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Abstract

It is no surprise that the land is a potent signifier in Saskatchewan, Canada where hardscrabble frontiering and communal survival on the “bald prairie” have defined the way artists imagine and represent regional character. In alternative theatre practices in Saskatchewan, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, site-specific, community-oriented performances still frequently turn toward the landscape as the starting point in exploring who we are and are not and who we desire to become. This is a kind of cultural mapping that involves a profound self-reflection and personal asset-taking.

Since 2002, through my theatre company *Nowhere Productions Inc.* the author has investigated physical and conceptual space through large-scale performances that explore the intense relationship between people, their memories and their landscape. In collaborative performances, her company addresses the meaning(s) of community and belonging by amplifying and mapping the multiplicity of voices speaking from discrete places.

This paper explores aesthetic and communal practices grounded in a perception of the land as a potent and persistent signifier in place making and playmaking. It also considers the value of participatory engagement within communities where the tangible and intangible markers of cultural identity are multiple, their value contingent on economic vicissitudes and their nature reflective of patterns of immigration.

This paper inflects data driven research in the area of cultural mapping and encourages a soft process of charting the texture of a given community through socially engaged performance.

Ephemeral and Intangible: Performing Mapping

This paper addresses how performative mapping may contribute another perspective in distinguishing cultural markers, exploring the multiplicity of human experience, and mourning the disappearance of identifying landmarks in a given place. What it intends to underscore is a unique mapping variation by creative means rather than through data gathering, that can be brought to bear on communities as they reflect collectively on their cultural assets, both material and present and those existing solely as seared memories of traumatic loss.

While a key outcome of hard data mapping may be the facilitation of dialogue and a consensual realization of the complexity and richness of places we call home to provide a measurement useful for city planning, policy development and strategic lobbying, alternative forms of soft mapping serve to make alternate realities visible. This work can be done, as Wendy Sarkissian writes, through qualitative methodologies that incorporate soft skills such as “listening with your third ear” (Sarkissian, 2005: pg. 116). Such methods, although impossible to quantify, allow for a plurality of stories to surface and may give voice to things otherwise inexpressible. They may bring imagination, emotions and desires into play in productive ways that function to map information beyond the parameters of data gathering and mining.

As a scenographic practitioner, site-specific performance producer of *Nowhere Productions*, teacher and theoretician, I am concerned with place, identity, and spectatorship. As well, I attempt to trouble the edges of these designations, ascertain where they overlap and discover what is productive in the liminal areas of coincidence and confluence. My practice maps the relationship between people and places and manifests in performances created in the very places

where the narratives originated - the hidden routes, overgrown pathways of the people who live there. This site-oriented way of working exemplifies a complex triad of givens (site, participants and spectators), and looks at how each contributes in intricate ways to create an affective form of theatre that explores and celebrates the very human, and thus frequently thwarted, effort to stand up and be counted in the world. Probing the relationship of land to individual, this work examines humankind's attempt to perform god-like feats – and the inevitable failure that rewards such hubris. Drawing frequently from local history, personal memories and current concerns, this way of working challenges disciplinary boundaries and theatrical conventions by referencing the body and topography equally – it maps people in relationship to places. So, I am interested in mapping but what I do veers towards the theatrical, the fleeting and ephemeral.

What is achieved through these events is a charting not of the current material markers of culture, the addresses of institutions, buildings and monuments, but the intangibles of culture that make a community unique over a long duration. Both forms of mapping are significant means for affecting outcomes – aesthetic, social, economic and political, but using different strategies and to varying degrees. Mapping hard data identifies resources and provides ammunition for interest groups to lobby governing bodies for resources and support. Mapping soft data reminds people who they are and establishes what they want in order to speak with authority from a place of relative consensus.

