

“Dance Fever: A Derridean Impression”

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*There's no use writing. Rest assured, you're wasting words.*¹

— billy woods

I

There's an old aphorism, often misattributed to Elvis Costello, that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture.” I don't know what the hell that's supposed to mean, but I've seen it reproduced often enough that I may as well try to parse it. If the implication is that “dancing about architecture” is patently absurd and an impossible feat, then I beg to differ — because writing about music is easy. Take it from me; I would know.

If the implication is that dancing about architecture would yield an illegible product — that any attempt to convey the theme of “architecture” through dance would fall short of the mark and be overlooked by the audience — I don't think the analogy holds there either. There are many complaints that can be levelled at music critics: that we produce reams of overwrought, navel-gazing garbage; are overreliant on strained metaphors and pithy references; that many of us turn to criticism to conceal our own failure to hone our craft. I accept these charges. What I do not accept is the idea that we're all just spouting off nonsense. Many of us are fully capable of generating coherent copy. When the *Quietus* reprints the rumour that David Bowie recorded *Station to Station* while subsisting “on a diet of cigarettes, orange juice and cocaine,”² I can easily wrap my head around it because I've consumed two of the three myself. (And as for the other, well, I hear it's part of a balanced breakfast.)

So perhaps the real reason that writing about music is like dancing about architecture is that one is no substitute for the other. Words alone cannot capture a sound, a live performance, the acoustics of a room. A description of a thing is not the thing itself; it must be experienced to be known. But the same is true of everything. What's so special about music writing — or, for that matter, architecture-dancing?

But I suppose I've let this cold open drag on long enough. Why would I spend so long deliberating on something Elvis Costello never said? I don't know. Why would Young Lungs hire a music critic to write about dance? I barely know anything about *music*.

¹ Armand Hammer & The Alchemist, “Laraaji,” track 1 on *Mercy*, Backwoodz Studioz, 2025, Bandcamp, 0:45, <https://armandhammer.bandcamp.com/track/laraaji>.

² Ben Graham, “Notions of Decadence: Half a Century of Bowie's *Station to Station*,” *The Quietus*, September 2010 [republished January 23, 2026], <https://thequietus.com/opinion-and-essays/anniversary/david-bowie-station-to-station-review/>.

II

Now that I've undermined my own credibility as a narrator, allow me to start over. I was pleased to see that Waawaate Fobister's project description for *Miskwiin* contained references to "move[ment] through time" and to "the body as ... archive."³ My thoughts returned, as they often do, to Brien Brothman's byzantine and cumbersome article on his "helical model of record formation." Without getting too lost in the weeds here, the thrust of his argument is that "[n]o record is ever merely the documentation of, by, or from a present or past moment."⁴ Documents are not simply "born" at the moment of creation, nor do they "die" upon final disposition into a repository. As "external memory systems," archival holdings are intended to survive their creators and extend access to an indeterminate number of people who never witnessed the originating act.⁵

Because of this spatial and temporal chasm, when an archival record is activated, the viewer cannot help but imbue it with their contemporary understandings, expectations, and agendas. Moreover, the record itself contains traces of prior activations: a coffee stain, a crease, a removed staple, an acid-free folder. Most likely, the researcher first encountered the record via an online database or finding aid description written many years after the initial record was brought into being. Even a record's destruction — a necessity in archives, which, as a rule, do not have the real estate needed to store every item ever produced — must, if the archivist is diligent, be accompanied by the creation of a new record attesting to the fact.⁶

But if past and present are so deeply intertwined, then doesn't this logic extend to every conceivable human endeavour? When I go to Safeway, every item on the shelves was grown, extracted, or assembled somewhere else, shipped to the store in bulk, and placed there by an employee; my present consumption is the product of past labour. Once I have finished a meal, various bags, cans, and crumbs go in the garbage or down the sink drain, where they deposit their fine residue; my past consumption taking physical form in the present. When I get on a bus, my fellow riders all got there before I did and will disperse once they reach their destination. Public transit, too, is predicated on an ephemeral past, present, and future.

