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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Ecological Performance Practice, Bodily Research on a State of Connectivity

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Aliya Kerimujiang

Thesis Committee:  
Assistant Professor Lindsay Gilmour, Chair  
Associate Professor Chad Michael Hall  
Associate Professor Tong Wang

2021



# DEDICATION

to nature,  
I return to you as I walk away from ignorance.

to the believers of dance,  
we move until we die.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>1</b>
0.1 A Personal Journey To Connectivity . . . . .	1
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
0.1 What is Ecological Performance Practice? . . . . .	5
0.2 Research Methodology . . . . .	7
0.3 Thesis Project Overview . . . . .	8
<b>1 CONNECTIVITY</b>	<b>10</b>
1.1 Kimerer L. LaMothe . . . . .	11
1.2 David Abram . . . . .	13
1.3 Andrea Olsen . . . . .	16
1.4 Why Is Connectivity an Essential Aspect of Ecological Performance Practice?	19
<b>2 APPROACHES TO CONNECTIVITY</b>	<b>22</b>
2.1 Empathy . . . . .	22
2.2 Imagination . . . . .	25
2.3 Animal Body . . . . .	28
<b>3 REHEARSAL PROCESS</b>	<b>31</b>
3.1 Ritual . . . . .	32
3.2 Performative Ritual Practice: Walking . . . . .	33
3.3 Part I: Preparation . . . . .	34
3.3.1 Exploration . . . . .	34
3.3.2 Intention . . . . .	36
3.3.3 Entering the Space . . . . .	37
3.4 Part II: Enactment . . . . .	38
3.5 Part III: Return . . . . .	40

<b>4</b>	<b>CONNECT/disconnect</b>	<b>44</b>
4.1	Artist Statement . . . . .	44
4.2	Project Summary & Choreographic Process . . . . .	45
4.2.1	Becoming Animal . . . . .	45
4.2.2	Who Am I? . . . . .	46
4.2.3	We Are Movers . . . . .	47
4.2.4	The Memories of Nature . . . . .	48
	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>50</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>54</b>
	<b>Appendix A Selected Earth-Poetic Journal From My (Aliya) Perspective</b>	<b>60</b>
	<b>Appendix B Paloma’s Reflection on Ecological Performance Practice</b>	<b>62</b>
	<b>Appendix C Selected Rehearsal Practice</b>	<b>72</b>
	<b>Appendix D Supplementary Files</b>	<b>74</b>

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# ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Ecological Performance Practice, Bodily Research on a State of Connectivity

By

Aliya Kerimujiang

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2021

Assistant Professor Lindsay Gilmour, Chair

This thesis focuses on my rehearsal process by examining a personal movement practice—ecological performance practice, which is a series of conceptual and practical approaches to connectivity, such as empathy, imagination, and animal body. In ecological performance practice, connectivity refers to a state of being where the performer experiences a sense of interconnectedness with the self and environment in which they inhabit. I ground my understanding of connectivity by following three contemporary intellectuals: Kimerer L. LaMothe, David Abram, and Andrea Olsen. The deconstruction of my rehearsals allows the readers to gain insight into the process of the performer interacting and interchanging energy with nature through movement by activating their empathy, imagination, and animal body in designed performative ritual practice(s). Additionally, I introduce how these approaches produce materials for my final creative project: CONNECT/disconnect.

# PREFACE

## 0.1 A Personal Journey To Connectivity

I am 10 years old, walking my dog Shier in the community where my family lives. Autumn is about to end, and golden leaves spread out on the entire road. I smell winter approaching. Shier and I are both excited to be out. She sniffs around to find territory to relieve herself, and I lay on the ground to experience the softness and wetness of the leaves and soil. Nothing can express my feelings except poetry and dance.

The daydream ends abruptly by a neighbor overly concerned with the filthiness of the ground. I am surprised by her reaction as much as she is confused about my behavior.

I have been a student of dance since I was three years old. Dance has shaped my belief system and has always been a place for me to explore meaning in life. My training in various cultural forms informed my early understanding of the animal body, imagination, and empathy which are the core components in my work, ecological performance practice. In order of appearance, these are my initial studies in dance that have influenced my research.