So, as place is always located, let me fill you in on from where I am speaking – Saskatchewan, Canada. It is no surprise that the land is a potent signifier in this part of the world where hardscrabble frontiering and communal survival on the bald prairie have defined the way artists and non-artists alike imagine and represent the metal of regional character. Indeed, given the climactic and spatial exigencies of this part of the world, survival against the odds and situating oneself describes both the historical and current reality for comers to this vast and empty place. It

is a place of new comers, many en route and in transit – it is a place of migration and displacement and settling first for indigenous people, then for waves of immigrants who, for little more than 200 years had carved their routes here.

Even in alternative theatre practices in Saskatchewan, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, alternative theatre frequently turns toward particular landscapes and their inhabitants to create work that explores whom one is and is not and whom one desires to become. This is the nature of my company's creative practice through which we investigate physical and conceptual space through large-scale, site-specific performances. In collaboratively devised performances, we address the meaning(s) of community and belonging by amplifying and mapping the multiplicity of voices speaking from discrete places. These theatrical events reflect a process of identification that involves a profound self-reflection and personal asset-taking by the artists who create the work as much as for those who watch the work. It is both biographical and autobiographical – about people and their relationship to places. It is equally about narrating and way finding, a Janus-like looking forward and backward in time to understand the complexities of particular populations where identities are multiple and contingent on a wide range of personal circumstances, economic and political vicissitudes and resulting immigration flows. The processes employed are not unlike census taking, nor unlike the mapping of local cultural resources. However, the data extracted is softer - based on memory fragments, repeated stories and dreams of the way things were and might be. The tools used are conversational, the means of recording and analyzing information more abstract and poetic – listening with the third ear to the grain of the voice. These data fragments we collect and reproduce, not as documentary or verbatim theatre, but as multidisciplinary performance that, as site-specific guru Mike Pearson, writes, “takes region as its optic, acknowledging the affective ties between people and place” (Pearson, 2006, pg. 3).

As Co-artistic Director of *Knowhere Productions Inc.*¹, I have produced, since 2002, three multi-disciplinary, large-scaled performances in iconic and compelling places around Saskatchewan. These sites (an abandoned mental hospital, a brick plant and an entire French-speaking village) exemplify discursive fields where variously embodied experiences of space and place coexist; performative places that lend themselves to devised practices. During the arduous process of conceptualizing, funding and realizing them, I have observed the proclivity of people in Saskatchewan to represent and interrogate their place in the world. Equally, I have observed the willingness of many who have never heard of alternative performance practice to enthusiastically support these endeavours in all manners of ways and with countless leaps of faith – by donating their time and resources, stories and memories, food, furniture and clothing.

In doing so, the company has created work that is engaged and engaging. The work is both creatively worthy and socially worthwhile and, I believe, it does something in the world. I have not always felt this way; indeed, following many of its critics, community-engaged practice has caused me, at times, to question its ethics, aesthetic and social value. However, I defend the “value” of the work as a means of tapping emotions through a nostalgic relationship with the land itself, assessing its worth,

“in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, pg. 1)

With the following few images, I reference three productions: *The Weyburn Project*; *Crossfiring /Mama Wetotan*; and *Windblown / Rafeles*. Through these works, *Knowhere Productions* asserts its mandate “to carry out creative activity that explores the relationship of a local population to a particular place, time, and community by drawing upon the particular and discrete cultural and geographical resources found there.”

The Weyburn Project took over one wing of the derelict Weyburn Mental Hospital and staged performances over two weekends in September 2002 that brought together visual and sound artists, filmmakers, actors, writers, composers and members of the Weyburn community, exploring the site and, more widely, institutional care in Canada. In creating a performance that was historical, locally contextualized, and globally resonant, it gathered together a multiplicity of conceptual, historical, political and social layers - a “forensic site investigation” that culminated in an artistic and political intervention that focused the community on saving the building from demolition. During the performance, it routed the audience through the four floors of this huge building and carried them on a temporal journey across 100 years of mental health treatment in Saskatchewan, some of it extremely forward thinking as in its use of LSD in the 1960’s; some of it abusive, reactionary, racist and sexist as in its treatment of those women and children who could not defend themselves.



