

CATHERINE WOOD IN CONVERSATION WITH

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HOW DOES THE BODY CARRY HISTORY?

TLL: History sets the current conditions under which we live. This is particularly evident for Indigenous peoples contending with difficult histories and conditions within the context of settler colonial states on Turtle Island (North America) and elsewhere.

History is unfolding in real time every day. Our bodies accumulate these historical experiences (that we may or may not understand to be historical as they occur) over time. Indigenous and non-Indigenous theorists describe this in different ways, as a kind of density of time in the body.

In some instances our bodies reach back in time to the experiences of our extended family and ancestors, towards generational kindnesses as well as deep grief, so that those affective experiences are present for us in this moment.

I am also compelled by moments as well as durations of agency and resistance within the context of history. These moments only become visible occasionally but they are ongoing, daily, and even quotidian.

I am quite interested in a bodily, lived, ongoing, reflexive theorising that connects history and the body.

OO: The body carries history in the blood, in how sound rolls up through your throat, in the distinct placement of the vibrations along your vocal folds, in the crook of the elbow, in the length of your foot against the surface of the ground, in how your stomach settles or unsettles after eating spicy food, in the stories your parents reveal to you when you are old enough to look at them with immense curiosity and wonder about who they are, in the way your ears ring and your heart aches when they take the time to tell you.

FL: To wake up one morning in 1997 and to hear on the radio that Zaire no longer existed and I had to learn to call my country Democratic Republic of Congo was quite troubling. I realised that actually my real heritage is ruins. So my work has been about trying to make sense of these ruins. It is the ruins inside us that are the most difficult to deal with.

When you're trying to understand history, obviously the question of archives becomes central. But then immediately when you start looking into archives, coming from the Congo or Sub-Saharan Africa, we are confronted with how far back you can go into written archives, because before colonial times, our ancestors used to record history differently. There were few cultures with a writing system on the continent: they relied on oral traditions. And so with colonialism, all that was thrown away and written archiving was imposed upon people. The only written archives you can get cannot take you beyond 200 years, and, moreover, they are the winners' archives; it is the European perspective.

So what can you understand of the evolution of a people within such a short period of time? That's when being a dancer became significant. Maybe I can access a potential other archive here through the body, because even genetically you can say that babies who are born today are ancient. They can be connected to many, many generations past. And so someone can say that their body knows things that we cannot put into words. My body knows a lot of things that I cannot comprehend intellectually. So could dancing be a way of asking the body questions? I've been listening to the body, hoping that it would speak back. But then the question is, do I even have the tools to understand this language if the body spoke back?

WHAT DOES COLLABORATION MEAN FOR YOU?

OO: For me, a collaboration fills me with heady expectation for outcomes and possibilities that I could never have imagined. A collaboration is to dive, headfirst, into the unknown, with total trust. A collaboration is simultaneously an act of dispersal and gathering - I feel I must let go of my preconceived ideas, of my expectations, and then perhaps I give myself the chance to gather what is most vital, very closely and hold it within.

TLL: Facilitating an ethical space between myself, dancers, composers, other artists, curators and writers and organising or putting into place (to the best of my ability given other structural constraints) the conditions for a generous and generative process come to mind when I consider collaborative processes. In conversation with curators I understand the structural conditions of the work in relation to the museum, an exhibition, and the time and space allowed for the work to come to be.

This information is coupled with a mobile framework, a set of ideas or questions that I've gathered through an intensive research process over years or in more recent thinking. This research extends to the open rehearsal process, such as that which I shall share at Tate; a building of a performance through a bodily and sometimes sonic investigation of the questions I am posing.

I also consider relationships built over time that are tended to in a process of communication and reciprocity. I consider collaboration an anticolonial approach in that I work to eliminate violence within the process; to do no harm (Paul Cormiere, an Anishnaabe scholar in Ontario, recently spoke about this). Beyond the elimination of violence within the process, I attempt to embody and transmit Indigenous ethics in these relationships.

I navigate the complexities and nuances of working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks in my practice. Recently I've come to understand that the belief and support of my work by folks gives me hope for the future of these broadly complex and difficult relationships between peoples.