My training started fifteen years ago in the Vaganova Method of Ballet which taught me to have self-discipline when it comes to movement practice. I was also trained in Uyghur dance, Tibetan dance, and Mongolian dance. These dance styles led me to discover Shamanic philosophical views on nature. The use of imagery (in relation to nature) was one of the most common techniques used by instructors in teaching central and eastern Asian cultural

dance. They would associate movement steps to animal behaviors and natural patterns like leaves, branches, flowers, etc.

My mother, a practitioner in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has taught me the basics of TCM which informed my early understanding of interconnectedness between self and environment. One of the most fundamental concepts is Qi, in Chinese philosophy literally means air, and it is also life energy or life force. Qi roughly translates to ‘Prana’ in Hindu philosophy, ‘Ki’ in Japanese philosophy and ‘Gi’ in Korean philosophy. When we breathe the air into our body, we connect our body and earth with life energy. Additionally, my training in Chinese traditional dance, Korean dance, Japanese Butoh, Ashtanga yoga, Vinyasa flow, and Yin yoga has deepened my embodiment of the force of life. After ten years of studying modern dance, including Frederick Floor Work, Laban Movement Analysis, Bartenieff Fundamentals, Alexander Technique, and the Klein Technique, my relationship with body and movement was expanded. My practice in Sufi whirling allowed me to rediscover through its obliteration a concept called ‘nafs’, which translates to ego in western understanding. These practices shaped the way I perceive my body and influence how I move, teach, and choreograph.

Only in dance do I feel included; wherever else I go, I feel I am an outsider. Growing up in different cities in China and coming to America at the age of 18, I often find myself in a situation where I am the outsider. Perhaps I am the only Uyghur, or the only Chinese, or the only Asian, or the only foreigner, or the only woman, or the only queer. All of these labels have not helped me to establish my identity, rather they have prevented me from getting to know who I am. I never want to accept any labels that I am given by the world. I desire a universal identity. This desire has deepened through the years of uprooting and rerooting from one space to another in the journey of learning dance. I am a mover who believes in dance as it allows me to experience something so pure and authentic. When I dance I feel connected to all living things, and all cultures from every different part of the world. I want

to be a person with a fluid identity where I can become anyone or nobody, and I find that in dance.

Years of studying dance in various cultures allows me to explore the nature of being a mover. Through imagination and empathy, each style of cultural dance or movement practice allows me to feel a sensation of rebirth where I have a new identity each time I embody a different culture. This embodiment of dance is not only about movement steps, rather it is a whole study of culture, philosophy, belief systems, collective burden, joy, pain, honor, and grief. All the practices I have learned contribute to the formation of my identity and how I view the world. In dance, I often experience a universal love that I believe is all human-animal desire.

My experimental movement practice has allowed me to experience a profound connection with the animate (living) earth. To me, each practice is bodily devotion dedicated to nature and the unknown. No matter if it's choreography, improvisation, performance, or warm-up, there is always a moment where I set up an intention prior to the journey as it allows me to be truthful for the new experience that is about to take place. I witness growth and transformation within my body as I complete the practice. A few years ago, I made a vow to devote myself to continue studying this sense of union I experience with all living things in the animate earth, an experiential existence that feels larger than myself. I want to share this feeling with people who I work with, specifically the other performers. Here I am, studying the art of articulation and contextualization of my embodied research. Here I am, standing on the shoulders of those who walked here before me: the movement researchers, scholars, artists, and wanderers in dance and life.

After the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the entire globe, forcing a transition to an entirely online work force and online education, my work feels more necessary than ever to me. As I embrace nature's pattern with my movement, I can't help but wonder how much people have lost as they spend hours upon hours every day in front of the computer. I

can't help but wonder what will happen to this beautiful dynamic natural world once our human species completely forgets that we are all interconnected to this animate earth and responsible for keeping it clean and healthy. With these questions, I begin my bodily research on the state of connectivity by activating imagination and empathy with my animal body.

