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Article abstract

This article charts the development of, and connections created through, the Vancouver-based Talking Stick Festival to inform how performance-making and gathering over shared interests can maintain artistic relationships and nurture respectful intercultural relations. We demonstrate this through genealogically connecting the Talking Stick Festival to the 1997 Festival of the Dreaming in Sydney Australia linking this theoretically to Indigenous ideas of transformational love, “grounded normativity” and kin relations that cross earthly boundaries. We examine the strategic ways that the annual festival builds networks of communication, including movement around territories, and the valuing of flexibility to honour accountability. And, of immense value to the rebuilding of broken kinship networks is the love and support for emergent artists as well as staff and volunteers who are mentored in the ever-expanding and continuous building of relations. We write explicitly from our own positions and discuss how we, the co-authors of this piece, have ourselves been transformed through interactions with the festival as a way to show how this kind of relationship building can create a shared future. We conclude that the organizers of the Talking Stick Festival create spaces that centre Indigenous resurgence through personal experiences of transformation and kinstellatory relations of co-resistance.

Transformational Kinstellatory Relations and the Talking Stick Festival

LINDSAY LACHANCE AND SELENA COUTURE¹

This article charts the development of, and connections created through, the Vancouver-based Talking Stick Festival to inform how performance-making and gathering over shared interests can maintain artistic relationships and nurture respectful intercultural relations. We demonstrate this through genealogically connecting the Talking Stick Festival to the 1997 Festival of the Dreaming in Sydney Australia linking this theoretically to Indigenous ideas of transformational love, “grounded normativity” and kin relations that cross earthly boundaries. We examine the strategic ways that the annual festival builds networks of communication, including movement around territories, and the valuing of flexibility to honour accountability. And, of immense value to the rebuilding of broken kinship networks is the love and support for emergent artists as well as staff and volunteers who are mentored in the ever-expanding and continuous building of relations. We write explicitly from our own positions and discuss how we, the co-authors of this piece, have ourselves been transformed through interactions with the festival as a way to show how this kind of relationship building can create a shared future. We conclude that the organizers of the Talking Stick Festival create spaces that centre Indigenous resurgence through personal experiences of transformation and kinstellatory relations of co-resistance.

Cet article retrace l'évolution du festival vancouverois Talking Stick et les liens qu'il a permis de créer afin de montrer comment le fait de créer ensemble des performances et de se rassembler autour d'intérêts partagés permet d'entretenir des relations artistiques et encourager des relations interculturelles respectueuses. Lachance et Couture explicitent le lien généalogique entre le festival Talking Stick et le Festival of the Dreaming organisé à Sydney, en Australie, en 1997, pour ensuite l'investir de sens à l'aide des concepts autochtones d'amour transformatif, de « normativité enracinée » et de liens de parenté transfrontaliers. Elles examinent les stratégies employées par le festival Talking Stick pour créer des réseaux de communication, notamment en prévoyant des déplacements dans les différents territoires et en valorisant la souplesse pour honorer l'obligation de rendre des comptes. Selon les co-auteurs, l'amour et le soutien porté aux artistes émergents de même qu'au personnel et aux bénévoles qui bénéficient d'un encadrement au sein d'un réseau de liens toujours grandissant sont d'une importance cruciale à la reconstitution des réseaux de parenté. Lachance et Couture partent de leur propre expérience en tant que participantes ayant été elles-mêmes transformées par leurs interactions au festival pour montrer comment ce genre d'expérience relationnelle peut mener à la création d'un avenir partagé. Elles concluent en disant que les organisateurs du festival Talking Stick créent des espaces qui privilégient la résurgence autochtone en permettant des expériences personnelles de transformation et en créant des rapports de co-résistance axés sur les liens de parenté.



Welcome to what we hope might be a space of transformation. We acknowledge the places on which this work has been created: the unceded ancestral and traditional territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations (Vancouver), Treaty 6 territory, the lands of the Métis (Edmonton) and the unceded lands of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg (Ottawa). We also ask that you pause to consider your relation to the Indigenous peoples, lands, and waters on which you are currently placed. It is with deep respect to all of these relations that we offer this article.

In the following pages, we recount the development of and connections created through the Vancouver-based Talking Stick Festival to inform how performance can nurture respectful intercultural relations. We demonstrate this through genealogically connecting the Talking Stick Festival to the 1997 Festival of the Dreaming in Sydney Australia, which is the traditional territory of the Gadigal clan of the Eora nation, linking this theoretically to Indigenous ideas of transformational love, “grounded normativity” and kin relations that cross earthly boundaries. We also write explicitly from our own positions and discuss how we, the co-authors of this piece, have ourselves been transformed through interactions with the festival as a way to show how this kind of relationship building can create a shared future.

Full Circle First Nations Performance, the Talking Stick Festival, and Margo Kane

We begin with some context. In 1992 Cree/Saulteaux theatre artist Margo Kane established Full Circle: First Nations Performance (FCFNP), a non-profit society and interdisciplinary performance company based on the territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Kane has devoted her artistic career to training and mentoring emerging Indigenous artists and developing new and multidisciplinary Indigenous works. Through the Aboriginal Ensemble Program and the Talking Stick Festival (TSF), Kane provides Indigenous theatre practitioners the opportunity to look to their Indigeneity to find the contexts and tools to create places and moments of permanent transformation.

Margo Kane created the Aboriginal Ensemble Training Program at FCFNP in 2002 with funding by the National Arts Training Contribution Program of the Department of Canadian Heritage. The Program fosters Indigenous artists who “wish to develop and practice their art in a way that appreciates cultural traditions” (“Ensemble Program”). It is the only all-Indigenous theatre training program in Vancouver, hosting workshops by visual, dance, theatre and performance artists.

