judith Butler's theory of precarity well contextualizes the phenomenon of

MMIW and shows how art performances such as *ACHoRD* challenge the oppressive authority of the Canadian nation-state. In her definition of precarity, Butler states:

Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death (2015: 33).

According to Butler, in the current political global climate, diverse populations are increasingly precaritized (2015: 15). I assert that Canada was built upon a state of precarity, where bodies rendered indispensable were an outcome of the founding of Canada as a sovereign nation state. Critics argue that up until the imposition of European colonial patriarchy, a balance of complimentary roles existed between genders (UBC Indigenous Foundations 2010: para. 10). The principle legislation through which the government took control of resources and Indigenous people was the Indian Act of 1876 (Government of Canada 2018). This act redefined Indigenous female identity in order to disenfranchise and dispossess large numbers of women from legal and cultural recognition. In other words, Indigenous women were disappeared from the Canadian landscape. When women did appear, they were most often portrayed in stereotyped and sexualized roles. Even today, Indigenous women are five times more likely than non-Indigenous women to die of violence (Suzack 2010: 8; Saramo 2016: 204).

In Canada, colonialism is directly tied to an identity of rigid masculinity that serves to oppress Indigenous communities through sexualized and violent atrocities against women. Cynthia Weber argues how this expression of gender served, and serves, to enforce sovereignty and is performatively enacted through various codings (1998: 91). Significantly, Weber points out how Butler warns against universalizing sex and gender but seeks to investigate historically how the “masculine state” is formed (1998: 93). The violence done to Indigenous lands and Indigenous women have been tied to each other since the time of colonial contact (Smith 2005: 34). Words such as *pillaged*, *penetrated*, *raped*, and *murdered* have been used to describe both land and women. Both have been deemed available for exploitation (Million 2014: 32; Savarese 2017: 175). Poignantly, the words of Butler and Post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2007: 8) capture Canada’s history as they point out how the colonial legacy of the nation-state was brought into being and sustained on the backs of the stateless, the unrecognized, and the disappeared.

This occupancy by Canada continues with clear objectives. Kenyan novelist and scholar Mbembe wa Thiong’o (1998: 28) considers performance to be a crucial aspect of the nature of power in the post-colony nation, which organizes spaces with clear entrance and exit points. These points include legal power, cultural recognition and territorial claim. Through the Indian Act of 1876, the government of Canada has forced Indigenous communities into physical segregation

and removal from their ancestral territories. While the Indian Act is federal legislation, provincial powers have actively supported this denial of recognition and land. As such, access to land resources and full membership in Canada have been manipulative tools for the government. The performance of *ACHoRD* intentionally took place on the government legislature to challenge these divisive boundaries of membership. How *ACHoRD* sought to push the boundaries of government authority well illustrates Butler's analysis of public protest. Butler affirms how assembled bodies can challenge disposability and "are demanding to be recognized, to be valued, they are recognizing a right to appear, to exercise freedom, and they are demanding a livable life" (2015: 26).

While the nation of Canada has sought to render Indigenous women as disposable, Butler asserts how those who are cast outside the recognition and protection of the nation-state are not without power (Bell 2009: 152). At the beginning of her essay "Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics," Butler asks:

How does the unspeakable population speak and makes its claims? What kind of disruption is this within the field of power? And how can such populations lay claim to what they require? (2009: xiii).

To consider Butler's analysis of power and voice, specifically how the performance of *ACHoRD* challenged the precarious position of Indigenous women in Canada, I refer to the work of Indigenous scholar and feminist Diane Million. Million proposes, through her analysis of Franz Fanon and Indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard, that in the master's gaze of coloniality, there will be no reciprocity, "since the 'master' in such a relationship can never actually recognize its 'other' as any true equal" (2011: 324). Therefore, activist work must create opportunities outside of these constructions of power. As I will show when describing *ACHoRD*, a significant challenge for the women who participated in it, was to negotiate how voice and power were represented within an Indigenous-centered art project. And while *ACHoRD* may be criticized for enacting gendered roles, I would like to suggest that how we attended to precarious positions must be considered in light of the very points Butler brings forward in her questions: that is, how voice, disruptions, and claims must be determined by those who are recognized as precarious. By centering the agency of Indigenous women, we were stepping outside of the master's gaze and allowing for empowered conceptualizations of self beyond colonial imaging.

