Chapter Four

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Performing (Readings of) Moving Across as Decolonial Praxis

Figure 4.1 Vanessa Dion Fletcher embodies a language of indigenous sovereignty, as land writes itself on her copper shoes (Courtesy Dion Fletcher, *Writing Landscape,* video still).

Overview

Looking at the copper intaglio plates strapped around Vanessa Dion Fletcher's feet as she moves along a rocky beach, I wonder what her intervention sounds like, smooth rhythmic press into wet sand, then the stones etching in jabs and scratches onto metal, uneven drag against copper, thunk, flex and crack as her weight presses in. The land that speaks —literally writes itself—through her feet receiving, balancing, moving.

Her body co-authoring her indigeneity with the land.

In this chapter, I consider the work of four urban-based female artists, Camille Turner and Vanessa Dion Fletcher from Canada and Mariana Rocha and Oriana Duarte from Brazil, who use their bodies in motion—across space, across eras—in ways that perform historiographies in compelling ways. I draw on my Canadian context, and my experience at the 8th Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics Encuentro in São Paulo, Brazil in January 2013.

The thread running through the work to be discussed is the body moving across as a memory practice that challenges the present. I use my own performance practice and the *praxical* concerns I grapple with to read these works. My aims are to demonstrate performance as research; to situate scholarly dialogues emergent from gathering these artists; to point to queer feminist decolonial possibilities thereof; and to suggest research implications. This chapter can be considered as a documentation of the process of figuring out how to do contemporary queer feminist decolonial scholarly-arts praxis, one in which myself, my body *where it is and goes in relation* must be foregrounded as I cross genres into and through the academy.

Multicrossing

I research an under-known eighteenth century "multicrosser." Sift through documents. Walk a city's grid. Return to archival handwriting. Walk between sheets of fabric on stage, suspended between testimony writ large and a projection of waves crashing where Europe meets that ocean that would carry empire, her, him, them between shores. I sit opposite you, cast as my interrogator, undressing. I walk São Paulo barefoot, between cathedral and synagogue, my visibility forced by the camera, bouts of choreography, changing from female to male on the street. I return home from a Toronto theatre after performing in French a show I wrote in English, and attempt to write a paper. How to find language for the relationship between performing an archive and theorizing a life that erupts into visibility in a colonial record circa 1738?

What is an archive? Is my body an archive? How to "tell history" in the colonial present as a decolonizing practice?

The multicrosser in question is Esther Brandeau / Jacques La Fargue, purported first Jewish person to come to Canada, purported Jewish female

passing as Christian male, outed on both counts, held under house arrest, deported for refusal to convert. And disappears. This after five years working as a male Christian around France. This was a life constricted by and made possible by movement and colonial geographies. I understand my practice of performing (with) them as "*becoming archive,"* intimately linked with autobiography (Hermant, forthcoming; 2013). I have called this practice "historical non-fiction embodied as autobiography," "ceremonial archival performance" and "a midrash on the archive" (midrash is the Jewish tradition of reflection on Biblical text, Hermant 2013, 40). In 2010, this historical figure and the process of (performing) reading(s of) them became the subjects of my doctoral dissertation.

Strands of methodology

I am an artist and academic. My intuiting body moving through space across eras is the most important of my tools. Performance practice as methodology lends itself to radically local, emergent responses, neither prescriptive nor repeatable. I am interested in how research-creation might challenge what is expected as/of research. I want my work to *do something* about the colonial present. I envision an academic context that is interdisciplinary, intermethodological and multigenre. My hopes drive an approach of "bricolage" (Kincheloe et al. 2011, 168), of the "scavenger" (Halberstam 2013, 13).

A key way to situate the discussion herein within the academic landscape is within what has variously been called research-creation, performative practice, practice-led research and creative arts practice. Research-creation is the making of art as/for research, say Chapman and Sawchuk, *distinct from* but sharing characteristics with qualitative and quantitative research. It poses a challenge to "the argumentative form(s) that have typified much academic scholarship" (2012, 6). Bolt writes that in creative arts practice "theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time that practice is informed by theory" (2007, 29). Haseman argues that rather than accept subsuming under the qualitative research umbrella, practice-led research *is its own paradigm*: "[It] expresses the research and in its expression becomes the research itself" (2007, 148-150). There remains the expectation that a research question precede research, even though as Fleishman argues in the case of performance as research, performance does not know what it is searching for before it begins the search (2012, 30). Fleishman argues against opposing traditional modes of research vs. practice-based research though, and

instead for "compossibility," what bringing multiple modes into proximity can offer, not the least the paradoxes and anomalies revealed (2012, 30).