Along with the Aboriginal Ensemble Program, Full Circle First Nations Performance is perhaps best known for developing and hosting the annual Talking Stick Festival (TSF), a two-week, citywide gathering that honours interdisciplinary Indigenous performance, dance, and art. The festival programming always includes free and sliding-scale events that are organized to be accessible to a wide range of participants. The 2017 festival produced Urban Ink’s and the National Art Centre’s co-production of Kane’s own play, *Moonlodge* and a staged reading of Hardline Production’s *Red Patch*. The 2018 festival showcased Gwaandak Theatre’s production of *Map of the Land*, *Map of the Stars* and *Sokalo* by ZOGMA and the

Louis Riel Métis Dancers.² Other annual events include a Métis culture day, a powwow, an art show, contemporary and traditional dance performances, spoken word, live music and more. From a programming perspective, the TSF sound very much like other Canadian-based intercultural performance festivals, such as Aluna Theatre's RUTAS festival, that include a variety of modes of performance as well as opportunities for community engagement. The distinct nature of the TSF's festival infrastructure and the organizers' methods of programming, however, are hinted at by the themes of the recent years such as: in 2017, Kw'eykw`áystway (Speaking With One Another), and in 2018, Scháyilhen (Salmon Going Up River) and in 2019, hənəmstəmwxw tə syəθ (Using Tradition). These themes, expressed using progressive verbs from an Indigenous language of the land hosting the festival, demonstrate important ideas: the actions of continuously speaking to stay in relation with each other and tradition, and of salmon returning to spawn the next generation (which also reflects the cultural importance of the salmon in coastal relations between human and other-than-human beings). These themes are descriptors of how the TSF enables Indigenous performing arts to create alternative spaces, processes, and futures within an occupied Canada.

Although Full Circle First Nations Performance as a company is deeply rooted in Coast Salish land, politics and communities, its Talking Stick Festival expands to include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit voices and works from coast to coast to coast. Geographically the Talking Stick Festival roams in its scheduling as events take place across the city. The 2017 and 2018 gatherings took place at The Roundhouse Community Center in Yaletown, Simon Fraser University's Woodwards building in Gastown, the Arts Club BMO Theatre Centre in Olympic Village, Café Deux Soleils on Commercial Drive, The University of British Columbia (UBC)'s First Nations House of Learning Longhouse on the Point Grey campus, and various other locations that range from independent venues in East Vancouver to the Presentation House Gallery on the North Shore. The involvement of various co-producing partners signals a relational aspect of the festival that embodies a constellation of active and invested collaborators, witnesses, and communities. While unusual in some ways for a festival, the non-centralized locations and multiplicity of collaborators also demonstrate the sort of network of trusted partners that has been built up over the years. The sites each interact with their own local communities while attracting people from further away to continuously expand the relations.

Each event at the festival begins with a welcoming, a song, or a territorial acknowledgement which embodies Indigenous gathering protocols and creates a place to generate "good medicine" (Nolan *passim*). Algonquin/Irish theatre practitioner Yvette Nolan explains how "Indigenous theatre artists make medicine by reconnecting through ceremony, through the act of remembering, through building community, and by negotiating solidarities across communities" (3). Nolan recognizes the culturally specific spiritual presences within theatre-making and performance practices. She acknowledges theatre's ability to build community through the power of ceremony, remembering, and the dreaming of new possibilities. The Talking Stick Festival is rooted in aspects of love and kinship as Kane supports the Indigenous artists by giving them a platform to share their stories. She also feeds audiences and witnesses—both with actual food at some events and through knowledge-sharing at performances or conversations. The combination of sharing meals and knowledge is a long-standing method

of creating ongoing relations through the physical, spiritual, and intellectual nurturing that enables future generations to stay connected to the past.

Statement of Method and Form

The methods we've used to both develop this article and shape its form are directly connected to our experiences with the TSF and informed by what Cree artist and scholar Karyn Recollet calls "kinstellatory" and transformational theories of love that oppose ongoing exploitation of Indigenous bodies, lands and resources by settler colonial powers. Recollet eloquently links artistic work to the constellatory when discussing "kinstellatory relations." Constellations are generally understood across many cultures as the shapes of stars and planets in the night sky that inspire wonder about the extraterrestrial while also often mapping out culturally specific stories. Those with deep knowledge of a land through seasonal variations can also use constellations for guidance when travelling in darkness. Recollet's term, kinstellatory relations, includes the celestial in reciprocal relationalities of kinship across the human and other-than-human worlds to open up multiscale flows of Indigenous being and thinking (Carter, Recollet, and Robinson 214). She takes inspiration for this from existing Indigenous cosmologies and explicitly discusses the connections as ones of radical kinship. She encourages artists to mirror the constant movement and formation of constellations in their work and organizing as ways to bring principles born of love "in our actions to activate the territorial, radical relationalities that are bringing what is traditional into the future" (215-16). We also recognize that the relations created at TSF come out of an ongoing practice of decolonial love—as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg artist and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains, a joining "together in a rebellion of love, persistence and profound caring" ("decolonial love"; "Leaks")—the kind of enduring love that teaches, as Cree poet and scholar Billy-Rae Belcourt says, a love that is "a *process* that makes us submit to incalculable forms of transformation, ones that make life bearable [...] as an ethical imperative to be with others in ways that require your constitutive *becoming*" (emphasis added).