Examining past and present narratives are a powerful tool to understand how these points might be challenged by women in precarity. Million describes the potential of narratives, particularly for Indigenous communities:

We need to recognize our own power to reposition these, to reattach and play new meaning to old horror, to renarrate, to restore our attachments, and certainly to live them differently, to speak, to power differently (2011: 328).

Butler herself asserts that performativity must be not only a theory, but a practice against oppression, “since gender performativity was a theory and a practice...that opposed the unlivable conditions in which gender and sexual minorities live” (2015: 33). Consequently, Butler opens up space to negotiate what empowerment means for those in a state of precarity, and perhaps proposes a model of activism that is responsive and relational. What is politically significant about Butler’s (2015) claim is the “differential distribution of precariousness upon which political actors should prioritize political intervention, namely those whose lives are immediately at stake” (32–34). According to Butler (2015), precarity may be a galvanizing force for gendered bodies to gather in activism; however, in *ACHoRD* we had to be aware of our differing levels of precarity or risk losing the leverage of our political force. As Josephine Savarese, professor of Criminal Justice, points out, “when applied to the current Canadian landscape, goals of decolonization can work with performativity to disrupt histories that give priority to certain ‘modes of knowledge production’ over others” (2017: 160). It is essential to centre the emotionally felt narratives of Indigenous women’s experiences over the silencing “objective” meta-narratives of Canadian history and colonization (Saramo, 2016: 206). Additionally, re-storying for Non-Indigenous women will look very different than for Indigenous women. Canadian scholar of Indigenous Governance, Paulette Regan declares in her highly esteemed book, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, “[W]e must work as Indigenous allies to ‘restory’ the dominant culture version of history; that is, we must make decolonizing space for Indigenous history—counter-narratives of diplomacy, law, and peacemaking practices—as told by Indigenous peoples themselves” (2010: 2). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1991: 85) points out the responsibility of the dominant culture to listen, to be responsive, and to avoid silencing voice. This notion ties to proposals by Social Justice Education theorists Lee Anne Bell and Dipti Desai to situate dominant discourses within historical contexts and “to be attentive to the kinds of stories that are given voice through history and those that are not” (2011: 288).

Co-creation and Unity in Movement to Activate Space

The process of art making is emerging as an important topic in debates around performativity and activism. In fact, the process of making the performance was of greater importance than the actual performance of *ACHoRD* itself. When we began, Delaronde affirmed that the value of *ACHoRD* lay more in the process of Indigenous centered co-creation than in the final performance piece:

It is accessing the best power stories to empower one another. Co-creation is the most natural process for engagement. Understand how we are all part of life, and to tap into the natural rhythm of this life force will give clarity and direction. Coming to one mind and consensus is incredibly important. While a

longer and harder process, a strong foundation for risk taking and boundary pushing is created (personal communication, April 2017).

In the creation of *ACHoRD*, I and the other participants worked through the challenges of reconciliation with the goal of political activism. At the beginning of each practice, the women of *ACHoRD* would recite lines from the song to set our political intent and unify our movements as performers. Butler points out that “acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political” (2015: 9). Likewise, Performative theorist James Wilson refers to French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who observed that social relationships are integral to the final product and reflect “living and models of action within the existing real” (2012: 111).

In my view, in art projects like *ACHoRD*, rigid oppressive performatives are disrupted because of their permeable temporal boundaries. A performative focus on the product/process and private/public qualities of the performance reorients both creators and viewers from an object centered final product to engaged activist praxis. Curator Rupert White considers how this relational quality of art making creates valuable entry points for audience engagement (Art Cornwall 2008: para. 10). Later in this article, I will describe the reactions of a few audience members who felt drawn into the performance through movement and breathe.

