





Dee(a)r Spine: Dance, Dramaturgy, and the Repatriation of Indigenous Memory

Sam Mitchell and Julie Burelle

It is necessary that, with great urgency, we all speak well, and listen well. We, you and I, must remember everything. We must especially remember those things we never knew. Obviously, that process cannot begin with longer lists of facts. It needs newer, and much more complex, kinds of metaphors. Perhaps we must trust confusion more, for a while, and be deeply suspicious of simple stories, simple acts. (Durham and Fisher 1995, 147)

Sam: *Dee(a)r Spine*¹, a duet I choreographed, and then performed with musician Tommy Babin, was presented in 2014 at the Wagner Dance Building at the University of California San Diego (UCSD). The piece was born out of my desire “to remember the things I never knew,” to employ Durham’s evocative expression (1995, 147). I was born Yaqui but was adopted early on by a white family and thus, like many other Native American children, I grew up far from my culture.² Through recent conversations with my biological brother, meticulous research, and with my grandparents’ marriage certificate issued in Imuris, Sonora, I now know that my grandmother, Maria Luisa Aros Siqueros, was Yaqui. Her daughter, Evangelina Gaxiola, immigrated to California, married, and had my six siblings and me. Evangelina died tragically when I was an infant. As an adult, I embarked on a journey to reconnect with my family and community, and to find ways to “remember everything.”

Sam Mitchell (mitchell.sammy@gmail.com) is a first-year PhD student. He received his BFA in Dance at the University of California, Santa Barbara and his MFA in Dance Theatre at the University of California, San Diego. As a practitioner, Sam has performed and choreographed nationally and internationally. Most recently, he has choreographed *Borealis* for the Wagner New Play Festival; choreographed *Dunamis Novem* for Thesisworks, collaborating with world renowned physicist, Dr. Raymond Simmonds; produced, performed, and co-directed *hedda’ing* for La Jolla Playhouse’s 2014 WOW Festival; and choreographed/performed his duet, exploring his own native heritage with musician/composer Tommy Babin, entitled *Dee(a)r Spine*. His research focuses on the ever evolving practices within Indigenous dance and theater communities while interrupting settler–colonial notions around traditional and contemporary aesthetics.

Julie Burelle (jburelle@ucsd.edu) is assistant professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California, San Diego. Her recent work focuses on how questions of First Nations sovereignty, cultural identity, and nationhood are negotiated through performances in the particular context of Quebec, Canada. Her work has been published in *Theatre Forum*, *TDR: The Drama Review*, and in various edited volumes. Julie also works as a dramaturg for dance theatre pieces, new plays, and documentary films.



Photo 1. Sam Mitchell performing *Dee(a)r Spine*. Photographer: Jim Carmody.

Julie: But, how does one repatriate cultural knowledge—songs, practices, dance movements, and their related stories and ways of understanding the world—from which one has been estranged, or that one never knew? What creative methodologies and practices does one use to repatriate memory and the intangible: what was, and what could have been, had one not been separated from their community? *Dee(a)r Spine* engages with all these questions. Sam’s personal adaptation of the Deer Dance, a Yaqui dance ritual performed around Easter that has adapted to and resisted colonial pressures and influences, is a piece that Durham might call a complex metaphor. It meditates on genealogy, on connections (lost and rekindled) with the landscape, and on the ways in which dance can serve as a vehicle to repatriate Sam’s fragmented Yaqui heritage.

Working in San Diego on Kumeyaay territory, and on the UCSD campus, which sits atop a Kumeyaay burial site, added yet another layer to Sam’s creative investigation. Indeed, from 2007 until today, UCSD has been embroiled in a bitter dispute with the Kumeyaay and with a contingent of its own faculty members over the repatriation of ancient remains, excavated from under the chancellor’s house in 1976. The Kumeyaay and the Yaqui are very distinct nations, but they share a common relationship with settler colonial states (the U.S. and Mexico) marked by ongoing loss and desecration of their specific cultures and practices. I was writing about this repatriation case (Burelle 2015) when I worked with Sam as a dramaturg for *Dee(a)r Spine*, and thus our projects, while engaging with different communities, echoed and nourished each other in productive ways.

Sam and Julie: This article documents the process that led to *Dee(a)r Spine* and is written in our two voices: the voice of a man of Yaqui heritage and the voice of a non-Indigenous woman from the settler province of Quebec, Canada. This conversational format is, in a sense, a natural continuation of the relationship between artist and dramaturg. More importantly, co-authorship practices a scholarship that aligns with the decolonizing gesture and the repatriation impulse central to Sam’s work. By eschewing single authorship and offering instead a multi-vocal perspective, we hope to decenter a model of scholarship in which Indigenous artists’ voices are subsumed under that of non-Indigenous scholars. Co-authorship is a way to “speak well and listen well,” to allow

differing visions to exist side-by-side, to expose gaps and to “trust confusion” as a way for the writers (and perhaps the readers) to be un-settled in a sensate as well as in a political way.