We have aimed to both keep clear our positionalities and draw the lines that demonstrate how we are in relation to each other and others in order to narrate a story that helps make sense of our experiences. At times we write about our own individual experiences—these are indicated by section headings and a shift to writing in the first person singular. Sections not indicated in this way have been co-developed through a reciprocal editing process.

Selena Couture

I am a white settler scholar whose family heritage stretches back for almost 380 years in the lands that are now known as Canada. Along with all the privileges I've inherited from this lineage, I have also accrued centuries of debt, for which I aim to take responsibility. One of the first steps to doing this was to learn how to stop perpetuating a *xwelitem* relationship. In the Halqeméylem language a *xwelitem* is a white person, but the word literally means "starving ones," and originally referred to the non-Indigenous people who arrived in Stó:lō lands during

the Fraser River Gold Rush (Robinson 6). It is still used to describe settlers who continue extractive actions both materially from the land through resource industries and through the knowledge extraction that takes Indigenous ways of knowing without permission to be used for personal gain (often called cultural appropriation). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson defines the decontextualization of extractivism as “a cornerstone of capitalism, colonialism, and settler colonialism. It’s stealing. It’s taking something, whether it’s a process, an object, a gift, or a person, out of the relationships that give it meaning, and placing it in a nonrelational context for the purposes of accumulation” (*As We* 201-02). Meeting Margo Kane and volunteering with the TSF was one important step in unlearning xwelitem ways. Through the experiences of being welcomed as a volunteer, despite my lack of knowledge or experience, and Kane’s willingness to speak with me about her work as a performer and arts administrator for my master’s thesis in 2010, I began to learn how to work alongside Indigenous artists and activists as a researcher. I recall my first TSF volunteer experience where, I was invited to attend an “orientation/cultural gathering” at the Roundhouse. I sat with twenty-five or so volunteers in a circle as Kane spoke of the origins of the festival and the company. A man then welcomed us, drumming and singing a song. I realized I was in a space run by Indigenous people that had been created purposefully for welcoming newcomers. My first shift was the “AbOriginal Writers” storytelling series with tea and bannock at the First Nations House of Learning (FNHL) at UBC. It was a pay-what-you-can event and I worked the door, greeting people and making sure the donation can was visible. Having never been to a Talking Stick event before and also knowing very few people, I was glad to be given a clear purpose. I did not feel like an out of place observer, but instead like a (very minor) supporter. I volunteered for a few more events that year and in reflecting on that first festival, I realize that I felt welcome, but also, at times, uncomfortable. I was outside of my usual sphere. There were many times when I was not sure what I was supposed to be doing. There were many occasions when I was experiencing something totally new and I had to be present and attentive at all times. These experiences reflect clearly the sort of dynamic of inclusion/exclusion that Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson writes about in “Welcoming Sovereignty” in which he explains, and demonstrates through a performative writing method, the significance of being welcomed into an Indigenous-led space of relationality while also knowing that the welcome does not extend to all places for white settlers (20). I learned experientially through this that research with Indigenous peoples is, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith says, “a humble and humbling activity” (5).

It is as a volunteer, an audience member and eventually also a sometimes invitee to Full Circle meetings that I gained knowledge and skills that led me to complete my doctoral work and now guide me in my teaching and ongoing research. I have felt for a long time that I have not yet adequately reciprocated this generosity. The next part of this article, which charts the trans-Indigenous genealogy of the TSF in relation to the 1997 Festival of the Dreaming in Sydney, Australia, is an effort to give back by using my skills as an academic writer and researcher to, in Chadwick Allen’s term, juxtapose, or “close together place” these events that are close in time but far away from each other in place (“Introduction” xviii). Allen suggests that this method of engagement places Indigenous works into “into different kinds of conversations” which acknowledge “the mobility and multiple interactions of Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories, and texts” (xiv). While Allen’s work is mainly in literary scholarship, he also applies this method in relation to theatre and performance, asserting that “noticing,

describing, and taking critical account of Indigenous-to-Indigenous literary and artistic contacts, interactions, exchanges, and collaborations” is a productive way of seeing that centres Indigenous contexts creating interpretations and understandings that are not only local but also “hemispheric and oceanic and as aspiring toward the global” (“Performing” 411).

Kane discussed the influence of her experiences at the Festival of the Dreaming and its relation to the founding of the Talking Stick Festival in her recent conversation with performer, activist, and scholar Michelle La Flamme (Métis/Creek/African-Canadian). La Flamme’s article is an overview of Kane’s career and an opening up of the narrative of Indigenous theatre history which includes Kane’s persistence through decades of isolation and her unique interdisciplinary artistic vision for Indigenous theatre. In it Kane explains the development of her first play, *Moonlodge*, a one-woman show that uses song, dance and humour to explore the life of a young Indigenous woman named Agnes and her upbringing in foster homes during the time of the Sixties Scoop.³ First performed in 1990, the play toured extensively, including to Native Earth Performing Arts’s Weesageechak Begins to Dance Festival in Toronto, and to smaller Indigenous communities in a bare-bones version that could be performed in intimate, immersive environments (La Flamme 101-02). Seven years into her work with the play she was invited to perform at the Sydney Opera House during the “Wimmin’s Business” series at the Festival of the Dreaming in 1997, which was the first of four Cultural festivals leading up to the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000. Kane describes how she was impressed by the three-week experience which included Aboriginal dance, storytelling and visual arts featured at the large art galleries and theatres, along with traditional dance and song in a sand pit outside a gallery. She states how inspired she was and that it made her think about also having such a festival one day (104-05). Kane explains that the conditions for Indigenous performance in Vancouver (which included a lack of audience engagement, restrictions on access to theatre venues, and the influence of artist-run centres) along with her inspiration from the Festival of Dreaming led to the creation of the Talking Stick Festival (106-07). In 2001, along with Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen, she organized the one-night Talking Stick Cabaret. She and Ravensbergen aimed to bring disciplines together—poetry, dance, visual arts—all built around a cabaret style with only eight to nine-minute performances. Kane also notes that it engaged with the “local cultural community,” with an opening by Skwxwú7mesh Chief Ian Campbell/ Xalek/Sekyu Siyam and local youth who sang, danced and performed their stories (110-11).