# INTRODUCTION

## 0.1 What is Ecological Performance Practice?

Ecological Performance Practice is a series of conceptual and practical approaches to connectivity, a state of being where the performer experiences a sense of, or a state of interconnectedness with themselves and the environment in which they inhabit—interacting and interchanging energy with nature through movement by activating their empathy, imagination, and animal body. The concept of performance is a complex term, and can be researched in several fields, but for my purposes in this investigation, this thesis does not attempt to address performance in existing performance theory, rather we look at it as a process of enacting a series of designed events, instructions, and rituals.

Empathy, imagination, and animal body are the approaches found in ecological performance practice that allow the creative materials to unfold and accumulate organically, which lead to my final production: CONNECT/disconnect. Additionally, these approaches affect the dancer's performance quality: the authenticity of performance derives from the dancer's innate impulse to interconnect with the self and environment, resulting in an earth-friendly way of self-learning the interwoven relationship between our animate body and the living earth.

My exploration of ecological performance practice is derived from practical reflections

on my professional career as a performer and movement practitioner, teacher, guide, and director/choreographer. My research project is examined in the context of three intellectuals which have contributed to my development of ecological performance practice: Kimerer LaMothe's understanding of ecological dance, specifically bodily becoming, David Abram's research on the human relationship with earth, specifically his notion of animal body, and Andrea Olsen's investigation of body and earth.

LaMothe defines bodily becoming as a process wherein humans enact patterns of sensations and responses, moving into the idea of our movement creating us as we create it. LaMothe's bodily becoming offers a theoretical insight into a state of connectivity through exploring the idea of why humans dance. In this thesis, I will explore LaMothe's philosophical approach to ecological dance to examine my understanding of connectivity.

I follow the philosopher, cultural ecologist, anthropologist, and magician David Abram's footprints on the idea which he refers to as becoming animal. His idea explores the reciprocal participation of our animal sensory experiences with the environment in which we live. In search of connectivity in the following discussion, I will carry on this tradition of believing that to become fully human, we have to remember that we are human animals.

Andrea Olsen is a dancer, somatic practitioner, and professor, and her integration of somatic movement practice with environmental study and science revolves around systematically guiding the readers to explore the interconnectedness between body and earth in the context of self-practice. Her 2002 work *Body and Earth* generates theoretical insights into the human relationship with the planet from a mover's perspective. Furthermore, I discuss connectivity and examine the application of my rehearsal process through the lens of Olsen's lifelong artistic and academic work *Body and Earth*.

To sum up, each author emphasizes the body as an essential way to experience the interconnectedness of self and environment; additionally, the significance of sensory participation

in movement with planet earth contributes to this connectivity. Although there is nuance in the detail in which these three scholars discuss these concepts, there is much crossover as well, which I will explore in more detail during my discussion on connectivity in chapter one. Moreover, each author explores their academic work through the incorporation of their personal bodily sensory experience; I also explore this bodily experience through my personal practice, an important research endeavor which I will integrate into the following thesis. The first-person subjective experience is essential as this embodied practice requires the performer to research the means of self and environment through the movement their bodies create.

Through discussion, I will put forth the idea that ecological performance practice is a foundational work to embody a state of connectivity with my co-performer. To eventualize the embodiment of connectivity, the performer has to research the following conceptual elements: empathy, imagination, and animal body through events of performative ritual practice. Following the investigation of this written thesis in subsequent chapters, we will see how the application of the above-mentioned conceptual elements connects to my choreographic process in relation to the performance aspect of this thesis.

## 0.2 Research Methodology

This thesis uses Practice as Research as a mode of research to explore ecological performance practice within my rehearsal process. Following Robin Nelson's mode of Practice as Research, the movement practitioner of the Discipline of Authentic Movement Emma Meehan describes Practice as Research as:

...a process of exploring how [artists] work together to inform knowledge and uncover insights which would not be available without processes of bodily expe-



rience, thoughtful reflection, physical activities, collaboration with others, documentation and articulation across various media. (Meehan 315)

My rehearsal process will be utilized as a movement research practice with a collaborative solo dancer: Paloma. The dancer who was selected from the dance department's undergraduate dance students at the University of California, Irvine. As a part of Practice as Research submission, besides written thesis, I also am performing and directing a creative project: CONNECT/disconnect. The process of my movement research not only accumulates the creative materials, but also has a direct impact on my choreography and personal life. As substantial evidence of my movement research process, I have uploaded most of the recorded rehearsals videos, journal entries, sketches, and rehearsal instructions on my UCI Google Drive for reference.