The practices I consider also intersect with autoethnography (Holman-Jones et al, 2013) and autoethnographic performance in particular because of the centrality of the artists' bodies, body as site of research *and* research tool. Autoethnographic performance draws on "a highly situated (and contested) perspective that gazes inward (auto) and outward (ethno) simultaneously in order to performatively enact complex intersectionalities of identity, place, and power" (Shoemaker 2011, 524). A definition of performance seems in order. I consider central the following: the body is in motion; the body transmits, translates and intervenes in story; and the body in action engages the question of witness. Performance is relational and moving. I draw on Conquergood's "performance as kinesis" (Shoemaker 2011, 525); Spry's understanding of the body in performance as "a site from which the story is generated by turning the internally *somatic* into the externally *semantic"* (Pelias 2011, 388); and performance studies' broader concern with performer-audience relationships.

Since I am concerned with historiography, a vital theorization of remembering is performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's elaboration of "the archive" (written documents, photographs, wampum belts) and "the repertoire" (performance as embodiment of knowledge and transmission of histories and ideas) (Taylor 2003, 19-20). I also draw on Carolyn Dinshaw's account of longing as starting point for a queer historiography, where "touching the past" is a means of constituting community (1999, 1-54). I am informed by decolonial feminism as articulated by Maria Lugones (2010) and by the indigenous scholarship and critiques of settler colonialism of Jodi A. Byrd (2012) and others (Morgenson 2011; Driskill et al 2011). As such I attempt to shift the place of meeting as one of indigenous presence across disparate geographies, of "cacophonous" hierarchical and lateral encounter and the "enjambment" of diverse histories colliding unresolvedly, to borrow Byrd's terms. In investigating how performers' works respond in the face of each other, I aim for dialogical intersectionality, and gesture toward expanding intersectionality to the arena of genre and its entwinement with hierarchies of knowledge and power. I cannot perform all my ambitions here, but offer a trace of intention *in process*.

A contextualized writing

I am a PhD candidate in Gender Studies in Utrecht, writing in Toronto in the midst of the most significant social movement in Canada that I have yet seen. *Idle No More* (INM), led by Indigenous women, erupted in November 2012 in response to a bill proposed by the conservative government. Indigenous people view this bill, which drastically reduces the number of waterways protected by environmental legislation, as violation of their Treaty rights, evidence of Canada's failure to meet First Nations in nation-to-nation relationships, and an open door to resource extraction on indigenous lands. It is not the only reason for INM's eruption, but served as a lightning rod spotlighting settler colonial dynamics.

Artists have been vital to INM as has "movement across," from round dances in shopping malls to *The Journey of Nishiyuu* (Nishiyuu means people in the indigenous Cree language), in which Cree youth walked from northern Quebec to the Canadian capital over several winter months, enacting a traditional imperative to perform indigenous sovereignty by moving through traditional territory (Seesaquasis 2013). Other walks and over-water movements continue. In January 2013, Kayapo Chief Raoni Metuktire in Brazil endorsed INM in the midst of struggle over the Belo Monte Dam (Raoni 2013). In May, INM affiliates protested Shell Oil at its annual general meeting in The Hague (Flegg 2013). In July, the 4th annual indigenous-led *Tar Sands Healing Walk* took place in the heart of petroleum extraction in Alberta in the midst of new oil spills. In August, 500 paddlers arrived to New York to renew the two-row wampum treaty made between the Dutch and the Haudenosaunee 400 years ago.

As a settler artist-scholar drawing together artists from Canada and Brazil in an anthology of Dutch feminist praxis, I begin with INM to point to the entanglement of nations in the intercontinental, transhemispheric constellations of contemporary colonialism and resistances thereof, as we artists perform 'history' on seemingly disparate sites.

