



SWEET LAND

February 29 - March 15, 2020 • Los Angeles State Historic Park

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INTRODUCTION

Sky Woman Falling

By Aja Couchois Duncan

Before there were continents and colonialization, before Columbus and slavery, there was one contiguous land mass named Pangaea, a word from ancient Greek meaning “whole earth.” I’m going to tell you a story about the whole earth, about how the earth came to be. The story comes from the Haudenosaunee. They—like my own people, the Anishinaabe—are from the eastern Woodlands. Known as “the People of the Longhouse,” the Haudenosaunee are the children of Turtle Island, the progeny of Sky Woman Falling.

Sometimes the story starts before Sky Woman fell. Sometimes the story doesn’t begin until she falls. I like to imagine the world beginning with Sky Woman Falling. I like to imagine that when she fell, Sky Woman called the whole world into being.

What matters is that when she fell, Sky Woman cried out so loudly that the water animals—beaver, muskrat and turtle—heard her. They looked up and saw the hole, really a capacious tear, in the sky above them. They looked up and saw Sky Woman falling, hurtling towards them.

There’s nothing for her to land on, otter said to beaver. There is nowhere for her to land, muskrat told them both. So otter dove, and beaver dove, and muskrat dove, deep into the dark waters of their water world. They dove until finally muskrat surfaced with a clutch of mud inside his paws. Beaver used the mud to paint the surface of turtle’s back. Again and again muskrat dove until there was enough mud to build a bed of earth on turtle’s back.

Being gracious and quick-witted, a flock of swans flew skyward to Sky Woman. On their wings, she floated gently downward until she was placed on the soft mud of Turtle’s back.

In gratitude, Sky Woman began to sing to the swans; to muskrat, otter and beaver; to turtle and her wondrous carapace. As she sang, she began to dance, to move her feet gently across the mud, spreading it, expanding it, until turtle became as round and wide as the earth.

Still singing, Sky Woman drew from beneath her dress a bundle of seeds and scattered them in the four directions. And then she sank to her knees. She was tired from the fall, from her dancing, from the baby that was growing inside her. So she curled up on Turtle’s back and went to sleep. She slept for a long, long time.

When she woke, the earth was covered in wild grasses, flowers, strawberries and sacred tobacco. Into this abundance, Sky Woman’s daughter was born. Together they walked the earth, harvesting food and making medicine. Things went on like this for some time. But not forever; nothing lasts forever.

One day Sky Woman’s daughter came home flushed and swollen. Sky Woman gave her herbs, but her daughter did not recover. Instead her daughter’s belly quickly grew, signaling that a birth was imminent. Sky Woman helped her daughter prepare, but none of their preparations prevented the violence of the births. For inside Sky Woman’s daughter had grown twins. The twins were not identical; they were dizygotic, each having grown in their own placentas and amniotic sacs. Perhaps this explained why they were so different.

One twin came out the way babies usually do. But the other twin, who had argued with his brother about who would come out first, burst forth from the daughter’s armpit, killing her. Sky Woman grieved her daughter’s death and buried her body in the earth. Within hours, the soil in which Sky Woman’s daughter was buried erupted in squash, beans, and corn. From the nutrients of her body came all the food that humans would need for millennia.

Meanwhile the twins prepared the earth for the first people’s, the first humans’ arrival. The gentle twin, mourning his mother, began to wander the earth. Everywhere he went, he carved river valleys, sculpted pine and cedar trees, made spirit into flesh in the forms of bear and elk. The forceful twin—the one who in his haste had killed his own mother—stalked his brother, altered his gifts; he added thorns to fruit bearing vines, broke rivers in two, making rapids where once calm eddies pooled. He divided valleys with ragged mountains, separating one tribe from another, splitting families into different species.

And so when people began to populate turtle island, they did so in a world of creation and destruction, of benevolence and violence. The people’s lives were not easy but they knew they were beneficiaries of turtle’s sacrifice. They gave thanks to Sky Woman and her daughter. They recognized that the twins were two sides of the same whole. That we all have both brothers inside of us.

Sweet Land Cast and Crew

CREATIVE TEAM

Raven Chacon, *Composer*
Du Yun, *Composer*
Aja Couchois Duncan, *Librettist*
Douglas Kearney*, *Librettist*
Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Director & Costume Designer*
Yuval Sharon, *Director*

CAST

PRESHOW

Percussion improvisations by Corey Fogel and Derek Tywoniuk

FEAST CAST

Coyote Micaela Tobin
Wiindigo Sharon Chohi Kim *
Totaa'ar Jenny Wong / Lucy Yates
Makwa..... Kelci Hahn
Grandfather Derrell Acon
Father..... Babatunde Akinboboye
Brother..... Fahad Siadat
Jimmy Gin..... Scott Belluz

TRAIN CAST

Coyote Carmina Escobar/ Kathryn Shuman (3/13)
Guide..... Jehnean Washington
Bow Lindsay Patterson Abdou
Drum..... Nandani Sinha
Captain..... Jon Lee Keenan *
Preacher..... Richard Hodges
Rifle..... Joanna Ceja
Scribe Peabody Southwell (2/28- 3/8) / Molly Pease (3/13)

THE CROSSROADS CAST

Coyote Carmina Escobar/ Micaela Tobin /Kathryn Shuman (3/13)
Wiindigo Sharon Chohi Kim *

ECHOES & EXPULSIONS CAST

Speck..... Micah Angelo Luna / Leander Rajan (3/1, 3/8, 3/15)
Hera Nandani Sinha
Dolores..... Joanna Ceja / Angelica Rowell (3/13)
Rosa Molly Pease
PercussionJordan Curcuruto, Corey Fogel, Derek Tywoniuk

ENSEMBLE

FEAST ENSEMBLE

Maria Elena Altany*
Richard An
Adam Faruqi
David Harris
David Hobbs
Laurel Irene
Molly Pease
Theodosia Roussos

TRAIN ENSEMBLE

Luvi Avendano
Jessica M. Choi
Mindy Ella Chu
Mana Contractor
Angelica Rowell
David García Saldaña
Jaquain Sloan

ORCHESTRA

Marc Lowenstein, *Conductor*
Jenny Wong, *Conductor*

Maiani da Silva, *Concertmaster*
Adrianne Pope, *Violin*
Mona Tian, *Violin*
Marta Honer, *Viola*
Diana Wade, *Viola*
Jennifer Bewerse, *Cello*
Derek Stein, *Cello*
Hakeem Holloway, *Bass*
Ben Finley, *Bass*
Erin McKibben, *Flute*
Damon Zick, *Flute & Saxophone*
Brian Walsh, *Clarinet & Saxophone*
Andrew Conrad, *Clarinet & Saxophone*
Sarah Belle Reid, *Trumpet*
Matt Barbier, *Trombone*
Luke Storm, *Tuba*
Brad Moller, *Tuba* (2/28, 3/7, 3/13)
Lily Maase, *Guitar*
Michel Von Loh, *Guitar*
Lucy Yates, *Piano*
Milena Gligic, *Piano*
Corey Fogel, *Percussion*
Jordan Curcuruto, *Percussion*
Derek Tywoniuk, *Percussion*

* Denotes a Company Member of The Industry

PRODUCTION

| | |
|--|--|
| Production & Lighting Designer | Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew |
| Sound Designer | Jody Elff |
| Scenic Designers | Tanya Orellana, Carlo Maghirang |
| Costume Designers | Cannupa Hanska Luger, E.B. Brooks |
| Projection Designer | Hana S. Kim |
| Projection Advisor | Alex Schweder |
| Choreographer | Tonantzin Carmelo |
| Executive Director | Elizabeth Cline |
| Executive Producer | Jhane Myers |
| Production Director | Mariana Perez-Seda |
| Technical Director | Jacob Patterson |
| Production Stage Manager | Amelia Nordin |
| Associate Director | Jonathan Muñoz-Proulx |
| Props Master | Kevin Hughes |
| Associate Producer | Yael Greenberg |
| Stage Managers | Isabella Grace, Ben Kutner, Mitchell Webb |
| Assistant Stage Managers | Kymerli Skye Butler, Aliyah Smith, Amanda Reynoso, Andrea Ruffalo, Pita Taing, Liv Wafler |
| Assistant Lighting Designer & Master Electrician | Ashley Duke |
| Assistant Costume Designer | Annie Szeliski |
| Wardrobe Supervisor | Kaszandra A. Liput |
| Wardrobe Assistants | Ryan Norton, Cassidy Santos |
| Assistant Projection Design/Video Lead | Erin Teachman |
| Crew/Video Operator | Tess Lauren Holtzman |
| Build Lead | Greg Schenk |
| Crew | Helen Aboulhosn, Cole Castine, Jay Emstrom, Josh Esquivel, Stephen Estrada Jr, Alex Legolvan, Roman Prado, Francesca Quintano, Mateo Rudich |
| Associate Producer, Audience Experience | Brian Sea |
| Associate Producer | Gabriella Rhodeen |
| Box Office Manager | Sydney McDonald |
| Community Outreach Manager | Derrell Acon |
| Community Outreach Assistant | Alyse James |
| Associate Producer, Events | Jaden LaRue |
| Communications | Sounding Point |
| Public Relations | First Chair Promotions |
| Lettering and Graphic Design | Visual Issues |
| Front of House Staff | Jay Carlon, Evangeline Crittenden, Dionna Daniel, Richie De Maria, Brenna Fredrickson, Ryan Masson, Stephanie Petagno, Jonathan Potter, On Shiu, Kelley Williams |

SYNOPSIS

CONTACT

Music by Raven Chacon and Du Yun
Libretto by Douglas Kearney

Traveling by ship, the Arrivals run aground on the shore. They encounter a community they begin to call The Hosts. The captain of the Arrivals instantly breaks protocol by mistaking the Father — not Totaa'ar, the Matriarch — as the leader of the community. Despite that, the Hosts nevertheless agree to considering the Arrivals as guests: half of them will be taken to a ceremonial feast, and half will be guided into the land and taught the ways of the community. The Arrivals split, but not before revealing that they have brought Captives with them.



TRAIN 1

Music by Raven Chacon
Libretto by Douglas Kearney

The Preacher, a former Captive, is now a missionary and inspires the religious fervor necessary to build a train and industrialize the land. The Arrivals push further and further West: Rifle learns to hunt from Bow; the Scribe tries to categorize the Native technologies described by Drum; and the Captain leads Guide into a murderous trap.

FEAST 1

Music by Du Yun
Libretto by Aja Couchois Duncan

The Hosts promise to feed the hungry Arrivals at a ceremonial feast, which goes awry when the outlaw Jimmy Gin tries to claim Makwa as his wife. The Host community defends Makwa and expels the Arrivals, but not before Jimmy Gin proclaims, “Your way of life must end.”



