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New Directions in Site Performance Practice: Intersecting Methodologies in an Era of Climate Coloniality

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Article abstract

In this short piece, I start to tease out the challenges of examining a field of performance that, in theory, deeply understands place but has insufficiently faced the impacts of climate coloniality on place, in part due to the fact that the field has largely been defined and developed by white researchers in the Global North. Specifically, by looking at a recent project called VINES, initiated by me and Brandy Leary, I dig into the site performance field's investment in workshop-oriented practice-based research to consider what it might mean to intersect posthumanist research methodologies with Indigenous methodologies that emphasize relationality, reciprocity, and accountability.

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New Directions in Site Performance Practice: Intersecting Methodologies in an Era of Climate Coloniality

Melanie Kloetzel

As a researcher, I am fascinated by the relationship between humans and place. From examining the smallest details of a place to considering how these details connect to larger global concerns, I adore how a single place can convey the complexity of the planet, with all its beauty and challenges.

But when I talk about “place,” I am not talking about a geographical site that may be classified and rationalized using data and statistics, or, alternatively, an abstract or symbolic place that is used to wax poetic about some theoretical trope. Rather, I understand place as a tangible, sensible partner, a corporeal conversationalist with whom I actively collaborate. We dialogue by engaging in a mutual physical practice, a practice that, although associated with a single place, ranges across time and space due to its inevitable integration with larger systems (Heddon 2007; Kloetzel 2019, forthcoming). Place, in other words, works with me to reveal ideas about the world, ideas that would never have come to the fore without the keen dialogic of “attending to place” (Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009, 6-7).

Some of you may be assuming, “Oh, she’s talking about site-specific performance,” or maybe even (due to the current timing), “Site performance was useful during the pandemic, but thank god we can go back to the theatre now.”

Yet, is this what we’re talking about? Some “field of research” that has been (always) already defined, delimited, demarcated? Or is it time to take a second look at that “field”?

I am a white settler woman living on the “ceded” lands of Treaty 7, traditional territories for the Blackfoot Confederacy, as well as the Tsuut’ina and Îyâxe Nakoda peoples. I was not born on Treaty 7 lands; I did not grow up here. I have transplanted myself from one white supremacist colonialist nation to another for a job in an institution also based on colonialist ideas and practices.

What I now know is that the labels, limitations, and experiences that are associated with me have unfortunately meant that my own long-term practice-based research in the “site performance field” has often been, at best, incomplete, and, at worst, corroborating of colonialist realities. In other words, while I have certainly investigated, dialogued with, and then presented some “form” of the sites I have researched via performance, due to my own position of privilege and the blinders that I have failed to remove as part of that privilege, such presentations have too often been inadequate, particularly in terms of exposing or challenging the white supremacist and colonialist realities that characterize each of these places.

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But that has only become evident as the realities of climate change and coloniality have taken up more and more of my consciousness. Unlike others—who do not have the privilege of having climate and coloniality as a “backseat” in their consciousness for decades of their lives—for many white, settler, and/or economically privileged individuals around the world, these realities are finally coming to the fore via the increase in experiences and/or reporting of extreme weather events, forest fires, flooding, migration, and the painfully regular and state-sanctioned murders of Black people in the United States (to name a few).

For many in the academy, these realities are transforming “established fields” and, naturally, the practice-based research within those fields. For instance, in the field of what is often called “site-specific performance”—one constructed and defined almost solely by white practitioners educated in Global North institutions dedicated to maintaining the stories, ideologies, and practices of modernity/coloniality (Machado de Oliveira 2021)—discussions and practice are starting to shift to address these realities.

In a recent Hub session concerning “place-based praxis” at the Dance Studies Association conference in Vancouver in 2022, such a shift or, really, a reshuffling of assumptions, helped pave the way for an illuminating discussion that, while not directly addressing “site performance,” had direct implications for it. Led by the Indigenous practitioners in the room, “place” became much more than something to investigate and perform. Rather, place was revealed as a crucible for all existence, all knowledge, all relationships—and individual places and the search for “true” stories that grew out of these places (with particular attention to more-than-human relations) offered an altered view of what place-based praxis could become, a view that was, at times, quite different from established tropes around “site” or “site-specificity.”

Such experiences are helping to chart new directions for practice-based research (PBR) that link place and performance.