Tactile geographies

Toronto artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher's *Writing Landscape* project, an image of which opens this chapter, predates the eruption of INM. Of Potawatomi and Lenape ancestry, (lands south of a national border that makes little sense for indigenous nations that transcend them), Dion Fletcher's practice ranges from curation to performance to video to visual arts. She writes:

> *Writing Landscape* is a series of images that were created between my body and the land. The finished product consists of three parts. The first is a series of copper plates that were marked up when I wore them on my feet and walked over the land. The second is a series of prints that were produced from the copper plates. The third is video documentation of my performance of walking. Together, these images constitute an exploration of the relationship between my identity as an indigenous woman and different places on Turtle Island [Indigenous name for the Americas, HH]. This work begins in my mouth with my voice and moves down to my feet and the earth (Dion Fletcher 2012, 81).

The artist collaboratively produces an archive together with the landscape, performing memory as dialogically embodied: it is a conversation between her body and the land. Central to *Writing Landscape* is the relationship between movement over the land, indigenous identity and language. Dion-Fletcher began the project in response to being monolingually English-speaking and not knowing her ancestral languages. Her doing—land-body-language-archive as memory, her feet 'seeing' as the land authors—is evidence of another kind of literacy. Her walking not only contests the supremacy of English and the world views and histories embedded within it, but expands 'language' to non-verbalized forms, while complicating the subject-object relationship often assumed between land and body (2012, 82). She also constructs layers of witness, with visual forms inviting us to witness her witnessing the land and her dialogical entwining with it. Across layers of distance we see *their* collaborative output.

Like the Nishiyuu, Dion Fletcher performs indigenous memory and sovereignty through movement over land, through the land writing onto and through her. In so doing she speaks and writes her indigeneity *and*, I am compelled to read, the land does the same. Her work is indeed an act of reclamation and recovery, autonomy and sovereignty. But even as the work speaks of the violences of colonisation, it compels a move well beyond reading through the trope of repair, of movement toward wholeness from brokenness along a linear progression. The work suggests walking as theorization of embodied memory that exceeds autoethnography, which exceeds the time and logic of the fracture that compels it. *Writing Landscape* un-names land as thing, perhaps even land as having autonomous agency, because body and landscape are entwined in doing.

If, as she writes, the project starts in her mouth with her voice and moves down to her feet and the earth, she occupies and queers *this* English language in which I am writing, its words, its logics, bends it from its

power to unmake, to enact removal.

Sonic geographies

On a cold March day, artist Camille Turner leads my PhD supervisor Dr. Gloria Wekker and me through a snowy memorial park nestled among condos. Dr. Wekker is in Toronto for events I have helped coordinate entitled "The Contemporary Urgencies of Audre Lorde's Legacy." We walk headphones isolating us each in our own experiences of a performance playing out in our ears and through our bodies, guided by historical figures re-imagined sonically into the present and accompanying us like whisperers. This is *Hush Harbour,* an immersive sonic walk that animates Black histories through a transtemporal Afro-futurist imaginary. We are beckoned to stand on a stone. The elder's voice weaves time:

> This is the story of Samuel, a man with a mystical past who was born to an enslaved woman. His mother was determined that he would be free so she placed him in a boat on a river. Years later he arrived fully grown on the shore of the town of York [former name of Toronto, HH] where he witnessed the arrival of African astronauts (Turner 2012a).

A soundscape brings to life Peggy, a slave who cannot be freed because of a grandfathering of abolition even as Blacks from south of the border gain their freedom by arriving to Canada. It should be noted that Canadians are more likely to know about the Underground Railroad that enabled slaves to gain freedom by crossing into Canada, than they are to know that slavery ever existed in Canada. We meet Sam, one such free Black man. Turner is best known for *Miss Canadiana*, in which she takes on the persona of a national beauty queen (Turner 2011). Writes Turner, "Black skin and dreadlocks isn't what is expected as the embodiment of the Canadian Nation" (Turner 2012b, 53). Turner's work contests the active absenting of over four centuries of Black presence in Canada and aims to "evoke a Black cartography, in which Black histories and Black bodies, hidden within geographies of domination, are visible and mapped to the land" (2012b, 54).

