

# Shifting perspectives through Choreography

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*A study on bodily rights from an Indigenous perspective*

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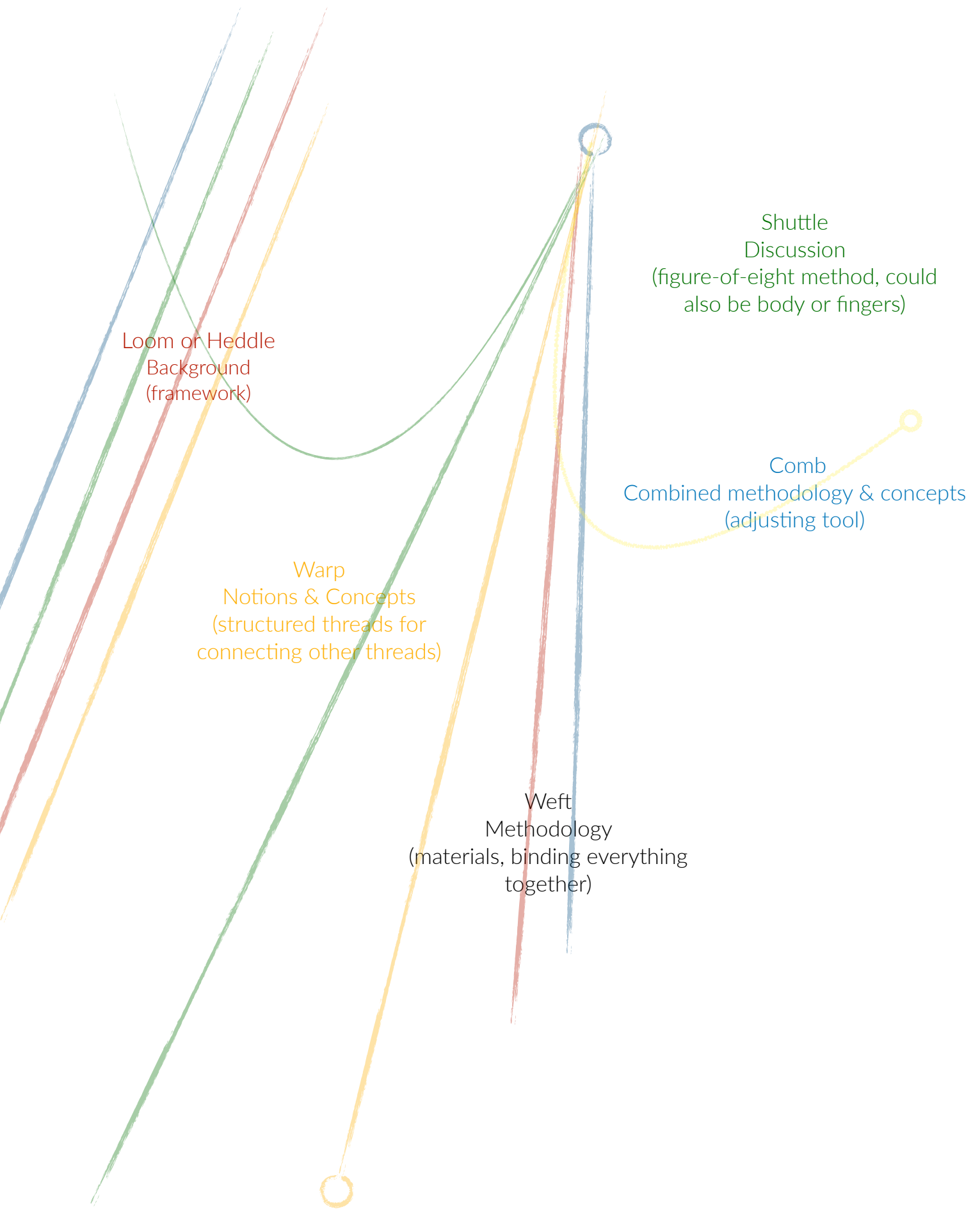
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See Appendix nr 1 for images of traditional materials used in weaving

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## Abstract

In the current globalisation of the planet, Indigenous peoples are attempting to reclaim their lands from extraction and natural disruptions due to new sustainable energy projects and dam constructions. This study is exploring how choreography and dance are addressing the issue of exploitation of land and bodies, directly weaving together ideas of ancestry and indigeneity through gathered testimonies from three Indigenous choreographers. The work allows for activist ideas to shift the perspective on humans' relationship to soil and its emancipation from coloniality by acknowledging the ancestral body as an intrinsic, lived experience within the Indigenous choreographer. Positioning the study in relation to critical artistic practice, the text is proposing an opportunity for the reader to explore the link between bodily rights, minority politics and soil, thus revealing how the reconstruction of ancestral memories and movement can remind us how to repatriate our dismantled and dislocated history. By finding ways of connecting choreography to agency over body and indigeneity, this work is exploring how dance can constitute Indigenous connectedness and how testimonies by these choreographers are passed on through their embodied experiences of indigeneity, ritual, repatriation and recognition of the Indigenous body.

Keywords: Indigenous, Dance, Choreography, Repatriation, Weaving, Body, Ritual, Indigeneity, Retribution.

## Loom

As I was walking down the path to Hokkaido University in 2019, my eyes were met by Zen-like architecture - green patches between buildings where students and professors were having their lunches, smiling and chatting in a murmur of what felt like an energetic academic atmosphere like any other university. Colourful bento-boxes, students rushing to lectures, a buzzing of sounds that echoed between monuments of Japanese colonial history.<sup>1</sup> After some time, walking through the enormous campus, I encountered a big parking lot where I would soon find my final destination. The murmur of happy faces and chatter disappeared and the scenery suddenly changed.

The buildings grew taller and beiger, the murmur turned into intrusive noises of construction site workers and all of a sudden there were no longer any people around. Through the windows of the beige buildings, I could see people in medical outfits working, testing, speaking through masks. I finally stopped in front of a building with a small sign “The building for animal experimentation” in Japanese. Beside it was a building made of concrete with no doors, no windows. I was told by the professor, that inside the building there are nameless boxes containing around one thousand Ainu bones.<sup>2</sup> I was told they are stacked on top of each other, some parts missing, deconstructed and dismantled. No one is really certain which bone belongs to whom. What we know is that according to the Ainu spiritual belief system, the body that is not gathered in one piece when buried in the soil, cannot move on to the next world.<sup>3</sup> The Ainu people of Japan, as well as the Sámi of the north, that have been excavated from their sacred burial sites for centuries are still waiting to be returned to the soil of their homelands, Sápmi and Ainu Mosir.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix nr 2: Private photographs from my visit to Hokkaido University Campus with Masumi Tanaka and Hiroshi Maruyama in 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Personal correspondence with Masumi Tanaka and Pr. Hiroshi Maruyama in May 2019, visit to Hokkaido University and the hidden building nearby the campus where the bones were waiting to be relocated to museums and new buildings in Hokkaido.