More than a process account, this article offers a critical reflection on dance as a tool for repatriation. It proposes one possible creative methodology—the repatriation practices devised by Sam as an artist of Yaqui heritage—and various avenues of exploration centered on the moving body. These practices are infused with uncertainty and a desire for complex intimacies (territorial, interpersonal, ancestral)³ as a way to remember the intangible and to plant new seeds of belonging. Indigenous peoples have always created novel nation-specific practices (dances, songs, performances) and forms of relationality to respond to new political, communal, and cultural situations. In this case, we posit that dancing offers a pathway to repatriation, a way to capture and honor the trajectories of Indigenous creators whose connections with their communities have been interrupted by the effects of settler-colonialism. Dancing can access memory; it can assert kinship and a sense of belonging to land and community. In doing so, dancing performs a form of what Sto:lo scholar Dylan Robinson aptly calls “sensate sovereignty”⁴: that is an assertion of Indigenous presence, epistemologies, and practices, a carving of a sovereign space of self-representation that operates in realms that exceed western legal definitions of sovereignty and centers instead on Indigenous forms of knowing.

Awakening the Body, Calming Doubts

Sam: There is, in the act of choreographing and making new work, the very real challenge of starting at the beginning. There is my body—the body of a dancer of Yaqui ancestry, trained in classical and modern dance, there is the space, and there is the history of my body in space. Choreographing has often been a kind of battle for me, one in which I’ve had to face self-resignation and doubt, and push past the obstacles I create for myself. Sometimes I succeed but sometimes, the space remains blank, and the stories inside of me untold.

Julie: The space you describe, a rehearsal room on a university campus, is not neutral. While academic training can offer an artist a space to create outside of economic pressure, a moment to pause and dig deeper into one’s work, it is by no means a neutral environment. Academia has a long history of objectifying Indigenous bodies and practices, of misinterpreting or appropriating them, or of simply refusing to read Indigenous practices as embodiments and manifestations of epistemological frameworks on their own complex terms. While Indigenous dances have clearly influenced a great number of non-Indigenous dancers, they have often been relegated to folk practices rather than artistic ones, and as Tsimshian scholar Mique’l Dangeli argues in her work, scholars have mistakenly assumed Indigenous dances to be fixed or rigid because of their anchoring in protocols inherited and honored from one generation to the next.⁵ The space of academia is thus never a blank slate.

Sam: Choreographing *Dee(a)r Spine*, I developed a mantra. When faced with crippling creative block, I would say “ask your bones,” or “it’s already in the space, now you just have to reclaim it.” My struggle with choreographing this work echoes the many challenges I face as a Yaqui artist reclaiming his heritage. I struggle with questions of authorship. What gives me the right to even “embody” the Deer Dance? In *We Will Dance Our Truth*, David Shorter writes: “[b]y seeing Yoeme collective identity as embodied in these ritual performances, we see that many Yoemen spatialize their cosmology into multiple worlds, or *aniam*, and that these places provide Yoemen spaces to enact their identities and share them with the plant, animal and ancestral families” (Shorter 2009, 30). I have not inherited the Yaqui Deer Dance from my community but, as Shorter suggests, exploring it has allowed me to see my past, present, and future coexist in one space and to claim my complex lineage. My biological siblings (with whom I have reconnected) recognize me as their own but the sealed documents surrounding my adoption make it virtually impossible to prove officially

that I am Yaqui. I am not an enrolled member of the Yaqui tribe and my identity, it seems, depends on settler colonial notions of blood quantum that feel inadequate, as if only a percentage of me is Yaqui. Which percentage of my body is it? Is it my leg? My torso? My head?

Furthermore, my training as a dancer is entrenched in western epistemologies that have often appropriated Indigenous practices. Improvisation, ritualization, and embodiment are heralded today as “revolutionary” or “innovative” but, in fact, they are at the core of Indigenous cultures. If I spend too much time dwelling on these contradictions, my creative impulses vanish. The truth is that my Yaqui identity is like that mantra: It’s deep in my bones, resonating like a powerful kind of language or knowledge.

Julie: Listening to your bones: moving them, and using them to remember, to assert a space. That was important throughout Sam’s process and it helped me articulate my own research on the Kumeyaay repatriation case at UCSD. Indeed, the remains or bones found under the Chancellor’s house at UCSD, are ancestors for the Kumeyaay. They are not inert matter, despite what the UC scientists who oppose repatriation have argued, and the repatriation of these ancestors, in accordance with Kumeyaay practices, is an affirmation of Kumeyaay sovereignty.⁶ Indigenous bones contain memories, they bring stories forth that often act as counter-texts to the settler colonial project. As this case moved from campus committees to a full-fledged court case, my research thus converged with the questions that fuel Sam’s creative journey: how does one excavate, reclaim and mourn what has been hidden and devalued for so long? How does one—Yaqui, Kumeyaay or member of any First Nation—counteract the violence of what Patrick Wolfe calls “settle-colonial’s logic of elimination” which constantly aims to erase and eliminate Indigenous voices, bodies, and epistemologies even when they are unearthed as remains (Wolfe 2006, 388)? How does one dance on a landscape like the UCSD campus that often denies the validity of Indigenous stories and claims, whether they come from students who walk on the campus ground or from the ancestors that lie under it?