I ground my conceptual research, the interconnectedness of self and environment, through the lenses of my three primary sources: LaMothe, Abram, and Olsen. Additionally, I will identify imagination, animal body, and empathy that initiates a state of connectivity by also looking at my secondary sources, specifically focusing on articles from the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, *Research in Dance Education*, *Journal of Dance Education*, and *Dance, Movement and Spiritualities*, and others.

### **0.3 Thesis Project Overview**

In chapter one, I will discuss the selected literature to explore the concept of connectivity by examining in further depth the scholars: LaMothe, Abram, and Olsen. I review their academic work because these authors build an ecological approach to the animate environment we humans inhabit through body and movement. Their overlapping research offers a theoretical insight on the state of connectivity. As result, I will establish the idea that

connectivity is an essential aspect of ecological performance practice.

In chapter two, I will move on to articulate a series of approaches to connectivity, including three concepts: empathy, imagination, and animal body. I will expand the definition of each concept in relation to connectivity. This chapter focuses on the contextualization of these practices rather than introducing the application of rehearsals, which will be included in the following chapter.

In chapter three, the reader will gain an insight into my rehearsal process. I will apply the integration of empathy, imagination, and the animal body into a performative walking ritual practice.

In chapter four, I will bring the research to an end by articulating aspects of my creative production.

Finally, I conclude with my reflections on this entire bodily research process.

There will be four Appendices: Appendix A includes selected earth-poetic journal practice from my (Aliya's) perspective; Appendix B includes Paloma's written reflection on ecological performance practice; Appendix C includes one selected practice from a rehearsal; Appendix D includes link(s) to thesis rehearsals and film archival video access.

# Chapter 1

## CONNECTIVITY

Ecological performance practice is a series of conceptual and practical approaches to connectivity through the moving body in relation to the places we inhabit. The term connectivity is typically used to refer to a state of being interconnected across a variety of disciplines (dance, somatic education, phenomenology, epistemology). In this thesis, connectivity is a state of interconnectedness with self and environment which draws from Kimerer L. LaMothe, David Abram, and Andrea Olsen's research.

The performer's perception is transformed from their daily reality to a state of connectivity where they recognize there is no separation between the self and environment, recognizing that the body is a part of earth, and dance movement is a part of nature's patterns. An innate impulse arrives from within the performer's body, and they move to experience deep interconnection, enabling an authentic intercommunication in an alternative reality that only exists in a dancer's performance.

## 1.1 Kimerer L. LaMothe

“We are pattern perceivers, pattern creators, and pattern performers, but not because we are driven by a need to control, master, and understand matter. We are so because we exist to move with greater facility and precision. Because we are rhythms of bodily becoming, participating in a kinetic creativity that exceeds us and sustains us. Because we are, first and foremost, dancers.”

— Kimerer L. LaMothe

The dancer and philosopher Kimerer L. LaMothe introduces the concept of bodily becoming in her article “‘Can They Dance?’ Towards a Philosophy of Bodily Becoming.” She argues that bodily becoming as an approach goes further than materialized concepts such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s BwO (Body without Organs), Jane Bennett’s Vibrant Matter, and David Abram’s Animal Body. Borrowing German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of ‘Can they dance?’, LaMothe argues that even though all three scholars offer a profound theoretical framework to examine non-dualistic concepts to deconstruct the idea of the mind as superior over the body, the materialistic nature of these concepts prevent them from dancing. On the other hand, LaMothe states that the idea of bodily becoming offers an eco-friendly approach to experiencing the body and earth through movement. To LaMothe, to dance is bodily becoming:

