

Buerie Båeteme, welcome to Stuehkie, the south sámi name for Stockholm that is one of the administrative municipality for Sámi culture. I just want to take this opportunity to mention that during this seminar, I'd like for us to honor the wisdom and knowledge that our ancestors has attempted to pass on through us, and leaving their stories to be told before us. We find pathways of bodies before us that we trace and continue to develop today. The Sámi people has helped maintain and nurture this land together with the ever changing flow of the rivers and the landscape. It is with humbleness that we acknowledge and sustain these stories by being in this place together today.

Introduction

This presentation describes the process, goals, and methods of a multi-modal collaborative project entitled, “Humans & Soil.” Using music, dance, poetry, research, and education, we explore the connection and corporeality of human bodies and land rights from Indigenous Sámi (Sweden) and Ainu (Japan) perspectives. “Humans & Soil” confronts the non-repatriation of Indigenous human remains, which for centuries have been forcefully extracted from their communities, studied, and displayed as artifacts in museums and other institutions. Bodily autonomy is intrinsically connected to other political discourses of colonization that remain relevant to Indigenous communities today, including land rights and resources for the practice of traditional lifeways and traditional ecological knowledge. But we also try to deconstruct and problematic issues such as extraction of natural resources, as well as cultural commodification of the body by doing artistic presentations and performances. “Humans & Soil” seeks to demonstrate how human bodies both living and dead, can advocate for more respectful and nuanced relationships between Indigenous and settler communities.

In march 2022 at Dansens Hus in Stockholm, we will perform a piece named “of itself : in itself” that is attempting to convey a multifaceted piece of Sámi activism and art, that demonstrates the interconnectedness of issues such as repatriation, land, body, and knowledge. *Humans & Soil* fits into a larger trend of international collaboration and visibility. In this work, the microcosm of the human body becomes an embodiment of both trauma and healing, and

choreography becomes a mode of political advocacy for the dead through physical space, movement, and embodiment. As an example of artistic activism, the work that this project does on behalf of the Sámi and global Indigenous communities extends beyond the original subject that inspired it, and situates a larger conversation about history, ethnicity, and memory within the context of the living, breathing communities who remain affected by the traumas of the past.

Since 2019, the project has a collaboration with Ainu and Japanese artists, researchers and residency organisations, run from Hokkaido in northern Japan. I collaborated with CemiPos research centre and Sapporo School of Freedom, and I wrote a report around the notion of 'Safeguarding' that I will read to you now.

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.¹ 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 beige, 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.² 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, a body that is not gathered in one piece when buried in the soil, cannot move on to the next world.³ 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.⁴

I would like to propose ways through my artistic process how human bodies, both living and dead, can advocate for agency over its own sense of embodied indigeneity. This project forefronts the issue of non-repatriated human remains of Indigenous peoples whose bodies and lived experiences bound to soil are being compromised by land-exploitation.

In order to show the interconnectedness between Indigenous research and embodied experience, the project is discussing choreographic processes behind performances such as “of itself : in itself”.

One of my choreographic methods is experimenting with the body as deconstructed and the Indigenous identity as defragmented, scattered around as I am entering new territories, new institutions and new performative spaces. The project is an attempt to form new decolonial methodologies through dance, music and spoken word performance.

The research behind the project is an apt embodiment of Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s “Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects,” in which she describes how a set of interrelated methodologies can reframe questions, goals, and analyses in such a way that emphasizes Indigenous values, even while operating within Western academic structures (Smith 2012: 144). In one chapter of her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith describes twenty-five tasks or actions that Indigenous scholars and creators can do or work towards to help balance the contradictions inherent between their Indigenous knowledge and experiences, with their position in Western academies. Smith describes **testimony** as the presentation of oral evidence, and in the case of decolonizing research, allows for

including “a narrative of collective memory” in Indigenous research projects as a valid source of truth-telling. In the case of having a mixed heritage between Indigenous peoples, such as myself, there is a clear ambivalence toward embodying such collective 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 unknown and un-walked track toward embodying such tasks or movement. Yet, by creating performative practices; I am recollecting and reconstructing memories - and even then, representing a minority culture while at the same time problematizing the lack of embodied cultural experience makes me question the responsibility upon my body as representative of Indigenous culture and performance. The dismantling of my own body feels at times as a desperate attempt to become anonymous, unlabelled, having the right to my own body of and in itself. But discovering a ‘new body’ and entering a culture as a visitor as well as a part of the Indigenous community has changed my perspective on artistic production entirely. As I am entering this white space as a mixed brown, mixed native Scandinavian person, I also enter a political space where I am seen as a minority. It is an unwanted special treatment, in which the activist inside me emerges and unfolds the unprecedented, foreign political body. What ever an Indigenous Sámi, Kurdish dancer produces, it becomes, in some way, political. I struggle, I become proud, I struggle, I become empowered, I struggle again.