Sam: In the spring of 2013, I took my wife and son to the Yaqui Easter Ceremonies in Guadalupe, Arizona. Upon arriving in town, I was drawn into the little chapel next to Our Lady of Guadalupe church. As I looked upon the statues of Christ, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and various saints, I was stricken with an irrational panic. I wanted to run out of the chapel, get in the car, and never come back. I was able to brace myself, telling my wife what I was experiencing. She surmised the event with one apt remark: “Yes, that’s the years of genocide, rape, and violence!” My body was receptive to the layers of history that stood beneath my feet. It was an uneasy experience because, despite the kinship I felt with the Yaqui people around me, I had an aversion to this particular locale. I felt a sense of familiarity with the barrio of Guadalupe, which served in the early 1900s as a political refuge for Yaquis who fled the Mexican revolution, but the violence I sensed in the chapel resonated with the violence of the trauma I had experienced within my own body.

Later, as we stood waiting in the hot dusty town square for the ceremony to begin, we noticed a complete lack of anticipation and a kind of weariness from the crowd. I struggled with my own expectations about the ceremony: I had imagined that a quiet reverence would permeate the ceremony and indicate its sacredness. Instead of my romantic ideal, I found people casually strolling by, drinking or eating, laughing and talking: they were not performing for the outside world but living this day, these dances, as a community. The MC of the event spoke endlessly through an old PA system that distorted his voice. He reprimanded those who were taking pictures and told the audience to stay out of the designated area in the center of the town square. His weary, droning voice competed with the screams of the nearby carnival rollercoaster. Juxtaposed in this moment were the sacred and the quotidian, the ancient and the contemporary. I was reminded of Richard Schechner’s description of “the interlude, or cool down/warm up [that] occurred both before the dancing and after” the Yaqui Deer Dance as “forming a kind of background of ordinariness from which the extraordinary features of the dancing arose” (Schechner 1985, 13).

After what seemed like hours, a cloud of dust arose as hundreds of Pascola dancers stomped their way through the center, with careful, unified, measured steps. I tried to count the steps, but could not find a noticeable pattern. Yet they were all on the same foot, at the same time. The day culminated when I met Rafael Arrimente, a tribal elder with whom I had briefly spoken on the phone before coming. Rafael, a man in his 70s, wore a cowboy hat and spoke slowly, with deliberation. He immediately shook my hand, introduced me to his family, and presented me with a tribal enrollment brochure, papers documenting the Yaqui Easter ceremonies, and two lapel pins: one a Yaqui flag, the other a Deer dancer. We talked for several hours. Rafael invited me to come back later so he could show me around and introduce me to the community. I returned that evening exhausted from the range of emotions I had experienced that day, but was unable to locate Rafael who had gone home. I walked around the town square alone, when a young boy walked up to me and handed me a cigarette. I reluctantly took it from him, and watched as he moved from viewer to viewer, handing out cigarettes like party favors. I realized that this too, was part of the ceremony, as I saw a Deer Dancer and two Pascola dancers warming up. The performance continued late into the night and I left, disappointed that I wasn't able to reconnect with Rafael, but grateful for the experience in Guadalupe.

The next day, we drove home. Despite the fact that I had missed parts of the Deer Dance (I have seen other recorded performances since), I was irrevocably changed. I had just experienced a visceral connection to my ancestors and to my heritage. Mohawk dancer Santee Smith articulates this sentiment:

We think that [...] that we have ancestral memories in our body, and we are just trying to awaken those. That memory is in our body and in who we are. So when we do our performances and especially when we're talking about intention, about why we're moving in a certain way, [...] that's when we try to call upon that ancestral stuff or try to awaken that. (in Shea Murphy 2007, 223)

In the fall of 2013, Julie and I began to meet regularly, discussing the work of contemporary Indigenous performers and thinkers. Something had begun.

Julie: The work of a dramaturg has often been associated with textual analysis, historical research, or curatorial work, but it can be a lot more. Eric Ehn has called for dramaturgy to be an act of “co-creation,” and D. J. Hopkins writes about dramaturgical methods aimed at “starting trouble” (2003, 3). Ehn and Hopkins call for the creation of counter-texts to plays, for the fostering of spaces in the creation process where unresolved questions are allowed to simply exist in tension with plays, challenging them and revealing their fracture lines or hidden riches. While Ehn and Hopkins do not specifically address decolonization, I took their reflection as a starting point to define my role as a dramaturg for Sam's piece. The goal here was not to create a counter-text to Sam's work but rather to help Sam develop his intervention *as* counter-text to settler colonial narratives surrounding Indigenous bodies, their dances, and their genealogies on the one hand, and to a departmental ethos that privileged post-modern aesthetics and western methodologies that were sometimes hard to reconcile with Sam's desire to “tell his story.” In positioning his work as counter-text, Sam's piece would enact a form of Indigenous cultural, visual, and memorial sovereignty, reclaiming connections that settler colonial states have interrupted but never fully severed. But Sam's work is not only counter-text; it is not simply reactive to settler-colonialism. In fact, *Dee(a)r Spine* was not primarily aimed at a settler audience but instead it became a form of ceremony onstage, one that was performed in Sam's terms and that embodied and invited new forms of intimacies with the ancestral memory of the land, and with complex genealogies and forms of belonging.