THE CROSSROADS

Music by Raven Chacon and Du Yun with improvisations by
Carmina Escobar/Kathryn Shuman (3/13-15), Micaela Tobin and Sharon Chohi Kim



TRAIN 2

Music by Du Yun
Libretto by Aja Couchois Duncan

The country is now called Sweet Land. The Train is complete; the labor and bloodshed is forgotten; and the land is up for grabs. Bow remembers.

FEAST 2

Music by Raven Chacon
Libretto by Douglas Kearney

The country is now called Sweet Land. The ceremonial feast has been reset to become a wedding ceremony for Makwa and Jimmy Gin. Makwa remembers.



ECHOES & EXPULSIONS

Music by Raven Chacon and Du Yun
Libretto by Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney

Speck remains on the industrialized land.
The voices of America’s history rise up around him.

HISTORY OF THE LAND

Land Acknowledgment

We, the Indigenous People, the Traditional Caretakers of this landscape are the direct descendants of the First People who formed our lands, our worlds during creation time.

We have always been here.

Our Ancestors prepared and became the landscapes and worlds for the coming humans with order / knowledge and gifts embedded in the landscape.

Our Ancestors, imbued the responsibility and obligation to our original instructions, guided by protocol and etiquette to be part of, take care of and ensure the welfare of the extended family and community defined in its most inclusive expression, the NATURE, and to pass those teachings and responsibilities onto our children, grandchildren and many generations to come. (And to all those that now live here).

— Julia Bogany, *Gabrieleno Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians*

From Not A Cornfield to Bending the River Back Into the City

Lauren Bon, *Metabolic Studios*

The colonial city of Los Angeles was set on top of the pre-colonial spreading grounds of the once unbridled Los Angeles River. At that time, the wide estuarial floodplain existed where the historic core of the city would be. The Los Angeles River today is the final stretch of the journey of the glacial lakes of the Eastern Sierra, transported downhill to the San Fernando Valley by the Los Angeles Aqueduct, and to its engineered flow into the ocean. *Not A Cornfield*, 2005-2006, created a durational performance in honor of this pre-colonial watershed at “Yaangna”. We laid ninety-miles of irrigation piping, planted corn sourced from and returned to the Native American community, and cleansed the soil of this once abandoned train yard. *Not A Cornfield’s* transformation of the land back into a public space—a commons—created the possibility for a deeper emergence. It led me to establish my practice and collaborations that stretch all the way to Owens Valley—the circulatory connector of Los Angeles to its water sources in the Eastern Sierra and a paradise exchanged for the development of Los Angeles. *Bending the River Back into the City* will reconnect the river and floodplain in its current industrial condition. The idea of the work is to lift the waste water that runs within the LA River Channel, cleanse it, and redirect the flow to a network of public parks. The LA State Historic Park, which will receive its future water from this project, is the same site that *Not a Cornfield* was on. *Sweet Land* has encouraged me to reflect upon the past fifteen years and while *Not A Cornfield* purposely enacted the millennia-long custodianship of this land by the native tribes, the impossibility in 2005 of directly using the adjacent Los Angeles River as the *Cornfield’s* water source, has kept me here for over a decade and led me to *Bending the River Back Into the City*.

Eye of the Beholder

Michael Dear

The *Cornfield* is an eye watching over Los Angeles. This is a persuasive metaphor because the shape of an eye has universal esthetic appeal, and an eye’s proximity to the brain echoes the *Cornfield’s* adjacency to the original pueblo. It also reminds us that history lies in the eye of the beholder.

What, then, has the *Cornfield* witnessed? How should we remember its past?

The notion of place is at the heart of the way we remember. Pierre Nora observed that “memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events.” Memory also refers to the way individuals recall things, whereas history is more a collective process of formal commemoration. Between memory and history lies the city, where the past is stored in buildings, ruins, parks, and street corners. The city is where time becomes visible.

Both memory (place) and history (time) are selective processes involving manipulation and forgetting as much as recollection. Norman Klein refers to this as history’s “uncertainty principle”: As soon as a chronicler gazes upon the past, the narrative is altered; the very act of writing history becomes an intervention in the historical record. In this sense, there is no way we can truly know our past. History becomes a process of constant revision of the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. In the words of novelist WG Sebald, “History requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and we still do not know how it was.” The sense of history as an agreeable fiction is not an attack on historians; it is simply an admission about the limits of human knowing. Multiple versions of history are the norm, and history only becomes dangerous when it is institutionalized as a single Official

truth. Then it is transformed into a political document intended to silence dissent, test loyalties, and persecute unbelievers. By contrast, memory is a much more democratic and egalitarian form of remembering because it proceeds from the eyes of many beholders who together constitute the meanings of place. In order to avoid the potential tyranny of Official history, multiple autonomous acts of memory are necessary, each one tantamount to an act of historical sabotage. The accumulation of such acts produces a peoples' history in place of the Official truth.

Indigenous Acorn Fields

There is in Southern California an archeological record of extensive human occupation and settlement going back more than eleven thousand years. Reconstruction of that record has been hampered by rising sea levels that have obliterated most coastal sites, and by rapid urbanization that has carpeted many inland locations. One important exception occurs in the Channel Islands off the coast of Los Angeles, where some sites record an active fishing culture from more than 8,500 years ago. On the mainland, nomadic hunter/ gatherer societies sprang up around inland lakes and streams. Somewhere around 2000 BCE, the acorn became a food staple that allowed permanent settlement, increased trade, and more complex social systems to develop. According to archeologist Brian Fagan, "In the sixteenth century AD, the inhabitants of California formed a dense network of groups, large and small, speaking over sixty languages, and numbering an estimated 310,000 people. They occupied about 256,000 square miles of varied terrain, with an average population density of about one person per square mile, a higher figure than average for the North America of five centuries ago."

At this time, the lands surrounding the LA River were home to a group of five to ten thousand Tongva Indians. They occupied many relatively small settlements of perhaps two hundred inhabitants apiece, although the sites of individual settlements appear to have moved quite frequently. One of these settlements, Yang-na, was established at or near the site of the future pueblo close by the *Cornfield*. Another, called Maungna, was located in nearby Elysian Park. The Tongva are generally regarded as "one of the most materially rich and culturally influential" indigenous groups in Southern California. After the Spanish conquest, they were renamed the Gabrieleño Indians, reflecting their incorporation into the Mission San Gabriel. The Yang-na community survived until the 1830s largely because the pueblo

was dependent upon its labor for survival. And the Gabrieleño people endured well into the twentieth century despite missionization, epidemics, and political/military upheaval.

Spanish Footprints

The Spanish entrada on the West Coast began in September 1542, when Juan Cabrillo entered San Diego Bay. However, extensive Spanish occupation and settlement was delayed for two centuries at a time when other colonial powers began to evince an interest in Spain's far-flung empire. In 1769, Gaspar de Portolá, governor of Baja (lower) California, set off with Father Junípero Serra on an expedition to colonize Alta (upper) California. On August 2, the party stopped at a riverbank close to the site of the future pueblo. In a contemporary diary, Father Juan Crespi recorded the site's appeal: it had "all the requisites for a large settlement," including a vineyard of wild grapes, an "infinity of rose bushes in full bloom," and a soil "capable of providing every kind of grain and fruit."

The Portolá expedition named the river and valley Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciúncula. Portolá most likely forded the river at the northern end of the *Cornfield* site, near the present-day North Broadway (previously Buena Vista) bridge. His party proceeded to Yang-na, noted by Crespi as a "delightful place" where Indians presented them with gifts and a group of old men "puffed at us three mouthfuls of smoke." A few years later, another fabled explorer, Juan Bautista de Anza, traversed the same river crossing with a group of 240 people from Sonora, Mexico. Their purpose was to establish a settlement at San Francisco Bay.

Anza's 1,800-mile journey, incorporating the Portolá pathway, is today commemorated as the Anza National Historic Trail. A permanent Spanish presence at Los Angeles was assured when the governor of Spanish California, Felipe de Neve, arrived at Mission San Gabriel in 1781 to establish a pueblo at the Los Angeles River. Some months later, on September 4, 1781, forty-four settlers accompanied by four soldiers arrived at the site chosen by de Neve, not far from present-day Olvera Street. There the pioneers began to build a new settlement called El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciúncula. The first task of the settlers was to secure the pueblo's water supply. By late October, a Zanja Madre (mother ditch) was completed, diverting water from the river for irrigation and drinking purposes. The main channel from the Zanja Madre followed the present-day northern perimeter of the *Cornfield*, and a second

channel passed to the south of the site. More than any other single factor, the zanja system allowed the pueblo to prosper.

By 1870, there were eight zanjás in Los Angeles, with a total length of about fifty miles. However, the system became unsanitary, and local officials worried about public health. Pipes began to replace the zanjás, and private carriers sold water drawn directly from the river to subscribers. In 1858, the Los Angeles Water Works Company erected a forty-foot water wheel near Abila Springs (present-day Chinatown) to lift water for conveyance by flume to a brick reservoir in the pueblo's plaza. The water wheel was destroyed by bad weather in 1861–62, and the zanja system itself was condemned and buried by 1885.

The first rail locomotive arrived in Los Angeles in 1869, ushering in the modern industrial age. In thirty short years, between 1870 and 1900, the population of the City of Los Angeles grew from 5,782 to more than 102,000. A large part of the boom was due to the Southern Pacific Railroad Company (SPRR) which in 1873 was offered a sweet deal to connect LA to its rail network. The deal included part of the *Cornfield* site, where SPRR established a freight house and depot that came to be known as “River Station.” The economic activities that quite literally “passed through and around” River Station in the early twentieth century established the foundation for LA's emergence as an industrial metropolis.

After the 1876 arrival of the transcontinental railroad, SPRR acquired the northern portion of the *Cornfield*, known as the “Bull Ring.” There the company built a new passenger depot and the two-story Pacific Hotel, together with expanded maintenance facilities. During the 1880s, the River Station/*Cornfield* complex served as SPRR headquarters for its passenger and freight operations. It was a period of vivid and tumultuous growth. The agricultural lands around River Station were quickly overtaken by railroad and industrial activities, including an ironworks and one of Standard Oil's first refineries. The great land boom of the 1880s saw the rise of streetcar suburbs. In 1889, the LA Electric Rail Company built trolley lines along Buena Vista (North Broadway) and San Fernando (North Spring) streets. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, SPRR's expanded passenger and maintenance operations moved away from the *Cornfield* site, although River Station retained its function as “nerve center” of SPRR activities.

Trains continued to stop at River Station until 1915.

