

Between landscape and dance: Soil horizons in Sam Williams's 'Wormshine'

Essay by Victoria Gray (2025)

The title of Sam Williams's new performance work, *Wormshine*, evokes a slippery, slick, bodying. Anybody who has (be)held a worm will recall it as a sheeny, sticky slither. If you've ever placed one in your palm or held one tentatively between your thumb and index finger, you'll surely remember its mesmerizing tendency to wriggle, curl and flip unpredictably, to dextrously knot itself around itself.

For Williams, *Wormshine* figures the worm as an embodied metaphor for a queer, soft, vulnerable body. More than metaphor, the work confronts the visceral response often elicited at the sight and site of such (illicit?) bodies. Let's take Williams's figure of the worm as our example. That moist but not-quite-wet texture, that ability to writhe and coil – remarkably, without a spine – may cause you to recoil. When confronted with some “thing” sensorially sticky or unknowable, there is a tendency for our bodies to respond in a reflexively sinuous way. Curiously, when we are viscerally affected by such worminess, we physically move in a more wormlike way. We discover our innate worminess.

We recoil. Which is to say, there is an almost imperceptible tightening in the solar plexus that creates a subtle but deeply existential torque in the tummy. The base of the neck at the cervical spine contracts and pulls the crown of the head back, chin jutting uglily forwards. The hands flex at the wrists in response to this whole-body cringe reflex; to the feeling of ick and creature. Fingernails indent into clammy palms, knuckles go white, arms fold into the belly, as we origami ourselves into “our” “own”

“human” bodies. Perhaps we rub the palms of our hands down our thighs as if wiping some creepy crawling thing away, unconsciously seeking the skin-to-skin contact that produces the soothing hormone oxytocin. A shiver down the spine becomes almost reassuring. It reminds us that we have one.

Worms don't have spines. No backbone. They have a hydrostatic skeleton which means they are essentially made of liquid and muscle. They push through the soil in a wave-like motion using a combination of hydrostatic pressure and the movements of their circular, longitudinal muscles. What is more, to burrow their tunnels with which to move through, they eat what is in front of them. No chance of speed, straightness, directness, uprightness, or verticality . . .



How queer then, that despite their physical labour, worms are essentially the most efficient and effective engineers of the soil; ploughing through the dense weight of earth, turning and aerating as they go. Critical to this process is the worms' ability to compost and

process vast amounts of food waste and animal manures such that our entire ecosystem (and in turn, our economic system) rely upon the work of the worm to assist farmers and gardeners on both domestic and industrial scales. How queer then, that the movement, the sheer existence of this soft, vulnerable, body-with-no-bone – so often ignored, reviled or dug out for bait – is critical to terrestrial ecosystems, bodily nourishment, and ultimately ... life. When something (say, a worm) is soiled and of the earth, it is by turns rich with life-giving activity.

Without a spine or any bone to speak of, how do worms perform their rich movements? How does Wormshine move?

The work is structured around a score of 5 movement tasks or actions, related to the activity of worms, namely: casting/digesting, tunnelling/burrowing, levelling, turning, and gathering/nesting. As a performance-sculpture-installation, each dancer (in this iteration, two) perform these tasks in somatic relationship to varied lengths of extra-thick, heavy, industrial-scale rope. After each action has been performed, the rope is left in the space as a trace of the action, echoing the casts that worms leave in the sand or soil.

When 'casting/digesting' we witness the dancers pass the rope exquisitely slowly along an invisible median between mouth and feet, mimicking the act of eating and excretion. In 'tunnelling/burrowing' dancers feed the rope upwards from their feet to their heads, giving the impression that their bodies are sinking downwards into the earth. The act of 'levelling' entails flattening the discarded coils of rope into the ground with pressure from the dancers' bodies. When 'turning,' the horizontal bodies of the dancers perform a consistent rotation, whilst simultaneously spiralling and feeding the rope from head to feet. 'Gathering/nesting' is a gesture of extension and gathering whereby the rope is extended and lain across the space, only to be coiled back into itself and the body of the dancer. The above actions are performed by

the dancers in close contact to the ground. This low centre of gravity draws the eye downwards, and the prone, crouched, and coiled position of the dancers gives a sense of grounding and earthing in the space.



