



CLAUDIA DORING-BAEZ

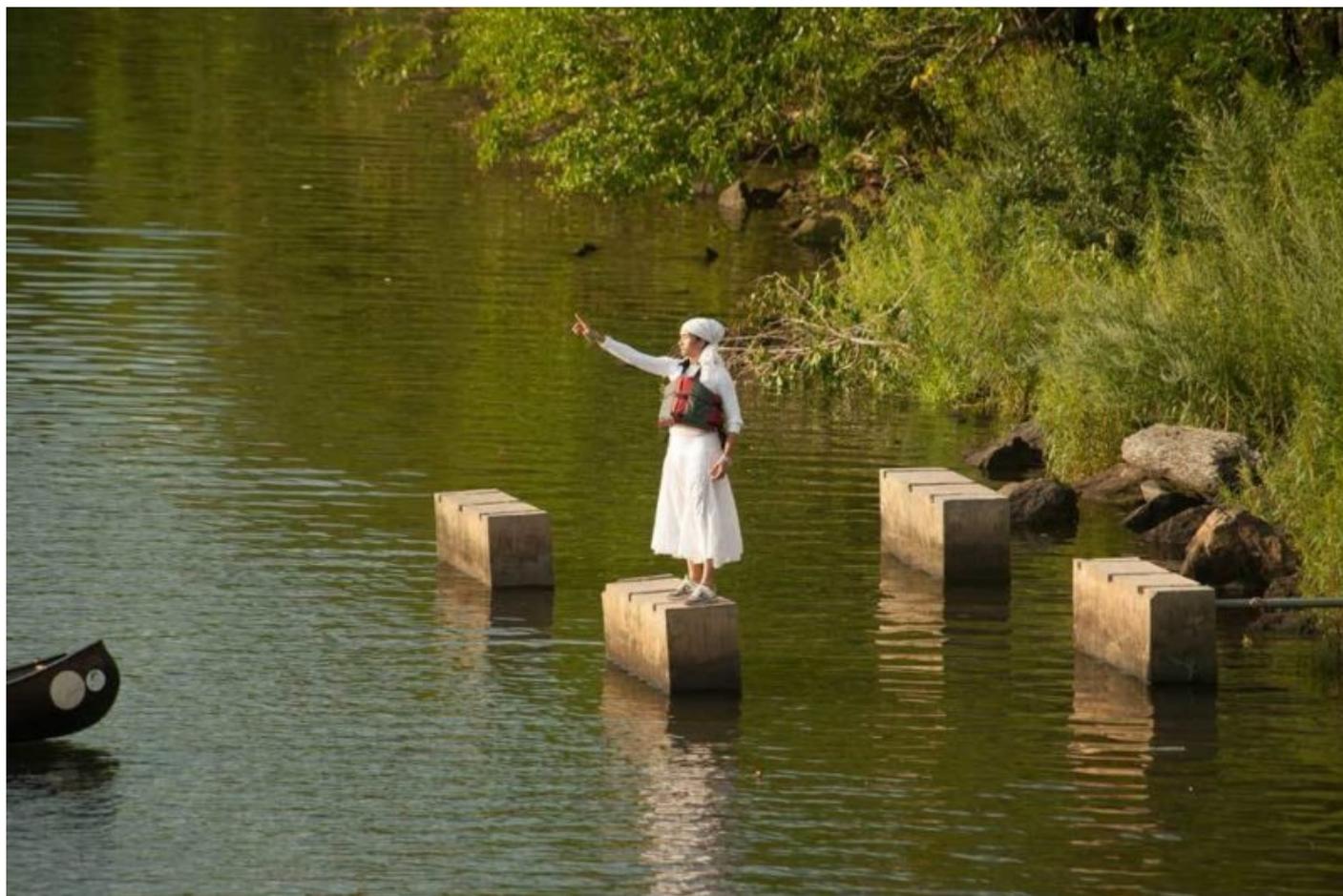
Outside It
Oct 3 - Nov 6, 2019



BOMB

Reclamation Is an Imperative: Paloma McGregor and
Damian Griffin Interviewed by Nicole Loeffler-Gladstone

Previewing a public performance on the Bronx River.