The ‘dance’ that results is not an act of becoming other, but of becoming body, a human body, capable of participating consciously in the process of creating and becoming patterns of sensation and response that relate to whatever elements and individual appear to us as life-enabling. (105)

She believes that dance is bodily movement and there is no dance without patterns unfolding in spacetime. Bodily becoming is to consciously experience the sensations and responses that the movement patterns of our bodies create. Simultaneously, the movement patterns our bodies create also make us. She further establishes the idea of bodily becoming in her later

2015 work, *Why We Dance, A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming*. Following her philosophical aspect of ecological dance and her personal story, the readers are exposed to an interaction between a dancer and the natural world through the medium of movement patterns.

Movement is many things to LaMothe, one idea being: “[movement] is energy with a form that is not materials” (28). When we move, our energy moves with us and when we move, our energy interacts with the world around us. Every movement we make has an effect in spacetime. Following LaMothe’s notion of humans constantly participating in movement patterns, we find ourselves even within the stillness, and as long as we breath, we are participating in the act of moving. When we commit to the act of consciously creating movement with our bodies, we begin to be aware of the sensory experience and the impulse response that our body organically creates. We begin to have a sense of self-awareness in this moving experience.

Moreover, the sense of self expands once we come to understand humans are the movement of nature. Our moving body interacts with the world. LaMothe encourages us to embody nature’s movement, thus letting our body come to experience the sensation and response of bodily becoming. She believes that through bodily becoming, one can understand and transform the self, and be able to dynamically change and adapt to their environment. Her vision of dance as a vital art form is an earth-friendly approach for humans to interchange movement with the animated earth. She believes that ecological dance is essential for overturning humanity’s current and unhealthy path which leads to ecological demolition and therefore self-destruction.

She encourages us to participate with the earth by using our sensory awareness. In the chapter “Earth Within,” LaMothe says: “I firmly believe that we will make progress on all registers if we can cultivate a sense of bodily selves as earth, as related to earth, as the continuing life and presence of earth, fully responsible for every move we make” (208). I agree with LaMothe that we need to reevaluate our relationship with earth as our

contemporary lifestyle doesn't pay enough attention to sensory awareness and thus leads to a lack of awareness in human relationships with nature. In her words, "If we practice dance, we may come to love the earth as who we are" (208). In my thesis project, I aim to explore the interconnectedness of self and environment through movement perspective. As LaMothe reminded us earlier: "we need to cultivate a sensory awareness of the movements making us that will guide us in creating and becoming patterns of sensation and response that honour the sources of our living ("Can They Dance?"" 105).

In ecological performance practice, I respond to LaMothe's bodily becoming by inviting the mover to experience a sense of self—the mover is responsible for being consciously present, aware and committed to each movement pattern their body creates. In ecological performance practice, A dancer sources their being and movement spring directly from their experience of nature. They dance to/with/for trees, soil, rain, snow, etc., experiencing the texture of nature through their sensing body. They tune into their body to connect to the patterns within nature, and through moving, they get to bodily becoming in this more-than-human animate world.

## 1.2 David Abram

"Owning up to being an animal, a creature of earth. Tuning our animal sense to the sensible terrain: blending our skin with the rain-rippled surface of rivers, mingling our ears with the thunder and the thrumming of frogs, and our eyes with the molten sky. Feeling the polyrhythmic pulse of this place—this huge windswept body of water and stone. This vexed being in whose flesh we're entangled.

Becoming earth. Becoming animal. Becoming, in this manner, fully human."