FL: Dancing can be an attempt to remember my name, to remember my body, and how this body relates to other bodies, to remember how this name is not isolated but it's actually related to other names, be they names of places or names of people, how this body, these names are related to history, to land. So *My Body, My Archive* is really like a search for the possibility of a circle in a broken world, because the circle is really a beautiful ideal, the ideal of circulation, energy that goes from my right shoulder will for sure come back through the left, that's the circle... Because when people make a circle to dance in traditional societies, it is a moment when the community comes together, so there is circulation, there is solidarity. Yet, this is probably only the world as it should be but it's not the world we live in.

Those moments when we – as human beings – tried to be together, we didn't take them for granted. How can we make them possible today, taking into account how broken our world is? So it becomes like a question of responsibility. It is broken, but what can I do about it? Can I do something to mend these pieces, maybe just finding circulation in my own body, and reconnecting with this history which I can't access otherwise?

And maybe finding a way of bringing people together as collaborators and sustaining this relationship over a long, long, long period of time. [Making] lifetime companions, because we're trying to expand the circle, so everyone needs to give themselves the means to work towards their own little circle. Then let's make a bigger circle together, and then let's

see how we go and meet the larger world. And maybe that's why thinking in terms of how we would inhabit the Tanks spaces here, I started thinking of circles. How do I make a circle with myself, how do I make a circle with my partners, how do we meet our audience? How do we just even for a minute remember all of us, performers and audience alike that, there is a larger circle out there; the world at large.

HOW DOES YOUR WORK DEAL WITH NOTIONS OF PLACE (GEOGRAPHICAL, IMMEDIATE LOCATION), IN RELATION TO TIME?

TLL: I'm mindful that I have had specific experiences in specific places in relation to specific peoples during my lifetime. I am weary of reducing Indigenous ideas as we contend with this reductiveness daily as Indigenous peoples in North America. I work between immediacy and history regularly in my work. I consider geography less as a mapped space. I think about land and waters in relational ways, meaning that we have a responsibility to them and them to us.

OO: I often work with duration, particularly in rehearsals periods. I am trying to gather time as material, and I hope that when my body is in a relationship to a particular site for a long period of time there are molecular shifts occurring within me and within the space of the action. I am hoping that a space for reflection opens up within me, my collaborators and the public. I am an African American woman of Nigerian descent, attempting to vibrate with a particular colonial history in Nigeria. Performing in the Tanks at Tate Modern, a place where oil used to be stored, which after its discovery in Nigeria in the late 1950s by Shell-BP, turned Nigeria into a single commodity economy. It became simultaneously Nigeria's gift and curse, but perhaps mostly its curse, as oil spills proliferate, polluting rivers, contaminating fish, degrading farmland, escalating cancer rates among the populations living in the delta river region.

FL: In the DRC, we have developed projects around water supply, education and reforestation. The circle includes notions of infrastructure and ecosystem. It's not just people, but a symbiosis with environment. Because we are part of an ecosystem, and we have to make it a liveable place. That's why I was talking of the web of relationships, it means not only being aware of my body, but being aware of how my body stands in space in relation to other bodies. So obviously the questions of social justice, the questions of ecology come into play, because I can only imagine circulation if everyone has a possibility of occupying a space which is liveable.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SHOW IN A MUSEUM SUCH AS TATE MODERN, WITH ITS FOUNDATION IN COLLECTING, AND (ORIGINALLY) AN IDEA OF CHRONOLOGICAL EVOLUTION OF ART?

TLL: Generally my work contends with museum collections and the museum as a structure that has had specific kinds of relationships to Indigenous peoples' material culture. The removal of our cultural belongings from our communities where they were surrounded by 'felt structures' – the people, our ideas, our ways of being, the land, the water – is a colonial move. I choose to engage more broadly with museums as a gesture towards this ongoing and fraught relationship between Indigenous peoples and the museum. This is not to say that the museum is immovable as it is made up of people. Yet, the structure of the museum has a distinct relationship to Indigenous peoples over time.

FL: There are many, many languages in the Congo, one of the major ones is Lingala. Something I find fascinating about Lingala is that we use exactly the same word – ‘lobi’ – to signify ‘yesterday’ as well as ‘tomorrow’.