Paloma McGregor at Concrete Plant Park, August 16, 2013. Photo by Charles R. Berenguer Jr.

On June 23, Paloma McGregor, a Harlem-based dance artist originally from St. Croix, premieres the latest iteration of *Building a Better Fishtrap / from the river's mouth*, a dance that makes the Bronx River its stage. McGregor produces her work through *Angela's Pulse*, an organization she co-founded with her sister (the name honors their mother), known for its deep commitment to community-building and ongoing support for African American artists. *Building a Better Fishtrap* developed over an extended timeline and is inspired by the historic fishing practice of McGregor's father.

Situated along the river itself, *Building a Better Fishtrap* honors the collective stories and memories of the Bronx River and its adjacent communities. It celebrates the ongoing restoration of the waterway, while mourning the cultural, ecological, and personal legacies lost within a context of colonialism, diaspora, and industrialization. The audience will float along in canoes and rowboats powered by docents from Bronx-based partner organizations, encountering performance installations along the way.

I spoke with McGregor and core *Building a Better Fishtrap* project advisor Damian Griffin, who is also the former Education Director at Bronx River Alliance.

—Nicole Loeffler-Gladstone

Nicole Loeffler-Gladstone

I'm so curious about the choice to stage this iteration of *Building a Better Fishtrap* along a river. What did previous iterations look like, and how did you decide that a moving, aquatic performance was the next step for this project?

Paloma McGregor

The first formal iteration of this work was in 2015, and it examined ensemble-building around a very personal entry point. I thought about the project in terms of water, memory, and home before I came to the driving questions: What happens when you leave your ancestral home? What do you take with you and what do you leave behind? What can you return to reclaim? One of the roots of this project is curiosity about a memory of my father's fishing, which I consider part of my personal history, but which I'm not certain is real. For the second iteration, I made a solo piece to examine what my own body holds in relation to this story. I was born in 1974, which is the year attributed to a wave of formalized cleanup on the Bronx River, as well as the year the oil refinery in my home landscape was at its highest production.

NLG

So there's a meaningful synchronicity in terms of pollution and restoration, and in terms of where you're from and where you landed.

PM

Yes, and I have a longstanding commitment to Bronx-based artists. This version of *Building a Better Fishtrap* feels like the beginning of collaborative potentials that could move way beyond me. I'm thinking of this as part of larger activity and action in the Bronx. That's one of the ways art-making has intersected with the river: the politics of who gets to make art and who gets to see it. You don't have to accomplish everything in one performance, because there's a long history of people doing things on the river.



Paloma McGregor at Concrete Plant Park, August 16, 2013. Photo by Charles R. Berenguer Jr.

NLG

When did you start working directly with the river?

PM

I started working on the river, in various ways, in 2012, when several dancers performed to one of Damian's poems. Since then, we talked about what it would mean to create an on-river production. The idea of reclaiming space for community to return—narratively, spiritually, and emotionally—is important to me. Ever since I started working on the river, there's been this big question for me about what the Bronx River—the animals, people, and spirits in the river—have to teach me about my practice. Just going to the river and spending an hour there, all summer, transformed my whole sense of New York.

Damian Griffin

For this performance, we started with conversations about what movement can be. For me, it was specific. For Paloma, the possibilities are vast, including bringing new people to the river. We would always pass people during Bronx River

Alliance canoe trips who don't know where the canoes come from. Paloma suggested that we bring the canoes down empty and then as we go back up, we pick up anyone who wants to get in. [Ultimately, McGregor and her team decided that all of the audience will travel the same route, embarking from Starlight Park.—NLG]

PM

People's investment in the river brought them to the project. All kinds of people have intersected with this work through their experiences of water. Some of my earliest processes involved asking people to tell stories about their first or most memorable moment with water. The river brought people together.