Turner tells us that "hush harbours" were places of clandestine meeting where enslaved people would gather at night in the woods, the sound of gathering dampened by suspended quilts. In *Hush Harbour* Turner weaves into a War of 1812 soldiers' grave site Black historical figures, those who come to us through archival records of the city's slave-owners, and those Turner imagines into presence from the "Coloured Corps and Indians"

note at the end of a list of named white soldiers on the park's memorial plaque.

By having us listen while moving through space, Turner makes a counterclaim on the land, populating it with erased history *through our bodies* as actively moving witnesses. *We* remap the memorial landscape, contesting its assumed whiteness. Adaptation of the museum audio tour to an Afro-futurist historic sonic walk as genre is significant; it suggests an Afro-lineage to "science fiction" by anchoring the telling in a cosmology in which ancestors are ever-present, foresee the future and serve as contemporary guides. It foregrounds "old" spiritual practices as "futuristic." The nearby pin-like CN Tower becomes a broadcasting point for the Black Ordinance, who "give the Afronauts access to ancient knowledge." Even as we might interpret the Afronauts as voices from the past, one will say to Samuel, "You are our ancestor." The work challenges notions of linear time and progress, and contests hegemonic neocolonial ways in which racialised people are perpetually located in the past yet erased from both the historical record, and invisibilised in the present.

When at the end of nineteen minutes we meet again atop the stone, the elder-narrator-guide anoints us. We cannot un-know what we have just learned, she tells us. Turner calls on us to bear witness, our in-bodiedness bringing us in close to enact an intervention, an embedding. I cannot be on the outside of the story, and that is precisely the point.

Mapped violence

Mariana Rocha is also concerned with absence and disappearance. From Belo Horizonte, Rocha walks *Google* maps that she constructs by linking addresses associated with obituaries published in newspapers. Rocha worked on the prosecutor's bench defending the victims of violence before abandoning law to focus on her arts practice, in which she researches the ruin of the body, compelled by the impossibility of witnessing one's own disappearance. She takes as her starting point Martin Heidegger's philosophical writings on being towards death. (Rocha 2013a). Her work begins with a performance of repetition: laboriously walking urban geography, unnoticed. Rocha walks the contours of the maps she creates, which sometimes physically exhausts her. This ritual becomes witnessable only in the visual art pieces she subsequently creates out of the shapes of the maps she walks, artifacts from her walking labour.

Rocha's maps uncannily take on the shape of bones and body parts. Coming upon a butcher's shop, she takes the butcher's discarded bones

and studies their decay, how to boil and preserve them, then casts these in bronze in forms uncannily similar to the map-drawings. She carves the maps into tree stumps and displays the bronzed bones atop. Later she discovers bitumen, a breathable substance that allows the bones to continue their decay, seeping through bronze-like exterior in exhibition spaces, underscoring the paradox that the body is dead but the bones are still, in essence, alive. Bitumen is also the petroleum product extracted from Alberta's tar sands in Canada, location of the annual two-day Tar Sands Healing Walk led by First Nations and Métis people whose environment and health are affected.

Vulnerability in the face of potential violence seems undeniable as I comb over the artifacts of Rocha's performative labour. I tell her her practice feels like ritual purging. I ask if it is partly a response to Brazil's military dictatorship. She responds:

> You are totally right about the need to orchestrate and control in the face of vulnerability, all of it on the terrain of a female body. ... It is like sacrifice is always present, but causes no pain. ... The ruin of my body and the death of the victims [for] whom I was a lawyer filled my mind with images and questions ... I grew up listening to the stories about missing people and how some of my mother's female friends were tortured. Some people just vanished ... During the dictatorship, my parents went to live in the US, otherwise I guess my mother would have died too. She was very active against the government. ... I had this teacher in art school that kept telling me that a lot of my performances were totally political (related to the dictatorship) and sometimes I did not see it (pers. comm.).

Only later would she clearly see the connection to the disappeared, when she realized the barrels she uses in her work were and still are used to disappear people in Brazil.