In tackling this new project, Sam was opening himself up to unpredictable forces, some coming from his own inner-censor and some from the outside. These are forces with which I struggle as a non-Indigenous scholar writing about Indigenous performance, and as a dramaturg for

Indigenous artists. How do I remain aware of my own positionality, of the set of biases I unwittingly bring to the table? How do I speak and listen well? Sam struggled at first to find the tools and the gestural vocabulary to develop his piece. It was clear to him that without training with Yaqui Deer dancers and without understanding all the protocol of this performance, his piece would have to exist as a personal response to the Deer dance rather than as a version of it. Sam's piece is nevertheless a Yaqui dance and he wanted to develop a methodology – a set of investigative and creation practices anchored in desire, respect, and listening with the aim to repatriate memory—to inscribe his *Dee(a)r Spine* as part of his investigation to understand Indigenous ways of understanding the world. Building on Sam's mantra "it is in my bones," I suggested we make connections with the Kumeyaay community to hear how they understood bones as repositories of memory but also to respect protocol and seek guidance and permission to dance on their land as a member of another nation.

"Indigenous Knowledge, Contemporary Performance," a project that includes Monique Mojica (Kuna and Rappahannock), LeAnne Howe (Choctaw), Ric Knowles, Brenda Farnell, and others, was a source of inspiration for us. This research project is "dedicated to investigating the analysis and use of the "DNA" of Indigenous cultural forms in the creation of contemporary Native theatre and performance."⁷ Mojica, reflecting in 2013 on the early stages of this research project, explained how she was drawing inspiration from encounters with Indigenous burial mounds to develop forms of dramaturgy aligned with specific Indigenous knowledges. Mojica described the powerful affect of these mounds and the ways stories welled in her as she rested near these sites that were now sitting, often forgotten, in the middle of settler communities (Mojica and Farnell, 2013). Because Sam felt at times removed (not only geographically but also culturally), I suggested that he follow a similar path and anchor his embodied research in the very land on which he was standing. What did this campus tell him as he walked its beautiful but wounded grounds?

Gathering Fuel for the Fire

Sam: During the initial phases of *Dee(a)r Spine*, I spent a tremendous amount of time conducting research. Archival research and consulting works by academics seemed at odds with the intent of my piece, which was to undo the ways in which settler colonialism had attempted to erase Indigenous bodies, presence, and practices from the land. The written archives have, to borrow from Diana Taylor, "served as a recognized weapon in the colonial arsenal" legitimizing settler colonial worldviews and erasing Indigenous epistemologies (2003, 41). Taylor positions the repertoire in tension with the archive: the repertoire, she claims, is the performances and practices –embodied, aural, non-linguistic or literary - that resist the archives, asserting other ways of knowing.

Drawing from Taylor as well as from the works of Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Richard Schechner, and others, I realized that I could use the archive—theory mostly—in tandem and tension with the body to make political claims. Rehearsal became a way to let these abstract, written ideas, siphon down into my bones. While I found it hard at first to embody abstract ideas such as repatriating things I never knew, the following passage from *The Sacred Tree*, proved useful: "Anyone who sets out [...] on a journey of self development will be aided. There will be guides and teachers who will appear and spiritual protectors who will watch over the traveller" (Bopp 1989, 30).

In the act of deepening my relationship with Kumeyaay territory I regularly visited La Jolla shores, Scripps Pier and Blacks Beach. I often passed the Chancellor's house, the site where the contested ancestral remains were unearthed. I imagined the Kumeyaay people, standing on the shores, looking over the Pacific, and feeling the same powerful feeling of awe. I continued to explore the campus by conducting several silent, meditative walks. "I placed myself on the land, in the ocean, on a river, among relatives, and embodied them by assimilating and integrating myself with their vibrations," says Monique Mojica, of her work, "Mola Dulad Aibanai." "I listened to what it had to tell me, and

listened to how my body responded. I put it all in one big vat until I couldn't hold it in any more. Then the impulse, the gesture, the sound, the word and the text developed from there" (in Bimm 2011). I sought instruction and council from the land: I tried to listen through my feet. What could I hear through the ground? On one particular day, a crow began to follow me, landing close by, cooing with the voice of small child. He looked down at me, and I looked up at him. We continued our exchange while students walked by, oblivious to this impromptu dialogue.

My teacher, Judith Sharp, recommended that I speak with Abel Silvas of the Kumeyaay, Luiseño and Yaqui nations, about my research. A historian, mime, actor, comedian, and storyteller, Abel has performed his one-man show *Running Grunion* nationally. We spoke on the phone before he brought me to various burial sites located around San Diego. I listened as he shared stories about the colonization of the Yuman people in San Diego. At one burial site near the Mission, Abel pointed out a beautiful pine tree that stood tall and proud. "Do you see that tree? Our ancestors literally made that tree. They are inside of it" (Personal conversation). Abel's observation proved true for my body as well. Just like that tree, my body was comprised of the histories of the people before me. Working with Abel was a vital step in my research. It allowed me to see connections between the Kumeyaay's past and present history, and to better understand the colonial violence that shapes the lives of Yaqui and Kumeyaay people. In developing these relationships, I discovered that trust requires time and care. I am constantly negotiating my intentions by challenging settler colonial notions that lie dormant within my own practices.