As a somatic practitioner my body finds many points of resonance and recognition in Williams's score. For example, as I observe the dancer's inch their way across the ground, pressing the weight of their muscle and skeleton to leverage traction, I am reminded of the Developmental Movement Patterns in Body-Mind Centering. There is a synergy between Williams's score – based on the invertebrate movement of worms – and the four pre-vertebrate, which is to say, pre-spinal developmental movement phases of human psychophysical development. These pre-spinal movements, also traced to in utero

development, are described as a writhing movement of the body with a fluid quality: like the worm.

I have a strong sense of kinesthetic empathy as I observe the liquid movements of both dancer and rope. An embodied memory of practicing Continuum Movement – a wave-like, spiralling, undulating somatic practice – wells up in my system, sending an urge (surge) to move-in-relation with the dancers.

As well as resonating with BMC and Continuum practices, the series of somatic explorations that constitute Wormshine's score call to mind the experiential movement practices of Caryn McHose and Kevin Frank. Through a programme of somatic exercises (or scores), their collaborative work explores life forms from a biological, evolutionary perspective – starting at the cellular level some 1.5 billion years ago – facilitating an embodiment whereby the human's relationship to the natural world, and all lifeforms, is brought to bear.

In the iteration of Wormshine I witnessed, a phylogenetic and ontogenetic developmental movement process seems similarly to unfold, in somatic explorations that span across 6 days: taking patience, concentration, and persistence.

A body lies on its side, limbs heavy, beside a heft of thick strewn rope. The palms and soles of the dancer's feet appear to be feeling for the body of the rope, the other dancer, and the ground. Just as worms use their skin to "see" for having no eyes, the dancers use their feet and skin like eyes. A prostrate dancer turns and opens their body to us, and we see a rope threaded along the line of the central axis of their body. I estimate the ropes heaviness based on its handleability and thickness. It is heavy. Grounding.

Gradually, the two bodies become connected by the same extended length of rope. As well as being tethered together by the rope, they are

paired by the same tendencies to move worm-wise; slowly, fluidly, and thickly. The viscosity of the movement, in combination with the friction and heft of the rope, creates the sense of a dense atmosphere in the room. The dancers seem to be moving through an airspace that is a viscous landscape, akin to the compacted environment of soil-pressure that worms eat their way through.



From my vantage point the dancers are resting on the floor, and yet, in their horizontal rope-based industry, they could be mistaken for climbing the walls. I feel an impulse to rest on the ground beside them, to see their bodies from the horizontal worm-plane. Over time, the weight of the rope has an impact on the muscles of the dancers, and their limbs become heavy in their intentional, intuitive work. At times, the tension between the rope and the body of the dancers loosens, and yet,

we sense a nascent tension. A readiness to resume burrowing again, and again.

The longer I spend with the bodies and rope, the more I enter a state of perception whereby the separability of elements – dancer and rope – becomes blurred. Body and rope entwine, and there is an intra-active relationship occurring. To manoeuvre the unwieldy rope whilst simultaneously moving-in-relation to each other, the performers become somewhat ambidextrous. We sense a foot is being deployed as a hand, or a head as an arm. The function of certain limbs (arm, hand, foot, leg) – at least in an atypical, able-bodied arrangement – becomes further troubled. An arm is no longer an arm, but an organic extension whose “function” is yet-to-be determined until its relation to the rope or body (parts) it wriggles up to is activated. A rope is not just rope. It is (a) body in and of itself, as well as becoming an extension of the dancers’ bodies.

The rope appears to have a life; is a-live. As such, an intimacy emerges between dancer and rope, a co-communicability that feels like telekinesis or action at a distance. When the hand of a dancer moves the tip of a piece of rope several metres long, and we witness a quiver at its opposite end, we can trace the transmission of energy through material: like the ripples traced by worms in the soil. Gradually, the dancers reach a temporary state of resting, like the state of aestivation in which worms curl up into a tight knot.