One of these new directions can be seen in a recent project I have been involved in called VINES. The VINES project—which developed from a collaboration between me and Brandy Leary—draws from workshop-based practices that have been developing in the field for many years. Less focused on end results (i.e., a set performance), the PBR that occurs in these workshops aims to encourage participants to explore what it might mean to dialogue with place through specific embodied activities.¹

A key attribute linking many of these PBR workshops is their link to posthumanism. Taking cues from more-than-human beings²—whether biotic or abiotic—these workshops may try to change human perspectives and/or lessen anthropocentric tendencies by focusing on what *else*—other than humans—exists in a given place. In *BIRD BRAIN* (2000–2008), for example, Jennifer Monson encouraged participants in urban spaces in the United States to tune into and emulate the sensory capacities of migratory birds (see <https://birdbraindance.org>); similarly, for *The Abbot Dances* (2014), Vicky Hunter asked participants, who were part of a project taking place in a 400-year-old Almshouse in England, to dialogue with building materials, like stone, that have both shaped and witnessed the world around them in meaningful ways (Hunter 2019).

But what happens when these posthumanist PBR workshops take into account the effects of coloniality that indelibly mark *each place* where they occur? Does anything shift through such

acknowledgement? Or, in more flippant terms, if we are examining bird migration, do we *really* need to pay attention to coloniality?

I could answer these queries a number of ways. Without question, coloniality—which cannot be separated from extractive capitalism (Sheller 2023; Figueroa Helland and Lindgren 2016; Sultana 2022)—has impacted every species and material on this planet. From this perspective, then, we must answer that, yes, coloniality enters into posthumanist workshops that explore bird migration (for example, via noting how migration patterns are changing due to colonially induced climate change) or stone (whose quarrying and construction, in this case, was funded by the slave trade).³

But the question can also be answered in other ways, as I am learning from various Indigenous artists and knowledge keepers on Turtle Island with whom I've been lucky enough to share certain research endeavours.⁴

For instance, in the project I mentioned, VINES, we have been delving into the world of plant morphology, propagation, and growth patterns to consider what it might mean for humans to embody the physical language of vining plants. Specifically, through meticulous research into the movement sensibilities of certain vine species, we have been developing an iterative, improvisational, and adaptable movement vocabulary that stems from the dialogues we have observed between these species and the places where they live. While exploring the more-than-human time scales of these plant-place dialogues, we have also contemplated how this movement vocabulary can become viable for human interpretation (and observation), in part through the lens of time-lapse videography.⁵



VINES in process, immersing ourselves into more-than-human movement. Direction by Melanie Kloetzel, dramaturgy by Brandy Leary, participants pictured include Cindy Ansah, Kaili Che, Natalie Fullerton, Hannah Isbister, Stephanie Jurkova, Taylor McLeod, and Reese Wilson. Photos by author.

This sounds familiar enough. Yet the research methodology for VINES has taken some turns that have been both unexpected and destabilizing. Some of these turns have been due to COVID delays and procedures (preventing touch, for example, for years). But others have arisen due to the knowledge bases and perspectives of the participants. For instance, one participant, Hannah Isbister, a dance artist of Métis heritage concurrently enrolled in a long-term course on Métis plant knowledge, deeply affected the research process when she decided to share with us Métis protocols for cross-species introductions and relationships.

As we considered her offering and tentatively explored what this might mean for a mixed group of settler and non-settler participants in the context of VINES, a very pressing concern developed over these protocols in terms of reciprocity and accountability. As Isbister clarified, cross-species relationships in many Indigenous cultures are predicated on the notion of *giving back*. If the vine is offering knowledge to us so freely, how can we be both reciprocal and accountable to that relationship? This was a radical notion to many of us in the group. What could we possibly give back to a vine growing along a railway fence? What would it want or need? Could we honour the knowledge it has offered by extending the learning to our relations with other species? Could sharing this knowledge with others via performance be one form of giving back, or is that just another colonial/extractive instinct?⁶

These were questions raised by a settler (me), as well as by other settler participants. But I would venture that these questions are critical as we consider the intersection of posthumanism and coloniality and how (or whether) this intersection is important theoretically, but also corporeally and cross-culturally.