***ACHoRD*: How Notes in the exact Chords Create a State of Grace**

The name of Delaronde’s performance was inspired by a Jamie Sieber song, *Mandlovu Mind*, and signifies how song, voice, and body can be powerful tools of activism. *ACHoRD* reflects how chords in music must find harmony to enter a state of grace, just as women in the group worked for consensus as they co-created the performance. Upper and lowercase letters signified the diversity of women in the project, diverse in each letter but united as a word. Furthermore, the name of the performance is a satirical play on the accord of state-driven reconciliation. To create a song, music notes must reach a state of perfection with other notes, and this metaphor contrasts with the dissonance between current state reconciliation initiatives and Indigenous communities.

To find performers for *ACHoRD*, Delaronde, with the support of choreographer Monique Salez, sent out a call for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous women who were interested in reconciliation and could contribute to the project with either dance, art making, or personal insights into reconciliation. 14 women, whose experience ranged from none to extensive experience with movement and performance, were selected to participate.

I responded to the call because dance is a powerful learning tool for me, and I have gained deep insight in embodied activism through previous performances. Most importantly, as a white settler, I benefit from ongoing colonialism. I must consider my place in Canada—personally and politically. In my conversations

with Indigenous elders and community, I continue to gain insight on how my personal narratives provide clues to better understand how to work for justice. Collette Jones, instructor at Vancouver Island University and member of the Snuneymuxw First Nation of Vancouver Island insists that Non-Indigenous activists cannot be productive until they work through personal emotional trauma (personal communication, January 2018). If not, according to Jones, their personal story will overshadow the depth of systematic violence and blind any possible praxis response to injustice.

With this intention, I joined a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women to create and perform *ACHoRD*. We worked intensively on the project for three months amid celebrations and protests leading up to the national birthday party in the summer of 2017. Delaronde allocated funds from her city sponsored residency to support the creation of *ACHoRD*. Participating women agreed at the onset of *ACHoRD* to perform on the steps of the provincial legislative buildings with an intent to disrupt the colonial imagination and challenge Canada's "150" celebrations. Our goals were to momentarily reorient the landscape of manicured lawns and colonial architecture and leave onlookers to reflect on the stark contrast created by the disruptive presence of *ACHoRD*, performed by women only. While *ACHoRD* was advertised in the official city programming for "150" events, the nature of the performance stood alone. Rather than entertain, *ACHoRD* sought to unsettle and challenge these privileged spaces so often characterized by whiteness and by high social and economic standing (Saramo 2017: 216).

Indigenous perspectives on the past, present, and future that create opportunities for justice engagement are unique (Anderson 2016). According to these perspectives, time does not have a designated boundary or a definitive end, and self-determination depends on unceasing reflection between the past and future. In the months of co-creation and rehearsals leading up to the performance, participants identified how our past histories and self-location affected not only reconciliation but all aspects of our lives. Women in *ACHoRD* courageously faced the pain of their narratives as gendered bodies. While the public performance challenged state proposals for reconciliation, the process of creating the art itself was the embodiment of reconciliation for the piece's co-creators. I cannot speak for other women in this group because the process was deeply personal, but I believe the three months of preparation challenged every woman in the group to contend with their personal and political performative intersections of race and gender. My own experience cemented for me that justice work and activism must begin with my story if I am to navigate boundaries of politics and oppression.

The process of creating and performing *ACHoRD* was structured by Indigenous scholar Kim Anderson's *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (2016). To reconstruct Indigenous womanhood, Anderson suggests that Indigenous women must work through four sequential stages: resistance, reclamation, construction, and action. Delaronde is convinced that all women in Canada

must engage in these four stages to truly disrupt the rigid performatives of Indigenous and settler women alike. Additionally, for Delaronde, artists' work must consider local protocols, Indigenous knowledges, and Indigenous ways of being. Throughout the creation and practice of *ACHoRD*, we worked in consultation with the local Indigenous community.