<sup>3</sup> Personal correspondence with Masumi Tanaka and Pr. Hiroshi Maruyama, May 8th, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Yuji Shimizu writes in *Indigenous Efflorescence - Towards a Respectful Repatriation of Stolen Ainu Ancestral Remains*. 2018 on page 117 that during the mid-Meiji Era (1868-1908) Japanese researchers joined North American scientists' methods for comparing, measuring and exploiting Indigenous bodies, searching for human remains. Such excavations were simultaneously conducted in Sápmi, and cultural anthropology became a trend, creating a racial differentiation and thus normalizing the white body. Japanese researchers collected around 1,637 Ainu individuals that are currently being housed at universities such as Hokkaido University.

## Warp

In this text I will discuss my approach to the notion of Indigenous and its political references. A theoretical underpinning for this study is the convention formed by the UN declaration of Indigenous rights - ILO convention nr 169 - that is not yet adopted by Swedish authorities even though it speaks for the constitutional rights of the Sámi peoples. Classifications such as *minority* in Scandinavia politically determine the conditions in which Sámi peoples lose their constitutional right to grazing land and therefore the direct link between body and soil. Contextualizing this notion is a way for the reader to understand historical and current discourses around the Indigenous identity. Inspired by the writings of Linda Tuhiwai Smith and her *25 indigenous projects*, the intention of this study is to set a framework for artistic practice through *writing, reading and reframing* discussions about the Indigenous identity in order to restore what has been silenced due to systems of racial classification. These methodologies are then re-invented through the artistic practice of ‘Humans & Soil’<sup>5</sup> that embodies the individual experience of bodily sovereignty through international collaboration. Humans & Soil is a project that unifies artistic research with music and dance performances by Indigenous peoples. The production *of itself: in itself* is using dance and choreography to embody the strive toward equality and agency over the Indigenous identity and will be further explored in the part named ‘Weft’ in this text. “The politics on sovereignty and self-determination have been about resisting being thrown in every other minority group by making claims on the basis of prior rights.” Smith writes.<sup>6</sup> As I perceive it, being referred to as *Indigenous* in Sápmi instead of *minority*, is a quest for equity in nations where the convention is not applied. It affects the ability to collectively claim land rights in political decision-making and preserving the reindeer-husbandry. However, definitions of the two, aside from *people, peoples, independent peoples*, depend on the geography and protective conventions applied by nations throughout the years.<sup>7</sup> John B. Henriksen clarifies the dichotomy between the two notions in *Principles in Implementing ILO Convention No. 169*:

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<sup>5</sup> See appendix 3 for images regarding the production *of itself: in itself* The first staged production by Humans & Soil with in total six performers on stage with various background, Swedish and Sámi. More information about the project can be read at <https://www.humansandsoil.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies - Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd edition. London: Zed Books 2012, 152.

<sup>7</sup> On the website of <https://www.sametinget.se/samer>, (English version available) the definitions in relation to Sámi rights vary depending on the conventions applied. Where ‘folk’ (peoples) theoretically has more independence and rights comparing to ‘national minority’. Yet, ‘urfolk’ (Indigenous) has less rights than ‘folk’ (peoples)

In essence, the difference between minority rights and indigenous rights is that minority rights are formulated as rights of individuals, whereas those concerning indigenous refer to collective rights of peoples. Another major difference between minority rights and indigenous rights is that international instruments specifically acknowledge indigenous peoples' rights to lands, whereas minority rights instruments and provisions do not contain such rights.<sup>8</sup>

As a contrary to correct capitalization, the term Indigenous with a capital I and its usage in the Scandinavian political context, is not to take for granted as Smith also describes in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, the struggle toward interdependence in colonised territories can create trouble; “There are many countries where indigenous is not a term that can be used safely by communities who might wish to call themselves indigenous.”<sup>9</sup> The striving towards Indigenous sovereignty over self and body is intrinsic in this research and manifested through the theoretical and practical work of my project Humans & Soil. In some areas, for example in Ainu Mosir,<sup>10</sup> the word *Ainu* which means *human*, regardless of singular or plural, is spelled with a capital A. I experience this being of significance to claim and emphasize the Indigenous identity. In this text I choose to use the capitalization when referring to *Indigenous*, *Ainu* and *Sámi* plural *or* singular, to position the word in relation to the goals of collective self-determination. While Sámi people are waiting for basic land rights and self-determination, the bodies of those who are creating various movements of resistance and retribution, will settle for using artistic processes and the performance of rituals as their activism. Artists that are attempting to express a sense of indigeneity by representing the Indigenous body and spirit, are partly concerned with countering society's image of Indigenous peoples lifestyles and belief systems.<sup>11</sup> In this text you will encounter the testimonies of three Indigenous choreographers: Marika Renhuvud, Liv Aira, Moya Michael and my own work with Humans & Soil, where we in some way are touching upon the presupposed image of what an Indigenous body should look, feel and be perceived as. I am investigating how we, through dance, are countering the stereotyped and appropriated body to instead find the connection with repatriating oneself, one's ancestors and the soil-bound body.

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<sup>8</sup> John B. Henriksen. *Key Principles in Implementing ILO Convention No. 169, Case Study:7*. 2008, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 2012, 152.

<sup>10</sup> As explained in the *loom*, some Ainu peoples refer to Hokkaido as a region by its Indigenous name, *Ainu Mosir* as a way to emphasize their right to their own land. Although not all Ainu individuals feel that they need to claim their identity or land rights, this is recently being more and more discussed through passing on the stories of elder Ainu, or finding a way to repatriate narratives through new methods by the younger generation.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 152.

## Comb

In this text I have chosen to incorporate the dissertation of Kelsey A. Fuller, who is one of the guest researchers for Humans & Soil. She attained her Ph.D. at the University of Colorado, and finished her dissertation in 2020 about Sami popular and contemporary music, *Sounding Sápmi in Multimedia: Gender, Politics, and Indigenous Solidarity in Contemporary Sámi Music*.<sup>12</sup> Besides being an ethnomusicologist, Kelsey is also a musician and photographer with a genuine interest in dance and how it alongside musical expressions, can announce a breadth of intervening research-work. She has provided the ethnographic insight to my research, as well as for the production of *itself: in itself* with her audience perspective:

As an ethnomusicologist who has spent several years studying Sami music and social politics, Marit's work with the Humans & Soil project stood out to me for a variety of reasons, but what I found myself fixated on is the breadth of activist work this project can accomplish, stretching beyond discourses on bodily autonomy, land rights, and Indigenous knowledges, to more widespread aspects of the lived Indigenous experience, body, and narrative.<sup>13</sup>

She helped not only to verbalise the aesthetics of the work seen from an audience point of view, but also showed a commitment to the body of the project's artistic practice. Fuller is positioning herself as an outsider of the community yet showing a clear intention to conduct research that is beneficial in highlighting the need for Indigenous sovereignty. Her ethnographic viewpoint balances with my own fluid position as a researcher that the reader will be able to note in the weft of this text.