Eye On the Future

I think it is possible, even necessary to imagine a *Cornfield* that will contain both an official history and a host of informal memories. But, truth be told, LA is not very good at official remembering. We have few grand palaces, monumental war memorials, commemorative boulevards, or garish testaments to governmental authority. Instead, we are better at small spaces that surprise most city dwellers: The Great Wall of Los Angeles mural, for example, or the Biddy Mason and Little Tokyo “Power of Place” projects in Downtown LA.

So let us begin with the *Cornfield* as a place of small remembrances. The past is present, anywhere memory acts. An orange-blossom fragrance always recalls the first time we came to LA; the phrase “Florence and Normandie” reminds us (powerfully, without further qualification) of the city's 1992 unrest. The challenge at the *Cornfield* is to incorporate multiple memories in ways that are consistent with present-day community needs and identities. Because it is a small site, perhaps the brimming, echoing well of *Cornfield* memories is best honored by ensuring its active engagement and connectivity with the places around it — the LA River, pueblo, Elysian Park, Chinatown, and so on — to create a spontaneous peoples' memory.

If we respect this place as a container of history and memory, the new *Cornfield* may serve as both an opening to a remarkable past and an eye toward the vistas of an unfolding future.

Excerpt from the essay “Eye of the Beholder” by Michael Dear is reprinted with permission from *Not a Cornfield*, Edited by Janet Owen Driggs (Los Angeles). Project catalogue, 2007, <http://www.notacornfield.com/>. *Not a Cornfield* is a project by artist Laura Bon.

LIBRETTO

CONTACT

Libretto by Douglas Kearney
Music by Raven Chacon and Du Yun

I wonder: is there such a thing as sonic shadow? Does an image echo? Maybe here, maybe now.
And if so, what would we hear, see? How do THE HOSTS manifest in such circumstances?

Dusk hangs over Sweet Land. Someone follows the dusk to get there. Do we know who that someone is?
Are they also shadow and echo? Are they in this time? Coming in, opposite from dusk.

There they are in a craft that is a map of itself. A craft that can take people to dusk over rough water.
A craft that sets people into their places like vocal arrangements. The craft has been through storms.
In a sense, it's made of storms.

We do, however, hear a hymn, sung with many voices and a variety of tones.

THE ARRIVALS

When they pierced His feet and hands,
Twass blood came down!
Twass holy.

When they pierced His heaving side,
Twass water poured!
Twass holy.

When they slashed his heav’nly brow,
sweat and blood!
O, twass holy!

Blood and water purify
Make us fit for glory!
Blood and water sanctify
Fill us with the spirit!

Shadows are becoming flesh, echoes becoming voice. The HOSTS sing.
THE SHIP, too, becomes a kind of material.

THE ARRIVALS

Somehow tiered together.

When they killed the Lamb of God,
Was yesterday,
They told me.

They’re slaughtering the Lamb of God!
I witness it
This moment.

I’ll rise beside the Lamb of God,
Come tomorrow,
I know it!

The ship runs aground. What might 400 years of industry colliding with a mountain’s iron core sound like?

THE HOSTS

(shaken by the collision)

It furrowed space like a plow does fields.
Shrugged space away like a snake does skin.

COYOTE is present and among THE HOSTS.

COYOTE

Poisonous crops? Nourishing venom?

GUIDE

The life in all that’s cast aside.

MAKWA

The end in every start.

THE CAPTAIN emerges from the ship. A shadow becoming flesh. Wind.

TOTAA’AR, the matriarch, descends to meet them, accompanied by GRANDFATHER, FATHER, BROTHER, and MAKWA, as well as BOW, GUIDE, and DRUM. THE CAPTAIN strides past TOTAA’AR and toward the largest HOST he can identify as male.

THE CAPTAIN thinks this one is the leader and he becomes the FAUX CHIEF.

COYOTE

A lucky break! To receive
a new chief from strangers.

CAPTAIN

Blood and water sanctify!

SCRIBE AND RIFLE

Fill us with the spirit!

ARRIVALS

Fill us first with food—
our flesh is worn and weakened!

CAPTAIN

We followed the sun to Eden.
I'll follow it all the way on
to burn away what's broken
to be born new and strong.

GRANDFATHER

As tradition says,
we will see our guests are fed.

COYOTE

What wondrous and magical bread
turns “strangers” into “guests”?

FATHER (with COYOTE mocking)

I, your new chief. As chief,
I, chief-in-chief command—
guide them where the sun
bleeds into ocean.
The Captain says a garden's there—

GUIDE

Probably sand.
New Chief Upside Down,
Chief Buffalo Chip.
I'll go to watch
more than to guide.
A strategy that you might try.

THE GUIDE, BOW, and DRUM head to Sweet Land's west. THE CAPTAIN follows, and begins flogging THE CAPTIVES.

A CAPTIVE (later the PREACHER)

Blood and water purify—

RIFLE & SCRIBE

Make us fit for glory!

As THE CAPTIVES proceed, they drag the part of the ship that will become the railroad behind them by the chains on their necks. The ship leaves blood in its wake.

CAPTIVES (as a dirge of sorts)

Blood and water putrefy—
Fix us to their glory.

*The audience either follows THE GUIDE, BOW, and DRUM — "TRAIN 1" (p. 15)
or GRANDFATHER, FATHER, SON, and MAKWA — "FEAST 1: This Land is Our Home" (p. 13)*

END SCENE (CONTACT)

TWO WRITERS IN CONVERSATION:

Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney

DOUGLAS: So this is your first opera. How has the process been?

AJA: It's strange and amazing. And I have learned so much from you; you really mentored me. I feel deep gratitude for the relationships we have developed through this project. And I would have loved to learn even more about musical composition and the production. If I lived in LA, I would have been at every audition, rehearsal and design meeting. There are so many talented people involved. I would have loved to spend more time in the collaborative process as the work evolved. I won't actually have a full appreciation of the opera until I am in the audience along with everyone else. That is both exciting and odd.

DOUGLAS: Yes, indeed.

AJA: It's so far from where we began nearly two years ago when we wrote the first libretto, the one we tossed, our secret opera...

DOUGLAS: Right, exactly. The *secret* one.

AJA: How has this opera been for you? I know you've done a couple, maybe more. How has this one been different from the others?

DOUGLAS: Well, I love thinking with you as a collaborator and conspirator. And working with a group of fiercely committed, passionate people with diverging ideas about what they want to make, I've learned so much from you in that regard. That seems to be the kind of community you guide for a living! What a secret superpower to bring to *Sweet Land*! [Aja laugh] But knowing we could communicate with each other honestly about the things that skeeved us out or the things we meant to hold, even the times when we had different ideas about how to proceed. I've loved every bit of our librettist collabo. I'm deeply grateful to you and this project for the opportunity to work with you for—is that right? Two years?

AJA: Yeah.

DOUGLAS: Right.

AJA: One thing you have named as different about working with Yuval and The Industry is that the libretto isn't simply submitted, after lots of discussion about the story we want to explore, and then a year and a half go by until the final production. It has been really wonderful to have the ongoing conversations with Raven, DuYun, Yuval and Cannupa and have opportunities for reimaginings and revisions. It would have felt very strange to submit a text or a libretto and then a year and a half later, be like "Oh, this is what you all did with it, interesting."

DOUGLAS: [Laugh] Right. I've never had a "drop-off" libretto experience, but The Industry keeps you *really* involved.

AJA: We all brought various questions and concerns, the tensions we were holding about the content we were working with. I think those conversations were really rich. At times, you and I were pretty emphatic about what we thought was important to make visible, what we wanted to blur and subvert. I really enjoyed and appreciated the time we took to work through these things. Not because we ever solved them, but because we were willing to be in generative tension.

DOUGLAS: Absolutely.

AJA: Yeah.

DOUGLAS: One of the things that I think has been the most complicated in *Sweet Land*'s dramaturgy and

its relationship to U.S. history are these moments of specificity, these moments of what we might call with a Nabisco chime at the end: U.S. American®! When in one draft or path might we be really referencing a geographical specificity versus drawing from the historical to create a resonant fabulation that's legible as invention? I think of the character names: how in the Feast path the names indicate a particular nation, thus a specific place and cultural body. In Train, by naming the characters after objects or jobs, we may blur some of that specificity. In the full libretto, I undermine that further by suggesting that "Bow" doesn't even necessarily have to hold a bow.

AJA: Right.

DOUGLAS: They can hold any projectile weapon as far as I'm concerned. But I recognize even through naming we reach for a kind of fixity even as we're resisting other kinds of fixities. I know very, very, very early on, you and I talked about what it would feel like to try to strive for a strict documentarian approach, like signifying historical accuracy as a way of combating mythologization. Opera didn't feel right at all for that approach! So we moved toward a profoundly grotesque version of the mythic that was critically carnivalesque but also familiar, right?

AJA: Right.

DOUGLAS: Where do you feel like we ended up? How does the erasure method factor in?

AJA: There's a couple of things coming up before I answer the question of how I feel about where we finally landed. I just started reading an article in *Bitch* magazine by Abaki Beck who notes the appropriation of Native American languages and symbolism as foundational in much of mainstream (insert white) science fiction. This is obvious— and the point of her article is more about Native writers engaging in speculative fiction to write their present and future in the context of an idigenous cosmology and not simplistically some inversion of settler colonialism where white people are situated as the victim. But reading her article reminded me of our early conversation about specificity, at least in the indigeneity aspects of it, as critical because of the sort of Pan-Indian elements that are used so whimsically in mainstream (again, insert white) work.

[BOTH LAUGH]

AJA: So I was working against that and simultaneously embracing the grotesque-erie aspects of the historical and contemporary moment, the violence and attempted erasures—because nothing can ever be completely erased—in the piece. And I think because of the way that we had conceptualized things, the way we had language things, that we, I hope, created a complex enough container. Also the different backgrounds, perspectives, wisdoms of the other collaborators created a big enough holding that it prevented us, or me, from being too literal and thus reductionist. If just one of us was trying to hold all that complexity it would have been harder; there would be too many things to work against, right?

DOUGLAS: Right.

AJA: I think that the convergence and divergence of our styles and ways of thinking and being actually really created a wide enough container for it. We'll have to see if that is true. It will be interesting to hear the criticisms that come from our people.

DOUGLAS: Yup.

AJA: Because I'm sure that will happen.

DOUGLAS: Yeah.

AJA: So, yeah, I don't know. I'm curious about how it will be, particularly for Native and Black people, the Native and Black audience.

AJA: How do you feel about where we ended up in terms of our responsibility, accountability to our communities?

DOUGLAS: This piece doesn't really address the enslavement of Black people in the so-called New World.

AJA: Right.