Dee(a)r Spine

Sam: Creating *Dee(a)r Spine*, I had hoped that perhaps, if the circumstances were right, the same sort of visceral connection that occurred in Guadalupe might happen onstage. *Dee(a)r Spine* followed a structure that was both specific and ordered, and contained the potential for interaction, spontaneity and repetition. It was organized as follows: The Prologue, (An open ended invitation); The Mapping of the Space; The Ritual; A Devised Sequence, The Medicine Wheel as Vision Quest; The End, (An open ended question).

Prologue

Julie: *Dee(a)r Spine* begins with Sam performing as a trickster inspired by the Yaqui Pascola. Entering the performance space during the intermission (*Dee(a)r Spine* was features with other works), Sam wears a leather mask crowned with a row of split palm leaves and a long brown cape (Photo 2). He begins by loudly dragging heavy benches and transforms the performance space from a frontal to a circular arrangement. He then invites audience members (subtly and often hilariously bluntly) to sit closer to the stage, teasing them, sitting on their lap, hiding behind scenic elements, and re-emerging to the audience's surprise. Some audience members are visibly confused: has the intermission been cancelled? Has the piece started? Should they be silent? When Sam-the-trickster finishes setting up the stage, and his audience is seated, he leaves the space.

The Mapping of the Space

Julie: A moment later, Sam returns, preceded by musician Tommy Babin. Sam no longer wears the mask; he has transformed, but unlike traditional Yaqui Deer Dancer who embodies the hunted deer, Sam does not wear a deer headdress. On his back, Sam wears an external spine; a series of exposed vertebrae that evokes the life and death cycle that organize the deer hunt. The outward spine also illustrates Sam's personal quest to re-establish a foundational connection with his Yaqui heritage and recalls Sam's mantra: "it is in my bones."

Sam: As the piece continues, my re-mapping of the space or claiming of the territory begins (Photo 3). It is no longer a dance studio, but a space that is as endless and vibrant as the ocean, with past and future made visible. I am in conversation with the space, versus merely occupying



Photo 2. Sam Mitchell as trickster figure. Photographer: Jim Carmody.

Although Tommy “passes” with his suit and contemporary appearance, his headdress, shaped by bursts of wind, is very earthly. My shoes, on the other hand, interfere with my vital connection to the earth. Our wholeness is compromised, and we are reliant upon each other. As we circle one another, Tommy and I “see” each other. It is an act of haunting discovery. It challenges settler colonial notions of claiming territory while erasing Indigenous history as the wild man

it. Tommy enters with his European instrument, an acoustic bass. He wears a suit, dress shoes, and a silk tie. His beard and hair are long and wild and he wears a fantastic headdress made of grass, as if he had just emerged from the earth. He traces a circle while walking on stage. I enter and trace a circle, counter to Tommy’s path. I seem to come from an elemental world, roots grow on my legs and my spine is exposed. My shoes look like deer hooves. I am connected with an ancient myth but my contemporary existence challenges the notion of “tradition” as belonging solely to the past. I push against what the archive may define as a Yaqui man.

Our circular pas-de-deux suggests that the wild man in the suit and the Indigenous man may represent the same person. I learned to shift roles seamlessly to survive in white society.

Photo 3. Tommy Babin and Sam Mitchell during the Mapping of the Space. Photographer: Jim Carmody.



acknowledges the presence of the Indigenous man, and the Indigenous Man asserts his presence as permanent and connected with the land. This embodied encounter, what Diana Taylor classifies as the repertoire, “invites a remapping of the Americas,” one that re-centers Indigenous sovereignty and challenges hegemonic historical narratives (Taylor 2003, 20).

The Ritual

Julie: After this initial contact, Sam runs in complete silence several times around the circular space, the audience aware of his growing exhaustion (Photo 4). His endurance run culminates into a final sweeping sprint that abruptly ends when Sam falls on the ground exhausted. The lights change from the fluorescent studio lights to a single spotlight, shining on the fallen dancer. Tommy begins to play.

Sam: My body leans into the space as I run, following the circle that Tommy and I initially traced. Through this repetitive re-tracing, I mark it as a ritual space. My feet hit the floor with a hypnotic sound, a rhythm that increases, echoing through the room. I touch the floor and underneath it, the land. I invoke what lies beneath this campus: ancestors, stories, and songs. I invite the audience to witness this ritual space even if they do not fully understand what it is. As exhaustion sets in, I collapse onto the floor, broken, spent. I feel the audience’s gaze as my chest heaves, contracting and expanding. I stay in this place for a sustained amount of time.