## Shuttle

The research following questions acts as a shuttle weaving the text and help verbalise the practical and theoretical work of Humans & Soil:

*How can discourses concerning Indigenous bodily rights be addressed through choreography and international performing arts?*

*How can and how are Indigenous artists working with movement to gain agency over body, culture and sense of self?*

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<sup>12</sup> Fuller, A. Kelsey. *Sounding Sápmi in multimedia: Gender, Politics and Indigenous Solidarity in Contemporary Sámi Music*, Diss., University of Colorado, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> From the presentation of co-writing with Fuller and Carolasdotter at SASS Conference, Seattle 14th of May 2021.

## Weft

The work of *Humans & Soil* is a project guided by artistic research and artistic practice. By creating the production *of itself: in itself*, I am attempting to explore what is between threads of identity, ancestral bodies and experimental practices, and how we repatriate forgotten or unknown memories. The production is a way to apply artistic research methodology and choreographic practice that initially started in Hokkaido with the Ainu people, onto bodies that have recently discovered their Sámi backgrounds, exploring how the body itself together with movement creates meaning and understanding of our Indigenous descent. The focal point of our production and movement practices is to explore not what we know or do not know, but rather what we do not know but desperately wish we would have learned. The separateness from ancestral soil, and as a consequence, silenced history, has created an interest for what was previously mentioned as *what are between the threads* of cultural identity. What is this *new* body I have just discovered? Am I what (you) say I am?<sup>14</sup> The production are the fingers of this research, probing and searching for ancestral memories that might bind the threads together.

The	“Rather than drawing from a form of	The	traditional dance, <sup>15</sup>
undiscovered	<i>Humans &amp; Soil</i> uses	undiscovered	contemporary <sup>16</sup>
choreography of	dance to	choreography of	embody
this text is one of	shared knowledge and	this text is one of	
weaving. As I recently found	trauma.	weaving. As I recently found out	
out my dominant Indigenous		my dominant Indigenous heritage, I	
heritage, I tried to find a concrete practice		tried to find a concrete practice that would	
that would teach me something about my own		teach me something about my own Sámi heritage,	
Sámi heritage, one of them being the craft of		one of them being the craft of weaving.	
weaving.			

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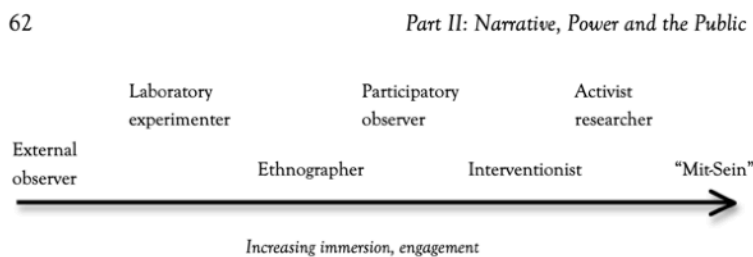
<sup>14</sup> ‘You’ in this context could be many different things, it could be your Sámi mother or father, power structures in society or the colonialist classifications of ‘minority’ or ‘mixed-race’. It could be a community or family that knows more about where your Indigenous roots are, than you do yourself.

<sup>15</sup> Continuation of quote; “However, using both lecture and multimedia performance art allows for straightforward conversation about the topic of repatriation of human remains, and also for the experiential exploration of states of being, identity, and bodies that the subject raises.” Fuller. *Sounding Sápmi in multimedia: Gender, Politics and Indigenous Solidarity in Contemporary Sámi Music*, 2020, 220.

<sup>16</sup> As I have started to apply the theoretical work of *Humans & Soil* into the production *of itself: in itself*, I noticed that I have a difficult time referring to my dance as ‘contemporary’. In its creation, the soundscape and research make the work more toward the experimental, although genre is not something deliberately specified in the project.

## Researcher Position Continuum

The research positions itself in the region of outside - inside perspectives by participating in embodied experiences in the Indigenous community and at the same time aiming to make interventions as an action-based research,<sup>17</sup> meaning, the methods applied intend to involve the bodily experiences of the dancers and choreographers through practice-based research into the contextualisation of Indigenous discourses. The methods are a way for me to zoom in and out the work and I am presenting the model below as an inspiration to navigate *between* that of an 'ethnographer' and 'activist'. The latter is carried out on the basis of having the lived experience of the subject matter.<sup>18</sup> What I would like to emphasize by including this model within the research is that I have been an 'observer' of the Ainu community through my visit in Hokkaido 2019, at the same time initiating the project Humans & Soil to make art that clearly *intervenes* by making statements against the exploitation of bodies (non-repatriation of bones) in Japan and Sápmi. As a result, the 'activist researcher' is emerging in my lived experience as a Kurdish and Sámi choreographer, making sure that I am creating conditions for other Indigenous voices to be heard. Therefore, literature and references written by Indigenous authors are imperative to the research, as it is affirming connectedness to the Indigenous community. In terms of previously conducted artistic research by other classified minority groups, there are very little sources of artistic research from Sámi artists in Sweden, but I hope that this text will open up to new perspectives and contacts within the field. The spirit of connectedness within the Indigenous community is built upon trust and sharing. Therefore conducting ethical research when built on testimonies<sup>19</sup> from Sámi choreographers is an important part of validating this research. The choreographers that have been interviewed for this paper contribute with their reflections and personal embodiments of their indigeneity.



*Artistic Research Methodology, Model of research continuum* 2014, by Mika Hannula, Juha Soranta, Tere Vadén.

Figure 5.1. Researcher Position Continuum

<sup>17</sup> Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 2012, 148.

<sup>18</sup> Mika, Hannula. *Artistic Research Methodology - Narrative, Power and the Public*. Vol.15. New York, 2014, 62.

<sup>19</sup> The term 'testimony' is being used in various Indigenous discourses when giving account for collective stories or narratives for lived experiences in the community. Linda Tuhiwai Smith gives good examples of this notion in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 2012, 145.