Paloma McGregor at Concrete Plant Park, August 16, 2013. Photo by Charles R. Berenguer Jr.

NLG

What has Bronx River activism looked like, historically?

DG

From the beginning, industry took people's access away. We know that the river was very important to indigenous people (the Lenape people are the original inhabitants of Manahatta, before it was renamed Manhattan, which is part of Lenapehoking, or Lenape homeland), and it was the reason colonizers came to this area. The Bronx River supported Manhattan's textile industry, and was used as a dumping ground. By 1974, it was forgotten. The only place you could see the river was in the Botanical Garden, but you wouldn't want to go down there. Many people grew up not knowing about, or ever even seeing, the river. Eventually, community dedication and interest sparked what would become the Bronx River Alliance. But we have to make sure that credit for the work goes back to the people who actually did it. The community pushed the Parks Department to make change.

NLG

It's powerful to remember that the people who started fighting for a revitalized river knew they might not see their goal accomplished, that it would be something for future generations. They recognized the river's importance in their community, if only through through stories and memories.

PM

The people who imagined public space on the river were visionary. I'm interested in doing work that's in solidarity with them and strategic to my role at home in St. Croix. It helps to remember that as human beings we're eighty-percent water, and that all these waters touch each other.

NLG

I just realized that we don't refer to people as "bodies of water," even though that's what we are. I wonder if experiencing *Building a Better Fishtrap* could help erase the false dichotomy between "people" and "nature." I feel ecological losses as personal losses, and I suspect that ecosystems feel loss, in some way, when humans abuse or vacate our reciprocal relationships.

PM

So how can we set intention to shift those water molecules within our bodies and within the river? What can choreography and ritual bring to an experience like this?

DG

I've recognized how choreography can live on in people.

PM

Residue is a huge part of my thinking as an artist.

DG

There's the performance aspect, which people will see. But gathering stories and passing them on has become part of the performance, part of the choreography, too. When those memories are shared, the choreography turns into an ongoing process. People are engaged for a much longer time.



From left to right: Jessica Lee, Shantelle Courvoisier Jackson, LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs, Ricarrdo Valentine, and Patricia McGregor at Concrete Plant Park, August 16, 2013. Photo by Charles R. Berenguer Jr.

NLG

It's like how you described the early Bronx River activists fighting for a mostly forgotten, unloved waterway. They had this residue of memory, stories from their grandparents or great-grandparents, about what used to be, and that inspired what could be. I've heard people talk about how physical actions, like learning a culturally significant art form for the first time, can cause previously unknown memories to surface. Intergenerational recognition is ignited in the presence of something that connects you to your ancestors. That said, there's also intergenerational trauma stemming from historical loss and dispossession.

PM

It's complicated to love water and feel liberated in water spaces, while simultaneously contending with the trauma of water space. Journeys across water have shaped possibilities and narratives for people throughout history. I started developing the work around the time I traveled through West Africa. I was close to the waters on the other side of African diasporic history, connecting dots as a person who comes from the middle of the Middle Passage.

NLG

Performing along the river embraces the fluidity and complexity of your total personhood. It acknowledges the historic pain and contestation of global waterways, but also the possibilities of healing and renewal stemming from ancestral knowledge and community power—from finding your place and protecting it for the future.

PG

That's where making space to reclaim comes in. With the river as a collaborator, we can hold these resources as sacred. We can reestablish an embodied connection to the water and practice being in living conversation with these forces. Reclamation is an activated call, an imperative.

Building a Better Fishtrap / from the river's mouth takes place June 23 at the Bronx River (Starlight Park, Concrete Plant Park, and Hunts Point Riverside Park).

Nicole Loeffler-Gladstone is a Brooklyn-based writer, performer, and stagehand. She is the Communications Director for Clowns Without Borders USA. She regularly contributes to Dance Magazine, Dance Spirit Magazine, The Dance Enthusiast, The Brooklyn Rail, and Chamber Music Magazine, and is particularly interested in environmental justice, labor history, and dismantling hierarchy.

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