DOUGLAS: And some of that is because we focused on the idea of global indigeneity along with global arrival—not just the Americas and Caribbean say 500-plus years ago—and I get that maybe that would make it too specific. But there are elements, I guess, of other approaches, that we took and didn't completely move away from, that are *less* blurry. So, there's all that in the atemporal and geographically stirred soup. And then, there's the gap between the libretto and a production. One thing I do think about, though, which connects to the article you talked about, regarding Black presence, is what it means to use strategies or compositional techniques that I understand as being rooted in Black cultural approaches. I do think my parts of the libretto are in that tradition. And hell, when this started, I thought I'd be writing the pilgrims, straight-up. So...

AJA: Yeah. And you had done such impeccable research.

DOUGLAS: Ah well. It metabolized. But, I keep fixating on blurring and specificity. I'm sorry! When Raven and I were planning out our scenes, we often asked whose story we were telling. Geographically. Manifest Destiny, for example, is another one of those specificities that we flirted with before blurring.

AJA: Well it has been the ongoing tension. And as the opera evolved some of these registers were missed or transformed into something else. This has been a learning for me as a librettist—that the words alone are not enough. They can't hold all the dramaturgical elements.

DOUGLAS: So the tagline that's been sort of circulating around—“a Manifest Destiny Opera that erases itself.” It's tricky, because it makes the blur sharp in a fashion that maybe cuts both ways. Though, I can get with the idea of zeroing in on Manifest Destiny as a synecdoche or metonym of settler colonialism.

AJA: I actually do not agree that this is a description of at least the libretto.

DOUGLAS: Got you.

AJA: I don't think that's what we were doing, I think it was something else. We are working with erasure, for sure. But we don't actually believe it's possible to erase history, the whole point of this being is that we are living in this experience that is language by those in power as the result of something historic, in the past, “that happened hundreds of years ago.” they say. But even epigenetics tells us that the legacy is in our cells, in our DNA. And then there is the present that has echoes of the past, and its own active systems of violence and subjugation. So no, it is not an erasure, but rather the brutality of these ongoing attempts, and our resistance and surfacing this in very oblique ways.

DOUGLAS: Yeah, true. True.

AJA: And too the collaboration, the breadth of it, made so many wondrous and nuanced things possible.

DOUGLAS: Ha! Right. So, you can see how opera can create an ecosystem in which collaboration becomes sustaining. Once you're in production mode and you're like, “Oh, my

gosh that was a beautiful moment. I want to work with that artistic director again!” Or, “Oh, I really want to work with this composer again.” Or maybe a performer sings something so beautifully you're like, “I just want that person to sing everything I ever write.”

AJA: Yes, yes. Thank you for bringing up the actual performers, the people—

DOUGLAS: The people— [laughter]

AJA: The people that are opera. I think it was during the auditions and folks were coming up and saying things like, “your words mean so much to me; thank you for the opportunity to be able to do this work.” And with the distance and the way the collaboration really happens, I felt very separated from these relationships, ones with the performers. right? But really, we are writing for them. There was a video that Babatunde Akinboboye did talking about what *Sweet Land* means to him. He spoke about the importance of this story, about black, brown and indigenous bodies and why it matters that this story is being told in an operatic form.

DOUGLAS: Yes, yes.

AJA: And I was just like, “Right, that's actually—” more than the audience, it's the performers that we're writing for, right?

DOUGLAS: Remember way back when you first joined the production and I was going on about how the composer's score is a reading of the libretto?

AJA: Mmmhmmm.

DOUGLAS: If we can't write a libretto that can move our collaborators—then what? And it's a real hope that—and here's one part of what being in collaboration can really mean: if people respond to an opera, it's not just because of what any one part of it does, it's all of us in conjunction. People will respond to different parts at different levels but it really is that collaborative *work* and that's why we have to hold each other, that's why we have to hold each other's contributions and the work itself. When it happens, there's something really beautiful and magical about it, and it's one of the reasons to come back to making opera, even though it's complex and it's complicated and sometimes it can be frustrating. It's a very different relationship to control than you have with writing poetry.

AJA: Right, right, right.

DOUGLAS: But there is something about that collective creative possibility that's just powerful. Add to that what happens when you have collaborators who are trying to make something that could have a sociocultural impact; collaborators you can engage with questions in a very serious way. You might not always agree, but you feel there's real discourse happening even in just making the damn thing.

AJA: All of what you've named, and the tendrils of our conversation really surfaced for me that whatever the story is and however it's going to end up being received by different members of the audience, that it is an opera and that this way of trying to tell this story needed to be in the form of an opera. It seems very true and necessary, especially as opera has its roots in European aristocratic traditions, in colonialist traditions, and this is a really essential piece of what we're trying to stretch, to make more malleable. And the collaboration itself has been a way of making the story more hyperbolic and phantasmagoric, of making it operatic. I'm super excited about it, about being in the audience for the first time.

FEAST 1 : *This Land is Our Home*

Composer: Du Yun
Libretto: Aja Couchois Duncan

The Arrivals come from the east, the way the sun rises, slowing at first, then bright and unyielding, a ball of hot plasma creating a magnetic field into which everyone is drawn. They come over the hill and into the valley and fill it with their bodies, their hunger, their need. They sing as they walked, the song as sharp as a bird’s cry. Above them the sky is vast and unknowable as god and It is god to whom they first sing. Their sound is deep, reverent and tormented.

The feast itself is held in a large structure built of roughly hewn cedar tree planks held together by rope. Coyote is seated there with a Kudyapi on its lap.

ARRIVALS

You command, we command.
Command the land to open,
command the earth
to split her veins.
We come hungry and
we try to consume her.
But the land is lazy,
the land slow,
the land is unresponsive,
her legs tightly closed.
We come hungry.
This feast will fill us.
We come hungry
Sweet Land will be our home.

Father, Brother and Grandfather – three generations of the head family of the hosts – stand, and Grandfather sings a blessing:

GRANDFATHER

The plants and animals come before us.
The water, earth and sky their home.
We absorb their wisdom
in our nascent bodies.
Another cycle of reciprocity
has begun.

Father joins in.

FATHER

My family thanks you
for coming to this feast.
My people thank you
for sharing what we eat.
More than food we have to share
something for your spirit’s treat.
My daughter Makwa
Will dance the unseen world alive.

As her father sings, Makwa begins to dance around the table.

Jimmy Gin stands.

JIMMY GIN

Your generosity is welcome as is the land on which we stand.
But your generosity is poison to the freedom of a man.
We must ask for nothing, accept nothing from another’s hand.

Brother stands and sings to Jimmy – man to man.

BROTHER

Everything we have comes from water, soil and sun.
The birds and four legged ones share their feathers, fur and flesh.

JIMMY GIN

What soul lives within a bird’s breast?
What spirit alights inside moose or deer?
God gave us dominion over everything.
Accept this flower for this food.
Accept this flower as payment for your future brood.
With this woman I will give you children stronger than your own.
With this woman we will make a new race of people who claim this land as their own.

Jimmy places the flower on Makwa’s lap and reaches forward to kiss her.

MAKWA

My people are ancient
as this earth.
Our children are strong.
They are the future
of this world.
You are *biiwide*
strangers,
tolerated guests.
I would no more breed with you
than welcome an invasion
of maggots
into my chest.

JIMMY GIN

My beauty you have misunderstood my request.
I will make you my queen
and our children will subdue this wild land.
Think of what we, together, can create.

COYOTE

The cycles are getting closer together.
You can reach out and touch them.
Past and future just inches from each
Others hands.

TOTAA'AR, BROTHER, FATHER, GRANDFATHER:

Some guests are gracious
Some guests are grateful
Some guests are greedy
Some guests defile
Some guests are bloody:
future massacres in their arms.

JIMMY GIN

Your way of life is dying.
Death is all your future holds.
We are offering you a way
to be part of all that will be produced
from our domination of the earth.

Jimmy reaches into his waist and draws a pistol.

JIMMY GIN

Your way of life must end!

*Makwa moves quickly towards Jimmy and draws a knife clasped at the inside of her thigh, bringing it across Jimmy's neck.
The scene freezes at this moment of violence as the audience moves to "THE CROSSROADS" (p. 20)*

END SCENE (FEAST 1: This Land is Our Home)

TRAIN 1

Composer: Raven Chacon
Libretto: Douglas Kearney

From the darkness, we hear PREACHER.

PREACHER

Fellow travelers
Of the saltwater road
Delivered to sweet, sweet land.
As we travel west,
in the name of our Lord—
tell me of beginnings.

RIFLE

Preacher!

SCRIBE

Preacher!

CAPTAIN

There was Creation!

PREACHER

—all that God has made—

CAPTAIN & RIFLE

Forever and ever!

SCRIBE

—and ever!

PREACHER

By His word—

CAPTAIN

And by the blood—

We hear the sound of a metal hammer striking a railroad spike. Lights flash in time on PREACHER and CAPTAIN. The hammer sound continues, steady and sure, throughout the scene. As the scene progresses, a train is being built—especially noticeable among the ensemble constructing it are Black people and Chinese people. One should have the sense that it is being constructed from the ship’s parts.

PREACHER

Seas away, a savage greenness—
Seas away, an Eden.

The lights flash on the wilderness, revealing what will be Sweet Land’s trees, hillocks, things darting through limbs and thicket. GUIDE is among them, she points to the West. SCRIBE stands by vigorously scribbling everything down with a vulture feather quill.

CAPTAIN

All of nature!

SCRIBE

All of nature!

CAPTAIN

Every plant!

RIFLE

Every creature!

PREACHER

All were nameless—

CAPTAIN

—a blank surface!

A flash reveals RIFLE is pounding a gun butt against the ground in time with the hammer sound. RIFLE stands with BOW, who is holding a projectile weapon that may not be a bow at all. BOW is showing RIFLE how to hunt.

BOW

One mustn’t fire the arrow
For it would never arrive.
Always a ways further to go.
See? An arrow stitches distance—
Doesn’t fly so much as bind.
All you kill you carry—

A burden dragged behind.

HERD ANIMALS sound a way about being killed “properly.” It’ll be a different sound soon.

CAPTAIN

Preacher! Tell me what dominion is.

PREACHER

The Word of God
is the Hand of God. *(points to the sky)*
Hear Him calling:
Adam!

SCRIBE

Adam!

RIFLE

Captain!

SCRIBE

Captain!

The lights flash on BOW and RIFLE. RIFLE seems to be firing an awful lot while BOW fires perhaps a quarter as much. BOW hasn’t noticed RIFLE’s excess yet.

RIFLE

The blood! The blood!
The blood! The blood!

HERD ANIMALS sound a way about being killed “excessively.”