Kane emphasizes that the festival aims to develop work and capacity: “we’re building on people, we’re building on their strengths and we’re building on relationships we’ve built” (113). And she stresses that she keeps

holding the circle, even if nobody’s in it, because that was all I can do, I want everybody to contribute, I want them to feel valued, I want them to know they have a voice that can be heard... I want our people to come, just be inspired by the art, I want the artists to take their place in that circle of tribal leadership which includes the healers, and the teachers and the storytellers, and the dancers and the singers, and theatre-makers and spoken word artists. (113)

Kane’s determination to create and hold space for relationships to form and artistic leadership to influence community has persisted over decades and is core to the organizing principles

of the festival. The relation of these principles to those at the core of the Festival of the Dreaming, can help demonstrate how the TSF's transformational space builds from the changes Kane experienced there.

Rhoda Roberts (Bundjalung Nation), co-founder of Australia's first Indigenous theatre company Aboriginal National Theatre Trust, was the artistic director of the Festival of the Dreaming which ran from 14 September to 6 October 1997. Six weeks after the festival ended, she gave a lecture, "A Passion for Ideas: Black Stage," in which she discussed the principles behind the organizing as well as some of the methods she employed to manage the massive scale of the event. She explains that although the timing was not the best (because Indigenous communities conduct ceremony during September and October), she took the opportunity to reach wide audiences at major venues with a four-million-dollar budget, a huge amount in comparison to the largely arts-council-funded budget of the TSF, especially given the context of the right-wing Australian government policies of the time. She considered the staging of works in the Opera House and Wharf Theatre as a chance to reach mainstream audiences, to bring the good work being done in Indigenous communities to these large stages. She also established a policy of placing authorship and control in Indigenous hands—consciously working to create the policy as a precedent and legacy—which she says did not inhibit, but enhanced collaboration (8). She discussed the core value of waking up Indigenous languages that had been outlawed, giving an example of how the Bundjalung language version of *Waiting for Godot* brought in community members and elders because they heard their language:

But to see these little old people and to see young people—nothing to do with the arts—that are actually fulfilled when you hear your own language. It gives you something that I can't explain in words. So I sat there and looked and I thought: shouldn't their voices be taken to often the deaf ears and the Redhead [Pauline Hanson]⁴ perhaps? Because they are the ones who need to hear what our dreaming cycles are about in the 90s. (8)

The festival program (which was distributed for no cost) emphasized the places, cultures, and languages of all performers, which included Bininj Gunwok, Bundjalung, Arrernte and Darug peoples (Gilbert and Lo 66-67), as well as the place of the festival event itself (the lands of the Gadigal of the Eora Nation/Sydney, New South Wales):

The relevant use of language; particularly of the Sydney region was fostered, reclaimed and encouraged; the Gamarada programme was introduced—Gamarade (Kamarada) is a Sydney word meaning friend. It's a protocol programme with great initiative and magnitude of long term importance. By having our elder statespeople representing us at major Olympic events puts the focus on Australia's First Nations Peoples as well as giving national and international recognition. (9)

The team produced a "Protocol Manual" as a practical guide for staff engaging with remote communities (either rural or urban) including terminology and language use. Festival planning included flexibility in production management for performers to uphold their ceremonial protocols within the structure of the festival (10). Their management model also took into

account the possibility of the need for performers to return to their communities in the event of a death in order to take part in ceremony (10).

All of these organizing methods that Roberts describes, the centring of Indigenous protocols, languages, lands during an arts festival that welcomed intercultural audiences that included multiple Indigenous nations as well as non-Indigenous people, while also flexibly attending to the importance of Indigenous responsibilities within their own communities, have been carried on in similar ways through the work of the TSF staff, participants, and volunteers. There are a few ways to understand Roberts's organizing principles as related to "Indigenous internationalism", as articulated by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who emphasizes how this has always been part of Nishnaabeg thought and practice, reaching back to Nanabush's travels around the world, and including relations with plant, animal and spirit nations (*As We* 55-57). Simpson also relates this practice to Dene scholar Glen Coulthard's "grounded normativity" which she asserts supports respectful inquiry and relation-building across Indigenous cultures. While writing from her own Nishnaabeg worldview, she also suggests that an Indigenous internationalism that de-centres white settler capitalism is part of Indigenous resurgence (*As We* 64-66). Roberts explained that she decided to take part in the festival even though the timing would interfere with community ceremonies because of the opportunity for international influence that the Olympic venue offered. Clearly this decision was not made lightly, and the organizing committee followed through on supporting commitments to ceremony by building flexibility into their event structure. Such ceremonies are part of the ways that communities maintain their relations to "plant, animal and spirit nations," especially in the event of a death. In addition, the emphasis on Indigenous authorship and control, which was then able to be responsive to the lands and languages of the place of performance, is an expression of "grounded normativity" which refuses an extractive relationship. And, as Roberts reports, rather than damaging relations with non-Indigenous artists and festival participants, it strengthened them.