My interest in exhaustion as a gateway to being visited by those I carry within me—a form of repatriation of the intangible—started in 2013, when I developed a project revisiting Anna Halprin’s 1981 “Planetary Dance” with the help of the Medicine Wheel. I began by mapping the North, South, West, and East points of the Wheel in the studio space. With an Apache drumming song playing, I ran and I felt my spirit surge, as I let my aching feet follow the drumming. I had several cuts on my feet from dancing, and I grimaced as they split open again. “I run for my father,” I shouted, “I run for Albert” (Albert, from the Tohono O’odham nation, was my best friend and took his own life). Unresolved grief came bubbling up about Albert’s death (I’ve not been able to weep once for him) and other tragedies. After a while, I felt a sense of reconciliation.

Photo 4. Sam runs to map the ritual space. Photographer: Jim Carmody.



Marking the studio with my feet, I asserted my right to be in this university, to exist, tell my stories, and thrive. I ran, until the song ran out. I touched my right shoulder to the Earth, as instructed by the score. I kneeled in prayer and silence.

When I watched the video of this exploration, I saw an exhilarating spiritual journey of repatriation fueled by a real and visceral fire. This triggered questions about ritual, performance, Indigenous dance, and contemporary dance practices, which I continued to explore at the Indigenous Dance Residency at Banff, Canada.⁸ This proved a tremendously validating experience, as I was able to rehearse, train, and dance with other Indigenous dancers. In one particular exercise, we were asked to run in a circular formation for five minutes, increasing our speed every minute until we were sprinting and leaning into our turns at a maddening pace. This made an indelible impression on me. Pushing myself physically and mentally brought me to that breaking place. To live this in a safe space surrounded by other Indigenous bodies that, like mine, were historically traumatized through genocide, colonization, and racism, allowed me to revisit this trauma and reclaim it. As my body and mind struggled, I dropped into the pain, and even learned to welcome it, meeting it instead of allowing the stress of this trauma to unhinge me. I utilized this valuable experience in my version of Halprin's "Planetary Dance."

I integrated a score created by Margaret Grenier of the Gitksan Company *Dancers of Damelahamid*. Grenier, who was in residence at the Banff during this same period, instructed us to develop movement phrases for the Four Great Meanings of the Sacred Tree: wholeness, growth, nourishment and protection. I worked with two Pow Wow dancers, Lace Mode, and Jen Yellowhorn, and experienced something very powerful: with Grenier's mentorship, I claimed my identity as an Indigenous dancer for the first time. The work with Margaret provided an anchor that rooted my work to the land in a real and substantial way. I felt like I now had "permission" from mentors that allowed all my practices and training to exist simultaneously and on the same plane. I could explore elements of avant-garde theatre, such as abstraction and deconstruction, with the agency that these were practices long ago utilized by my ancestors.

For several months before *Dee(a)r Spine*, I worked in the studio alone. I began each rehearsal with a silent sitting meditation. Then, I would begin the same ritual, circular run. I referred to *The Sacred Tree* often and meticulously built phrases based on the concentric pattern of the Medicine Wheel: phrases for red, yellow, black and white; phrases for protection, growth, nourishment and wholeness. The process was painstaking and I worked in silence. I built a score in which these phrases would naturally arise depending on the direction in which my body landed.

A Devised Sequence

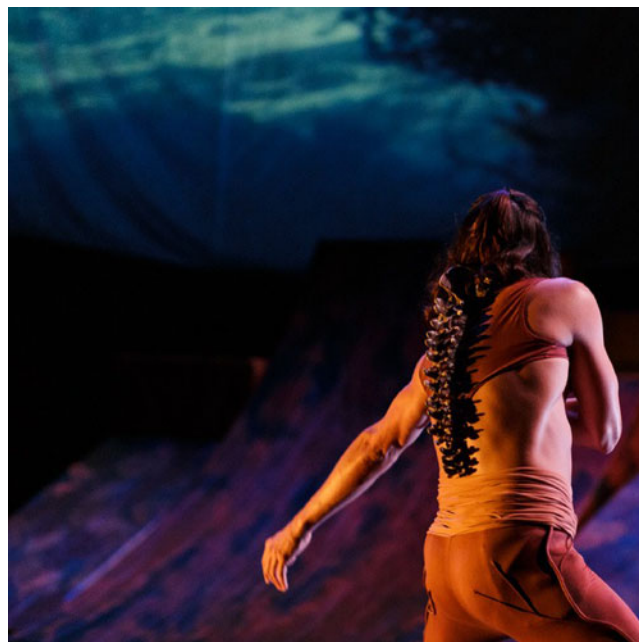
In rehearsal one night, I experimented with the Fibonacci numbers, a mathematical sequence in which each subsequent number is a sum of the previous two (if the first two numbers are 0 and 1, the next would be 1, 2). While seemingly abstract, the Fibonacci sequence occurs in nature, in the arrangement of leaves on a stem, the branching in trees, the flowering of an artichoke, and the spiral arrangement of the scales in a pine cone, for example. I built a movement phrase that emulated the sequence. It became my response to the visually and rhythmically complex steps of the Fariseo dancers from the Yaqui Easter ceremony who stomped the ground of Guadalupe and made dust rise into a cloud. I was concerned about committing a kind of "spiritual theft" by appropriating steps, without having full knowledge of their power. I struggled with questions of whether what I was doing was legitimate. The Fibonacci Sequence, its expanding and contracting score, allowed me to echo the Fariseos from a respectful distance, using what I know to respectfully approach what I have never known. Interestingly, while rehearsing this particular sequence, the curvature of my spine and the grounding of my feet changed my posture and my body channeled the posture of a Deer Dancer.