## Ethics in Indigenous research

Sámi and non-Sámi scholars have conducted decolonizing research over recent decades, drawing attention to historical and contemporary concerns regarding Indigenous research.<sup>20</sup>

The methods for this text are designed to combine legitimate embodied experiences through artistic practice, yet accounting for notions and political concepts with a sensitivity toward the Indigenous history and current research about repatriation. Ethics in Indigenous research in the academic context is a guideline in order to, as Smith previously mentioned in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, create a sense of connectedness to the community. As art can create awareness with its audience, I think that the presence of these guidelines is of importance to my work as it could potentially become a valuable derivation of artistic research for the Sámi community.<sup>21</sup> It is meant to be an inspiration on how dance and choreography can approach the painful issues of exploitation, whilst the art practices explored try to influence the Indigenous perspective on body and movement with a positive outcome.

By drawing parallels from the repatriation of human remains, it is embodying the connection between contemporary and colonial discourse, as well as future Indigenous sovereignty over body, self and community.<sup>22</sup> The ethics that influence the research is present in order for readers that are outside the Indigenous communities find this as a source for inspiration when academically or with a general interest study dance as a part of inherited Indigenous culture.<sup>23</sup>

It is engaging in practice based research with consideration for those affected by historical bodily exploitation and necessity for sensitivity towards those involved in a continuous discussion on decolonisation. Through gathered testimonies from Indigenous choreographers, the text aims to challenge the present and past view on the Indigenous body by dominant institutional misinformation: the paternal state-body has the need to protect the Sámi peoples' rights through classifying them as a minority. Yet it deprives us from being a collective body with lived experiences and instead forces us to be singular representatives of our culture, affecting how the choreographers interviewed in this text chooses to initiate their creative productions.

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<sup>20</sup> Anna-Lill Drugge. (ed.) *Ethics in Indigenous Research - Past Experiences, Future Challenges*. Umeå, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Turnón, Kvarnström & Lerner. *Ethics in Indigenous Research - Past Experiences, Future Challenges*, 75.

<sup>22</sup> Kelsey A. Fuller. *Sounding Sápmi in multimedia: Gender, Politics and Indigenous Solidarity in Contemporary Sámi Music*, Diss. Faculty of the Graduate School, University of Colorado, 2020, 216.

<sup>23</sup> One important source of information around the origins of dance in Sápmi is readable in the writings of Ola Stinnerbom and Birgitta Stålnert. *Jakten på den försvunna samiska dansen*, Umeå: Centrum för Samisk Forskning, Umeå Universitet, 2011. In my future writings I hope to have time for interviewing Ola on the subject as a very valuable source of information when it comes to traditional dance in Sápmi.



## Meta-weaving

In difference to scientific and ethnographic research on Sámi culture where the subject is analysed and fragmented through depicting testimonies or histories, this practical research merges artistic practice and theoretical work where artistic subject and object oscillates in and out of testimonies and bodily experiences. In order to illustrate the interconnectedness between research and embodied experience, the text is discussing the choreographic process behind the performance *of itself : in itself*. The performance is staged by six performers with a connection to Sápmi and with various experiences of using their art to connect with their inherited identity.<sup>24</sup> The aim with creating a production was to translate colonial and human rights issues onto Indigenous bodies, exploring the potentiality of information conveyed through the human body including multimodal practices such as music, dance and spoken word performance. Kelsey Fuller describes *of itself : in itself* as a translatable medium for Indigenous discourse:

The embodiment of political issues through dance, rather than discussion of such issues through formal political channels, challenges and interrupts the positionality of the dispassionate or objective observer, and instead allows for performers and audiences to translate complex socio-political experiences and knowledge through the medium of the human body.<sup>25</sup>

The discussion or ‘shuttle’ of this text is describing choreographic processes and embodied creations from national and international Indigenous perspectives through the testimonies of the people interviewed. It has influenced the way I approach my own bodily work with dancers Sebastian Björkman and Linnéa Sundling and as it has transformed my own relation to the practice of ‘ritual’ which is explored in our performance. As I am weaving theoretical approaches through the creative process, I want to bring forth multiple angles on how discourses concerning ‘silencing’ and ‘invisibility’ is discussed through dance and transformed through the human body.

The body of writing, interviewing and producing is intertwined and during the process of weaving this text, the bodily experiences of the people interviewed has an interesting path to follow that deepens the connection to the choreographic process in my own body of work, readable in the ‘shuttle’ of this text.

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<sup>24</sup> Choreographer/dancer: Marit Shirin Carolasdotter, dancers Sebastian Björkman and Linnéa Sundling, musicians Annelie Nederberg and Nina Nordvall Vahlberg, Text and spoken word artist Juvvá Pittja and light designer Erik Wiedersheim-Paul.

<sup>25</sup> Fuller, A, Kelsey. *Sounding Sápmi in multimedia: Gender, Politics and Indigenous Solidarity in Contemporary Sámi Music*, Diss., University of Colorado, 2020, 217.

## Shuttle

### Silencing:

One of the trajectories in Sámi artistic practices, is revitalising or repatriating its Indigenous culture. What I found from my interviews with Indigenous artists, is that it has become difficult to revitalise something that has been suppressed to the point of invisibility. The foundation of communicating with the body in the community has been silenced through oppression in the midst of coloniality. Marika Renhuvud is an artist from the South-Sámi area of Sweden, who uses her choreographic practices in order to retrieve and pass on information about Sámi culture that has been lost:

Many people succeed with this through music, texts, books etc., but I've felt with dance as an artform this has not been done before. As we are trying to develop new strategies and methods to increase the awareness of Sámi culture, it needs new platforms to become visible on all platforms, not just on the ones that are most visible. Dance as an artform is not seen so much in small villages, very little where there are Sámi villages,<sup>26</sup> that's why I thought - why not 'kill two birds with one stone' - if we can reach out to more people about Sámi culture through high-quality dance to the Sámi people, makes it interesting to combine with different artforms.<sup>27</sup>

Marika feels a certain responsibility towards re-educating her audience about Sámi culture through her dance, and has no trouble with doing so, but when we are dealing with a culture that historically has been eradicated and excavated it can easily take focus away from the dance itself. An important matter that both Marika and Liv mention during our conversations is the fact that dance as an artform doesn't emanate as much nationally as other forms of performing arts, which puts another layer onto the challenge faced as a Sámi choreographer. How can new paths be built into the future when the artform is still seen as something of the past? How do we proceed?

Rolando Vázquez describes 'decolonial aesthesis' as a way to recover memories that have been silenced and displaced from the world of modernity: "When confronted with all those regions that have been silenced, the task of listening becomes the task of giving back a place in the present, of hosting and emplacing what has been eradicated."<sup>28</sup> He is also very beautifully expressing that

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<sup>26</sup> 'Samebyar' in Swedish or directly translated to 'Sámi-village'; Sápmi is divided into several territories, where those who are still able to own parts of their own land by reindeer-husbandry, often in terms of smaller communities, relatives or families.