1. The Weyburn Project, Knowhere Productions 2002

Crossfiring/ Mama Wetotan was a one-off dawn-to-dusk performance in which musicians, dancers, actors, singers, ceramists, sound, installation and media artists collaborated on the site of a former brick plant. Historically, the plant produced bricks that form Canada’s most iconic and historic buildings. The performance sought “to investigate, interrogate and celebrate the

significance of the brick plant and surrounding hills in the cultural and social development of this part of Saskatchewan” (<http://crossfiring2006.ca/>) by bringing together parallel histories of use: one visual and iconographic – the creation and circulation of bricks to establish Canada’s aesthetic geography – the other local, and contested – the industrialization of the land, which replaced the indigenous use of the clay for making sacred vessels and for medicinal practices. The event processed its spectators across the barely visible historical native pathways through the hills at the same time it followed the service roads that carried machinery used to strip the hills to access the clay.



2. *Crossfiring* / *Mama Wetotan*, *Knowhere Productions* 2007

Windblown / Raffles (2007), was created at the invitation of the Ponteix Town Council and the Catholic Diocese. The event, a performance to mark the town’s centennial, charted the history of a community whose circumference had been defined by the distance the wind carried the bell chimes of the church. The square mile of town site became the stage and the auditorium for a perambulating piece of theatre that took the better part of one day to complete. The intent was not merely to enact a memory play about early 20th century immigrant experience, but to look

critically at the town's diminishing population and loss of French traditions and Roman Catholic rituals, and to consider options for the 21st century. While it marked a moment that will be introduced into the town's public record as a significant act of creative place making, economic contingencies, measured at a global level, not local performance, will eventually chart the town's failure or future.



3. Windblown / Rafales, Knowhere Productions 2009

Considered overall, these works have created a dialogue between the artists, the space, and the communities represented and involved, in which the performance only materializes through a constellation of elements – through activating memory and the visceral engagement between each participant and the space itself. This approach achieves one of Knowhere Productions' most insightful goals: to peel away the many layers and forms of public spaces by exploring their normative histories, routes and pathways in a way that sets in motion a dialogue with their other hidden trajectories.

A project that I am currently working (05/ 2014) on takes a slightly different approach – although it also profoundly maps aspects of my local community. The project, called *Home Cooking / Cooking Home*, looks at food ways as narrative pathways – it is a cultural mapping through food and memory. At one end of dissemination, this project creates a video installation of ten cooking lessons made by ten women who are, in one way or another, far from home. At the other end, it aims to chart the worldwide flow of humanity to my hometown through a staged meal on a beautiful wooden table situated for an audience of ten “power brokers” in the community, comprising ten courses, ten unique ceramic place settings made by local artists, reflecting ten homelands and ten food-related stories or issues. What underlies this research is how the equation of individuals + food + distance equals the sum of how humanity sustains and performs itself in a world characterized by intense mobility. Specifically, it reflects the immigration and foodways that are significantly altering the demographic and way of life in Canada.

In this project, home cooking is recognized as both a life-sustaining process and a creative practice that bridges current circumstances and memories of home. As a creative practice, it allows individuals to share favourite recipes and hands-on cooking lessons through a video installation in a gallery setting – to explain how they make and “make do” without certain ingredients, thereby creating new, hybrid recipes that illustrate the challenges and the opportunities of their new home. This project has fueled my teaching and pedagogy for the past year and has helped build a significant research network with artist scholars from theatre programs in Glasgow, Liverpool, Athens, Tasmania, Finland and, most recently, Coventryⁱⁱ. The team of academics and artists is entitled *The Food Project* and, reflecting the specificities of their discrete practices, the collaborators look at food from a variety of performative perspectives. The aim is to create a cluster of networked, international events staged on both real and virtual platforms (<http://www.rachelhann.com/foodproject/>).