The Medicine Wheel as Vision Quest

Julie: Landscapes, their physical contours and layers of memory, are at the heart of Sam's work in *Dee(a)r Spine*. During my first visit to Sam's rehearsal space, he showed me how he had started to build movement sequences drawing from a map inspired from the Medicine Wheel. The map served as a guide, an instigating tool. Moving east on the dance floor, for example, meant doing a certain gesture and calling upon an emotion aligned with a season or quality, etc. Perhaps as a result of using this map, Sam's movement sequences were often close to the ground, his feet anchored, his body falling and rolling, returning to the ground before soaring. Moving within this circular model gave Sam's piece a clear sense of landscape, a circular scenic territory that he visited over and over again, adding layers of emotions with each reiteration of the movement sequences he devised. Tommy Babin developed an aural landscape to respond to Sam's movement: wind-like sounds, flowing notes reminiscent of water, abrupt thunder like sounds, and importantly, moments of silence that let Sam's exhausted body be heard. Watching their interactions felt like watching a territory both physical and emotional being mapped, its contour surveyed. With each revisiting of the circle, Sam's body appeared more anchored in the ground, channeling the underground currents and buried histories contained in this small circular parcel of a larger settler-colonial landscape. The scenic design supported Sam's investigation and rendered visible Sam's landscape as he circled it in his movement sequences. Pine trees and desert vistas were projected behind Sam and wooden structures akin to skateboard ramps were used by Sam to jump and fall, dropping down into the valleys and rising up to the mountainous landscape.

Sam: After collapsing, I regain my breath and stand up (Photo 5). I re-trace my steps, surveying the four points—North, South, East, West—of the Medicine Wheel. I allow myself to re-discover how each direction affects my body, my movements. I then face North and thus must choose one of the phrases I have constructed in rehearsal in relation to this direction: my body can move wholeness, or a state of fire, or negotiate the space in an unpredictable manner (all elements associated with the North). Each movement phrase is open-ended, allowing me to be spontaneous in performance. For example, at the end of the "North" phrase I spin around not knowing where I will land, surprising myself. The ramps helped to throw my sense of balance off, to challenge me within the space. I had

Photo 5. Sam, at the beginning of the "Medicine Wheel" section. Photographer: Jim Carmody.



the designer build them as a way to destabilize the floor space. I ran up and down the ramps, launching my body into space, landing, arriving to the top of the sculptures, then sliding down (Photos 6 and 7).

Julie: Our conversations after rehearsals often centered on clarifying Sam’s discoveries: could playing with tempo or intention render a particular sentence or a leaping moment clearer? I worked with potential audiences in mind, but understood that this piece was performing a different kind of work. Sam did not demand to be recognized as an authentic (a loaded word) Yaqui dancer; he did not turn to the audience to obtain legitimacy. Sam asserted a space of self-representation in which he moved his story, drawing from the entirety of his experience, and in respectful relationship with the traditional teachings he was receiving from Kumeyaay, Yaqui and other Indigenous teachers. Sam’s *Dee(a)r Spine* performs Indigenous sovereignty in sensate ways—visually, Sam’s piece articulates a gestural vocabulary that attempts to put in conversation his Yaqui heritage and western influences; aurally, Sam’s breath, his stomping, Tommy’s soundscape, tell a story of repatriation and reconnection with Sam and this campus’ multilayered history. The audience may or may not get this performance of sovereignty and that is, in many ways, secondary. Some will act as witness, welcome the invitation, and others will remain on the outside.

The End: An Open-Ended Question

Sam: *Dee(a)r Spine* has taught me to trust the stories within my body. Tribal Enrollment, if it happens, will not tell me who I am; just as adoption did not erase the knowledge of where I came from. *Dee(a)r Spine* has given me a way to repatriate what adoption interrupted: what I once knew, what I am beginning to know, and what I have never known.

Julie: The creative and investigative methodology that Sam developed is in conversation with tradition but does not lay claim to it. It invests dancing with the possibilities to perform broken lineages and mend them; it saturates the moving body with performative qualities.

Photo 6. Sam Mitchell during the “Medicine Wheel” section. Photographer: Jim Carmody.





Photo 7. Sam Mitchell during the “Medicine Wheel” section. Photographer: Jim Carmody.

Sam: My body claimed space as a Yaqui man, my body, tuned to the voices stored in the land beneath and around me, remembered and refused to forget, my body told my story which is the story of generations of Native American children scooped from their families and communities and estranged from their culture.