Storying ACHoRD: Resistance begins Self

In the sections that follow, I describe from my personal narratives, the creation and staging of *ACHoRD* through the sequences of Anderson's four proposed stages for reconstruction and resurgence. The first step in constructing an empowered identity is to resist negative definitions of being (Anderson 2016: 36). In developing *ACHoRD*, we start our practices with a journal entry of self-location. This is mine:

I am from the weighted aching branches of oak and sweet-smelling cedar trees of rural Quebec. I am a sigh in the grass that aspires to live and die in seasons too short. I am a child who climbed picket fences on square packages of farm land, without understanding the necessity to return the land to the people who were here first. I am the daughter of an Irish father who was too broken to know his own brokenness and who hid behind bricks of masculinity in the turmoil of alcoholism. I am the daughter of a French woman whose father lost his identity papers somewhere between the end of a world war and the beginning of her life – another violent war performed in the most personal spaces of home and body.

Land is a complicated affair in Canada. In my story of self-location, I am torn between my deep connection to place and acknowledgement of my existence on stolen land. In the stories of self-location we share in *ACHoRD*, political and systematic differences of racism, privilege, and precarity emerge. While the goals of *ACHoRD* called for unity, as participants we have to recognize our differences of precarity through our social and political locations. For settler women, a reflective journey of honest reconciliation begins with self-location. For Indigenous women, simply to say "I am" challenges state denial of their identity (Million 2014: 36).

Stories of resistance guide the creation of our first set of movements. To develop the piece, we start with short statements of what we are not, ironically summoning words that sought our destruction. Our words pour out like shards of a shattered mirror:

I am not condemned, angry, invisible, drug addict, polluted, fake Indian, whore, drunk, alone, white trash, squaw, suspended between two lives, a bad mother, missing, a slut. I am not unforgiven or forgotten. I am not hopeless.

In this raw moment of vulnerability, trust binds us together. We bear witness to these words and then move to tell raw stories of times when we resisted violence,

patriarchy, and racism. Our hands dance with rage or gently fold together in gestures of sorrow. Sheets of tears cascade down our bodies like rain and are caught in the creases of our thighs. Palms up, we chop the air with conviction. Abuse, violence, abandonment unfurl in the rhythm of words, sobs, and grief-stricken movements. These stories hold us. We are bound in the performatives of gender yet we cannot ignore how violence against Indigenous women is deeply systemic. Aware of the differences among us, I am awed by the spirit of generosity in these moments as the weight of each trauma is neither measured nor compared.



Figure 1: Rage, Victoria B.C., 25 June 2017. Photograph by Maya Schauff

These expressions from our hands that act out stories become our first movements in the piece. We shout in rage, buzz, and clap to soft hymns as we cradle children in our movements. Our sounds of resistance harmonize us.

Reclaim and the Longing for Home

Reclaiming womanhood within Indigenous traditions will follow acts of resistance and offer opportunities to overcome patriarchal impositions on our bodies. Delaronde proposes that our bodies must be powerful shelters. Women can create safe places to give birth, physically and metaphorically and the strength of women's bodies can hold societies together. On one hand, the very ability to create life and community is a strength and on the other, because of the vulnerability within the divides of the masculine state, women's bodies are precarious. This is a complicated proposal and how strength is defined can risk reasserting traditional gender performativities. Interestingly, this phase of our practices creates the most contention between women, regardless of their cultural and ethnic identity.

For the Cree Indigenous peoples of the plains regions, according to Cree elder Mary Lee (n.d.), the word for a shelter is tipi. Fire is placed inside the tipi and is a metaphor for a woman's vast ability to provide warmth, comfort, and safety. Nearing the end of our practice and creation of *ACHoRD*, Delaronde and Salez challenge us to consider how we might visualize home in our bodies. Salez puts forward some different Indigenous cultural traditions that might help with the metaphor of home, one being the Indigenous protocol for women to wear skirts. When we show up for our practices in long skirts, a sensation of dissonance floats through the dance studio. I squirm in mine. I cannot move as easily, and my normally playful body is constrained by the weight of fabric. We engage in a heated discussion on appropriation, gender normativity and traditional taboos. Opinions remain polarized on whether skirts are oppressive or liberating. I feel backed into a corner because, for me, skirts have always meant a swing back into a rigid construction of gender. Yet our objective remains firm, to create a performance that holds up the resilience of Indigenous women and our unity in reconciliation. We reach consensus and choose to wear skirts as a symbol of the right for Indigenous self-determination and identity. While being one of the most difficult sessions, our debate and final decisions illustrate the real challenges involved in reconciliatory work.