When asked by an audience member at the lecture about the political resonances of any particular performances, Roberts cited the Wimmin's Business series, "because all the women were talking about either children being taken or displacement and it wasn't just from Australia, so I think for a lot of people it occurred [to them] that this policy actually existed in Canada as it did in Australia" (15-16). It was in the Wimmin's Business series that Kane performed *Moonlodge*. The series was a site of powerful trans-Indigenous collaboration and exchange. As Australian theatre scholars Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo explain, the festival was staged a few months after the release of the "Bringing Them Home" inquiry report on the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families. In a Canadian context, this would be as if a major Indigenous-led national performance event were to be staged immediately after publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report and Calls to Action. The Australian government, however, refused to apologize or take any responsibility for the violence done to generations of Indigenous children and families (64). Kane's performance of *Moonlodge* in the fraught political context in Australia surrounding its history of breaking apart Aboriginal families, resonated with plays by other Indigenous women who were also engaged with processing intergenerational traumas across colonial sites.

Kane's experiences of the festival organized by Roberts's team and in particular the Wimmin's Business series can be generatively considered in relation to what Leanne

Betasamosake Simpson has discussed as “constellations of coresistance.” Constellations exist in terms of the relationships between individual stars and are a “different conceptual way of collectively ordering beyond individual everyday acts of resurgence” (*As We* 215-16). She further explains how constellatory relationships operate within grounded normativity of individuals (or nations) and then can,

form flight paths out of settler colonial realities into Indigeneity. They become doorways out of the enclosure of settler colonialism into Indigenous worlds. [...] When these constellations work in international relationship to other constellations, the fabric of the night sky changes: movements are built, particularly if constellations of coresistance create mechanisms for communication, strategic movement, accountability to each other, and shared decision-making practices. (*As We* 217-18)

Part of the power of this conceptual reordering is that in a constellation there is no centre or margin, instead the image is suggested by one’s particular placement in relation to the formation of the stars and the lines drawn between them create the story. When there is a fixed centre, other things become marginal in relation to that *unmovable* perspective. The women’s performances at this festival (which for the duration of the event were a temporary centre from which to build strong lines of strategic communications) engaged with familial traumas across sites of settler colonial nations, in relation to each other instead of the continuing colonizing powers. Kane’s *Moonlodge* shared its central concern, of a young girl growing up without stable kin relations, and searching out how to create them, with the other six women’s monodrama’s which also contained themes of recovering from broken kinship ties. In the larger organizational structure of Roberts’s festival, relations between kin and the ceremonies necessary to keep ties strong were honoured and accommodated. While working within a context dominated by Australian nationalism, the organizers were also able to create ties with Indigenous peoples across borders that were not mediated by the nation-states they belonged to. Instead, ongoing trans-Indigenous relations were created in which common burdens are taken up and shared. Upon returning to her company on the west coast of Turtle Island, Kane expanded her efforts to create wider relations across time and space by founding the Talking Stick Festival as an event that honours and builds relationships and resiliency through deep love that aims to transform. As she explained to La Flamme in reflecting on her life and work, despite the complexity of her early childhood with multiple families, she knew that she was loved and wanted. She identified this sense of strength and security as the reason she’s been able to challenge herself out in the world and connects this directly to the organizational methods of the TSF which prioritize creating a feeling of being wanted, so that artists can always feel like they can return year after year (11). And people do return year after year to the TSF as a result of feeling loved and wanted. These travels create bright lines that connect individual stars to form the kinstellatory relations that continue to create Indigenous worlds. To expand on how the organizing practices of the TSF itself accomplish this, as well as how they might be genealogically linked to Roberts description of the Festival of the Dreaming, we invited Deneh’Cho Thompson, a Dene theatre artist and associate producer with Full Circle from 2015-2017, to consider the above description of the Festival of the Dreaming and reflect on practices he took part in during his years with

Full Circle. This was a generative conversation as we considered the opportunities that the TSF has, as an ongoing annual festival, to engage deeply in the development of many of the structures that informed the one-time event of the Festival of the Dreaming.

On the centring of Indigenous protocols, land and languages, Thompson explained that each year Kane conceives of a theme to draw together the work, she then presents the concept to a local language speaker (alternating between hən'qəmínəm' and Skwxwú7mesh languages) who then considers how to best express this in one of the languages of this land. Elders and language speakers are present at the opening event to welcome the visiting guests to the land—especially the artists who have travelled from their own territories. This is also key to the creation of an ongoing intercultural non-Indigenous audience. There is a clarity that comes from the Indigenous defining of value systems in such circumstances—as Thompson said, it is a way of stating, “*this is how* you’re welcome”—which helps make the power relations clear. A next step under consideration is to expand this work to build up practices that support further how it is that visitors need to be hosted.

In considering how a performance festival engages with Indigenous lands, Thompson explained that the lands on which the TSF occurs are surrounded by waters—and local teachings draw from the relations to water. Kane for many years has been in ongoing dialogue with S7aplek / Bob Baker, a Skwxwú7mesh knowledge keeper and leader of the dance group Spakwus Slolem. Baker shares his “canoe teachings” as a way to guide the organization, for example, the concept of “pulling together” in order to make the canoe go further informs how the artists gathered to perform and discuss their work might learn to work together. There are other examples of this as well, in particular the importance of salmon teachings that come from this land and water which were used as the theme for the 2018 festival.