PREACHER

Tell me what dominion is!

CAPTAIN

The Word of God
is the Hand of God
and what he names
is in his palm.

The lights flash on the wilderness, revealing Sweet Land’s trees, hillocks, things darting through limbs and thicket—now with words like “MIDDLE NORIAN REVUELTIAN GEOLOGICAL FORMATION (Painted Desert),” “CERTIFICATED RECREATIONAL SITE,” “SCIURUS CAROLINENSIS (Gray Squirrel)” stamped on them with projected lettering. Eventually, when the hammer strike lights flash, we’ll only see the words reflect light for a moment, like a coyote’s eyes catching a headlight.

DRUM

All of Nature is an archive
A house full of data—
Algorithm and hard drive.
We’re just winking signals.

Light on SCRIBE who scribbles furiously with a vulture feathered quill, while from darkness—

PREACHER

By His word—

CAPTAIN

And by the blood—

PREACHER

In His name—

CAPTAIN

And in the blood—

Elsewhere, the train is moving slowly, unobtrusively.

GUIDE

So here’s what Captain saw to call it?
It’s big enough to fit new nouns—
To us it’s *tsin*, to us that’s *tse*.

These visitors talk of blood.
Perhaps “blood’s” a name
for something else.

GUIDE crosses over to CAPTAIN. She removes a cloak that looks like it might be knitted from wool. She offers it to him.

CAPTAIN

An artifact of primitive textile folkcraft.

GUIDE

You understand it’s still *idaáshi*?

DRUM stands in light—it will be revealed that she stands near PREACHER and SCRIBE.

DRUM

I access the archive
with my fingers, a pulse.
I access the archive—

PREACHER (From the darkness)

Hocus Pocus!

SCRIBE

Hocus—!

The lights flash on BOW and RIFLE. RIFLE is covered with blood and seems to be firing an awful lot while BOW fires perhaps a quarter as much. BOW hasn’t noticed RIFLE’s bloodlust yet. Then, steady lights go up on BOW, GUIDE, and DRUM.

BOW

One must teach the best technique
Or these travelers won’t survive.
True hunters do not “sneak”;
They calculate with light.
Down the route of silence,
All you kill you carry—
A burden dragged behind.

So many HERD ANIMALS killed, they can only sound a way about it quietly. Many seem to have been loaded into the train, which is looking a lot like a charnel house floor.

DRUM is listening to SCRIBE and PREACHER. PREACHER is clutching a Bible.

PREACHER

All the answers are in here.

SCRIBE

The heavenly author!

PREACHER

I’ve read it over and over.

SCRIBE

Cover to cover!

PREACHER

And still I cannot say—

SCRIBE

Still you cannot say—

PREACHER

Hocus Pocus!

CAPTAIN

Drums of war!

SCRIBE

Just senseless rat-a-tat.
Ignore it.
Go on.

PREACHER

Still, I cannot say—

CAPTAIN

How will we be made clean
In this Garden?

PREACHER

Only through the blood—

SCRIBE

—the blood!

CAPTAIN

Only through the blood—

SCRIBE

—the blood!

GUIDE enters suddenly.

GUIDE

Whose blood?

Whose blood?

CAPTAIN is in the midst of profound spiritual uncertainty, and that GUIDE has witnessed it is upsetting.

CAPTAIN

I don’t know.

RIFLE dashes through, covered with blood.

RIFLE

Damn that game’s

like lambs in a fold!

Hallelujah!

BOW follows—angry and distraught.

BOW

Schkob!

All you kill you carry—

A burden dragged behind!

Sudden full dark except the RED LAMP of the train as its PIERCING WHISTLE shatters the space.

CAPTAIN stands before the train’s lamp.

CAPTAIN

Now only blood will wash us clean.

Then we’ll be new again.

But I’ve seen no savior in this land.

Where is the blessed—

GUIDE enters.

GUIDE

Such a chill in this dark.

May I use that cloak?

Take this in its place.

She hands CAPTAIN a necklace that seems to be made of 30 silver moons.

GUIDE

This is *naabikaagan*.

As the train moves forward, the CAPTAIN walks in its bloody wake. We finally see the tracks, as the stage lights flash with every hammer strike, illuminating, then obscuring the action. The tracks are an ensemble of people, especially Black people and Chinese people, beaten down, wrecked looking, brutalized, prone. They pass the train—loaded with bits of Sweet Land and its inhabitants—like it’s a stage diver—over their heads, as they lay prone. They moan in a tune that reminds us of the hymn as heard on the ship.

RAILROAD SONG

When we build the iron road,

“It’s destiny,”

They’ll tell me.

I’m paving a smooth way for God,

“Back to work!”

They tell me.

I’ll die beside this iron road,

and rise as smoke,

They told me.

Spike and hammer spark and fly,

How you make a Country!

Swing this hammer till I die,
And home can take my spirit!

Steel spikes pierce this Sweet ol’ Land,
swing hammers down!
Have mercy!

Railroads cut land half as wide!
Work’s twice as hard,
Have mercy!

Jordan, cool my weary brow,
sweat and blood!
Have mercy!

Spike and hammer spark and fly,
How you make a Country!

Swing this hammer till I die,
And home can take my spirit!

DRUM

I’ve heard of one
whose mouth is a hole in its belly
Is it the same where you’re from?

A GUNSHOT timed with the hammer strike – BOW screams and falls dead, joining the train tracks.

RIFLE

All I kill, I bury!
All I kill, I bury!

PREACHER

Twass blood came down
Twass holy! Swing hammers down,
Have mercy!

CAPTAIN

Only blood will wash us clean.
Where is the blessed Lamb?

PREACHER

How they pierced the Lamb of God,
How you make a country!

SCRIBE

Kill! Bury! Blood! Holy! Wash us clean, God!

CAPTAIN

Only blood will wash us clean.
Then we’ll be new again.

GUIDE

None can hope to come out clean
who reckons Sweet Land’s only dirt.
Who yearns for death in trade for birth
thinks freedom yields from fields of chains.

CAPTAIN

I name you: “Lamb.”

GUIDE

But I am—

CAPTAIN brings the knife down on GUIDE—a gout of bright red blood arcs out and— the scene freezes at this moment of violence as the audience moves to "THE CROSSROADS" (p. 20)

END SCENE (TRAIN 1)

THE CROSSROADS

At the Crossroads

by Aja Couchois Duncan

Can you feel the air
licking your skin?
The dance, the jingle
of night?

This land. This
land.

Once wild river basin,
now cultivated strip of sand.
This tree, this shrub, this
park, a public space
in a place that was
always, already
free.

Can you feel
it, the way turtle
its carapace
is home? This home
stolen, burned, a place
death came
now landscaped
budding trees,
these shrubs and flowers
inhabiting time between
worlds, between what was
and what will be.

This earth from
which the moon rises
from which Sky Woman
makes her ascent.

Do you hear it, do you hear
their cries? Coyotes will trick you.
Wiindigo will devour you.

Go back,
go back.
To the story
you know, to the end
to the beginning.
Go back
to where you
came from.

END SCENE (*THE CROSSROADS*)

Composer Statement by Raven Chacon, in conversation with Du Yun

This is not an opera about Pilgrims and Indians. That was just the cover of the book to get some of you audience in the door. But there are a lot of Indians. An entire hemisphere. And these encounters that happened in the past did not necessarily render them all extinct. Really, these encounters never ended. They morphed, they combined, they folded back onto themselves. Blood blended as often as it was spilled. Today, believe it or not, Indigenous people of the Americas still meet other Indigenous people of the Americas, maybe even in territories between the places that are considered home. And why end there. Land doesn't even really end there. Even if it does, people swim.

This is not Indigenous futurism. The perpetual deferment implied by that stylized speculation is unsatisfying, and is at best, comical as a critique comparing the rate of progress of our own contemporary U.S tribal governments.

No, this isn't that exactly either. Perhaps here in this Sweet Sweet Land, we see an alternate world where a Lakota futurist was making regalia on the other side of the world of those Italian futurist noisemakers. These could have been the art-tactics to avoid pan-Indianism. Nonetheless, here we are, there is no obligation for the sonorities inside this opera to replicate the music of Native peoples. Can we ever catch up or are we always doomed to be coming in last, behind even our own assumptions of who we are?

This is not reconciliation. These rooms are tight! And we cannot fit everyone in here. So why must those who have skewed the narrative of North American history always be given a seat, let alone be at the head of the table again? Instead opera gives us the opportunity to multiply perspectives in many forms, beyond the confines of a static installation, adding screens in front of cinema screens, to stir the stew so that it can never be unstirred. You are reminded that this is real-time, today, and that we are not talking about the past at all. Then I ask myself: Can we ask for land back, when many were forced to live here? This cannot end in resolution, but rather, a reset.

But this is about a series of waves trying to reach the shore first. A complex series of crossfades at the bottom of the hill from Elysian Park, north of Olvera Street, east of Chinatown. Crossfades can be crosshairs, as writer Josh Kun points out, are also sonic negotiations of cultural collision. It is at these crosshairs where Du Yun says we can avoid the “double trap”, a situation that first essentializes your worldview, then punishes you for sharing it in the first place. We, the composers of Sweet Land, have decided to work in this exact middle point, where we can shapeshift, without fearing our own questions.

To exist in sound

Improvising in Sweet Land

Carmina Escobar

Improvised music is alive. It connects you to the now, a sensory moment created together—space, players, audience—joined in solidarity.

Sweet Land makes room for improvised participation with the characters of Coyote and Wiindigo, allowing the individual voices of these characters to unite in collectivity, provoking the stereotype of a composer working apart and above the ensemble, challenging the myths of western classical form and cosmogony.

These vocal improvisations question the persistence of spoken signifiers. They destabilize language, atomize the phonetic material, expand the limits of its tympanic and onomatopoeic abilities.

With these erasures, every performance of *Sweet Land* is a revision, an ongoing quest to exist within the sounds of the now and discover what cannot be said.

FEAST 2

Composer: Raven Chacon
Libretto: Douglas Kearney

The feast now looks a bit like Golden Corral: there is a bank of white buffet steam tables and a large white table with benches set around it. In a darker corner, Coyote is cooking a stew. MAKWA is rolled up in aluminum foil. Like leftovers. One of the ARRIVALS points to the floor:

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

Here dear, right there is where you’ll stand.
A blushing bride. Our blushing bride!

WIINDIGO

Though who could tell?
Like blood upon an apple—
or ketchup on a cherry.
So red red red...

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

Won’t do for proper weddings.
Like blood upon an apple,
Or ketchup on a cherry—

WIINDIGO

Hurry! Hurry!
Get her ready!

COYOTE is cooking with great focus.

