

The Poetry of *Performing the Ecology of Place*

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*Performing the Ecology of Place: Embodying an Eco-Cultural 'Living History' on Lasqueti Island/Xwe'etay*ⁱ involved the creation of a one-time cross-generational, outdoor, community performance event that endeavored to allow for a deeper understanding of the relationships locals held with the place and culture in existence on the unique 'off-the-grid' island of Lasqueti/Xwe'etay, in the area now recognized by many as British Columbia, Canada.



Lasqueti Island circled in redⁱⁱ

Performing the Ecology of Place was initiated with the hope to elucidate Dr. David Abram's visionary statement:

The singular magic of a place is evident from what happens there, from what befalls oneself or others when in its vicinity. To tell of such events is implicitly to tell of the particular power of that site, and indeed to participate in its expressive potency (Spell, 182).

Beginning in the Fall of 2012, *Performing the Ecology of Place* saw me undertake the facilitation process of devising a site-specific, equally site-sensitive and sensuous, place-based performance that explored and captured inhabitants' (both present and past) relationships to the local ecology, the local culture in/on/with the island community I call 'home.' Lasqueti Island, arguably, prides itself somewhat on its renegade reputation

(first established some hundred years ago, with being home to BC's most notorious pirates, and then further perpetuated by its renown for being a hotbed of marijuana cultivation). This reputation, both encouraged and countered by local residents, required approaching the theatricalization of a 'living history' with sensitivity.

It was hoped, and actively strived for, that *Performing the Ecology of Place* would integrate members of the Tla'amin First Nation, actively engaging and co-creating with them. In the past, the Tla'amin inhabited Lasqueti/*Xwe'etay* both permanently, and at times only seasonally during fishing, shellfish and food gathering rounds (Lepofsky, *Personal Emails*), however, there no longer exists any 'physical' presence of the Tla'amin on the island known to them as *Xwe'etay* (Yew Tree). The overall aim of the project from the onset was to facilitate an official return of the Nation to the island; and to work together with the Tla'amin along with a diversified group of current island residents, to collectively create what would result a staged and embodied 'living history': a theatricalization rooted in an eco-phenomenological approach and an Indigenous worldview. Indeed, what transpired, after my making multiple trips to meet with, and be openly welcomed and supported by the Tla'amin Cultural Committee and Tla'amin Elders, did not, in the end, result in any members being able to travel to Lasqueti Island/*Xwe'etay* for the one-time performance, or see anyone travel from Lasqueti to learn from the Tla'amin, other than myself. As I was trying to initiate my project with the Tla'amin, they were simultaneously, culminating a multi-year Treaty negotiation with the Province of British Columbia and Government of Canada, which resulted in all parties signing a Treaty. This national monumental milestone was drawing all their needed attention. However, through my visits, I learned more about Tla'amin culture and until the day arrives when we see members return to the shores of Lasqueti/*Xwe'etay*, I carry with me what I have learned and am able to share these gleanings. Even without Tla'amin involvement in this project, the entire process and performance proved pivotally powerful for the Lasqueti Island resident population. *Performing the Ecology of Place* stands as an effort that has already and will continue to serve as a bridging tool aiming to mobilize a collective community and activate reciprocal learning.

How do we/you define Ecology? How do we/you define Culture? How or Do they overlap on Lasqueti? How do you describe Lasqueti? What are Lasqueti's Most Defining Characteristics? How is Lasqueti expressed through you? What do you express through Lasqueti? How does Lasqueti shape us/you? How do we/you shape Lasqueti? What is your relationship with Lasqueti? How is your life (intimately) connected with the land, seasons, weather, tides, etc. of Lasqueti? Where does Lasqueti begin and You end? Where are the boundaries of (y)our subjectivity and objectivity with/to/for/against this place? How does local/situated knowledge interplay or stand in relation to the now-colonially displaced traditional knowledge of a First People who have/had resided here since time immemorial? Where does Indigeneity begin and where does it end in relation to this place? Has your experience of Lasqueti changed (over time?) If so, how? How do you relate to Off-the-Grid living? How do ethics, ecology, and culture interface on Lasqueti? What are the challenges and benefits of living on Lasqueti? How do Place, Space and Pace relate to Lasqueti?