Delaronde and Salez ask us to visualize what we long for in the metaphorical homes of our skirts and then ground our bodies in movement. To avoid any cultural appropriation, one woman asks us to refer to our skirts as shelters rather than tipis. The exercise is soothing, despite my discomfort in a skirt. We stand in line, and as each woman steps out to express home, we follow her breath in unity. While resistance opens up voice, at times a cacophony of protest, reclamation compels our breath to help us ground back into a unified state. Throughout our sessions together, working with breath guides us to a state of openness and connection.

Construct in Synchronized Unity

In the construction of a positive identity, Delaronde suggests translating traditions into contemporary contexts. The word “tradition” to me implies the past, yet in an Indigenous conceptualization, tradition offers security in the present and offers promise to the future. Integrating tradition brings a timeless quality to our piece. Delaronde asks us to focus on a moment in our lives that we identify as sacred and retell that story through gestures. I define the sacred as a fragile composition, the result of many variables coming together for no other reason than to affirm life. In my sacred moment, I remember how my heart beat together with that of my childhood horse to create a symphony of percussion. These were moments of peace in a turbulent childhood.

In retelling our sacred moments, it is the first and only time we will be perfectly synchronized. In *ACHORD*, I have worked through decades of grief throughout the three months. I have felt intense somatic and emotional pain. My story, reflective of my relationship with horses, is told through beats on our chests and in the flight of moving legs. These deeply personal moments invoke feelings of vulnerability. As women retell these stories through words and movements, our goals in constructing identity are to witness story and create relationships of trust.

In the final revisions of the piece, repetition is the focus of our work. We decide to use breath and sound in all our movements, save for two lines from the telling of our sacred stories. In the first story, we recount a warm greeting one woman felt when she arrived home, “Oh good, you are here.” We face the audience and for a brief moment, make eye contact to break the divide between performance and onlooker. When we engage the audience in the final performance, I see a wave of emotions on watching faces that range from discomfort to affirmation of our work. In the second story, one woman recounts deep love for her grandmother. The sacredness of her story recognizes the ethereal quality of light when her grandmother looks at the night sky stars and exclaims: “Look at the lights. Aren’t they beautiful?” When we retell this story, our hands are gently held up to the sky as light evokes the beauty in our movements and the possibility of hope.

Act in the Breath and Unity of Resurgence

The final step in Indigenous women’s resurgence, according to Anderson (2016: 265), is to support the overall well-being of communities. The intent of our final performance is twofold: to disrupt oppressive political narratives on the land of the legislative buildings and to reassert women’s voices, bodies, and politics. While our intent is a unified performance, group decision making in these final stages seems to be fraught with tension. As we continue to prepare, for motivation, one of the Indigenous woman sends out a report from the Canadian government

in 1921 that banned all forms of dance by Indigenous communities. Our actions and intent require us as a group to be accountable to communities and reconciliation; our movements will speak for ancestors who could not dance.



Figure 2: Lindsay Delaronde, Indigenous Artist in Residence, Victoria B.C., 25 June 2017. Photograph by Maya Schauff

In the final choreography practice, Salez brings forward the need for representation in our appearance. Many of the Indigenous women would like to use their nations' regalia and Non-Indigenous women representations of their cultural heritage. Once again, we must negotiate how to represent our diversity without losing the force of our intent to disrupt the space of the legislature buildings. We find consensus with skirts and agree on some individual symbolism and expressions of

our experience in *ACHORD*. To express both the grief and hope I have felt in the past few months, Delaronde suggests I adopt the persona of Skeleton Woman, from an Inuit fable of death and renewal. My appearance in the final dance, with my face and arms painted in hues of white, blue, and grey, reflects these traits without appropriating any elements of Inuit culture.