COYOTE

This stew is good authentic shit.
Like a Granny Snake would make.
An appetite can bite you back
When the gut outgrows the spirit.

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

Here dear, right there is where you’ll stand.
You’ll say, “I will.” You’ll say, “I do.”

WIINDIGO

You’ll cry a little.

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

Yes, you will.
You’ll be perfect.

WIINDIGO

She needs a veil,
At least a bonnet.

ARRIVALS

For days and for days, we wandered the sea,
in search of this place where You bid us to be.
Bless our new friends, and teach them to hear
The gift of salvation we speak in their ear.
We feast on the bounty found in this new land.
A garden of goodness that grows from Your hand.
We thank You for blessings and mercy and love,
And the grace from the Blood that pours from above.
Amen! Amen! Amen!

ARRIVALS serve themselves at the buffet. They begin eating—maybe some don’t even wait to sit down. They aren’t paying much attention to MAKWA until she scrambles to her feet on the table.

MAKWA

Who are you?! What is this place?!

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

The Lord bless you—

WIINDIGO

and keep you!

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

Who wants seconds?

COYOTE

When the gut outgrows respect,
an appetite grows teeth.
The brain climbs down beneath
and the stomach rides the neck.

MAKWA stands on the table, wary and in a defensive stance.

MAKWA

What happened to the land—?
It’s a bone bleached in sun.
Who could have picked it blank
Like locusts or buzzards?

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

It’s cleaner now, don’t you think?

WIINDIGO

Getting ready for tomorrow.

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

Here dear, right there is where you’ll stand.

MAKWA

Where is my family?
They were by my side!
Where are my people?

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

You’ll get a ring! A pretty ring.

WIINDIGO

More than you deserve.

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

And a bouquet of flowers to carry.

WIINDIGO

Hurry! Hurry!

ARRIVAL MEN

Groom! Groom! Groom! Groom!

JIMMY GIN swains in wearing a coonskin cap and a tuxedo, both brilliantly white.

MAKWA

What became of all that came before?
The feast we set for you and your folk?
My memory is smothered under heavy snow.

JIMMY GIN

There she is! My spirit’s treat!
I knew you were mine the moment we met.

MAKWA climbs down from the table. She still maintains her powerful bearing.

ARRIVAL WOMEN

Bride! Bride! Bride! Bride!

MAKWA

I know you! You were the one—

JIMMY GIN

The only one
who can hold you till tomorrow.
Sunset’s red
washed with pale light of morning.
All you’ve seen,
what you remember doesn’t matter.
My tomorrow has come
and it’s so much better.

The ARRIVAL WOMEN distribute mortars, the ARRIVAL MEN produce brushes from their clothing—these must end up with the mortars, whomever has them.

MAKWA

I remember:
When you came, your skin reeked of drowning—
you were huddled, wretched and poor in your ship.
We told you this land is our kin.
When we fed you our family’s bounty,
we shielded you from dying.

JIMMY GIN

We sailed over oceans,
driven by the Lord.
By His blood alone
were we saved.

MAKWA

Then when we fed you our family’s bounty,
we poured *our* blood in the sea.

JIMMY GIN

This land He has given
is our reward.
He promised us Eden:
we have arrived.

MAKWA

You’ve buried us in your garden.
You’ll use us to harvest this land!

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

Here dear, right there is where you’ll stand.
You’ll wear a new dress.
Pure as new sunshine.

MAKWA

What have you done?!

WIINDIGO

Yesterday’s over.
It’s our future.

MAKWA

Why can’t I stand—?!

AN ARRIVAL WOMAN

Can’t you just see it?

COYOTE

This stew is good authentic shit,
Like Raven stirs.
An appetite can get some spurs
When the gut outgrows the spirit.

MAKWA

If I could find grandfather, I’d ask
How to right a boat without oars?
If I could find my father, I’d ask
How to shut a house without doors?
If I could find my brother, I’d ask
How to beat the ocean from shore?
I was a seer,
I knew the future—

MAKWA is in a white wedding dress, it should look almost like a cage that she is trapped in. It is built so that it stands her up.

JIMMY GIN

I’ll never leave you, honey,
You got nothing to fear.
I vow to hold you here forever,
in my Sweet Sweet Land.

MAKWA

I was a seer,
I knew the future...
But I didn't see our erasure,
That they'd make us disappear.
I'd draw my blood back from the water,
but blood and brine is just tears.
I'll say, "I will." I'll say, "I do."

ARRIVALS

We'll always make a place for you,
In our Sweet, Sweet Land!

Beaming, JIMMY GIN leans in to passionately kiss MAKWA. The stage goes dark, except for the vanishing light on COYOTE who is still busily cooking:

COYOTE

It's almost done!
It's almost done!

The scene freezes at this moment of violence as the audience moves back to "Final Scene: Echoes & Expulsions" (p. 30)

END SCENE (FEAST 2)

TRAIN 2

Composer: Du Yun
Libretto: Aja Couchois Duncan

Post western expansion the train is an echo, a metaphor, a decoration. At the historic spike of the intercontinental railroad, the Captain holds a bottle of whiskey; his clothes are disheveled and his shirt is flecked with dried blood.

CAPTAIN

All of this is mine.
Everything seen and not.
The whole world is mine.
If I name it, I claim it.
This rock, this point, this spike.

Preacher enters with a group of House Hunters. Preacher leads them to cardboard cutouts of condominiums. The house are cookie cut; the cutouts provides almost as much depth as the condos they represent.

PREACHER

Everything I tell you is true.
This deal. This opportunity
Is chosen for you.

Bring your friends and family.
Bring your money and ambitions.
You too can have it all.

The House Hunters murmur to one another, touch the cardboard cutouts as if touching a real home.

CAPTAIN

With this train we scattered the “injuns”.
We decimated their sacred buffalo.
With this train we penetrated the wilderness.
We tamed her unrecognizable.
A mere child’s toy.

Scribe steps into the light. She is all angles and pearls.

SCRIBE

Language is everything. Perception a mere turn of the phrase.
What they believe is formed by what the market’s say.

PREACHER

Our forefathers brought light
to a dark and savage place.
Opened up this land so it could be
parceled, bought and sold.

Available now to those of you
brave enough to claim them.
Home ownership. Be the master
of your domain.

CAPTAIN:

We forged ourselves from iron,
Animated ourselves with blood.
Now we are told to swallow this
replica. Paradise blown.

We are no better than the “injuns.”
Look how we’ve weakened
Under another’s hands.

SCRIBE

You must not confuse the masters
and the masses.
Everyone dreams to be better than
their brothers, their neighbors, their kin.

PREACHER:

Paradise my friends.
Is this land we were given.
Paradise my friends.
Is the riches we receive.

This is how we know
we are chosen.
We take whatever
we want, whatever
we need.

BOW

Every opening
is closing.
Every life
is dying.
These animals are nothing
but dead, dead bones.

PREACHER

Start fresh.
Buy new.
Never inhabited by others.
This miraculous moment
begins with you.

Bring your friends and family.
Bring your money and ambitions.
You too can have it all!

HOUSE HUNTERS

Whatever we want.
Whatever we need.

PREACHER

Take this piece of paradise
Name it your own
Each and every one of you
Can claim this place
your home.

BOW

Mother metal, mother sword, tell us what's in store.

Guardian of mysteries, guardian of subconscious mind,
Travel across the realms and bring us a sign.

Oh mother of sustenance, oh mother of sons,
What reckoning is possible; they defiled the sun.

Let the dead hold you.
Let the dead support you.
Little, little lambs.

PREACHER

Wealth can yield eternal life.
You are carried in its arms.
Prosperity is your lord and savior.
Sweet Land, the sweetest land of all.

BOW

Let the dead hold you.
Let the dead support you.
Little, little lambs.

Bow is assembling all the bones into one enormous skeletal structure – the pieces clearly do not connect to one another and the structure is most definitely a monster.

BOW

Thigh bone connected to the hip bone
Hip bone connected to the back bone
Back bone connected to the shoulder bone
Shoulder bone connected to the neck bone
Neck bone connected to the head bone
Them dead, dead bones.

Darkness. Silence. The audience moves back to "Final Scene: Echoes & Expulsions" (p. 30)

END SCENE (TRAIN 2)

THE DIRECTORS IN CONVERSATION:

Yuval Sharon and Cannupa Hanska Luger

CANNUPA: I was trying to imagine your position as a director and having someone like me, from outside the art form, working alongside you. I think if somebody came into my studio and made suggestions about what I was working on, it would drive me crazy, totally crazy.

YUVAL: It's been the opposite of crazy-making in every way! It has been empowering to have a partner on every idea, to look at every aspect of the realization of this work together. And it has been a very important corrective to what we are all trying to accomplish; I can't imagine us doing this project without your voice.

CANNUPA: Yes, I think it would be difficult. Because of the lack of visibility, to open up these conversations and to have the story without a point of reference to that sense would be tricky.

YUVAL: We have in mind that a director is autocratic: it's their way, and usually his way...

CANNUPA: Just proper pronouns in this case! [Laughter]

YUVAL: I actually feel like what we are undertaking is a mode of leadership that the world could use most right now. What are we actually rehearsing when we go to rehearsal? What are we practicing? We're practicing another form of being together and another form of sharing space. And I think the thing that has been so powerful for me about this experience has been that, up until now, my attempts to unravel all the pernicious influences of my "education" of American history has remained an intellectual experience. Whether it has been reading Howard Zinn or Vine Deloria – a fine start, maybe, but purely cerebral. This experience working with you and working with everyone that's a part of this has been to engage and find a way to share with the lived experiences.

CANNUPA: We all come from diverse communities; we're dealing with individuals who had completely different experiences. It's interesting how all of these issues shake out once we start telling stories – and it's weird to have that responsibility even to do that. Because I can't tell Raven's story. I can't tell somebody's story on the East Coast. I can't speak for the Wampanoag, I can't speak for the Iroquois Confederacy. I can't speak for most of us. So much of my practice has been trying to delineate the weight of the Native American umbrella. Let's add complexity to that: let's recognize that there are hundreds of different languages, cultures and voices underneath that umbrella. This is why I started working in futurist narratives, because I could bypass all of the protocols and constraints that a living culture exists in presently. It exists in its own pocket universe: an alternative, and I think that's the only way we could really look at some of these issues, rather than it becoming didactic.

YUVAL: That's actually why I think opera is a powerful medium to explore everything we are discussing – which might at first seem contradictory, since opera in this country can feel like a colonialist art form. It's curious that the invention of the genre and the landing on Plymouth Rock are only within 30 years of each other. So as Europeans were coming here, they were also making opera. There is something about this intertwining of this notion of opera and the "discovery of the New World" that is at the core of what we're doing.