***How do, or how can, we define the local ecology and culture of Lasqueti and how might we perform them?
How do we perform place?***

Further to interrogating how we perform place through community-devised performance, this project was instigated to explore how these questions might be answered outdoors, site-specifically:

Performance draws attention to the details of location, valorizing them, pulling them out of the everyday into relief, acknowledging them, staking claim to them in passing, as places to be to do, to watch. And the land in its specificities of slope and texture, occasion certain kinds of physical and engagement and response (Pearson *Site*, 48).

On April 13, 2013 *Performing the Ecology of Place* was staged 'in place.' The exploration of these dynamic intertwinings took the form of a multi-month, multi-streamed group process of gathering stories and sharing experiences, with over 50 workshops being held. Separate focus groups: homeschool youth, public school children and adults gathered, with all of their collectively-devised 'independent' creations being

woven together on the day of the performance, into a pastiche-style presentation of these vignettes of perspectives.

What emerged during the course of *Performing the Ecology of Place*, was an orientation towards/with ‘ecology’ “as a way of thinking, a *praxis*, that refuses human and non-human exploitation, and importantly, situates that refusal in the most everyday of activities, namely in how we locate ourselves at home” (Chamberlain, Lavery and Yarrow 27). This understanding was presented and performed through songs, through the art flapping in trees, through the localization of fairy-tales, through the re-enactment of historical moments, through costumed birds emerging from trees, and invading pirate boats, through an inter-tidal labyrinth built from the shore’s rocks: at times revealed, at times submerged, all alighting site-as-interlocutor: a dynamic, shape-shifting, unstable player in the unfolding drama.

Throughout the *Performing the Ecology of Place* process right up until (and throughout) the performance itself, site and place were never merely backdrops or scenic elements. There existed an animate element of co-creation and negotiation. Tides, temperatures, beach debris configured to make each site-meeting, a truly unique configuration/experience, never before experienced previously as such, or to be replicated again in the future, each time embodying the challenge of site (not) being a theatre ‘set.’ The day before the performance, south-east winds howled into the bay, moving logs where it was thought that audience-members would sit, rains poured town with torrential force and sub-zero temperatures resulted in there being not even a quasi-dress rehearsal. The factors that were affecting this specific place rippled out towards the immediacy of what such weather translated-into when living off-the-grid. Homestead chores dominated, and even for those few who dared/strove to venture out to the bay with the knowledge of tomorrow’s pending performance/sharing, the present conditions prompted huddled, if not numb, expressions of the ‘dynamic intertwining’ of place/people. These fluctuations experientially addressed questions of:

- How can site-specific performance play a role in an active engagement with place, helping make sense of the multiplicity of meanings that resonate from landscapes and memories?

- What mechanisms for enacting the intimate connection between personal biographies, social identities and the biography of place can it provide? (Pearson *Site* 56)

Not only was the notion of ephemerality applicable to the one-time performance, so too was it, most evidently, related to the composition of site, of ever-changing place. From its very conception, throughout the unfolding of this project, I was intrigued by Tim Ingold's question: "If landscape is a matrix of related stories as much as topographic details, can contemporary forms of devised performance enable us to reveal it, to relate its stories, 'as we go'?" (qtd. in Pearson *In Comes I*, 17). I enabled *Performing the Ecology of Place* to engage through an extensive, creative, community dialogue for a one-time, impermanent response. "The guarantee of a specific relationship between an art work and its "site" is not based on a physical permanence of that relationship..., but rather on the recognition of its unfixed *impermanence*, to be experienced as an unrepeatable and fleeting situation" (Kwon 91). The temporal situatedness of one community's place-ing/place-d performance would be mirrored in the make-up of site and players alike. On the day of the performance, the skies cleared, the winds abated, the temperatures rose (just a little)...and then, the sun came out.