The dispersed nature of the festival venues, as mentioned above, are also in some ways related to engaging with the lands. The festival thereby occupies spaces throughout the city, presencing contemporary Indigenous artists and their work as well as local Indigenous nations. It also means that more people have the opportunity to go to a very local event in places that have different modes of access, and as many of the venues have hosted TSF events for years, returning annually continues to build on those relationships.

And finally, Thompson also indicated that the content of many (many) performances that occur throughout the festival are themselves deeply engaged with land relations. The example that immediately sprung to his mind was Gwaandak Theatre’s *Map of the Land Map of the Stars*. Developed using Spiderwoman Theater’s non-hierarchical, Indigenous feminist Storyweaving methodology, the performance is a non-linear depiction of colonial events including the Klondike Gold Rush and the building of the Alaska Highway interwoven with stories of love that demonstrate the performers’ quest for a positive way forward that continues to be guided by a sky-being made up of stars (Olson 62-64). This work exemplifies the de-centring of settler capitalist narratives, by shifting the story of the Yukon to one that was collaboratively devised by the performers based on the land, their bodies in relation to it, the current of the river and each other. In this way the performance was of creators who “are tied into this northern landscape and the human stories that are interwoven into the rivers, trees and mountains” (Olson 64).

Thompson emphasized that the TSF’s conception of taking care of community is multifaceted creating a responsive (and wild) way of working. It includes supporting the artists’

as they maintain their relationships with their home communities (as Roberts did in Festival of the Dreaming) as well as the care of the community of staff and volunteers working on the TSF. They use programming methods that remain open until, seemingly, the very last minute, such as venue changes on the day-of, or cancelling events because an Elder has another responsibility to attend to. It can also mean adding programming as the festival progresses. This demanding method of working, Thompson explains, is taught through intergenerational teaching, where staff are brought in early in their careers, and kept on in different capacities over many years. They are first asked to participate in protocols in small ways until they learn to run them themselves. He sees this as an embodied practice that could be understood in relation to what Roberts described as the “protocol” manual. However, since the TSF is an ongoing annual event, these ways of supporting good relations and “wise practices” can be passed interpersonally over an accumulation of years through the Full Circle intergenerational management practices, ongoing conversations and Industry series panels. Younger artists are then able to build on the work that has been done for many years and take it back to their communities and places of performances—including how to manage relations with non-Indigenous organizations—thereby expanding the kinstellatory network. As non-text-based knowledge, this could be understood as a repertoire of knowledge that is much more interpersonally responsive than the archivable “protocol” document that was necessitated for the mega-event in 1997.

Thompson also expanded his commentary as we discussed this work in relation to Indigenous resurgences and the kinstellatory. He commented on the names of the festivals—that Dreamings can be understood as other-than-human entities, which gives another way of thinking about how the original festival in 1997 was itself engaged in a different scale of relations. The “talking stick,” often explained as a method to give authority to a speaker, might itself be thought of as animated mediator of relationalities. Together these two names evoke the Indigenous internationalism that creates relations with plant, animal and spirit nations.

These details serve to both explain the trans-Indigenous relations between these two festivals, while also giving insight into the strategic ways that the annual festival builds networks of communication, including movement around territories, and the valuing of flexibility to honour accountability. And, of immense value to the rebuilding of broken kinship networks which were demonstrated at the Wimmin’s Business series in 1997, is the love and support for emergent artists as well as staff and volunteers who are mentored in the ever-expanding and continuous building of relations.

The following section explains, from Lindsay Lachance’s personal, embodied perspective, the individual and community transformations that are enabled through the TSF.

Lindsay Lachance

In the third chapter of Jill Carter’s (Anishinaabe/Ashkenazi) PhD dissertation, “Towards a Poetics of Decolonization: Becoming (and then Staging) The New Human Being,” she critiques contemporary Western theatre scholarship’s assertion that theatre is an ephemeral experience and that its effects on space, performer or spectator are impermanent (“Repairing the Web” 107). Impermanence for me denotes the opposite of transformation. Something

that comes, lasts only for a brief lingering moment... and then disappears. Never to be seen, felt or heard again. Carter is addressing the debate between theatre and performance studies scholarship about the liminoid phenomenon and the liminal event. Carter is critical of the distinction between the liminoid and liminal because she believes that Indigenous theatre can blur the distinctions between artistic practice and ceremony in hopes that the work might result in “permanent decolonization” (“Repairing the Web” 109).

As an Indigenous theatre artist, I refuse to accept that while in artistic process, witnessing a performance or gathering to collaborate, I “leave the real world” behind me and have to “come back to life” once the work is done. Contrary to this belief, I actually carry all of myself into my artistic collaboration and performance work. This is because my values, knowledges and beliefs are rooted in my lived experiences and my truth as an urban Algonquin Anishinaabe woman. In my experience, transformations occur when teachings are shared, culturally-specific Indigenous experiences are had, and new relationships or processes emerge from Indigenous knowledge frameworks. In the artistic processes I’ve been involved in, I’m constantly transforming as I look inward and carry aspects of my ancestral knowledges forward into the work. My body, spiritual connections, and lived experiences are a part of my practice, research and art, and they have always been seen, valued and welcomed when I work in partnership with the TSF. Instead of accepting that theatrical creation and performances provide “breaks” from the real world, I am considering how the festival embodies Indigenous values and intelligences that allow its Indigenous participants to feel safe, seen and loved. From my perspective, the Talking Stick festival holds space for those with common goals to come together under Indigenous processes to produce, celebrate, alter, love and unsettle artistic work.