Figure 3: Grief, Victoria B.C., 25 June 2017. Photograph by Maya Schauff

For our public performance, we consider juxtapositions of sound and silence. We decide that our choreography will stand alone, without music. Our voices will carry our intent through song, chants and utterances of grief and joy. We will

begin and end our performance in silence to honour the women who cannot walk with us.

Our performance begins on a warm summer early evening where crowds of tourists and locals wander through picturesque Victoria. The tidy streets and colonial architecture pander to comfort and imaginations of visitor expectations. The presentation of this downtown area is predictable and mimics cities all over the world with a history of colonialism. Like other cities reliant on tourism, glossy official pamphlets wipe away the blood of conquered peoples left in the cracks of cobbled streets. As the sun sits heavy on the ocean to cast a red sheen of light over the city, we leave the dance studio. Our bodies and voices are quiet, and our steps are taken unison. Perplexed onlookers comment or walk alongside as our line breaks open a path on the sidewalk and towards the legislature buildings.



Figure 4: Walking the Streets, Victoria B.C., 25 June 2017.
Photograph by Maya Schauff

When we arrive at the legislative buildings, we begin with a song to honour all our ancestors and women who are not present. We have chosen a women's warrior song. Permission to sing was granted by the song's creators, the Sta'timc Indigenous First Nation of coastal British Columbia, to those who will honour murdered and missing women. Delaronde begins to sing and our voices join in as we shatter the authority of colonial architecture. Then, a moment of silence holds the audience accountable and present. If tourists have wandered over to be entertained by a celebratory event, they are mistaken. Our voices and movement erupt with rage. Breath and sound keep our choreography tight. We move as powerful dancers, vulnerable daughters, instinctual mothers, and grieving sisters. The complexity of our identities in the performance cannot be contained in one proposal of womanhood or reconciliation. Yet, together we are unified in our demand for social and political change. As we move through the stages of Indigenous resurgence, our final choreography invokes peace and symbolizes one woman's experience when she runs through forests. I feel a shift in my body and can sense the knotted tree roots taking over concrete as we transition to the end of *ACHoRD*. I am no longer on the legislature grounds but sip in the sweet air of damp mossy west coast rainforests. I wonder how each woman feels as we finish three months of dedicated and difficult work. I glance over to see mixed facial expressions, but our bodies continue to hold the power of synchronized movement. As we walk away from the legislature in silence, our audience does not move, does not clap, does not make a sound.

Weeks after the performance, I asked Delaronde why *ACHoRD* was so powerful. Delaronde had set up a media site through the city of Victoria and commentary included: "While breathing was an integral part to your art, I was left breathless. Unbelievable. Thank-you". Other comments focused on the use of breath in the piece but how audience members felt drawn to move and breathe with us in synchronicity. Many summed up *ACHoRD* as a story of women unified through stories of struggle and triumph, beauty, rage and hope. Curiously, not one contribution pointed out how the performance was centered by Indigenous values or womanhood but rather focused on the power in our unity as performers. I found this detail perplexing as we purposively centered Indigenous forms of gender expression. This is Delaronde's response to my question:

We held onto our identities, our blood, but the story of *ACHoRD* came from walking together, loving each other. This performance only worked because we had to be united, honest, loving, but in a very truthful way. We walked in silence to honour the past. We moved and told stories to hold the present accountable. We breathed through our sacred stories to bring trust and possibility to the future (personal communication, August 2017).



Figure 5: Holding silence, Victoria B.C., 25 June 2017. Photograph by Maya Schauff

In my view, the potential of *ACHoRD* lay not so much in the public performance but in the process and relationships required to create this politically challenging artwork. The work done by the women in *ACHoRD* affirms how the arts have an important role in reconciliation and offer space for revolutionary narratives and perspectives.

In *ACHoRD*, we found the strength to politically activate and challenge oppressive narratives in Canadian society. To do so, we had to cement an inner circle of trust, forgiveness, and love. Scholar and poet bell hooks (Brosi & hooks 2012) calls such a space we have created one of beloved community – a loving space that allows transformation thereby making a working through political issues possible. This commitment, like reconciliation, is not a single act but an ongoing praxis of reflection and action.



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