Performing the Ecology of Place: Embodying an Eco-Cultural 'Living History' on Lasqueti Island/Xwe'etay was designed to, and succeeded in offering, both participants and residents a timely perspective on the place they call 'home.' One, among countless examples, of an incredible dimension of this project was the combing of Lasqueti's his/hertory with the island's children. The level of intrigue and curiosity that it sparked amongst them all, and the rich-story sharing that it sparked: with me, with each other, with teachers, and with parents, was astounding. The children would delight in quizzing their parents on such facts as 'when did the first car come to Lasqueti?' Parents were coming up to me saying how their knowledge of Lasqueti's was expanding vicariously through their children. Questions emerged between us of what historical moments to, or not to, include, allowing the children to come to a firm understanding of how subjective history is. Even locally. The youth, through *Performing the Ecology of Place*, took ownerships of their history...and their own stories. "It is *performance* which returns to define site-specificity, not only as a set of critical terms and as a mode of work,

but as a way of characterizing *the place* these various site-specific practices reflect upon” (Kaye 12), wherein:

Place provides a template for practice – an unstable stage for performance. Place provides the conditions of possibility for creative social practice. Place in this sense becomes an event rather than a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the authentic.

(Cresswell as qtd. in Pearson *In Comes I*, 13)

Performing the Ecology of Place strove to facilitate a devising process that was imbued with an inextricable poiesis, a poetics – *an eco-poetics of place* -- indivisible from the dramatic performance. Much as site-and-peoples’ relationships were being viewed as inextricable throughout the process, so too was the development of content within the focus groups. Children and wrote poems collaboratively. The etymology of poiesis being ‘*to create*’ and ‘*drama*’ being ‘*to do*’ – then, the embodiment of the *eco-creative* methodology employed involved approaching ‘*poetry*’ as intrinsic to the process...and ultimately, the performance. The words were featured during the final sharing...’spoken through’ the island’s feathered friends: costumed Eagle and Raven. Heidegger believes that “poetry that thinks is in truth the topology of Being. This topology tells Being the whereabouts of its actual presence” (12). This project approached Heidegger’s topology as having the potential to illicit a site-specific, site-sensuous and site-sensitive ‘*topography*’ of being and Being, through process and performance.

“Devised theatre is transient and ephemeral, which makes the documentation of the form difficult” (Oddey 21).

And so, I document my experience of the performance/performative experience through poetry...a decision that was never pre-meditated, but rather emerged as I reflected on the process as a whole. It became a way of rooting the project, from my vantage point as facilitator, in “*notions of the authentic*” (to reference Cresswell, above)...a through-line from the process I had had participants engage in, to one I would

myself participate in; and a way of stylistically capturing the nuances, the subtleties, the flow, the fluctuations of the piece-(*as process*)-as-whole.

The process that was not about me. It never was and it never could be. The community owned the process and the performance. I was merely a conduit...

*and so she called
“all aboard”
toted through ferry-madness
the names of a community
held together in space
in place
for all the hear, for all the be here
present as the circle is opened
cast wide through expansive direction(s)
earth, air, fire, water
below and all around
stories surround
eagle high a top
old growth tree and juniper-nestled
trickster raven recall
the poetry
their inter-species ventriloquism
usher in students from the past
swinging on history’s branches in
maple grove –
this is I-T-E-U-Q-S-A-L
Y-A-T-E- ‘E-W-Xⁱⁱⁱ
where invading pirates land
boats taking on water
emerging drunk from the row
forgetting their quest for rumored treasure
leaving poster of their 1913 leader
beneath wet floorboards
they set to pillage for women
burly-man-in-woman’s-blouse
about to make off with unsuspecting local
dame, is stopped mid-swoop, by his
sword-carrying, ransacking comrade:
‘wait, that’s my mum’
taunting tubas intervene, in a show-(down)
staging three generations of one family
through bolting brassica grace, the rogues
make off only with ‘jake’*