<sup>27</sup> Marika, Renhuvud, choreographer. Personal Interview on Messenger, 5th of May 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Rolando Vázquez. *Decolonial Listening - An interview with Rolando Vázquez*. 2019, 150.

listening is also “enabling the memories to take place again through embodiment and experience.”<sup>29</sup> If and when the bodies try to speak again, whether present or ancestral, the memories re-manifest and could become visible as long as someone listens.



Picture: Marika Renhuvud, Photographer: Naina Helén Jåma

The embodiment of dismantled and forgotten history manifested in Marika’s work is an ongoing process of embodying the ancestral and the generational transfer of bodily memories through practice and educating. What I believe puts the choreographer in a difficult position when attempting to undo the dismantling of history, is the requirement of repeatedly explaining what it is that you are:

With Swedish dancers, they might not know what a Sámi person is, and we have this built-in idea that everybody *should know* what a Sámi person is. You get disappointed every time you have to explain *yes* we have our own language, *no* everyone does not work with reindeer-husbandry...and the stereotyping sets more in you emotionally; I can’t just take on the role as a choreographer, I have to talk about my heritage, who I am, why I feel this way, why we bring up this subject, why this is important, why *they* should think it is important. There are so many more steps to take.<sup>30</sup>

When I listen to Marika talking about what she is trying to do in terms of inventing new ways of communicating with the body, I come to think of my own artistic practice, and what it is attempting to do in terms of temporality; I find that there is a disruption in time by trying to make oneself visible by engaging with the act of remembrance, in the past, whilst making an effort to be voiced in the now. How does this displacement of time manifest in the work of the Indigenous dancer?

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*,151.

<sup>30</sup> Marika, Renhuvud, choreographer. Personal Interview on Messenger, 5th of May 2021.

Spiritually and bodily, the worldview of temporality in Sámi and Ainu culture goes beyond the linear perception of past - present - future, which we can confirm when we study the non-repatriation of Sámi and Ainu bones. During my visit to the building in Hokkaido University where the bones of the Ainu people were kept I imagined them stacked and dismantled and saw not only the gruesome exploitations of past bodies, but also a disruption of time that goes beyond the future. It determines the positionality of the being in the afterlife. This is not only in a spiritual sense; in order to retrieve the bones into the soil you have to prove that you have a direct linked ancestry to that body.<sup>31</sup> Whilst the Sámi and Ainu community are waiting for the past ancestors to be repatriated into the soil by state and the church, there is this urgent need from the settler community to be educated on Indigenous history and definitions.<sup>32</sup> It disrupts the process of creating meaningful art that wants to convey deeper meaning than only relating to identity politics. In *of itself : in itself* the dancers of Humans & Soil are in the action of trying to remember the past. And we are not talking about events that occurred days or years ago. We are trying to remember the soil and the bodies of our ancestors that were unable to leave us a followable trace into the present. We are always searching, and through bones we are realising that those non-repatriated bodies this research put forward are also a part of our history. We just did not know it, we discovered it. Through repetitive movements, we escalate through time and energy. The intensity of the body increases as several memories manifest in our dance. We try to embody them, push them away, ignore them, long for them, weave them together and sever them. We never reach the point where we find true retribution, yet we attempt to reach transcendence through our bodies.

In Marika's dance-work *Mijjieh Daesnie*<sup>33</sup> we witness two dancers standing next to each other in a low light setting of a theatre space, simultaneously but not completely synchronized, making gestural, repetitive movement. After some time, the gestures become more and more urgent, the expressions of the faces more intense as their movements escalate. The repetitive movement is a form of conveying the everyday life of a Sámi and a Swedish dancer: "I wanted to incorporate gestures, gestures that are rooted in our spines and what they become when we pass them on."<sup>34</sup> The key words we find here in terms of time and embodied temporality are *to pass it on*. The repetitive movements emerge when you know a routine so well, you can perform it without thinking. When we are speaking about Sámi tradition and lived experiences, this is an important

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<sup>31</sup> Shimizu, Yuji. *Towards a Respectful Repatriation of Stolen Ainu Ancestral Remains in Indigenous Efflorescence*. 2018, 118.

<sup>32</sup> 'Settler' is a term used to refer to colonisers, or those who set foot on land after the Indigenous.

<sup>33</sup> *Mijjieh Deasnie* is in south-Sámi language and means *We are still here* was a duet re-created with Marika Renhuvud together with Kajsa Nilsson from a previous international collaboration in Bangalore.

<sup>34</sup> Marika, Renhuvud, choreographer. Personal Interview on Messenger, 5th of May 2021.

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aspect when growing up within a community where the way of life is inherited by action, training and making sure that your practices are intrinsically a part of your full being, thus floating more toward the right spectrum of the research continuum.<sup>35</sup>

In the case of having a mixed heritage between Indigenous peoples, such as myself, there is a clear ambivalence toward embodying such traditional experiences when the heritage has not been able to be passed on, due to silencing and eradication by the state. The time and space when or where my ancestral body was passed on from my mother is an un-walked track toward embodying such tasks or movement. This disorientation is one we are trying to embody in our performance in *Humans & Soil*. I would therefore like to adjust the threads and go back to the warp of this text; positioning myself in-between researcher positions in the continuum and looking for repetitiveness and ritual in movement, the one thing I find is that despite my ability to zoom out of the work I am still carrying out this research more toward the activist spectrum, living the life that is under research in order to not only understand it: “the point may be to change the world.”<sup>36</sup>

The ‘world to change’ is one of bodily retribution and in this text it departs from dance and movement. In the performance, we are embodying the ritual that emerges from a rigorous dance practice; one of generating energy until it is ongoing, until we know it so well we can continue without struggling. Marika is very efficiently describing a ritual that derives from something concrete to embody, an inherited knowledge that describes how discourses on the right to body and livelihood can be addressed through choreography. But when in cases where the knowledge of your ancestry is unknown and you have no choice but to constantly zoom in and out of your own indigeneity. When you do not know, where do you place the next thread?

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<sup>35</sup> Hannula, 2014, 60. Lena Valkeapää’s description of her research; Zooming in and out from researcher position, an exchange with interventions and actions that “engages the individual in all her being.”

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*,62.