What gives Rocha's work such unsettling power is the execution of beautiful, sensual, topographical, bodily forms incongruent with the unspeakable of which they can speak, and that the process from which they are derived allows Rocha to write her autonomy. I see Rocha's work as historical-contemporary testimony, dependent upon and made possible by the performing female body that moves across space, stitching and dragging times. Without necessarily intending to, I think this work stands as evidence of lateral and intergenerational trauma and resistance, of *past* injustice feeding into the multiple forms of *contemporary* violence.

My question returns: *Is my body an archive?* Yes. I refine the question. *How does my body archive a time before me?*

Embodied questions

Oriana Duarte's doctoral thesis, *Plus Ultra: The body at the limit of communication* (Duarte's translation), is multigenre, practice-led scholarship that defies expectations of what doctoral research and a thesis outcome should look like (Duarte 2012). She looks to *sport* as an *artistic* practice *and* an embodied practice of *philosophy.* Where Dion Fletcher, Turner and Rocha walk, for her doctorate Duarte rows in order to engage-embody Foucault's ideas and those of Cristine Greiner and Helena Katz, (Foucault 2001, 1997). Of interest to Duarte are knowing the self, caring for the self and engaging with others, and the close relationship Foucault demonstrates in his study of Greek and Roman ascetic practices between athlete and philosopher (Duarte 2012, 169). Greiner and Katz theorize what they call "corpomedia" [bodymedia], how the body itself communicates (for an overview in English, see Rosa 2011).

An established Brazilian artist, Duarte trained for months then rowed rivers through five Brazilian cities, a treacherous endeavour on river as well as in the almost exclusively male clubs she had to integrate herself into to seek rowing partners and coaches. Years of process as research yield a performance practice of rowing as methodology and outcome; exhibitions of video installations from footage gathered from cameras rigged to her boat; a thesis comprised of three notebooks that include drawings, journal excerpts, still images, poetic and scholarly writing and literature review. Duarte's dissertation crosses genres, disciplines, eras, spaces, borders. In her stated intention of investigating trajectories of movement between art and life as a means to understand self and an ethics of being, she demonstrates that "research-creation may act as an innovative form of cultural analysis that troubles the book, the written essay, or the thesis, as the only valid means to express ideas, concepts and results of experiments" (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012, 8). Much of the knowledge she produces resides in its best form, *in the act of rowing itself*, in the *process* of the research.

That she chooses rowing has particular resonance from a feminist perspective in Brazil, and for someone sourcing Foucault. She maps rowing's colonial genealogy as a British import to Brazil that enacts the disciplinary practices Foucault wrote of (1975). The boat as a promising heterotopia, after Foucault, carries conflicted meaning, particularly when Duarte tells the story of responses to an indigenous rower she sees at a race who is exceptionally fast, with a technique derived from paddling on

Amazonian rivers, not in rowing clubs (2012, 206). Heterotopias are real sites that are at the same time "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites [...] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." They are places of possibility and difference, which unlike utopias can be pinpointed to actual, real location. The boat, for Foucault is "the heterotopia par excellence", "a place without place", "closed in on itself yet open to the infinity of the sea" (1984). Those who resist the indigenous rower say he is not skilled to do team work. (Read: He isn't disciplined by/in the club system.) He later wins a medal for Brazil in a world competition. Duarte questions her impulse to zero in on this story, but leaves her questions unresolved. Byrd might call us to consider that Foucault's theorizing and Duarte's coming to know depend on the indigenous body as a transit of ideas (2012).

Duarte tracks such distances between people revealed through her process, even as she experiences a profound rapprochement with landscape through her body's extension into becoming boat, becoming oar, becoming water. She does not see the passing landscape directly since she moves with her back to it, but she experiences it proprioceptively. She invents language to translate the experience. *Corpobarco (*"bodyboat"). Doing "body-landscape-boat" (2012, 50). Later she sees the landscapes (again) by witnessing the video witnessing her immersion. She meticulously documents a Brazil *as only she can know it*.

When she finishes the project, she investigates a lump that emerged on her back while rowing. She documents the surgery. When she writes ambiguously of "the incommensurability that lies dormant in the Brazilian body" (2012, 353, my translation) I cannot help but wonder at that lump as a complex trace of lost borders between storied materialities, of the impact of her feminist immersion in masculinist disciplinary regimes, of battling colonial legacies embedded in and ever active on the land she witnesses from the water, all surfacing up through body.