As a recent ensemble member at Full Circle First Nations Performance and a curator/facilitator of some gatherings during the 2017 and 2018 Talking Stick festivals, I understand the festival to generate portals into my kinstellatory relations creating moments of “presencing” that model resurgence and potentially lead to permanent transformation. My journey with the Talking Stick festival centers on multi-year involvement with Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists who come together in artistic collaborations, workshops, industry series, and performances that transform our understanding of Indigenous-centered performing arts. Similar to kinstellatory theories, presencing is a practice that activates moments of resurgence through allowing heart, mind and body to reconnect with ancestral and spiritual knowledges that Indigenous artists carry with them into artistic collaborations. My conceptualization of presencing refers to the ability to call upon the intangible realities within our Indigenous selves at various moments of the artistic process. In my dramaturgical practice, I presence people’s work, presence familial knowledges, and presence relationships with other-than-human relations. The art of presencing is a way in which I articulate how my dramaturgical practice includes more than just new play development exercises or highly intensive research obligations, but are relational and inclusive of the people, places, ancestors and other beings involved in the work. My academic and artistic undertakings are made up of various relational processes centering on the belief that I’m connected to my ancestors, past, present and future. Knowing that I carry my ancestors with me and that I do not walk or create alone, opens me up to the various articulations of presencing and keeps me grounded in my web of kinstellatory relationships. The ways in which kinstellatory relationships reveal themselves

are sometimes public and sometimes private, or felt. The constellations that manifest from these kinstellatory relationships are always different. Here, I offer an example of how my kin presented themselves to me during a session in the 2018 TSF.

On Sunday, February 18th, 2018, elder Sharon Jinkerson Brass (Key First Nation), Margo Kane, and I collaborated during a morning session of the Industry Series of the festival. The session was to discuss the importance of ceremony, protocol, and intergenerational knowledge within artistic practice. With the assembled group of theatre artists, scholars, and arts workers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, Elder Brass facilitated a ceremony for us all to participate in. She invited her Anishinaabekwe kin to sing and drum during the ceremony. There was a circle of chairs placed around an offering in the center of the room. This offering was built in the four directions of the medicine wheel. On each quadrant was a colour—black, red, white, and yellow—and the medicines—cedar, sage, tobacco, and sweetgrass—were also present. Elder Brass placed the company’s talking stick in the middle of the quadrant and black, yellow, red, and white beads sat in a woven basket. Before the ceremony began, Elder Brass asked me if I would walk around the circle with the basket of beads and allow each person in the circle a moment to connect themselves with the beads. Some held the basket, some touched the beads, some smiled, but ultimately, everyone connected with the offering and participated in the ceremony.

This was a very emotional and challenging experience for me. The week before I had unexpectedly lost my grandfather. Our leader, our trickster, our connection. I remember feeling activated and fully present in the room with the other participants, but also activated on an intangible and spiritual level. I could feel my relationships with the spirit world—with my ancestors—activate, and my body was radically present in an emotional, vulnerable and truly humbling way. With the basket of beads in my hands, and tears pouring down my face, I was working through my grief and considering the values I carry with me. I couldn’t help but think of my grandfather (I called him Fasse), and his new journey in the spirit world. Through presencing Fasse and inviting him into this artistic ceremony, I was able to activate my kinstellatory relations.

My felt experiences during this gathering are what Recollet calls “kinstellatory” and transformational theories of love. While I was grieving the loss of my kin, a constellation was revealing itself to me. With a deep connection to Fasse, and our shared blood memories flowing through me, this constellation was providing me strength in a dark time. Fasse was presenced, and with me, with all of us gathered. I called and he responded.

This activation was rooted in my body, and created a constellation connecting Fasse and me. Above, when writing about the Festival of Dreaming, Couture writes about Leanne Betasomake Simpson interacting with Glen Coulthard’s “grounded normativity” to demonstrate how it theoretically engages in respectful inquiry and relation-building across Indigenous cultures. Grounded normativity is the understanding that Indigenous knowledges are culturally specific, whether deriving from land-based education, from creation stories, from other familial or nation-based experiences, or from other ways of knowing (Coulthard 13).

I move this offer forward with my belief that grounded normativity is also an ethical methodology that is rooted in the body and thus travels with the individual outside of their traditional territories and into their everyday practices and circumstances. For Indigenous artists and academics, there is growing interest to work within Indigenous structures, frameworks,

and stories as the guiding principles of their work even if these Indigenous structures are not from their home community or Nation. These guiding principles are the “grounded” part of grounded normativity. The values and principles that make someone feel grounded in their cultural identity can translate into their artistic practice and can inspire and connect them with their collaborators even if they are not from the same nation or community. Grounded normativity is activated when Indigenous artists look to our own laws, practices, protocol, and stories to create alternative ways to make our art. This grounding creates an embodied reaction that can be shared amongst participants and collaborators who are open to the effects that Indigenous intelligences, practices, and experiences have on their practices. Whether big or small acts, these moments can fill our bodies with the love, strength and power to move forward. We are creating kinstellatory lines of connection between the grounded places we carry with us, and the physical places of artistic creation and performance.

I walked the circle, carrying the basket and looking at everyone gathered. The drumming and singing filled the room as I stepped forward, and my body began to feel the hotel conference room transform. We entered into relationship and transcended notions of time, place, and space. An intangible shift occurred in my body. I felt connected to myself; seven generations behind and seven generations to come were presenced, Fasse specifically, and I felt deeply aware of the others in the process. I was aware that they too carry kinstellatory relationships with them and that perhaps some of those relations were presenced in the circle as well. For the duration of the ceremony-making workshop we transformed the room into one of resurgence, of love, and of accountability to ourselves and to the process.