Because 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 observer to understand historical and current discourses around the Indigenous identity. Inspired by the writings of Smith and her 25 *indigenous projects*, the intention of this research 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'.

A theoretical underpinning for the research 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. Contextualizing this notion through art and especially movement, as well as verbally transfer information through the Sámi and Ainu perspectives is an important part of creating the performative space through Humans & Soil. The creators are using dance and choreography to embody the strive toward equality and agency over the Indigenous identity and embodied using dance as a form of testimony to advocate for after-death personhood, and ask museums and other research institutions to address the silence and inaction surrounding calls for repatriation of stolen human remains.

By the projects design, the audience is connected to the space and performers through surrounding sound, light, and close physical proximity. The audience is pulled into the performance through lack of boundary, asked to witness the testimony, and reflect on their position in relation to the performers. Without an audience, there is no testimony, and without the post colonial gaze, there is no recognition of the continuous struggle toward political sovereignty. As Smith writes; "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."⁶ 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. Through my journey to Japan and investigation of how unrepatriated bones are being handled, we can clearly see that without proper political definition of Indigenous and minority plays a crucial role when it comes to the celestial and body in the afterlife. However, definitions of the two, aside from *people, peoples, independent peoples,*

depend on the geography and protective conventions applied by nations throughout the years.⁷ John B. Henriksen clarifies the dichotomy between the two notions in *Principles in Implementing ILO Convention No. 169* written in 2008:

“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.”

Choreographic practices and writing is a way of communicating what we want. Dance, is fundamental to maintaining stories and symbolic, traditional narratives. Dancing collectively, is a condition to evoke healing in Indigenous communities. And experimenting with new forms of reconstructing collective memories through movement, brings forth testimonies from long-term silencing.

We experience this struggle through the performers, and as a witness to the testimony, we must then decide how to interpret, and how to respond.

Dr. Kelsey A. Fuller, a co-researcher and ethnomusicologist with Humans& Soil expresses:

Ultimately, an ideal response would be wide-spread institutional change. The reaction from museums and other institutions to previous outrage on the subject has often been to remove stolen Indigenous remains from display, and instead move them to storage—hidden in climate-

controlled vaults, labeled in an archival box with a specimen number and probably a barcode. Institutions are hesitant to “give up” their acquisitions and collections, as these are how they measure and justify their self-worth. To avoid confronting this painful history, museums and cultural institutions whose collections benefit from the knowledge, artifacts, and remains that were stolen as recently as the 1950s generally try to justify their holdings by citing their scientific value. In general, rather than seeing repatriation as an opportunity to build more trusting relationships with Indigenous communities, many scholars and institutions have argued in favor of “academic freedom” and the “public benefit” of archaeological study on Indigenous human remains over repatriation, with discourses rooted in their assumptions of the universal relevance and objectivity of Western science that does not honor, or even recognize the existence, never mind the legitimacy of, Indigenous spirituality as it relates to burial and funerary practices (Smith 2004: 405-406). This is just one more manifestation of what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls “the white possessive,” or white justifications for ownership of Indigenous bodies, lands, and knowledge (Moreton-Robinson 2015). We in the audience must determine to what extent we are willing to work towards reconciliation for both the original possession, and the consequences faced by generations of living, breathing, Indigenous descendants.

As the project seeks to embody and perform the physicality of collective and inherited memory, the artists in the project suggest an alternative measure for the relevance of museums and their knowledge: instead of seeing stolen human remains as institutional property which unlock intrinsic empirical data, could they instead see the descendants of those stolen ancestors as the true inheritors of collective memory in both theory and practice, and let that marked change in attitude motivate them to foster opportunities for healing rather than continued exploitation.

Humans & Soil : commands a wide breadth of social, political, and artistic work on behalf of Sámi and Ainu communities, as well as the global Indigenous community more broadly. Collaborative works that target visceral, in-person experiences with specific political messaging contribute concrete dialogues to Sámi and pan-Indigenous movements and causes. The specific issue of Indigenous bodily rights that initiated the project leads the collaborators to other arenas of Indigenous politics. Using a multimedia format of music and sound, dance, poetry, research, and education, a single issue such as repatriation of Indigenous human remains can become a more widely encompassing piece of international Indigenous advocacy, creating new opportunities to discuss specific similarities between geographically divergent examples of colonization in Sweden and Japan, as well as their respective efforts towards decolonization. The work and artistic practice gives its international audiences concrete examples of how Indigenous peoples have been affected by imperialism and colonization, and also clear directions for how some aspects of institutionalized racism can be dismantled by listening to the appeals of Indigenous peoples.