Returning to a question

I walk barefoot from church to synagogue past the mid-point between the two, where I am staying in São Paulo, a queer person descended from the lineages of both architectures. The majority of colonizers of Brazil were Jewish-descended, targets of Iberian Inquisition, says Suely Rolnik (2013). Embodying my research subject, purported Jewish female who passed as male Christian, I walk a counter-assimilationist direction. What of the historical trajectory of Jews into whiteness? Of my concurrent movement

from female to male? My body barefoot does not know the Brazilian landscape nor language(s) with which to read my experience t/here, nor see what is erased. An open-ended experiment. Research.

On stage in Montreal, in Toronto, a spinning Canadian winter landscape in video projection threatens to disappear her/his/our/their body into snowy whiteness as the land speeds up. I/we/they remain visible, in the labour of walking. I walk the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, intending to move *against* the pilgrimage grain, *with* the flow of exile. So much walking, I become nothing other than the moment of movement. Battling embodied histories concentrate into contact of the soles of my feet. *Ici. Neste lugar. Hemen zaude. Aqui. Here* (The word "here" in French, Portuguese, Euskara/Basque and Spanish, Hermant 2013b). Full-bodied meditation achieved, like Duarte, at the limits of my capacity, my perception of time changes, 1738 becomes recent. I cannot continue.

I walk a French town, intuitive aid to reading records I sift in the local archive where she/he/they are never directly present. I walk a cemetery in search of a feeling found at the Amsterdam archives months before. I move between 'male' and 'female' in a tiny room with one witness at a time, audience cast as interrogator, my gestural movement in shadow incompatible with the realist script we speak. I lose track of the directionality or even fact of passing (Hermant 2013c). I translate an archival interrogation record into gesture, syllable by syllable writing its violence, my body its author (Hermant 2013b). I pull my body along a diagonal as water in video behind me locates the ship underfoot, conflicted heterotopia. I move on stage pursued by my shadow multiple, the singular story never alone (ibid).

Does any of this movement—exile, deportation, translation—expose the assimilationist pull of the queer settler into collusion with settler colonialism? Which simultaneous multiple passings in the story I perform/research are visible, are palpable and to which audiences?

The act of moving over or in relation to land is compelling historiography because at play, I think, is a dialogical interpellation, body and land entwined archives activated and animated by movement. The body in motion is theorizing, experiment, research, its outcome. Easy distinctions between land, body and the time of 'history' lose their smooth logic.

Maria Lugones, when writing of the coloniality of gender, points to the possibilities of the locus of fracture and like Audre Lorde did, the possibilities of coalitional power because of difference. She sees in "tense multiplicity" a way out of the either/or logic of accomplishment of coloniality *or* freezing of memory, its ossification in the past (Lugones

2010, 754). This points to movement and the relational. My choice to tell the barely knowable life of the historical almost-settled multicrosser in "multigenre"—multiple genres in conversation—is a strategy for decolonial telling that tells while also fracturing the dominant idea that there is one cohesive story. The conversation between genres *is the research,* and it is to be in movement, in relation, troubled. To place this movement as telling within the context of other stories of moving over land as telling is to thicken the possibilities of tense multiplicity. A decolonial settler's telling contends with settler colonialism and so looks to land, neither as metaphor nor as abstraction, but rife, storied, always already peopled.

There is to be no resolution. Il n'y aura pas de certitude. J'interroge ma propre voix. Il n'y aura pas de resolution. *Le retour impossible. Il ne nous reste que de. It is not possible to return. Only to* (Hermant 2013c).

An ethical position might be one of embodying irresolution as a decolonial practice. If to resolve is to be in "joyous cacophonous multiplicity" on a shared globe that denies the reality of indigenous presence, of African enslavement, of coloniality past and present (Byrd 2012, 18). If to resolve is to deflect rather than acknowledge, to bury the colonial intention of removal, replacement, a disappearing act (Morgensen 2011, 22). Something about all of this is a search for what it is to be, to become, to (make) unsettle(d).

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