## Invisibility

Liv Aira is a choreographer and dancer from Jåhkåmåhkke, Sápmi with international experience at the Institute of the Arts in Barcelona where she attained her Masters Degree in 2018. During our interview online, she tells me something interesting about how she arrived at the name for her dance company ‘Invisible Dance Company’. It was during her presentation at school while discussing the diversity of Sámi artists in Sápmi and how she wanted to merge artistic forms by making the invisible people visible. Her fellow artists in Barcelona were astonished: “They said, *we have to see these invisible peoples!* And so, I chose the name to point out that the colonization of Sápmi still exists, have been invisibilized and created some kind of oppression.”<sup>37</sup>

Liv continued to ask some fundamental questions, the fact that there are an invisible peoples in Sweden, what does that tell us? How does it expose the exploitation by the majority-society when *finally*, the invisible people have spoken, and once we make ourselves visible?

We also spoke about the difficulty of “just being a dancer” aka having less opportunities than others in the international performing arts. I have recently been curious about how multiple discrimination inscribe itself in this research as female Indigenous choreographers that suffer from multiple silencing, multiple invisibility in the dance field. My project has not yet touched upon gendering as a case of study in the artistic practice and research, but working internationally with the Ainu women in connection to invisibility is worth weaving into this text. How difficult isn’t it then to try make oneself visible? How to gain agency? And is visibility for Indigenous peoples the same as making the people of Sweden aware of that we exist? I claim, that it is not enough. If we are supposed to, as Liv Aira also is attempting to do, stand side by side in order to have creative freedom it is not acceptable to think that the artists of Barcelona have more knowledge of Sweden’s native peoples than Sweden does.

I find a similar experience when I listened to Marika talking about her time in Bangalore, she did not expect her dancers to know anything about Sámi people, but it surprised her immensely when she discovered they knew so much more, being in a similar situation on the opposite side of the world. I heard from many people I spoke with during my short time of living in Tokyo 2016, that no

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<sup>37</sup> Aira, Liv; choreographer. Personal online interview, May 16th 2021.

one really understood ‘what an Ainu is’. Only that they are aware that there used to be an Indigenous peoples called the Ainu that lived in Japan a long time ago.<sup>38</sup>

This reminds me of my time in Hokkaido, learning from Ainu Women’s association, the work of professor Hiroshi Maruyama as well as Ainu activists in surrounding villages, constantly attempting to retrieve recognition and visibility through art, fishing and repatriation rights. They do so similarly to what we do in Sápmi: we wait for the next convention to come around, the next panel-discussion around Sámi promotional strategies, the next funding opportunity for ‘minority classified’ artists and so on. It is as if everyone is touching on the surface of the clothing, the appearance, the production, the education of Indigenous peoples so that the majority-society will suddenly, announce the existence of the invisible people.

What we can confirm from these testimonies, is that Indigenous peoples are not only using embodied practices such as dance and activism to retrieve retribution for their ancestors, but also planning on what the impact of their practices will evoke once they become visible.

In *Beyond Feminism* by Ann-Elise Lewallen, she describes the process behind Ainu Women’s Survey led by Tahara Ryoko,(whom I was also extremely fortunate to meet during my visit to Sapporo) and the survey as a tool for analysing multiple discrimination that seemed to have a positive impact on the Ainu women. It provided emancipation from victimhood that was caused by multiple discrimination and “allows them to exercise agency by defining the prejudice they experience as external to themselves.”<sup>39</sup> an emancipation from the strained body as women, as Ainu who has been devoid of the right to the ancestral and independent body.

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<sup>38</sup> Mana Shinoda, a young Ainu dancer from Hokkaido, describes in her essay *Living a Modern Life in Hokkaidō as a Young Ainu Dancer*, on page 166, that there was even a statement from a Japanese politician saying ‘The Ainu people does not exist anymore’ and ‘ It is doubtful that the Ainu are Indigenous’ *Indigenous Efflorescence*, 2018, 166.

<sup>39</sup> Lewallen, describes the somewhat ambivalent issue of Ainu women being exploited not only as Ainu, but also as women where in general unwanted body hair derives from a feminist discourse. According to the survey made concerning these women, not all women reported experiences of direct discrimination but there is still this underlying disguise and invisibility applied for the Indigenous woman. Lewallen further explains that older Ainu women wore face masks to cover their tattoos around the mouth, “to hide despised markers of difference.” Lewallen, *Indigenous Women and Feminism, Politics, Activism, Culture*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011, 152-177.



## Ritual

Moya Michael is a South African dancer of Khoi and San descent,<sup>40</sup> currently residing in Brussels, is one of the international Indigenous choreographers I have been interviewing for this project, looking closer at the 'self-learned' ancestral body and the discovering of it. In her dance-solo *Coloured Swans 1: Khoiswan*<sup>41</sup>, which she performed in both South Africa and in Europe. In exploring her identity, she was researching the assigned identity 'coloured' in South Africa and what it really meant surviving racial segregation. She is re-affirming her own sense of in-between without looking at her body as two separate identities, but rather personifying it in her own way:

I claim it because I can say *I come from these people*, grounded - not trying to figure out what my 'multigenerational mix up' is, not one being more worth than the other, that's all a colonialist idea. but the claim to these people, to that land, is very strong as they are the first people to that land and a lot of people don't understand it. *I am not coloured, I am Khoi, I am Khoi.*<sup>42</sup>

But before Moya started using choreography as her way to orientate in her indigeneity, being classified as 'coloured' generated a lot of questions. How can you look at a body and determine what it is, before looking at yourself? And how do you determine if someone is 'coloured', black, brown or Indigenous? She mentions various tests you had to go through in South Africa, to determine what race the body corresponded to. For example, a pencil test could determine which race you could pass as, depending on if it fell out your hair or not while shaking it. There are various examples from Indigenous racial-biological history where the phenotypic differences result in multiple discrimination. Therefore, I believe it is important for us working with choreographic processes with an Indigenous background to dig deeper into what we envision for ourselves, that our bodies and our independence in relation to gaining agency and respect is crucial to avoid further appropriation and exoticification by the colonial gaze. But what are the risks we take in doing so?

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<sup>40</sup> San = Sanqua = Soaqua was a name given to hunters by the Khoekhoen of the Cape. The word means 'people different from ourselves' Khoesaaan = Khoisan is a general term which linguists use for the click language of southern Africa. Physical anthropologists use it as a biological term to distinguish the aboriginal people of southern Africa from their black African farming neighbours. <http://www.khoisan.org/>

<sup>41</sup> Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/306693161> & Review by Isaiah Lopaz on Moya's performance together with Tracey Rose at KVS Brussels 2018: <https://www.vooruit.be/en/pQYvpSG/narration-is-a-creation-of-the-self--a-review-of-coloured-swan-1--khoiswan-by-isaiah-lopez>

<sup>42</sup> Michael, Moya; choreographer. Personal online interview, May 6th 2021.



