

Notes on a performance: an evening in two acts with Cheyenne Rain LeGrande

ᑭᑦᑭᑦᑭᑦ and Amrita Hepi

By Bopha Chhay

An evening at the Western Front on September 21, 2022. Presented by grunt gallery in partnership with Western Front. Organized by Vanessa Kwan.

letters

In preparation for my flight to Aotearoa/New Zealand I had lined up a handful of books to read on the initial 16-hour flight, and the various airport gates I'd be transiting through. I opted for *Rehearsals for Living* by Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. *Rehearsals for Living* takes the form of a correspondence through letters. At the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 Maynard and Betasamosake Simpson began an exchange that attempted to connect and together make sense of multiple social, cultural, and ecological crises within Canada. The letters are grounded in their work as artists, activists, and mothers. *Rehearsals for Living* was a way to locate a meeting point, to ground each other in a way that counteracted feelings of isolation and alienation, and together actively build towards the world they wanted to be part of. As I read *Rehearsals for Living*, I started to reflect on the performances of Hepi and LeGrande in the form of letters. Letters between each other, but also through their respective performances, letters to known and unknown, intended, and unintended recipients in the past, present and future.

gaze

Performances are made for a discerning gaze. In the darkened space of the Grande Luxe Theatre, our first encounter with LeGrande's *Maskisin* ᑭᑦᑭᑦᑭᑦ, is through song. A slow paced acapella, that leads us into a familiar tune. After a few bars, the tune was recognizable as Fleetwood Mac's hit song *Dreams*. As LeGrande entered the room, she sung the lyrics, not in English, but in Cree. Bathed in warm tones LeGrande's performance was ethereal and spellbinding. As audience members, we were invited into the work on multiple sensory levels – through a choreography of *Dreams*, song, image, and adornment. Le Grande's shawl made of pastel-coloured ribbons and soda can tops was sculptural in form, and seemingly possessed the functional form of protection, as it actively refracted a singular gaze through atmospheric smoke, mirrors, and choreographed lighting.

Certain elements of the performance could only be ascertained by some members of the audience. The lyrics were discernible to those who understand the Cree language. LeGrande performs and enacts a 'writing back to empire', or more accurately a singing back to empire that resists and safeguards the stories within the work from being co-opted by an external gaze. I would go further and argue that LeGrande's performance is not solely an act of writing back to empire, but more as a firm refusal. Her work cannot be easily subsumed by the canonical conditions of cultural production and knowledge as dictated by 'empire'. As Edward Said argues 'Resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving of human history'.

Performing an excerpt from her work *Rinse*, Amrita Hepi invited the audience into the work through a familiar oratory storytelling device. Like LeGrande, Hepi also performed a 'writing back to empire', an interdisciplinary dancing back. Hepi's refrain of 'In the beginning' provided multiple entry points into *Rinse*. It acted as a reminder of what came before us, whilst opening out towards a more expansive narrative of the paths laid out ahead of us. The paths we choose to follow, and those we actively choose to step away from. Sometimes it's not what we choose, but a process reaching clarity that indicates that a path is not for us. To hear this, and to observe this in action, was incredibly liberating. While the refrain acted as an anchor for our stories, it also provided us with a certain amount of slack to continue to pursue what we need to.

Using the energy and momentum of 'beginnings' Hepi folds into the performance her personal practice and trajectory as a dancer and choreographer. Her dance choreography, combined with oral storytelling offers a refracted break in time. Hepi's 'writing back to empire' is a refusal to impose or dictate neutrality upon the body. Delivered at a frenetic pace, Hepi provided a glimpse into her continued personal negotiation of the different lexicons of dance. The histories and hybridity of forms is evident in her references to renowned schools of modern dance such as the Martha Graham Dance Company, alongside traditional Ballet, Maori dance contextualized within Maori histories and creation stories of Papatūānuku and Ranginui. Hepi's *Rinse* takes us on a journey of the expectations often foisted on artists and offers a complex unraveling of how to break free from canonical histories and containers that do not serve all bodies equally.

citation

Integral within both their performances, was the consideration of the archive that resides within the body. How to communicate ideas, thinking, feeling, and doing that are not decipherable solely through language. Or put more simply, how to draw from what resides within one's body where language is incapable or falls short.

LeGrande and Hepi remind us that there are people, ancestors, and spirits you bring into the room with you. They are most likely already there before you arrive. They are sitting in the front row or waiting backstage. While both LeGrande and Hepi presented solo works, their performances carried and brought with them a multiplicity of voices, a lineage of family, friends, ancestors, authors, thinkers, artists, dancers, musicians, and mentors amongst others. I was reminded of the significance of the references and citational choices we make. The paths of thinking and practice we chose to take. The paths we clear, maintain, and strive for with intention. In her book *Living a Feminist Life* Sara Ahmed describes this intention as ‘the politics of citation’ – ‘Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths, we were told to follow.’

As I sat in the Grand Luxe Theatre, I was reminded of the work of two authors where citation provides a critical structural form within their writing. Through their poetry they actively build towards other possibilities. Julianne Okot Bitek’s book of poetry *gauntlet*, and Alice Te Punga Somerville’s poem ‘An Indigenous scholar’s request to other scholars’ in her book *Always Italicise: how to write while colonised*. Both Okot Bitek and Te Punga Somerville’s poetry take the formal function of the footnote to offer an alternate way to read, one that is non-linear. It offers a call and response strategy, where reading alternates equally between the body of the text and the footnote. While the function of the footnote is seen to hold and offer supplementary information, and details to support the ideas within the main body of the text, the footnote itself becomes integral to the work. Crucial in its ability to hold the lineage of an idea, offer clarity, points of contestation, or elaborate in more detail. The footnote provides the scaffolding for ideas that reside within the main body. The spatial oscillation across the page insists on movement between and amongst ideas and schools of thought. It is this same movement of ideas and thinking that I also witnessed in the work of LeGrande and Hepi. Their performances organized and determined the way the audience, and those involved occupied that space and time. Embedded within both their performances was a rhetorical form of call and response. Not solely for those in the audience, but seemingly more as a commitment to those who have helped shape their work.

on traversing bodies of water

On a plane over the Pacific Ocean, I thought about Hepi and LeGrande’s performances. I thought about their relationship to place, to their kin, to the land. I thought about how their friendship and artistic practice becomes a joiner of lands. Their insistence on a hybridity of forms

and relationships embodies what Lana Lopesi refers to as false divides. In her book *False Divides*, Lopesi discusses Moana (the Pacific Ocean) as a great connector of culture. She identifies the way the ocean came to be understood as a divider of lands and people. Lopesi traces how the processes of imperialism imposed a European ideology that shifted geographical and cultural understandings of the Pacific. Lopesi's transnational approach to the Pacific, dissolves the idea of borders imposed by the nation state, as she traces historical narratives of relationships that were already in place prior to imperialist agendas. Through their effusive, yet grounding performances Hepi and LeGrande's work offer provisional blueprints that alert us to the historical and emotional realities of our bodies as archives. The containers they build privilege a hybridity that allows for leaking, spilling, floating and melding over canonical rigidity. The storied histories of false divides that encourage a fluidity is one that recognizes the body as a legitimate archive, porous and extending beyond a singular body, and towards a collective body. Their performances are rehearsals for living.