And so on and so forth. You get the picture. But if we have established that writing is to music as dancing is to architecture, and dance is an archive of the body, and an archive is a grocery store, and a grocery store is a bus — then what, concretely, have we managed to say about any of them? Nothing — but, then again, archival theorists are quite fond of using many words to say nothing. One of the most cited works in the field is Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* and he made it very clear that he was just playing with words when he said the following: "concerning the archive, Freud never managed to form anything that deserves to be called a

³ "Waawaate Fobister — 2025–26 Artist-In-Residence," Young Lungs Dance Exchange, accessed January 24, 2026, <https://youn glungs.ca/waawaate-fobister/>; Waawaate Fobister, "Project Description — Miskwiin," unpublished PDF provided to the author on January 23, 2026, by Gaby Ortiz.

⁴ Brien Brothman, "Archives, Life Cycles, and Death Wishes: A Helical Model of Record Formation," *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006): 260, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12542>.

⁵ Brothman, "Helical Model," 249.

⁶ Brothman, "Helical Model," 261n51.

concept. Neither have we, by the way. We have no concept, only an impression, a series of impressions associated with a word.”⁷

Perhaps the injection of some authorial intent will set us on the right path. *Miskwiin*, Fobister told me, is an exercise in “revitalizing and embodying” Anishinaabe cosmology and storytelling, the product of a determination of “let go of that shame and embrace who we are.” “Everything was taken away during the residential school system,” they said — “language, ceremony, a lot of things were basically forbidden.”⁸

While the settler state forced Indigenous cultural practices underground, it could not suppress them entirely. “A lot of dances are coming back and so that’s what’s happening right now: we’re filling back our spirit.” Fobister related the project to *aadizookaan*, an Anishinaabemowin word meaning “the spirit of the story.” Citing the example of pictographs — such as those of *Mishipeshu* (“the Great Lynx”) — *aadizookaan* relays ancestral memory into the present, setting the stage for the transmission of stories through ceremony, song, and oral history. In this way, *aadizookaan* is an archive or, as Fobister described it, a “tunnel of time.”⁹ Upon hearing this, I connected it again to Brothman’s helical model and felt a wave of relief wash over me, reassured that there is nothing new under the sun. The interconnectedness of past and present is a fundamental concept of reality and can be observed through many prisms.

Still, I was tentative. I know nothing of dance and yet, here I was, tasked with writing an essay about it. I had to ask: what does dancing accomplish that other art forms do not? Is there anything that makes it unique? Fobister’s answer: “In dancing, there’s no lying. It’s all very truthful, everything you do. ... You can hide a bit, but the body gives clues [about] what’s going on with each person, and I feel like each person is a dancer.”¹⁰

A beautiful — if slightly unnerving — thought. It is only through physicality and presence that one can truly be understood; words offer their insights at the cost of obfuscation.

When I visited the studio one evening, I caught the tail end of Fobister’s rehearsal with dancer Zeus Gonzales. I watched as Gonzales, with Fobister’s guidance and to the tune of Tanya Tagaq, alternately portrayed an old painting coming to life and a wolf shapeshifting between masculine and feminine forms. I found my eyes enchanted by the movement of the shadows across the studio walls and floor. It served as a reminder that it is not just the body that moves, but the space around it. Every act requires earthly accommodation. It’s quite astonishing, really, that we even exist...

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 29. Clearly, Derrida was not trying to offer a rigorous theorization of brick-and-mortar archives; he was simply riffing on the *idea* of “the archive.” The rest of us are therefore under no obligation to take him seriously or treat his text as a solemn declaration of fact (except, of course, when doing so suits our argument).

⁸ Waawaate Fobister, conversation with author, January 27, 2026.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

III

... or something like that. I fear I have reached the limits of my ability to comment on dance. But the essay does not end here, for my training as a student of history has taught me that when you run out of words, you can just borrow someone else's; while my experience as a music critic has taught me that when you don't know how to describe something, it's easy enough to compare it to something else. So I now retreat to more familiar ground: historiography.