After a powerful walk of the circle. I arrived at the centre and placed our beads around the four directions. Elder Brass asked as I placed the beads on the medicine wheel that I name a value with each placement. After every bead was offered to the four directions, I returned and joined the circle. Then, the matriarch, Margo Kane, entered the circle and collected the beads onto a string, calling out the values as she strung the beads. She then attached the beads to the Talking Stick, held it up and spoke to our group. She spoke about working with protocol and ceremony in theatre-making and how we need to work together to ensure the safety of Indigenous artists within all areas of theatrical collaboration.

When thinking about Indigenous resurgence, resistances, and transformations, we might immediately picture largescale social protests or envision mainstream media-covered politically engaged standoffs. But what about the embodied moments of Indigenous presence, power, knowledge, and politics that manifest during artistic collaborations? Above, we mention how Leanne Betasamosake Simpson refers to “Indigenous internationalism” as a way to address collaborations, knowledge exchanges, or teachings between different Indigenous nations and how these exchanges create space for building new relationships and creating alternative futures. When speaking of embodiment, Simpson encourages us to act now, to do the work, in order to more fully know who we are. To love and to be loved. To transform.

In my experiences, The Talking Stick Festival is more than a curated series of events, performances, and panels; it is a relationship that claims space for Indigenous artists to perform themselves in the way they wish to be seen, and for Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants to let themselves be transformed by their experiences.

And the work continues...

Selena Couture and Lindsay Lachance

It had been seventeen years since Kane last performed *Moonlodge* when it was brought back to the stage by a younger generation of Indigenous artists during the 2017 Talking Stick Festival. Corey Payette directed PJ Prudat (Cree/Métis/Saulteux/Scandinavian/French) performing as Agnes in a two-week run at the newly built twenty-million-dollar BMO Theatre Centre in the heart of the area in Vancouver's False Creek developed to house Olympic athletes in 2010. It was far in time and place from the many pared-down immersive performances Kane had given in small communities; rather the site mirrored the 1997 Festival of the Dreaming event at the Sydney Opera house. It was staged by an Indigenous-led and centred theatre company, reflecting the Indigenous communities from which it emerged, and aimed at a large audience made up of people from multiple Indigenous nations and non-Indigenous people. The production was also an honouring of the kinstellatory unconditional love and labour that Kane has given over all of these years. The production demonstrated the results of her efforts to nurture the next generation of artists like Payette and Prudat, and once again offered up the story of a young woman struggling to understand who she is and how she is connected to others and the world around her. Agnes's resilient journey in the play is embraced through joyous song, dance, story, and a fearless embodiment of her good, bad, and ugly memories. In reflecting on her creation of the original performance Kane explained that these memories, and how they fit together, were special. She said to perform them is to take that story, "lift it up and say let's love this, enjoy it, let's share this" with new Indigenous audiences and with non-Indigenous theatre-goers who may come to some understanding and be moved together by Agnes's eventual connection, through the women of the moonlodge, to her place in the world ("Moonlodge").

Throughout this article we have been demonstrating how the organizers of the Talking Stick Festival create spaces that centre Indigenous resurgence through personal experiences of transformation and the charting of kinstellatory relations of co-resistance between Indigenous women from the west of Turtle Island with Aboriginal women in Australia. Kane's words about the remounting of her play emphasize how this important recent production and the annual Talking Stick Festival continue building relations. This work goes on, as it always has, allowing new generations of artists and audiences to connect with Kane's monumental work, with moments of intimate personal transformation alongside the longer-term societal shifts that are much harder to see if we don't lift our heads up to the skies and remember where we fit into the cosmos. And so, the starworld expands. And we continue to be transformed.

Notes

- 1 We extend our gratitude to the editorial team at *TRiC* and the anonymous reviewers whose feedback helped clarify ideas in this article. We'd also like to acknowledge Deneh'Cho Thompson, a Dene theatre artist, former associate producer with Full Circle (2015-2017) and currently an MFA student in Theatre Practice at the University of Alberta with whom we conversed in the late stages of the article's development. His reflections on the TSF production practices in relation to the Festival of the Dreaming greatly added to our understandings of the relations between the two festivals and the relations honoured by the TSF practices.
- 2 Gwaandak Theatre, based in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, was founded in 1999 by Leonard Linklater (Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation) and Patti Flather (Anglo-settler). Urban Ink Productions was founded in 2001 by Marie Clements (Dene/ Métis); Corey Payette (Oji-Cree) is currently the artistic director. Hardline Theatre was formed in 2010 by Langara College Studio 58 graduates. ZØGMA is a percussive dance company based in Laval Quebec since 2001 ("About Us"). The Louis Riel Métis Dancers perform Métis jiggling and are part of the V'ni Dansi which was co-founded by Yvonne Chartrand (Métis from St. Laurent, MB) and Mariko Kage (Japanese-Canadian) in 2000 to teach and perform Métis and contemporary dance ("Home").
- 3 The Sixties Scoop refers to the removal of Indigenous children from their homes by the Canadian child welfare system that accelerated in the 1960s. Children were taken without the consent of their families or communities and their heritage was often hidden from them when they were placed in non-Indigenous homes. Lack of cultural knowledge as well as underfunding and racism led to psychological harm and abuse (Hanson).
- 4 Pauline Hanson is a right-wing populist conservative Australian politician. First elected to federal office in 1996, she published a book in 1997 on what she called the truth about Asian immigration, the gun debate and the Aboriginal question—in which she made claims about Aboriginal people and cannibalism. She is currently a senator representing Queensland and the leader of the One Nation party.

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