Without question, we need to keep in mind the extractivist impacts of coloniality on all species. But this PBR indicates a further need, or perhaps an altered perspective. In other words, beyond demanding a condemnation of coloniality/extractivism in all its manifestations, this perspective also requires honouring the wisdom of Indigenous groups (and, in this particular situation due to Isbister's knowledge base, Métis peoples) who emphasize the need to approach any place-based praxis or cross-species communication with reciprocity, accountability and relationality (McGregor, Restoule, and Johnston 2018).

Yet, interestingly, while clear gaps of knowledge and understanding exist around the frameworks of accountability and reciprocity within our process, the potential for instilling a sense of *relationality* has appeared as a real contribution. In short, posthumanist PBR projects like VINES, which have a deep investment in honouring and embodying knowledge from the more-than-human community, may offer a generative and impactful means for fostering cross-species connections.

For instance, in VINES, participants rigorously embody the growth patterns of vining species, performing highly detailed, iterative movements *in dialogue with* the environment in which they exist. The work demands that participants enter an altered state—slowing down, moving with a hyperfocused persistence and intentionality, pulling back on vision as a priority, and keenly attending to the smallest details of the ground or wall surface (and their fellow vines) via the sense of touch. In doing so, the participants remark on the deep sense of empathy, respect, and, importantly, *kinship* they feel for the vine in question. Indeed, this is precisely what Isbister found. In her words, “I’ve never understood so deeply the intense perseverance of plants. . . . This is a helpful experience for people to see plants as kin.”⁷



VINES in process, exploring the perseverance of vines via the human body in multiple, disparate sites. Direction by Melanie Kloetzel, dramaturgy by Brandy Leary, participants pictured include Cindy Ansah, Kaili Che, Natalie Fullerton, Hannah Isbister, Stephanie Jurkova, Taylor McLeod, and Reese Wilson. Photos by author.

As we continue this process, and others like it, I am excited to see how respectful and empathetic immersion into more-than-human knowledge systems *in conjunction with* the demands of reciprocity and accountability can impact practice-based research. For, while the aforementioned “attending to place” might still act as an effective means for ethically grounding the site performance field (Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009; Smith 2018), as we learn from and/or uncover multiple methodologies—particularly from Indigenous practitioners who address extractive coloniality, but with a keen eye on accountability, relationality, and reciprocity—we may find more holistic and effectual ways to address the dire circumstances we find ourselves in. In the end, here is my hope: that in the generations to come, there may be individuals telling “true stories” about how we deepened our understanding of and *care for* our more-than-human kin through embodied practices that prioritized accountability and reciprocity among all species.

Notes

1. Many practitioners in the site performance field engage in workshop-based practices. Some of these include Sandra Reeve, Nigel Stewart, Sondra Fraleigh, Karen Barbour, Rachel Sweeney, Victoria Hunter, and many others. These workshops can take place with those inside or outside the “professional arts community,” or with some combination of these groups.
2. While popularized by David Abram in 1996, *more-than-human* is a term that rests on Indigenous philosophies that have existed since time immemorial. The term is intended to point to the larger systems and beings that share this planet.
3. Likewise, questions about how or whether settler/imperial academics have *extracted* posthuman concepts from Indigenous peoples without acknowledgement demonstrate that posthumanism is inextricably linked to coloniality (Bignall and Rigney 2019).
4. I would like to offer my deep appreciation to Chantal Stormsong Chagnon, Sandra Lamouche, Starr Muranko, Cole Alvis and Jacob Crane for supporting this learning. <https://caw-wac.com/about-caw/>.
5. For more on VINES, see <https://www.kloetzelandco.com/portfolio/vines/>.
6. In truth, this conversation gets more complicated by the fact that the vine species we were in specific dialogue with—the yellow clematis or *clematis tangutica* (which hails from high mountain areas in India and China)—has been labelled a noxious weed by the Alberta Invasive Species Council.

7. Hannah Isbister, research process documentation, August 24, 2022. Another participant, Camille Mori, voiced a similar thought: “One thing that stuck with me about this project was a comment made on one of the days regarding how embodying plant life in the human body can work towards creating a relationship with more-than-human life around us, and can create some kind of empathic connection. I certainly felt that in myself throughout this process and it makes me think about how that can be translated in the sharing of this work.” Email communication from Mori, August 29, 2022.

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