Before  
 you start  
 looking at me, you  
 really have to think; I can tell  
 you stuff about me, that will make you

Don't be afraid to claim, *yes*  
*I am Kurdish, I am Sámi*  
 you have every right.  
**It took a lot of slaughter and violence**  
**and shit to these people before they could be**

on what has been, to continue the path and  
 also a sense of importance to pass  
 doesn't exist anymore but  
 happened, it  
 I am  
 not half and  
 half something  
 It is indicating that I  
 would be half of a body

you  
 can still see  
 with your eye that it  
 has been there, creating  
 pathways that even though they  
 are not visible you can still see that they  
 have been there

a  
 rhythmical  
 logic  
 the repetitive movement of  
 Fuck, I am one of the last of these  
 people

There  
 is a lot of  
 suffering, as much as  
 we claim it **we need to**  
 recognise,  
 very clear. **My father and me**, I can see.  
 I can  
 also see. **That I am from these people**

These are a collection of testimonies by Moya Michael, Marika Renhuvud and Marit Shirin Carolasdotter

In my conversations with Moya, we were discussing the need to enhance Indigenous features but from an inner sense of pride and let it project outward. It is about reclaiming the body and at the same time reclaiming the spaces in which we perform, being able to choose our audiences and ask questions on how to challenge the exotism and fetishization we face.

Also in relation to the work of Marika, Liv and with Humans & Soil, there are questions concerning making the audience understand something around what we are defined as and what our bodies contain in terms of Sámi particularity. In speaking to Moya, I realise some truth regarding audiences in Europe, they are used to being spoon-fed information and therefore explaining your artistic work is becoming the norm after or before you do a performance. As Moya described: “as soon as something juxtapose it or goes against that, it is a big hoo-ha.”<sup>43</sup> How much should you as a reader and audience understand about Indigenous peoples before you see my performance or read my text? How much responsibility do I need to take in giving you the history and background before you can see the art behind my cultural identity?

From what I understand, Moya was also reflecting upon these questions as she was about to show *Khoiswan* on the European stage with her visual artist collaborator Tracey Rose, after performing in South Africa; “Tracey was like, fuck them! WHY are you torturing yourself, this isn’t you, you know? You have to stop. If people want to understand your work, they have to do their research. If you are not making this piece for them, who are you making it for?”<sup>44</sup> These questions resonated something fundamental in me that related to my work as a choreographer, especially in regards to facilitating the performance. I have noticed that all of the questions around coloniality and responsibility have made me afraid of stepping on someone’s toes in the event that I choose to make this *particularly relatable* to an Indigenous observer or audience. I sense some kind of hesitation that through my art I can change, well, the world if that is what I am pursuing. But as I was listening to Moya, I was empowered, a little bit braver. I also experience a similarity in her reflection after she created the solo, now that she knows more about her heritagem she can also claim it and in that way feel very grounded. Her dance is a manifestation of that, an inspiration to allow oneself to speak directly to your Indigenous audience:

When she said that to me, I thought - you’re so right, I can really think about my people and the fact that I am making this piece, is a testimony to them because I really don’t want to be making a piece for this audience, even though they’re the ones who are privileged enough to witness and see it, right?<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Michael, Moya; choreographer. Personal online interview, May 6th 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Here we were referring to the Indigenous/South African local audiences.

<sup>45</sup> Michael, Moya; choreographer. Personal online interview, May 6th 2021.

She decided after these affirmations to stop producing the piece for the white gaze, especially solos that are treating a particular history. Now she puts her focus on collaborating with other artists to create another universe in which we can operate freely, she refers to the word 'sacrality' when it comes to conditioning the body and the world around it. How people like us, Indigenous peoples, explore the sacredness of creation and of our bodies in these particular spaces in order to re-claim agency over them. It is also about advocating an embodied experience without hesitation or disruption of time that is sacred. About allowing sovereignty to take place, without having to 'deal with' colonial guilt. About allowing land rights to be a part of the discourse for the sake of the river as a body, not only an object to serve the human body. It is also about claiming the theatre space as a site for this ritual to take place. There is something repeated throughout colonial history and that needs to be repeated in order to un-silence and undo invisibility. The repetition is a part of the ritual, the healing and cleansing from what has been excavated and objectified. I think there is a beauty about deliberately choosing to dislocate oneself from the white spaces and the theatres that are not fully meeting the demands of the choreographers. It desires to create a sacred space where the body can be both the loom and the shuttle - that also includes the 'sacrality' of the audience, to not have to *make* them understand anything. However, I find it equally beautiful when for example, Liv Aira experiences that the audience despite their heritage can welcome and appreciate her work with Sámi narratives.<sup>46</sup>

Humans & Soil is attempting to weave together all of these perspectives with *of itself: in itself* where the objects such as bubble wrap, Jojk, transcendent dancing, words, audience's energies, coffee-grinder and soil is hard to place regards to the aesthetic experience of the audience.<sup>47</sup> It is likely then, as Nicole Haitzinger describes in *The School of the Jaguar*, that these experiences of the bodily work need to be understood, ordered, placed and named under the paradigm of modernity, classical thinking of universality. That these conditions we are operating within are highly rooted in colonialism<sup>48</sup> nonetheless choreographers like Moya are attempting to repatriate and re-locate the universe where we can operate freely. The journey in which we can embody these meta-perspectives are the physical ones - the one thing we know is to move and be moved. To enter the ritual is to generate energy within ourselves and let us be moved by the energy of a spectator (ancestor, audience, reader) in a sacred space of in-between where we are currently, creating ourselves.

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<sup>46</sup> Michael, Moya; choreographer. Personal online interview, May 6th 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Haitzinger, Nicole. *Thoughts on the Forest of Mirrors* in *The School of the Jaguar*. Vol.3. Austria: 2019, 30.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 30.

In the following section, I invite you as a reader to look at the following testimonies as embodied rituals - a trance that goes beyond a final destination, based on bodies with unfolded memories hidden behind the words of the texts. It has a meta-perspective, weaving together the testimonies with our practice in *of itself: in itself*.

In the certain process I was really like I could treat everything as the most sacred, we are defining the space with our bodies, so we create the space with the space, we're gonna just do the work, anyone who comes will appreciate or not. It feels safe.<sup>49</sup>

Discussing regaining agency over the Indigenous body with the help of choreography, I have discovered that it is really about having the embodied experience without hesitation or disruption of time, that is sacred. Allowing sovereignty to take place, without having to 'deal with' colonial guilt is a safe space. A 'space' can be in the theatre or on the land, allowing the land-rights to be spoken about for the sake of the river, not only for our own relationship to it. The river has its own body, it provides us with livelihood and inspiration for movement.<sup>50</sup> I let Sebastian embody the pulsation of blood and water, not only dancing about the river. At any time, the dam will crack, we just do not know when and in that space of unknowingness we allow the ritual to take place.