— David Abram

David Abram is an American ecologist, philosopher and magician. He is best known for bridging the philosophical tradition of phenomenology with environmental and ecological is-

sues. In his 1996 work of nonfiction, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, Abram grounds himself in the field of phenomenology—the study of consciousness and lived experience from a first person’s perspective—drawing from the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to articulate synaesthetic perception: “Each sense is a unique modality of this body’s existence, yet in the activity of perception these divergent modalities necessarily intercommunicate and overlap” (61). Abram emphasizes the importance of returning to our animal body, as it is an acknowledgment that we human-animals are a part of the earth. He argues that the loss of our sensuous participation with earth causes the disruption of the natural system. He invites us to cultivate a sense of direct sensorial connection with the breathing earth, as he describes the relationship between body and earth:

The breathing, sensing body draws its sustenance and its very substance from the soils, plants, and elements that surround it; it continually contributes itself, in turn, to the air, to the composting earth, to the nourishment of insects and oak trees and squirrels, ceaselessly spreading out of itself as well as breathing the world into itself, so that it is very difficult to discern, at any moment, precisely where this living body begins and where it ends. (46)

His work establishes an idea that humans are a part of this ecosystem—interconnected with all living things, and that this can only be experienced through the living body. Additionally, he argues that the writing system is the cause of digression for our sensory perception. His reflection on mind, body and materialized lifestyle allows us to reevaluate the neglecting of body education in the contemporary world.

Abram further investigates our sensory participation on earth in his 2010 work *Becoming Animal, An Earthly Cosmology*. He says: “this is a book about becoming a two-legged animal, entirely a part of the animate world whose life swells within and unfolds all around

us” (3). He continues to explore, reflect, question, and criticize the relationship between humans and nature from a personal perspective—a human animal point of view. He states that even though Descartes’ dualism is mostly abandoned philosophy, we still can find those who perceive the mind as superior to the body, and the mind exists independently of the body (104). Through his philosophy, the readers come to understand that in the contemporary world that we live in, humans are disconnected from our bodies due to our conditioned lifestyles. Our sensory participation on earth has been redefined due to the contemporary materialistic world. First of all, our senses are constantly being exposed to vast amounts of stimuli in relation to consumerism. Additionally, our ignorance of sensory awareness, our dependence on writing systems, technology, convenient lifestyles, and lack of body education causes humans to disconnect from their animal body. Consequently, our disconnection with the animal body results in continuing to have a negative impact on earth’s natural inhabitants. He believes that returning to our animal body would enhance our relationship with the natural world.

In the first half of the book, he introduces a series of daily phenomena that tend to be taken for granted in our life, for example: shadows, gravity, wood and stone, etc. He spends each chapter exploring one theme from his animal body perspective. For example, in the chapter ‘Wood and Stone’, he shares his sensorial participation with earth by introducing the reader to the concept of “awareness”:

The foot, as it feels the ground pressing up against it, remembers. The skin of the face remembers, turning to meet the myriad facets, or faces, of the world. The tips of the fingers remember well that each sensible surface is also, in its own way, sensitive. (39)

From his first person point of view, we get to experience Abram’s interchange with the natural world. He explores his animal body through his personal journey of studying magic,



indigenous culture, and shamanism throughout the world. Such reciprocity can't be learned through books or the internet, it requires the body to directly participate in nature. In his own words: "I write with the knowledge that there cannot help but be some overlap between my direct, visceral experience and the felt experience of other persons—whose senses, after all, have much in common with my own" (143). As humans, we share the experience of living on earth with our animal body despite the differences of culture, religion, beliefs, languages, etc.

In ecological performance practice, I reflect on my human-animal identity and our current ways of acquiring knowledge from books, media, the internet, etc. We unlearn and relearn about human identity by recognizing that human beings are animals and part of an ecosystem. We dance to acknowledge our animal body and honor the intricate intercommunication between the body and animate earth. We learn that through cultivating our sensory awareness in relation to connecting to earth, our body is able to generate knowledge that allows us to make more conscious choices in relation to the environment. I believe that the most effective and profound way to enhance sensory awareness is to simply let our animal body be in nature without any conceptual thoughts. For this reason, I encourage dancers in this practice to have direct participation in nature with their sensorial animal body. In chapter two, I will continue expanding the idea of animal body in relation to connectivity.

### **1.3 Andrea Olsen**

"We can experience the world around us as an organic living thing. It is not object but subject. It has interiority, subjectivity. It has something to teach us, and it inspires respect. When we have this attitude, the natural world can evoke awe and astonishment, stimulating connection to the sacred, integrative forces of life."