CANNUPA: It's funny, because just within my normal art practice I have been thinking about the importance of art existing as a verb rather than a noun. Art as a noun is how it becomes controlled: it becomes a commodity, sheltered in edifices in every major city to box it up and put everything in their place. I keep thinking about that in relationship to opera itself: why has it become this elite form, when those original projects simply brought artists together to create a narrative and communicate to their community about the problems of their society? Opera existed as a verb; that happens in a place; and the audience completed the work by embedding the ideas within the community. The only way to control that is to objectify it. So you build a house for it, like a museum – and then you're beholden to those who paid for it. And a process of objectification begins in a colonial fashion until it becomes opera as we experience it today.

What this country experienced, opera has also experienced and is experiencing. Every art form experienced it in the effort to control and monetize these systems. We challenge all of that. And as I look at and work and create for this opera, I'm hyper-aware of the audience – and I want the audience to also work.

YUVAL: Yes, and also not to create a situation where the audience feels let off the hook. How do we let the audience understand in the most visceral way possible their responsibility to the story that's unfolding? There's no separation saying, "Look what happened – but aren't we lucky we don't have to deal with the consequences of all this anymore?" Instead we're trying to point people's attention to how those consequences are still unfolding all around us. I think the whole point in doing this piece at the LA State Historic Park is to remember that this land is the site of so many consequences that have never been properly rectified or addressed.

CANNUPA: Totally – and each audience member's home, and their job sites, you know what I'm saying? And hopefully we don't become too solution-oriented. That's one of my biggest concerns with this project: how do you put more things on the table and allow people to flip things over and see what's what. How do we become, rather than teachers, reference librarians? I'm not going to teach you anything; I'm just going to lay information out on the table – you know how to learn.

YUVAL: You're right, but I'm not as worried about being solution-oriented, since we've all been pretty clear that we're not the ones to offer a solution or some kind of a "peace plan." That's not going to happen from people like us; but what can arise from artists is a process-based look at how we organize our lives, and to look at ways that we can inspire the world around us to think about alternatives. As soon as you create a piece of art, you're transforming imagination into reality; can we use the imaginations that we all have – whether its directorial, musical, linguistic, or performative – all of our imaginations combined to create one larger image of the world we want to see?

CANNUPA: This is the part I'm excited about: how the audience will move through and complete the story so the opera continues into the world. And yet the world is trained to look for teaching tools. So I'm fascinated as to how the

opera can shift the weight of this experience to be on the audience as a participant. There’s something inherent in the American population that is hungry for explanation, and not internalizing and or being accountable. “Teach me so that I can once again put it in the university, the museum of my mind, in its little box, which I can go back and reference as an anecdote.”

YUVAL: I know – audiences have been trained to expect a one-to-one relationship between the sign that you’re offering to people and what it signifies. As if all you need to know to comprehend the artwork is to find an elusive key that would unlock the singular intention.

CANNUPA: So how do we say, “It’s you?”

YUVAL: I think the artistic strategies you just spoke of – creating this kind of alternate, “pocket universe,” rather than depict specific historical moments – creates an essential distance that offers contemplation and reflection. You’ve always put it so beautifully by calling it a “blurring of the line” between American history and a speculative vision of competing worldviews.

CANNUPA: Yeah, and that’s what I’m really excited about in *Sweet Land*: we get to describe it as myth. And by stepping into this pocket universe, everything that I am creating with my imagination is juxtaposed over what we’ve learned. Can you expose a myth by duplicating it and by creating a contrary? So in “Train,” we never name it Manifest Destiny. But of course that is what we are depicting – and it’s also not that. That indeterminate space between the concrete and the abstract – living in that space is not comfortable, and we do not want the audience to feel comfortable in that space, because we actually want to make the audience uncomfortable – separating them, sending them on separate paths. And yeah, in America, it will look like an American narrative, but if you did this opera in China, if you did this in Australia, if you did this in any other part of the world that’s been affected by colonialism, they’ll be able to intersect. And that’s not a hard intersection. I think the hard intersection is between the Arrivals and the Hosts. How do I see myself as part of both sides, you know? How do we become accountable for both?

YUVAL: I think the notion of the “two tracks” of the *Sweet Land* experience is so crucial for the realization of this idea. People who have seen other projects by The Industry might be used to us offering pieces that resist a notion of a “a complete experience,” where simultaneous, multiple narratives co-exist. But in this opera, the idea of having multiple narratives has a different kind of social implication. You’re separated from who you came with in a way, and there’s no way you’ll know the other person’s story unless you ask, unless you engage, unless you share – otherwise there is a portion of the experience that will always be unknowable to you.

CANNUPA: I think in the myth of colonialism, there is the narrative of progress: everything moving forward inevitably. But what that undermines is the suffering that goes into that process; without that suffering, nobody benefits from a learned experience. So by making the audience divert and experience only a section of the story, you are reinforcing these ideas of loss and sacrifice and displacement.

YUVAL: Definitely.

CANNUPA: This is the story of displacement. Colonialism is a story of displacement. And the point of which we exist now, we weaponize that, as well as everything that could have been learned from understanding the weight and the tragedy of displacement. And we devalue it, because we don’t celebrate the hardship of it. And everybody whose grandfather denies associations with what happened, because “it was so long ago,” have not learned with their own selves. And maybe that’s a way for myself as well – as part of a community that had displacement imposed on them – to figure out where I intersect. Where do I intersect with settler colonial notions. This is a way to make an audience recognize that colonialism is a story of displacement for everybody.

YUVAL: But maybe the split opens up a possibility as well – a feeling of an openness as we look at the future. Allowing us to ask ourselves, “Did history really have to go this way?” Of course this is how history has unfolded over and over again – but are we doomed to just repeat these cycles over and over again? And can art do anything to illuminate a path towards stopping that cycle?

CANNUPA: Right. Just the formal aspect of bifurcating the path all of a sudden creates a plurality of those experiences. So you’re not destined, you know what I’m saying? This was a choice.

Final Scene: Echoes & Expulsions

Composer: Raven Chacon & Du Yun
Libretto: Aja Couchois Duncan & Douglas Kearney

SPECK, an adolescent of indeterminate gender and race, is working alone in a vast, industrial yard.
While working, they sing to themselves.

Meanwhile shadows are becoming visible, and the voice of ghosts of America’s history rise up around Speck.

Rosa

A young Pomo girl (age 10)

They sold me to Mrs. Bassett as house keep
for her angry home. I saw her hand the “baby hunters”
slips of paper, the same slips she used
to buy sugar and corn.
The cow cost less than me.
The bull cost more.

That winter my fevers
raged. Mrs. Bassett broke
the broom across my chest
tossed me into the storm.
They found me, dead,
half naked, curled in a box
behind Mrs. Bassett’s
angry home.

No Sweet Land here.
No Sweet Land here.

Hera

A Greek female immigrant (age late 20’s early 30’s)

First, the men came alone.
Thousands of them working
strikebreakers on railroad lines
quarrying copper from the earth
her skin split and exposed.

More than a hundred were killed
those first few years. Accidents others said.

But they stayed and later brought
picture brides. I, a village girl,
a folk healer tended to
the sick and maimed.

They said we would never
be true Americans.
Too dark, too poor, too tied
to our homeland.

But now in Sweet Land
you call us white.
Whiteness is the only thing
that protects us.

The Chinatown Massacre

CHORUS Los Angeles. 1871.

Yellow Peril burned white hot
that night the Black Alley choked—
500 men. Some women. Children.
When they burst in the building

a wave of white and brown faces,
churning with hatred.
Who could stop them?
Not even the doctor,
all that honor the white people gave him.
They cut off his finger to take his rings.
I saw them when they strung me up
after dragging me down Negro Alley.
They hung us by the Wagon Shop.
That night, they murdered 20 of us
Chinese boys and men.
They said we'd shot some white man.
Any excuse would have done—
We're here in the Sweet Land,
but they've wanted us gone
soon as their trains could run.
They made a noose our ticket away:
a noose, some laws, some guns.

Dolores

A Latina

In labor on a gurney
along the hospital hallway
I was hurting, I didn't understand.
The white doctors said
they could stop the hurting,
they promised I'd have babies again.
Understand, I was hurting,
alone, on a gurney
washed in pale, fluorescent light.
They told me my husband said it was fine.
I said, "Let me talk to him,"
they said: There's no time.
I felt torn apart in that hall, understand?
I think if I were nestled in a bed
with a window
and quiet
and a nurse
who whispered "Mrs."
not "Maria" or "Juanita"
they wouldn't jab needles
their white sheets of paper
a cheap, ball-point pen.
They wouldn't lie about what they're taking away.
But we're in the Sweet Land.
And who gets to have babies
is who gets to make citizens.
I understand now. I understand.

After a few moments, SPECK stands and begins following the movements of the different characters, mimicking, but not mocking, trying to understand and experience them.

Coyotes howl in the distance.

THE END

AFTERWORD

OF _____ WE SING: MAKING *SWEET LAND*

Douglas Kearney

Making a myth to kill yourself a myth you shooting a firehose at the ocean.

That's a something we reckoned when we saw us reckoning with history. With a wreck on the edge of a shore. Surely a show couldn't show what that sea saw. We couldn't land what fell at that land fall. What befell. There.

To say littoral—is to say the shore of a sea. The dictionary say. What diction say in the warp of song, the long note what's drawn, what's sung. What's sunk when sung, what's diction when drawn long, what's literal when re-figured over the the long tongue of a song sung, a note held. What builds besides drama in the dramatic, but myth?

What's bent over a long arc besides history, besides a note?

Opera, a work. What we work on, what we operate on, as if to say, what we saying who's sick. What this work works on, who's hurt? Who's broken? What we operating on, o opera, physician, physician heal thyself. Opera hear thyself. What this work works on, who gets to name the break, who gets to set the bone, connect it to the knee bone, the thigh bone, the shoulder bone. Who gets to say whose blood? Who gets to let as in drain, as in allow, as in rent.

Whose house?

A host. Welcomes. Oooooooooooooo, entertains. Works. If I knew you was coming—
If I knew you was coming—
If I knew you was coming—

The host blesses. Welcome. To know you was coming is to say “I been here.” Been being here. Done been being here. Which isn’t to say a been being here is done when you came, but to say been been being here. Which is to say, we aren’t
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaalllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllll
immmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmiiiiiiiigggggggrrrrrrrrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaann
nnnnnnnnnttttttttss.

Which is to say what does it mean to be in the place to be before some say it's a place? What a tactic is the tic-toc of time. Which is to say Time immemorial isn't to forget. Isn't to need to re-mem-ber what was cut from—isn't the need to re-mem-ber what was cut—

If I knew you was coming—
If I knew you was coming—

What's being cooked up? Cakes? After someone came what they cook up? Books?