*Having the theatre space for allowing the ritual to take place.* There is something repeated and needs to be repeated to be un-silenced and to *undo the invisibility*.

I am also screaming and ululating, talking in tongues basically and at some point, really screaming and the music gets really chaotic. It sort of drives me but because I am swinging the tube it automatically creates movement in my body that is sort of round. My feet are like, if you watch some of the khoi and san dances they used to move around in circles with this very simple movement with the feet, stamping in the ground so that was what I was doing basically, except that I was more full in my upper body and my hip.<sup>51</sup>

In weaving, it resonates where we let the soil and the feet determine our pathways. You have only one job: let your feet guide your way. Let go, but always increase tempo. The pattern is not visible until you have weaved for a while. She wishes it was also a part of her repetitiveness in daily life since childhood, but it never was. It is now we are here and now we move, as our in-between-states of embodiment listen to each other.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Michael, Moya; choreographer. Personal online interview, May 6th 2021.

<sup>50</sup> One of the ways in which Marika spoke about composition, was asking her dancers on how they would dance the river, go beyond what it looks like and instead what the movement of it feels like in your body. Liv compared it to the Jojk, in this case: *you become the river* as you are singing as it, not only *about it the river*.

<sup>51</sup> Michael, Moya; choreographer. Personal online interview, May 6th 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Shared experiences between the dancers Sebastian Björkman and Linnéa Sundling during the production residency for *of itself: in itself*. at Dansens Hus, May 2021.



## Conclusion

(Tracing the pattern with fingers)

The various ways of creating art in Sápmi that this research has presented are of great importance to the act of change and transformation, specifically with focus on the body. What is imperative to conclude in this research is that the embodiment of dismantled and forgotten history is manifested through these dance creations and shows the immediate connection between human and soil. It is an ongoing process of retrieving memories, locating them in the body and transferring them to the next generation, to prevent further loss. In the case of mix-raced Indigenous heritage, the emphasis lies on multiple mirroring of the past that goes beyond what is unknown, forcibly making us weave together threads because we *have to learn*. Not for the sake of our direct ancestry, but for what we imagine has been our ancestors' pathways.

Being aware of the in-betweenness in Indigenous ancestry is also a bodily right. We then have to zoom in on what our body individually could contain, whether it is finding out more about where the threads of your heritage attach or if you have learned to see the beginning of the pattern before you start weaving. If something to us *is not lost* because we did not know it *existed from the beginning*, something is severed and we need to create our own imaginary threads. Because looking closely at weft and the band as you finish weaving, you trace all of the uneven bulks and bumps created if you happened to be unfocused while you were weaving. The journey in *finding out* and then *passing it on*, the band you are weaving could stretch until you decide to stop or you put it aside and let the experience of it sit for a while, nothing is wrong or right. It is about creating a sacred space where the body can be both the loom and the shuttle, but it has to include sacred spaces allowing the body to be sacred as well.

Indigenous choreographers need to have the loom without dominant demands from a colonial society as their starting point for the weft, and there needs to be an understanding that this is not yet the case in Scandinavia or the rest of Europe. There is the choice of wanting to pass on the shuttle through weaving education and dance production together, or insisting on making your work visible to a specific audience. It is important to not separate the body from the soil, and to accept that lived experiences in the Sámi community are deeply connected with the opportunity to be soil-bound and it is equally valid to be nomadic. We cannot, in the case of the Sámi body, separate it from the land; it has a built-in cellular way of being in the world, the inherited world of ancestors. If that world is concentrated in the body but the lived experiences of traditional knowledge are absent, that is also a part of your world and equally sacred.

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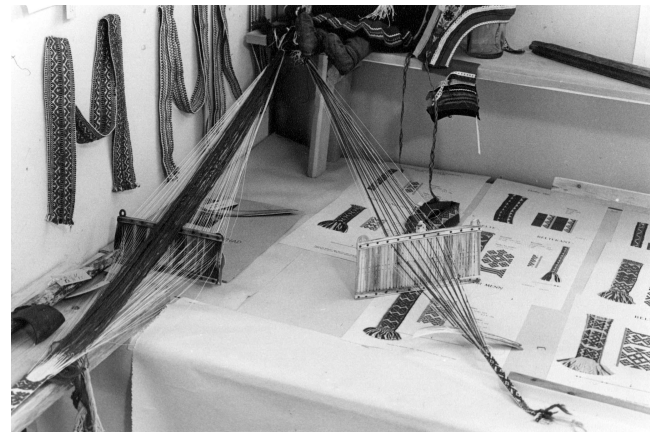
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Shuttles/Pennekniv



“Fra samisk utstilling på Den Samiske Folkehøgskolen i Karasjok fra 1951-1971”  
Wikimedia, Creative Commons  
Uploaded by Leslie Marr

Loom/bandgrind

Image: *Pennekniver, kniver og en båndgrinn i bensløyd - Norsk folkemuseum*  
Wikimedia, Creative Commons  
Uploaded by Unni Fürst/Norsk Folkemuseum



Shuttle/fingers

Warp & Weft

Image: Private photo of weaving Sámi shoe-band





A visit to Hokkaido University 2019  
Campus area

*The following pictures are private, taken by Marit Shirin Carolasdotter  
Guides: Masumi Tanaka, Hiroshi Maruyama in Sapporo 2020*



### Remnants of a river

This stream used to be a river, serving the Ainu people living areas and salmon for fishing.

When the Japanese settlers came, The Ainu community was deprived of their fishing rights and therefore their living areas.

Due to development of cultural areas upstream starting around 1951, the flow gradually decreased and eventually the river dried out.



### “Boys, Be Ambitious!”

Statue of William Smith Clark, a man from the U.S who served as a colonel in the Civil War. He founded Sapporo Agricultural College in 1876 which later became Hokkaido University. While in Japan he converted groups of students to christianity and remains a famous figure. You can even buy a miniature of him in souvenir shops around Sapporo. During this time, women were discouraged from studying at higher levels in Japan.



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(Downloaded 24th May 2021)





Photos by Andreas Nilsson  
Premiere at Norrlandsoperan August 2021



# HUMANS & SOIL of itself : in itself



Choreographer: Marit Shirin Carolasdotter,  
Dancers: Linnéa Sundling, Sebastian Björkman  
Music/Sound: Annelie Nederberg, Nina Nordvall Vahlberg  
Text/Spoken word: Juvvá Pittja  
Light: Erik Wiedersheim-Paul  
Costume design: Anna Ardelius  
Assistant: Jessica Karlén

[www.humansandsoil.com](http://www.humansandsoil.com)