— Andrea Olsen

Andrea Olsen is a dancer, somatic movement practitioner, author, and, educator in environmental studies. She has published a trio of books on the topic of body: *Bodystories*, *A Guide to Experiential Anatomy* (1999), *Body and Earth: An Experiential Guide* (2002), and *The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making with Colleague Caryn McHose* (2008). Each book is systematically organized into themes to develop an experiential approach to human bodies, earth, and art making. For example, in her 2002 book *Body and Earth*, she explores three themes: “Underlying Patterns and Perceptions,” “Body and Earth,” and “Connections.” This thesis focuses mainly on her book *Body and Earth* as it will offer a theoretical framework to examine my experiential approach to connectivity to self and environment during my rehearsal process. She incorporates environmental science, biology, meditation and somatic bodily expression from a pedagogical standpoint.

In the book *Body and Earth*, Olsen introduces three primary concepts, wholeness, intrinsic intelligence, and perception. She discusses each concept by claiming the discourse of the body:

*Body and Earth*, begins with the concept of wholeness. When we use the word body, we refer to all that it means to be human. These characteristics have many names, unique in different languages, for various parts: physical body, mental body, emotional body, intuitive body, spiritual body, soma, psyche, and soul, or collective terms such as person, self, and I. In this work, we consider the word body includes the whole. All the parts are essential to live a full life. (189)

In ecological performance practice, the word “self” contains Olsen’s wholeness understanding of the body. To add to Olsen’s definition, the self is a complex and existential concept that also includes an individual’s body, cultural identity, cultural memories, cellular memories, belief systems, personality, hobbies, life experience, imagination, and more. The same understanding of wholeness extends to the definition of earth. Both the body and earth are

organic vessels and living systems that nurture and are nurtured. We often think that we are separated from earth, but in fact the opposite is true. The body of the earth is the place in which our human bodies reside. Olsen reclaims the discourse of the body in relation to the earth to build a deeper connection between humans and their environment. To Olsen, the human body is a part of the earth. Earth includes soil, air, people, animals, living organisms, etc. Earth is a living system that humans inhabit. Thus humans are a part of the earth. In ecological performance practice, the word “environment” interchanges with Olsen’s earth. When the performer practices their connectivity with the earth during each performative practice, they practice witnessing earth’s patterns by engaging their animal senses, which I will discuss more in chapter two.

Moreover, Olsen believes the body has intrinsic intelligence, and “it is through the body that we experience the earth and through the earth that we understand the body” (189). Body itself can generate knowledge to teach humans to experience the interconnections between self and environment. Most of her movement practices are based on cultivating a practitioners’ intrinsic intelligence. The body’s intrinsic intelligence is a reminder for humans that the body is not a mechanical object, rather it is a living being. For example, through simply returning to the act of breathing, “we come to know ourselves through the larger context of earth, supported and embedded” (190). In ecological performance practice, as we breathe the air into our body, we inhale the landscape into our body. Breathing allows us to bring awareness to our body and concentrate on our bodily experience, and body is a medium through which we understand our interconnectedness of self and the environment (189). In addition, Olsen’s third basic concept of perception goes further to discuss how awareness shapes the ways we feel: “...where and how we place our attention affects what we perceive. Through the senses we construct our view of self and of the world” (190). In ecological performance practice, we intend to construct a sensorial perception through the medium of a dancing body. We cultivate this perception by constantly being in nature with heightened awareness and conscious attention on the movement sensation

that our animal body creates. These three concepts—wholeness, intrinsic intelligence, and perception—ground my understanding of the connectivity of self and the environment in ecological performance practice.

In ecological performance practice, I practice to witness the multiple layers of my identities unfolding in a non-linear way from within my body, and I practice to experience the constant transformation and changes in each moment as the movement unfolds through my body in relation to the environment in which I inhabit. I am conscious, present, and committed to the sensations of movement patterns I have created through my body—the performer arrives at a state of being where they experience the interconnectedness of self with everything that exists in the environment they inhabit, including other humans, objects, plants, animals, etc.