Awakening out of this semi-dormant state, a dancer begins to thread a heavy piece of rope down the front of their torso. It feeds through their legs almost autonomously, as if the rope has (and is) a creaturely body-mind all its own. In this act of entanglement and reciprocity, a notion of “human agency” or even “agency” at all, becomes a moot point. For whom/what is really moving who/it? Is it rope moving body, body moving rope, rope moving rope, body moving body? Is it worm moving

human, human moving (as) worm? A notion of separability – of body and rope, of worm and human, of human and human – is here redundant. In *Wormshine*, Williams scores a performativity that is ecologically and ethically attuned to the multispecies entanglements we are always already a part of.

By using the language of bodies, performance, dance, sculpture, and installation, *Wormshine* performs a dextrous praxis whereby, as a writer and audience, one could draw on a kaleidoscope of critical theories and histories of choreographic practices to talk about the work.

Reflecting on the work's form and content, I am sensitive to touchpoints of reference that connect *Wormshine* to a lineage of Avant-garde experimental dance from at least the 1960's onwards. I'm thinking *Wormshine* in relation to Simone Forti's *Dance Constructions* of 1961: 'Slant Board,' 'Huddle,' 'Hangers,' and 'Platforms.' Forti's scored, task-based works blurred the lines between dance and sculpture. Like Williams's rope as sculptural object, Forti's structures are similarly described as "steady state" sculptures that have a presence and performativity regardless of whether they are being activated by a body or not. Whilst Forti's work uses physical materials, structures and instructions to reveal the innate embodied intelligence of the dancers' bodies, Williams's score takes this one step further (or back, evolutionary speaking). *Wormshine* reveals much more than the materiality of the ropes, and the physicality of the dancers; it reveals our innate evolutionary relationship, and thus likeness to, other life forms other than human. *Wormshine* activates the traces of worm in human movement: human as worm.

Post-millennial points of resonance between expanded choreographic practices and *Wormshine* can be found in works by Florence Peake, Maria Hassabi, Tai Shani, and William Forsythe's 'Choreographic Objects,' for example. At first glance, the aesthetics of these works may not obviously relate to *Wormshine*, yet conceptually and formally, all

belong to a lineage – traceable to British New Dance (1960's) and a conceptual turn in European choreographic practices (1990's onwards) – that blurs the lines between dance and sculpture, movement and stillness, performance and fine art, object and subject, the relationship between the body and objects, as well as the relationship between human and non-human bodies. Additionally, works in this paradigm shift often comprise a series of iterations (or versions) that develop across time, are situated in museum and gallery contexts, and are durational in length

Duration is critical to Wormshine. Unfolding across 6-days, as an audience member, it is (virtually) impossible to witness the performance for the entire duration. What is more, the space is lit in a deliberately low-light, such that it takes time (work) to locate the bodies in space. These strategies challenge visibility and support Williams's desire to highlight otherwise unacknowledged forms of labour that are performed unseen. The heft of Wormshine's ropes demonstrate clearly a degree of physical labour, however, there are other forms of labour – invisible labour – that feel more critical to highlight here. As a queer, working class, disabled, neurodiverse body, I can't help but think about the continuous invisible labour of masking and passing that I perform, unseen. I think also of racialised bodies, cripp bodies, trans bodies . . . bodies for whom – according to a queer necropolitics – being seen, being visible, is in fact a very real threat (to life). We go underground.

What is critical to Williams is that you leave Wormshine grasping their core choreographic intention; to incite a curiosity about more-than-human-centric ways of being, and the ways in which the creatures, organisms, and intelligences we share this planet with work together in hidden, surprising and dynamic ways.

Like the figure of the worm, Wormshine carves out a space for critical conversations on theories of ontogeny, phylogeny, post-human practices, Anthropocene, Queer Studies, ecology, ecofeminist

embodiment, somatic practice, New Materialism, and more-than-human embodiment . . . to say the least. As new iterations of Wormshine are performed in new contexts, it is my hope that these conversations, and indeed these invisible bodies, will be brought (safely) to view.

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