So it’s only the context of the sentence that will make it clear if you’re talking of the past or the future. For a long time, I wondered why the ancestors who invented this language, Lingala, could not imagine a different word to tell these realities? But recently I thought, what if it actually was a way of saying everything is connected. And so, suddenly, the future and the past are connected through those who are present today. You could say that the ancestors and the unborn are connected. Those who are present here have a responsibility on one hand towards the ancestors and on the other hand towards the unborn, towards the future – what did you receive, and what do you pass on.

OO: Tate Modern is a space that has dedicated space for live, time-based performance and film as part of its master plan. I hope my labouring body is in direct contention with material objects that bare only subtle traces of the labour required to make them. I love performance as a kind of love labour, the work only exists when the body is labouring, but the work is disappearing in each moment of that labour, memory becomes unstable, reference points keep shifting. What’s happening is a kind of slow disappearing act, where, in the end, the witness has to be content with the residue the work left behind, in the unstable terrain of memory and within the vanishing spirit. I value this act of disappearance as a fundamental challenge to capital market strategies and/or systems of value that don’t know how to make meaning outside of the authority of the archive or the eternal and monumental.

WHAT DO THE NOTIONS OF TRADITION OR HERITAGE MEAN FOR YOU AND YOUR PRACTICE?

OO: Everything, but in very mysterious ways. As a child of the diaspora, grandchild of the colonised, I am a descendant of rupture and I work within that rupture, of forgetting and trying to remember.

TLL: I have spent much of my lifetime learning within Indigenous spaces; whether that’s learning on the land and water with my father in my homelands in Alaska, attending ceremonies with Anishnaabe and Cree peoples in the Rocky Mountains since I was a young adult, or participating in powwows and round dances in Alberta and Ontario over the last two decades. Many of these Indigenous networks have been invisible except to the communities and peoples who have been active participants. These spaces have been formative for my thinking. I apply what I have come to know to my practice in ways that might not be visible. Partly I am enacting relationality, an approach that creates a sense of community for the participants; where, over the course of several days, we think and work alongside one another, making contributions to a performance or other work. This way of working together, of our collective contributions, as an ethical practice, is rooted in my experiences and understandings of Indigenous practices.

FL: I said earlier on that the past is not dead, maybe also to think in terms of *lobi*, but above all for me it is the sense of responsibility towards those who are coming after me. And how do I make it possible for my own children to get a viable world, even just a house which is not a pile of ruins. So again it’s that sense of responsibility, what can I do about it, because I owe them something.

HOW DO YOU VALUE MATERIAL OR IMMATERIAL FORM IN YOUR WORK?

TLL: I am interested in the material when it directs our attention to the immaterial. The immaterial is our way of being with one another. It is a way of looking, listening and a kind of action. The immaterial is gestured towards within the material. I am thinking of Indigenous cultural belongings specifically as material forms that direct our attention to the immaterial that was (and continues to be) a kind of felt structure for Indigenous peoples. What I mean to say is that I understand a felt structure to be conceptual that comes to be embodied – it is a way of organising the way in which we understand ourselves in relation to one another, to the land, to non-human persons.

FL: Performance is a permanent negotiation in that it's not only about the piece, it is about how we create the moment for the piece to even be receivable. Hence the idea of treating the audience as guests. It doesn't mean that what we have to talk about or the meal we're about to share will be loved by everyone, even if we were there to fight and eventually blood will flow, people will die, but how can I do it in such a way that shows respect. It's not fun going through this, but it is necessary, that's why I wanted you to come, we need to sit, we need to listen to each other, we need to face this situation together.

So for me it's like accepting the idea of death as a necessary state for other things to emerge. I'm not searching for permanence...

The main question for me is whatever we keep in museums – whether it is material or a gesture or a song – how much does it carry in terms of energy of life that is needed in the world we live in now? When this piece – the mask, sculpture, dance or song – is only viewed as something great from the past, and even if it doesn't activate anything for us today, then for me it just doesn't make sense.

OO: I value material as something to dance with, vibrate with, and the immaterial is the energetic core of my practice. I work with what cannot be seen, but what might shake loose through vibration.