Julie: Accompanying Sam in his creative process has triggered a number of questions for me as a non-Indigenous dramaturg and scholar. Many of them are open-ended and perhaps they should stay that way. So much of settler colonial discourses in the United States and Canada has centered on moving past the so-called historical injuries or dark chapters that are the violent and genocidal campaigns against Indigenous people, the land grabs that led to the creation of the U.S., Canada, and other settler nations, the boarding schools and massive waves of adoption of Indigenous children outside of their communities, and the erosion of Indigenous rights, lands, and sovereignty. To witness Sam’s artistic process is to be reminded that these injuries do not belong to the past but are decidedly ongoing. Dancing as repatriation is an inherently political gesture, one that interrupts settler colonialism by telling/embodying a story that refuses assimilation and asserts the complexity of living as a Yaqui man in a predominantly white settler society. Dancing as repatriation reminds viewers of the stories, the land, and the ancestors that lie under their feet as they walk anywhere and ask them to think of the ways in which they have been silenced. Crucially, Sam’s methodology of uncertainty and desire for radical intimacies provides a way to think about healing and futurity that includes and simultaneously resists reconciliation and the ways in which it is currently deployed by settler colonial state as a “moving past,” or a closure. Sam is moving the past, but he is not moving past it. Instead, his body is, to borrow Karyn Recollet’s powerful words, “leaving no one behind,” carrying them into the present as a way to prepare the future.

Notes

1. *Dee(a)r Dance*. 2014. Choreography by Sam Mitchell. Dramaturgy by Julie Burrelle. Costume design by Janet O’Neill. Performers: Sam Mitchell and Tommy Babin. Wagner Dance Studio, La Jolla: University of California San Diego, March 12–15.

2. The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), which passed in 1978 (after I was adopted) was meant to halt the alarming rate of adoptions of Native American children outside of their communities. Though imperfect, the law affords protections that were non-existent when I was a child.

3. We would like to thank Karyn Recollet for this evocative image. More generally, we would like to thank Mique'l Dangeli and Michael Tsosie for helping us think critically about the notion of protocol versus methodology, and Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Tria Andrews, Maria Regina Firmino-Castillo, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Emily Johnson, Rulan Tangen, Jack Gray, and our two external reviewers for their insightful and generous comments.

4. Robinson recently led a working group on Sensate Sovereignty at the American Comparative Literature Association Conference held in Seattle, March 26–29, 2015.

5. See Mique'l Dangeli's (2015) work on Dancing Sovereignty for a discussion of the protocols that subtend Northwest Coast First Peoples' dances. She argues that protocol are not rigid but adaptive and that, as ways of knowing, they are highly creative.

6. The Kumeyaay have urged UCSD to repatriate the remains since 2007.

7. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, "Indigenous Knowledge, Contemporary Performance" (n.d.) is a major research and creation project. Aside from Mojica, Howe, Knowles, and Farnell, the project involves artists/scholars Michael Greyeyes (Plains Cree), and Candace Brunette (Omushkego Cree). The project involves embodied research "on the recovery of Indigenous knowledge through exercises governed by nation-specific aesthetic principles, and the development from these principles of performances methodologies for contemporary artists"; "the generation and development of contemporary Indigenous dramaturgical processes and structures grounded in Indigenous cultural forms"; and "the annotation of Indigenous non-text-based performance drawing on Indigenous forms of annotation such as pictographs and winter counts."

8. The Banff Centre, located in Alberta, Canada, offers summer residencies for Indigenous artists. See: <https://www.banffcentre.ca/programs/indigenous-arts-self-directed-residency>.

Works Cited

- Bimm, Jordan. 2011. "A Taste of Chocolate." *Now Toronto Magazine*. June 2. <https://nowtoronto.com/stage/a-taste-of-chocolate/>. Accessed April 2, 2015.
- Burrelle, Julie. 2015. "Theatre in Contested Lands: Repatriating Indigenous Remains." *TDR/The Drama Review* 59(1): 97–118.
- Bopp, Judie. 1989. *The Sacred Tree*, 3rd ed. Wilmot, WI: Lotus Light.
- Dangeli, Mique'l. 2015. "Dancing Chiaux, Dancing Sovereignty: Performing Protocol in Unceded Territories." Presented at the American Comparative Literature Association, Seattle, WA, March 26–29.
- Durham, Jimmie, and Jean Fisher. 1995. *A Certain Lack of Coherence: Writings on Art and Cultural Politics*. London: Kala Press.
- Hopkins, D. J. 2003. "Research, Counter-text, Performance: Reconsidering the (Textual) Authority of the Dramaturg." *Theatre Topics*: 1–17.
- Indigenous Knowledge, Contemporary Performance. N.d. <https://www.uoguelph.ca/sets/indigenous>. Accessed April 2, 2015.
- Mojica, Monique, and Brenda Farnell. 2013. "Mola Dulad Aibanai (Living Mola Moving): Reclamations, Reenactments and Creating an Embodied Script." Lecture presented at In the Balance: Indigeneity, Performance, Globalisation, Bargehouse, London, October 26.
- Shea Murphy, Jacqueline. 2007. *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shorter, David Delgado. 2009. *We Will Dance Our Truth: Yaqui History in Yoeme Performances*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Cultural Memory and Performance in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8(4): 387–409.