Shapeshifters: Black Queer Land(ing) at Gibney Dance

MAY 02, 2018  by MAURA DONOHUE  in DANCE
Gathering Place: Black Queer Land(ing), a three-week series conceived and curated by Marýa Wethers at Gibney Dance’s Agnes Varis Performing Arts Center, included events that highlighted “intersections and crossroads among Blackness, queerness, and Indigeneity.” Artists mayfield brooks, jumatatu m. poe, and the I Moving Lab collective offered performance works, workshops, durational installations and audience activations that forged traditional practices, with queer sensibilities and the acumen of global Indigenous experiences to enact modern rituals of transformation and reorganization. The substance of each work was significantly compelling, but it was the accumulation of engagements that made Marýa’s curational artistry especially potent. Material worlds came together with the divine, infiltrating mortal shells with eternal visitors and revealing shapeshifters among us.

mayfield brooks *IWB: Dancing in the Hold* Part II
performance in three parts from the ongo-
ing investigation by mayfield brooks, \textit{Im-
provising While Black (IWB)}. I had first en-
countered mayfield’s work through a 2016 \textit{Con-
tact Quarterly} interview about the use of dance improvisation for developing en-
vvironments around “atmospheres of care and inquiry while listening to ancestral whispers of the middle passage.” I had taken a workshop with mayfield during the Movement Research Spring Festival last year and had recently curated a new work-in-progress by mayfield into the Estrogenius Festival. Part I, \textit{P(a)RLAY} as a workshop for Black-identified artists was de-
scribed on \textit{Eva Yaa Asantewaa’s Infinite-
Body blog}.

Part II, \textit{Dancing in the Hold}, in Gibney Dance’s new Black Box theater, sub-
merged us below the ocean’s surface.

“Holds in older ships were below the orlop deck, the lower part of the interior of a ship’s hull, especially when considered as storage space, as for cargo”…As an audi-
ence member I invite you to immerse
Brett Davis’s sculptures were spread around the space as luminous plastic columns filled with seaweed. We were in the wreckage of historic atrocity and shimmering transfigurations. Both Mayfield and the dazzling Chicago-based, S. African artist Mlondi wore silver dresses while a sequined sentinel (Eva Yaa Asantewaa) sat to my right. As the work progressed through rapid fire mutations in sound and body, the two artists called forth mania and beauty. Against a stinging reminder (“was the seed, was the cause”), with the mention of Rhodesia, of the brutal imperialist belief systems of the likes of Cecil John Rhodes who infected Africa and the world with his ideas of racial superiority and conquest, *Dancing in the Hold* expanded the shipwreck of transatlantic slavery and genocide into a new day, a new dawn.

**jumatatu m. poe: terrestrial**

![Image of dancers]
Samantha Speis and vocalist Rodrigo Jerônimo had already been pulsing in The Lab at Gibney Dance for two hours before I entered their realm. The trio employed stomping, vibrating physical states alongside sung and hummed vocals which allowed dreamscapes to seep in and out of the room. Inspired by the hot brown granules in both desert dirt and beach sand, terrestrial presented “humans as earth and Black humans as having a long, continuing terrestrial history that far precedes—and will outlive—the past five centuries of white supremacy’s specific oppressions.” While descriptively rooted in the surface-world, my experience of the artists was of a sacred communion of body and spirit. Here we were finally inhabiting the distant horizon, joining both heaven and earth seated at the feet of red eyed, heady guardians. The ripples through the bodies were seismic. As the three collapsed slowly to the floor, the settling occurred through a series of ruptures, earthquakes and aftershocks. The continent of Samantha lay close to my feet, and I could observe closely the magnificent mountain range of the spine. Delighted and in quiet awe, I saw planets
deign a return to this sapient land, transmuting majesty into hills and valleys, resolving in the endless cycle of destroying all that was before to satisfy creation's call.

**I Moving Lab: I LAND 2018**

In the final week, the I Moving Lab collective shared *I LAND 2018*, an evening of works featuring Maori contemporary dance by Jack Gray, Bianca Hyslop (of Atamira Dance Company) and Dâkot-ta Alcantara-Camacho, as well as Indigenous hip hop and spoken word by Infinite Dâkot-ta and riveting songs from Lyla June Johnston. The I Moving Lab collective involves artists with lineages from Aotearoa (New Zealand), Guåhan (Guam), Hawai‘i, Puerto Rico, and Turtle Island. There was a pre-show Gallery activation with healing balm from New Zealand and participatory chants. There was
an invitation to transfer items from the altar in the gallery onto an altar in The Theater at Gibney Dance. There was a “Living Language Lessons” from Karen Mosko. There were several seamless dances that directed energies with luscious ebb and flow, melding superb contemporary artistic practices with aesthetics and vocabularies drawn from the personal cultural traditions of the various artists. There was a constant simultaneity, a being-ness on multiple levels that expanded both into the future and the past, a constant becoming that flooded the space with power. And, in the end, there was an invitation for us to participate and join in the dance and song, to become community in preparation for the sequel… All Nations Rise.

Lyla June Jonhnston and cast I Moving Lab I Land 2018 Photo by Scott Shaw
Tagged with: black, Gibney Dance, indigenous, jumatu poe, marya wethers, Mayfield Brooks, Queer

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maura Donohue

Maura Nguyen Donohue has been making and performing experimental performance works in NYC since 1995. She has been a member of La MaMa's Great Jones
Rep since 1997. From '99-04, as artistic advisor for DTW's Mekong Project, she facilitated residencies in the US and SE Asia. She's currently serves on the board of Movement Research and on the Bessies Committee. Her essay "Ambivalent Selves: The Asian Female Body in American Concert Dance" was published in Contemporary Directions in Asian American
Dance. She is Associate Professor at Hunter College, faculty fellow for the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute, and is the mother of 2.