

Questions Endlessly Worth Answering: Britta Joy Peterson's 'A Model for Staying With'

By Valerie Oliphant

“What conveys a right, and why should humans, alone on all the planet, have them?”
— Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

A lone figure awash in a spotlight appeared out of the dark on my Zoom screen, transporting me into Dance Place's theater. There, Britta Joy Peterson was wrapping up lighting cues in the final hours of her Creative Residency. The choreographer spent a week in February hammering out technical cues with her creative team: Robert Woofter, director of photography and video creator; Evan Anderson, technical director and sound designer; and Olivia Weber, producer. Composer Derek Blackstone joined virtually. They were constructing and finetuning Peterson's multimedia work *A Model for Staying With*. The Washington, D.C.-based dancemaker and director, a 2020-2022 Dance Place Artist in Residence (AIR), was invited to return to Dance Place's studio, which was closed for 10 months during the Covid-19 pandemic -- for a week of limited and safely designed rehearsals.

A Model for Staying With challenges viewers to contemplate their own place in our ecosystem. The installation includes movement, video, sound and music arranged on the stage for audience members to walk through and explore individually during their timed entry. To make it safe these days, one person is admitted at a time in thirty minutes increments over the course of five hours. Four filmed dance performances are simultaneously projected on both sides of separate screens arranged like a baseball diamond. Ultimately, the performances will be displayed on four commissioned sculptures. By design, no one can catch every moment -- some may be captivated by a single screen, others by the sound or lights. As a lone observer last month, I found myself torn about where to focus, wanting to watch everything at once.

Each screen captures a single dancer, wearing a clear raincoat jumper atop simple black undergarments, and outdoors among abandoned blocks of concrete overgrown with lush greenery. Malik Burnett, Annie Peterson (no relation), Vvette Tiya, and Zoe Wampler embody four characters envisioned by Peterson: the Gate Keeper, the Provider, the Generator, and the Conductor. At times they feel serene, like watching a stranger practice tai chi in the park. On screen, Tiya rocks rhythmically back and forth, arms open wide, face lifting serenely to the sun in a moving meditation. Then all four dancers turn frenetic, flailing. The camera zooms in to hips jarringly gyrating, then quickly cuts to elbows jabbing while the music crescendos to 93 decibels -- just two decibels below a damage-inducing level if exposed for 50 minutes or more.

Toward a More Livable Future

Sound designer Anderson and composer Blackstone worked together over the week to spatialize the sound, giving the performers a “voice” by placing a speaker behind each screen. If you stand in the center of the room, the sound bounces around you as the dancers seem to call and respond to one another. Sometimes it's so overwhelming I

moved to the periphery. The design of the installation encourages the viewer to enact multispecies theorist Donna J. Haraway's ideas of "staying with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth," which Haraway believes will allow humanity to build a more livable future. As humans, we are instinctively trained to respond to stimuli, so Peterson uses sound, lighting, and movement to guide viewers through the installation. Since each audience member is alone in the room, the art asks them to examine who and what they choose to engage with and how they understand their role in the world. What would it look like, I wonder, to change the shape of the ecological pyramid that places humans on top as the apex predator? What if we are participants in, rather than dominators or saviors of, the environment?

Later we talk. For every question I ask Peterson, she asks me at least three more. I am left pondering human existence. Her art and creative processes are iterations of intersecting projects that explore big ideas: connection, sustainability, identity, holding space, and communities. "I find a real intersection between my interest in taking time to work with ideas and letting them unfold and progress," Peterson said. As a Professorial Lecturer in American University's dance program, Peterson finds working in academia informs her creative process. She conducts an immense amount of research for each project with a wide variety of sources. For this piece, she used Richard Powers' Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory*; interviews with horticulturists and conservation scientists; and a myriad of other resources.

Mapping the Creative Process

While describing her work, Peterson pulled up a mind map on her computer -- an intricate lattice connecting all her past and current projects, with links to research, stories, and photos. *A Model for Staying With* is part of a larger series, *External Organ*, which examines sustainability and the human-created climate crisis. "I have made a commitment to always push myself and my processes with each project. So while I have creative strategies that I always employ, the process itself is really dynamic," she explains. She often starts with design and visioning, a way of thinking similar to Einstein's combinatorial play, which involves putting together two seemingly unrelated practices to generate new ideas. Then she toggles between leading the process and following what the piece demands and reveals to her. Since design is paramount for Peterson's works, this Dance Place technical residency provided crucial time and space to draw ideas out of everyone's heads and laptops and into three dimensional space.

Peterson began this project a year ago, just one week before the first pandemic lockdown in March 2020. Making collaborative art in a pandemic can feel impossible, yet Peterson safely put together *A Model for Staying With* while caring for her team. Inspired by ecologist Ingrid M. Parker's work on interactions between invasive and native plants, Peterson created a movement technique she calls "Speaker for the Dead," a method for relating to what has been lost. For this technique, she asked each dancer to research a different extinct tree species, which is then embodied in their performances. I can see this influence in the way Burnett stands tall and sturdy, calmly breathing while

staring directly into the camera, and when Annie Peterson's limbs search for the sun, a hand slowly pushing through leaves until fingertips shine in the light.

For the projected dances, Peterson spent one month rehearsing with each dancer separately, virtually as well as safely distanced outdoors, before filming their solos. Peterson tailors her style to each dancer, all strong improvisers who work collaboratively while maintaining their individuality. "The moves don't really matter to me. It's how they're done," she confides. "If you hand a dancer a coloring page and Crayolas and they're coloring it and choosing where to shade it, that's what I'm interested in."

When a Tree Is Ripped From the Ground

Each dancer filmed in solitude echoes the isolation the pandemic wrought. Concurrently, the interlinked system of these solo dancers evoke the complex root systems in forests that allows trees to communicate and support other trees. When a tree gets ripped out of the ground, what happens to the root system and surrounding trees? Similarly, what does it mean to disconnect humans from our networks as the pandemic has done? *A Model for Staying With* investigates these questions.

Peterson gushed about how critical Dance Place's artistic development support has been -- particularly when so many studios and theaters have been shuttered. It would be impossible for her to own all the equipment for a multimedia project of this magnitude - a full lighting plot, professional dance floors, pipes and drapes, power, projectors, 40-plus rolls of tape, a fast enough laptop to run everything, and high resolution monitors. Given an entire week to themselves at Dance Place provided the team time and space to try things. When I spoke with Peterson at the end of her residency, she and her collaborators had executed everything they set out to do ... and more. Another iteration of *A Model for Staying With* will become part of a full premiere at Dance Place in the spring of 2022.

While the way she describes her work may be esoteric for some, Peterson assures me that audiences needn't worry about "getting it." "I just ask a ton of intersecting questions and don't offer any answers," she states, reminding me of a quote from the novel that inspired her: "Sun and water are questions endlessly worth answering." Peterson wants to disrupt patterns of thinking and moving through the world, but in a caring way. "Providing small moments to tap into what you are feeling and what you are choosing in deep ways -- that," she says, "is the power of art."

"Think of engaging with art like being in the sun," she wants her audience to know. "It's not a word search or a test. You don't have to find 'the meaning' or the right answer. Just let it wash over you and absorb the heat. Jump in the pool when you're too hot. Then repeat."

Valerie Oliphant is a professional dancer and choreographer originally from Arizona, where she studied dance and international studies at the University of Arizona, including a study abroad dance program in Ghana. She is currently pursuing her

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