I've been reflecting lately on the legacy of hydroelectric development in Treaties 3 and 5. Pimicikamak Cree Nation suffered a devastating power outage in late December of last year. With no electricity or heat for several days in the freezing cold, water pipes burst, sewage backups spilled over, and soaked electrical panels caught fire. All told, more than 4,400 people were evacuated, and more than 1,300 homes were damaged. As Dan Lett reported in the *Free Press*, Pimicikamak has abstained from paying its electrical bills for over a decade in protest of the provincial government's failure to adhere to the terms of the 1977 Northern Flood Agreement. As a result, the First Nation has accrued over \$20 million in arrears.¹¹

Pimicikamak chief David Monias stands by this act of protest, saying, "We told [Hydro], if you think we owe you money, then sue us, OK? They haven't done that because they know that if they [go into court] to say that we owe them money, then we can point out that they owe us money, too. They owe us hundreds of millions of dollars and they'll have to pay up, as well." For its part, Manitoba Hydro insists that it "continues to honour all of its obligations."¹²

Under the Northern Flood Agreement, Pimicikamak granted easement rights to Hydro "in perpetuity, to inundate and store water" for its reservoirs across "all reserve lands below 690 ft. [above sea level] and contiguous to the Nelson River."¹³ In exchange, Pimicikamak and the four other signatory nations — Norway House, Nisichawayasihk (Nelson House), Tataskweyak (Split Lake), and York Factory — were each to receive "an area of land equal to not less than four (4) acres for every acre of affected lands." All parties further agreed to "jointly undertake to work towards a comprehensive Community Development Plan." Schedule "E" of the Agreement stipulated that the Community Development Plan "shall serve as a policy co-ordinating instrument, setting forth ... [a] joint action program for the eradication of mass poverty and mass unemployment."¹⁴ Pimicikamak's contention is that these goals have not been met and that, for this reason, Manitoba Hydro has failed to hold up its end of the bargain.

But this is where we run into the difficulty that Fobister identified with words, that they tend to make matters "more complex."¹⁵ What exactly are Hydro's obligations in respect of the

¹¹ Dan Lett, "Pimicikamak's \$20-M in Unpaid Hydro Bills Pales in Comparison to What Hydro Owes First Nation, Chief Says," *Winnipeg Free Press*, last modified January 20, 2026, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/featured/2026/01/19/pimicikamaks-20-m-in-unpaid-hydro-bills-pales-in-comparison-to-what-hydro-owes-first-nation-chief-says>.

¹² Quoted in Lett, "Unpaid Hydro Bills."

¹³ "Northern Flood Agreement," December 16, 1977, 4, 15,

<https://www.hydro.mb.ca/docs/community/indigenous-relations/northern-flood-agreement-1977.pdf>.

¹⁴ "Northern Flood Agreement," 13, [unnumbered first page of Schedule "E," page 102 in the PDF *op. cit.*]; Lett, "Unpaid Hydro Bills."

¹⁵ Fobister, conversation with author, January 27, 2026.

Northern Flood Agreement: to eradicate poverty in Pimicikamak, or simply to create a committee for the purpose of *contemplating* how to eradicate poverty? Because the first is a big ask, while the second requires only that some mid-level executive attend a few meetings.

This wouldn't be the first time that Hydro sold Indigenous peoples a false bill of goods. To take an earlier example: in 1964, the people of Chemawawin were relocated to Easterville, 51 kilometres to the southeast, to facilitate the construction of the Grand Rapids Dam. It was determined that the dam — needed to supply electricity to the Inco mine in Thompson — would raise the water level at Cedar Lake by 3.5 metres, flooding the community's original location.¹⁶ Although the people of Chemawawin were granted numerous assurances that they would be allowed to choose the location of their new town and would be given swift access to electricity themselves, it soon became clear that the major decisions had already been made by the province; there would be no negotiation.¹⁷ It took two decades and a protracted legal battle for the community to finally be granted title to the lands promised to them.¹⁸