*pink-sparkle tailed feral lamb
saxophones, trombones and
trumpets secure the peace...
& quiet (as the camouflaged 'plants'
 nestled into bluff 'give thanks') through
stoned labyrinth
lasquetia and little people walk through, as
horse-logging taxis
bare-back the witnessing of an
ever-moving post office...
there must be rules to all of this,
 sung and 'rap'ped in
plastic bags
welcome to lasqueti
where's the bar?
blue-in-the-face we wait for
gas til Monday
this is reason enough to declare a
world war
armed with driftwood
 and oyster shell
32 enlist
four year olds are employed to drive the first
 highways truck
headlamps are delivered by the three year old
 power company official
everyone else is otherwise occupied
 sipping local moonshine in the
 noisy pirate grotto, while
three little lasqueti lambs
quest to find their mother
 (now burnt beyond a recognizable
 crisp, equally forgotten by
 'overseeing' pirates)
perhaps the wood-splitting wwoofer could
prepare something for the feast, stepping out from
bear/wolf/cougar...dog stalked plywood/log/cob
home –
 to be wrapped up in one community's
 knitted blanket of
care...
 that presents and that 'speaks' through
 every 'disability'
guitars, banjos, drumkits and
xylophone cannot coax the
xylem of the*

*back-to-the-landers' voices to
flow any stronger
but through this 'recipe'
one woman
"inserted into the middle
comes out muddy and
grateful^{iv}" ...*



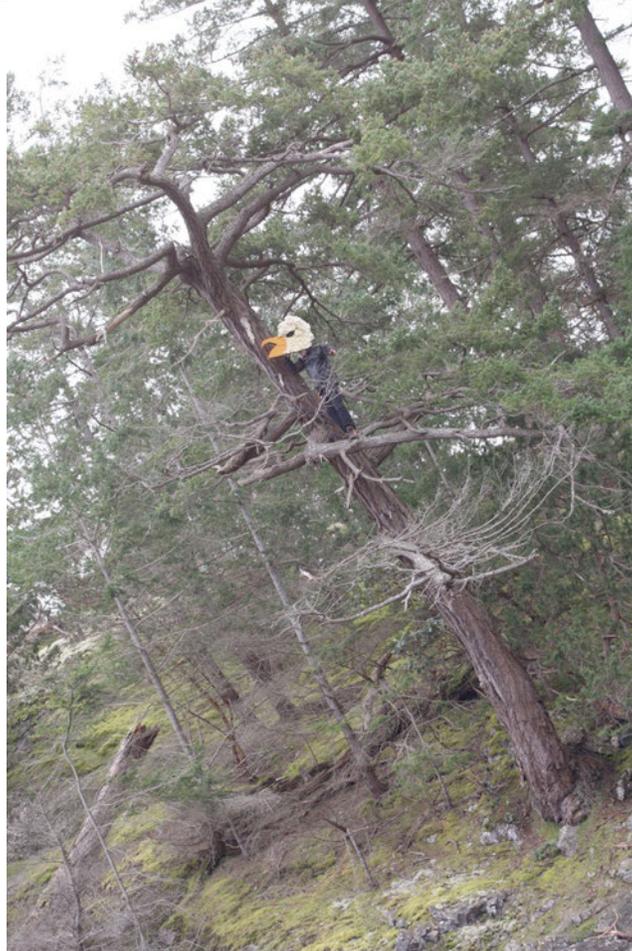
Eagle-Eye View of 'Performing the Ecology of Place'



The metaphoric connotations of the elementary school students accidentally spelling Lasqueti backwards during the performance.



Arriving to (re)claim Lasqueti's rumoured buried pirate treasure.



The Poetic Channels



ⁱ Funding provided for this project by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

ⁱⁱ Map Source:

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1a/Vancouver Island, with Lasqueti Island highlighted.png](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1a/Vancouver_Island,_with_Lasqueti_Island_highlighted.png)

ⁱⁱⁱ On the day of the performance, the elementary school students held up their lettered signs that read LASQUETI and on the inverse XWE'ETAY, backwards. *See photograph.*

^{iv} Quoted by poem *Recipe* written and read by Sophia Rosenberg at the end of *Performing the Ecology of Place*.