Finally, I am currently part of a significant cultural mapping project, funded by a generous Social Science and Humanities research grant, entitled *Understanding the Arts Ecology of Saskatchewan*. This project, one that maps hard data using surveys aimed at artists and non-artists alike, has the notion of cultural networks and artways at its essence. Its job is to assess artists in Saskatchewan to understand how creative, economic, and interpersonal networks bind artists together to create a healthy arts ecology – and indeed, a happier and more livable community.

This study was initiated in the context of budget cuts in the film sector, motivated by political machinations that threatened to undermine the overall integrated health of the arts in the province. While this mapping initiative will provide hard data useful for lobbying for future support for the arts, it is also revealing a hitherto little understood grassroots network that sustains the arts in meaningful ways. By scrutinizing the role of artists and the arts in the social, economic and cultural fabric of Saskatchewan, it is attempting to understand the way all types of artists, both professional and non-professional, collaborate and network with each other. At the same time it is taking a close look at the broader geographical, social, economic and cultural communities with which artists identify and the nature of engagement between them and their communities. This study will provide a better “picture” of the current provincial arts ecology and enable arts organizations, agencies, and governments involved in this study to develop programs, policies and funding that support and strengthen our artists’ ability to contribute fully to the province’s social, economic and cultural climate. Indeed, one of the aims of presenting this paper at a significant international conference, is to seek out international partners who may be interested in collaborating on a comparative project that considers the value of artways and creative networks in local environments.ⁱⁱⁱ

Finally, in considering the value of these varied forms of cultural mapping, can we simply assume that their merit is intrinsic and self-evident? Whether performative, qualitative and soft or data-

driven, quantifiable and hard, to what degree do these projects accomplish what they set out to do? Speaking from the perspective of an artist / practitioner, that there are fundamental concerns around this kind of socially-oriented practice and its putative long-term results is strongly articulated by its critics. There is little consensus on its value, affective or otherwise, in relation to the representations of identity and selfhood that have occurred, indeed burgeoned in various forms of art practice, on very local levels over the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first.

Nonetheless, the flourishing of interest in “lieux de mémoire” (Nora, 1996) or places of memory has, at its core, the notion of affect and how it addresses an emotional, experienced and remembered “sense of place” (Casey, 2007, 162). Given the ephemeral nature of such performance that is so interleaved with quotidian activity in material places – where arguably nothing is left or taken away – what is the value of all this affect?

Unquestionably, a kind of profit is realized through the performance of bodies in place – a knowledge gained that comes from seeing, sensing and remembering, that presupposes an instinctual and phenomenological relationship with the world. An affective engagement with bodies and space is a productive performance strategy for examining human tensions– and perhaps a social strategy for managing these tensions. This paradigm underscores the dialectic of striving and failing, of homecoming and leave taking, of power and its lack, which characterizes all spatial engagements and displacements that relate to local and global ruptures.

In measureable terms, we may never fully understand the value of soft mapping but I suggest that it can facilitate dialogue, may provide a channel to move beyond antagonism and political posturing between stakeholders, and be an empowering way to express that which is ineffable - the plurality, texture and weave of stories in neighborhoods.

ⁱ Knowhere Production Inc. was incorporated in 2002 in Regina SK with a mandate to produce cultural events that focus on the relationship between people and places. Performances are devised, site-specific and interdisciplinary. The working Board of Director comprises at the time of writing (2012) comprises Kathleen Irwin, Andrew Houston (Co-Artistic Directors), Wendy Philpot and Rebecca Caines.

ⁱⁱ The research team for *The Food Project* is comprised of Kathleen Irwin, University of Regina, Athena Stourna, Adjunct Lecturer, Faculty of Theatre Studies, Open University of Cyprus CAN; Rachel Hann, Edgehill University (UK); Anna Birch, Royal Conservatoire, Anna Birch, Royal Conservatoire, Glasgow; Athena Stourna, Open University of Cyprus; Rachele Viader Knowles, Coventry University, UK; and Stephen Loos, University of Tasmania.

ⁱⁱⁱ Saskatchewan Partnership for Arts Research (SPAR) <http://www2.uregina.ca/spar/> (May 17, 2014).

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