Making a myth to kill yourself a myth you throwing moltov cocktails at infernos.

This opera a work what worked us. Sometimes worked us up when we put in work on it. There was a time some of us meant to kill something. At least wound it. Mortally. All you kill you carry and we knew we carried what we meant to kill with us—kind of hosts, you see even as some of us are host-hosts on the real. Been hosts. What was in us? The hosts you hear here, they got a case of coyote. Coyotes always digging up mess. The hosts here know you ought not let coyote stew. Coyote smelled what was in us. A kind of erasure. Which is to say what was in us was something that was taken away. Ooooooooooh, we were haunted. We were ghost hosts. We meant to kill not what wasn't there, but what was an act of ghosting. An extraction. And what was extracted fed the extractors, even as they settled down at the table they built out of ship-wood. Even as they settled down to dine leaving

dead
dead
dead
dead
dead
dead
dead
dead
dead

bones. You can see them stuck in a
craw, bones to pick. You can see them, jutting from a coyote carcass what's done been
struck by a train what keeps running by a coyote carcass what's done been struck by a
train what keeps running by a coyote carcass what's done been struck by a train what
keeps running by a coyote carcass what's done been struck by a train what keeps running.
You can see them, bleached and blanched on a plate after a feast of who ate whom? The
bones leave a trace not an erasure, a trail of flesh, its ghost: the extraction.

*"The flesh stripped, cleft to leave the bleached and blanched—something removed, for sure, that flesh taken and eaten what
some wanted and needed from it, and only then voiding what one deemed null and void. Consuming is not to do some pure
erasure, but a brutal assimilation. That's that act of ghosting.*

*"You are regarded and disregarded, gift and refuse. What devours you uses you for power, unless you manage to be
poisonous. To eat or be eaten is intimacy fraught with violence. A peculiar ambivalence."*

I say we meant to kill that once. But we arrived elsewhere in the work that worked us.
This operation. An aesthetic one we hoped would come with little anesthetic. General,
or local. What's up in the ground here, hear? What might get dug up? What's the state of
this history?

Making a myth to kill yourself a myth you whistling at a windstorm.

An arrival enters and thus always brings something. Even an empty belly can be full of
need. An empty hand can be full of need.

An arrival enters. Thus, they arrive with themselves. A kind of gift. A guest brings a gift to
the host.

Some guests are gracious. Some guests are grateful. Some guests grace. Some guests
grate. Some gifts is gag gifts. Who the jokes on? Who chokes on whom? Welcome,
welcome!

Some guests come to work, which is to say to work for others. *Sun up to sun down...*

Some guests come to work, which is to say work others. *Sun up to sun down
counting...*

Some guests come to put in work, which is to say do the dirty work of wetworks.
The boats are coming ashore, ashore.

These arrivals, the arrivals you hear here. They cut the land but get cut, they get cut. They
cleave—they cut and hold—get gut cleft stem to stern. They grate into the littoral. They
bleed seas into the land. They seize, they take and shake. They know it was the blood. They
let it out.

What we arrived at when we worked on this opera as opera, a work. What we work
on, what we operate on, as if to say, what we saying what needs a mending. What
this work works on, who ain't well? Who's busted? What we operating on, o opera,
physician, physician heal thyself. Opera hear thyself. What this work works on,
who gets to name the plague, who gets to pick the bone, connect it to who? Who
gets to claim whose blood? Who gets to claim as in kin, as in own, as in stake?

Making a myth to kill yourself a myth you throwing rocks at an avalanche.

To say literal—is to say what's for true. What we rue when we think on what happened.
Claim as in assert. We couldn't kill a myth with a myth. To document what's been erased
is to show your papers. Please. Who you please with that paper? That bone of the sum of
some thought some thought. To say littoral—is to say the shore of a sea— to see a shore
for show a sho

What’s bent over a long arc besides history, besides a note what’s sang—

What bends what we know to rue when sang? What
ssssssssaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaannnnnnnnnggggggggI know it was
I know it was I
know it was the
sangthe blood—

what we arrived at what some of us was home we was well some of us was trained to

what some of we was trained on without no home training to but

trained on as in aim at train to as in worked see we was trained—

we can’t kill the myth with a myth but we can show the myth if we train on dem bones
dem bones dem bones still wet but not still with work that’s not done being done but been
done and stay being done as the work stay. What we re-member we take apart again and
again and over to show a kind of ghosting that’s a kind of hosting we arrived at and we
came to like we awakened from what wasn’t sleeping but a dream that isn’t dreaming
what we dreamed. This myth we can’t kill the myth with a myth and opera an aesthetic we
bend to rue what we make and welcome welcome to the work we work we made to make us
we are aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

the state of this history, this myth the bones we pick

we make a myth we built we trained to give you

a feast to see a gift

to g a g

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Gil Cedillo, Los Angeles City Councilmember, 1st District

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- | | | |
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Creative Team Biographies



Raven Chacon,
***Sweet Land* composer**

Raven Chacon is a composer, performer and installation artist from Fort Defiance, Navajo Nation. As a solo artist, collaborator, or with Postcommodity, Chacon has exhibited or performed at Whitney Biennial, documenta 14, REDCAT, Musée d’art Contemporain de Montréal, San Francisco Electronic Music Festival, Chaco Canyon, Ende Tymes Festival, 18th Biennale of Sydney, and The Kennedy Center. Every year, he teaches 20 students to write string quartets for the Native American Composer Apprenticeship Project (NACAP). He is the recipient of the United States Artists fellowship in Music, The Creative Capital award in Visual Arts, The Native Arts and Cultures Foundation artist fellowship, and the American Academy’s Berlin Prize for Music Composition.



Du Yun,
***Sweet Land* composer**

Du Yun, born and raised in Shanghai, China, is a composer, performer, and performance artist, working at the intersection of orchestras, opera, chamber music, theatre, cabaret, oral tradition, public performance, sound installation, electronics, and noise. Her last major opera, *Angel’s Bone*, won a Pulitzer Prize for music in 2017; in 2018 she was named a Guggenheim Fellow; and in 2019 she was nominated for a Grammy Award. She was hailed by the *New York Times* as a groundbreaking artist and was listed by the *Washington Post* as one of the Top 35 female composers. Known as chameleonic in her protean artistic outputs, her music is championed by some of today’s finest international performing artists, ensembles, and organizations. As a curator and activist for new music and art, she was a founding member of the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) and artistic director of MATA festival (2014–2018), and recently initiated the Pan–Asia Sounding Festival at National Sawdust. Du Yun was named one of the 38 Great Immigrants by the Carnegie Foundation in 2018.



Aja Couchois Duncan,
***Sweet Land* librettist**

Aja Couchois Duncan is a Bay Area writer, capacity builder, and coach of Ojibwe, French and Scottish descent. In her social justice work, Aja supports leaders, organizations and networks in advancing equity, complex systems change, and a more liberated future for us all. Her writing has been anthologized in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative Bay Poetics* and *Love Shook My Heart 2*. Her debut collection, *Restless Continent*, was selected by Entropy Magazine as one of the best poetry collections of 2016 and won the California Book Award in 2017. A fictional writer of nonfiction, she has published essays in the North American Review and Chain. She is a recipient of the Marin Arts Council Award Grant for Literary Arts and James D. Phelan Literary Award.



Douglas Kearney,
***Sweet Land* librettist**

Douglas Kearney has published six books, including *Buck Studies* (Fence Books, 2016), winner of the Theodore Roethke Memorial Poetry Award, the CLMP Firecracker Award for Poetry, and California Book Award silver medalist (Poetry). M. NourbeSe Philip calls Kearney’s collection of libretti, *Someone Took They Tongues*. (Subito, 2016), “a seismic, polyphonic mash-up.” Kearney’s *Mess and Mess and* (Noemi Press, 2015), was a Small Press Distribution Handpicked Selection that Publisher’s Weekly called “an extraordinary book.” He has received a Whiting Writer’s Award, a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Cy Twombly Award for Poetry, residencies/fellowships from Cave Canem, The Rauschenberg Foundation, and others. Kearney teaches Creative Writing at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities.



Cannupa Hanska Luger,
***Sweet Land* co- director**

Cannupa Hanska Luger is a New Mexico based multidisciplinary artist who uses social collaboration in response to timely and site-specific issues. Raised on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, he is of Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota and European descent. Luger produces multipronged projects that take many forms—through monumental installations that incorporate ceramics, video, sound, fiber, steel, and repurposed materials, Luger interweaves performance and political action to communicate stories about 21st Century Indigeneity. This work provokes diverse audiences to engage with Indigenous peoples and values apart from the lens of colonial social structuring, and often presents a call to action to protect land from capitalist exploits. He combines critical cultural analysis with dedication and respect for the diverse materials, environments, and communities he engages. His work has been exhibited internationally in such places as the Gardiner Museum, Washington Project for the Arts, Art Mür, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, among others. He lectures, participates in residencies and large-scale projects around the globe and his work is in many public collections. Luger holds a BFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts, was a 2019 Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grants Recipient and the recipient of the Museum of Arts and Design's 2018 inaugural Burke Prize.



Yuval Sharon,
***Sweet Land* co-director**

The Industry's Founder and Artistic Director Yuval Sharon, described by The New York Times as “opera’s disrupter in residence,” and for the last 15 years has created an unconventional body of work that seeks to expand the operatic form. He conceived and directed all of The Industry’s acclaimed world premieres: *Crescent City*, *Invisible Cities*, *Hopscotch*, and *War of the Worlds*. From 2016–2019 he was LA Philharmonic’s Artist-Collaborator, which culminated last year in a new production of Meredith Monk’s *ATLAS*, the first time the celebrated composer entrusted her work to another director. In 2018 Sharon became the first American director at the Bayreuther Festspiele with his production of *Lohengrin*. He was honored with a 2017 MacArthur Fellowship and a Foundation for Contemporary Art grant for theater.

Please visit www.sweetlandopera.com for the bios of all the extraordinary artists and designers.



About The Industry

The Industry creates experimental productions that expand the traditional definition of opera. By merging media and engaging in interdisciplinary collaborations, we produce works that inspire new audiences for the art form. We believe that opera can be emergent and responsive to new perspectives and voices in contemporary culture. The Industry serves as an incubator for new talent and for artists predominantly based in Los Angeles.

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founder & artistic director

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Image: *Sweet Land* performer and The Industry Company Member, Sharon Chohi Kim as Wiindigo. Costume design by Cannupa Hanska Luger. Photographed by Casey Kringlen Photography.

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