In Treaty 3 territory, meanwhile, hydroelectric dams wrought further havoc on Anishinaabe communities. Brittany Luby's monograph *Dammed* outlines the negative health outcomes at Niisaachewan (Dalles 38C) and Asubpeeschoseewagong (Grassy Narrows) caused by hydro dams built to support the pulp-and-paper industry. The dumping of effluent into the Wabigoon and Winnipeg Rivers resulted in high levels of methyl mercury contamination.¹⁹ Whitefish and sturgeon, staple foods for many Indigenous communities, were no longer safe for human consumption. As Luby argues, the effect was strongly felt by women and newborn children: Anishinaabe women had long regarded breast milk as having medicinal properties for their infants, and whitefish soup was commonly used in place of breastfeeding if a mother was temporarily absent or unable to lactate.²⁰ But now that these were dangerous to consume, they turned to commercial baby formulas and canned evaporated milk instead.²¹ Hydroelectric development had become yet another instrument for separating peoples from their history and culture.

¹⁶ James B. Waldram, *As Long as the Rivers Run: Hydroelectric Development and Native Communities in Western Canada* (University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 81, 85–86, Canada Commons.

¹⁷ One of the mandates of the provincial government's Grand Rapids Forebay Administration Committee was to "inform the residents of Chemawawin and Moose Lake of decisions made in Winnipeg," while an internal memo stated that "a firm of town planning consultants ... would endeavour to sell the Indians" on one of four preselected locations. Quoted in Waldram, *As Long as the Rivers Run*, 86, 90.

¹⁸ Waldram, *As Long as the Rivers Run*, 113–114.

¹⁹ Brittany Luby, *Dammed: The Politics of Loss and Survival in Anishinaabe Territory* (University of Manitoba, 2020), 216n4, 142.

²⁰ Luby, *Dammed*, 144, 150–151.

²¹ Nonetheless, Luby illustrates the cultural resilience that Anishinaabe women have shown in the face of adversity: "In the Kenora District, some Anishinaabe women claim that Carnation Milk cans make the best jingle cones for jingle dresses. ... By saving the tops of Carnation Milk cans, by washing them and rolling them to fashion jingles, Anishinaabe mothers help their daughters to develop new forms of medicine power." *Dammed*, 161–162.

And now Manitoba Hydro tells us that they will need more power as soon as 2029 to stave off an eventual shortage and that they must raise their rates to finance this.²² One wonders whom they will displace or swindle next. Returning to an earlier metaphor, if we consider hydroelectric dams to be an “archive” of kinetic energy, then we can see in it an example of Derrida’s observation that “[t]he archive always works ... against itself.”²³ The drive to industrialize — and to generate ever more electrical power — is nothing less than a death drive, a compulsion to destroy that which makes the “archive” possible in the first place.

But the longer I write, the more my condemnations ring hollow. (I mean, hey, I use electricity too.) Merely paying attention to the horrors of modernity does nothing to alleviate them, and we’ve heard variations of these stories so many times. As Nadia Abu El-Haj wrote with respect to the Nakba, the initial campaign of ethnic cleansing in Palestine by the nascent state of Israel:

Remembering has no relationship to justice here. No longer silenced, no longer forgotten, the catastrophe of 1948 carries no ethical, let alone political, force. ... For all the desire to write a countercolonial history, to insist on further declassifying archives, to collect and document the destruction of Palestinian forms of life, questions need to be asked: What does it mean for historians to endlessly document what we already know? Do these interminable iterations actually have ... progressive political force in the world?²⁴

So, if all words can do is complicate, deceive, or relitigate what is already known, then why bother writing at all? At this point, I write by force of habit. I am possessed of a ridiculous notion that my thoughts have merit and that I must put them into writing lest they disappear forever from my grasp. But I am beginning to doubt everything I ever thought I wanted. Maybe billy woods was right. Maybe we’re all just “wasting words.”²⁵

Maybe I should have been a dancer.

²² Ian Froese, “Manitoba Hydro May Need New Sources of Power by 2029,” CBC, last updated January 30, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-hydro-grewal-electricity-generation-1.7099055>.

²³ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 12.

²⁴ Nadia Abu El-Haj, “We Know Well, but All the Same. . .: Factual Truths, Historical Narratives, and the Work of Disavowal,” *History of the Present* 13, no. 2 (2023): 259, <https://doi.org/10.1215/21599785-10630149>.

²⁵ Armand Hammer & The Alchemist, *supra* note 1.