## **1.4 Why Is Connectivity an Essential Aspect of Ecological Performance Practice?**

In ecological performance practice, I agree with the three scholars' concerns that the destruction of the earth potentially stems from our lack of connection with the self and the environment as our sensory perception on earth has been neglected in our contemporary living styles. Per LaMothe, Abram, and Olsen, a sense of deep interconnection can prevent environmental destruction, which ultimately leads to self-destruction. In ecological performance practice, I enhance my sensory awareness by having a direct bodily participation with nature. Through my imagination, empathy and animal body, I practice an earth-friendly ritualistic performance, and arrive at a state of interconnectedness of self and environment.

Ecological performance practice is also a response to the contemporary phenomenon which the choreographer, scholar, somatic movement practitioner, and professor at UCLA

Susan Leigh Foster refers to as “hired body.” Foster first introduced the idea of hired body in the article “Dancing Bodies.” According to Foster, the hired body is a body with extreme strength, a multivalent, adaptable, versatile body capable of accomplishing various dance aesthetics. She states that most dancers today have a hired body, however:

The hired body, built at a great distance from the self, reduces it to a pragmatic merchant of movement, preferring whatever look appeals at the moment. It not only denies the existence of a true, deep self, but also prescribes a relational self whose desire to empathize predominates over its need for display. (256)

Foster’s concern with the self in a hired body explains how, even though dancers express, communicate, and train with their body throughout their education and professional careers, they remain cut off from the connection. Dancers’ bodies today are so dynamic because of their cross-training in various genres of dance. However, I believe that body education is more than gaining control of our body, or getting proficiency and efficiency with the varied aesthetic dance styles. Olsen puts it more elegantly: “one of the most thoroughly neglected areas of body education is the awareness of what is happening inside: the dialogue between inner and outer experience in relation to the whole person” (*Body and Earth* 11). Dancers work with their bodies, and yet the connectivity with self and environment often isn’t a part of their curriculum.

In this thesis, I am not trying to dismantle a hired body, rather, I hope to expand a hired body’s performance quality, by introducing ecological performative practice as a rehearsal approach to train a dancer’s interconnectedness of self and environment they inhabit. In Olsen’s 2017 journal article, “Threshold: Moving between Worlds,” Olsen explores an experiential approach to movement training she calls threshold. In this article, she reminds the readers of the importance of practicing bringing awareness inwards and outwards, specifically the awareness of outer landscapes. She says that, “Performing might be a meditative

practice. Invite awareness of every cell in the body with equanimity in movement or stillness” (213). In this ecological performance practice, I invite the dancer to tune into their intuitive self, and be aware of every sensation of each movement pattern their body creates. Letting their animal body to engage in direct participation with earth, and experiencing the interconnectedness of self and environment with their well-trained, diverse, cultured, and highly controlled body.

# Chapter 2

## APPROACHES TO CONNECTIVITY

In chapter two, I will move on to articulate a series of approaches to connectivity, including three concepts: empathy, imagination, and animal body. I will expand the definition of each concept in relation to connectivity. This chapter focuses on the contextualization of these practices rather than introducing the application of rehearsals, which will be included in chapter three.

### 2.1 Empathy

The term empathy is defined by researchers Sara D. Hodges and Michael W. Myers in the *Encyclopedia of Social Psychology* as:

...understanding another person's experience by imagining oneself in that other person's situation: One understands the other person's experience as if it were

being experienced by the self, but without the self actually experiencing it. A distinction is maintained between self and other. (297)

In this thesis, empathy is expanded to include not just empathy with other humans, but also with the natural environment and non human animals. The performer senses and imagines the experience of the living creatures and objects around themselves from their own bodily perspective. Dancers constantly train their empathy through the process of learning movement, often referring to this process as “kinaesthetic empathy.” Following the German Jewish Philosopher Edith Stein’s empathy, the Finnish scholar Jaana Parviainen, whose research includes social epistemology, phenomenology, and body studies, says “kinaesthetic empathy means that [dancers] can both perceive and feel the motion of other lived bodies in their corporeal schema without moving themselves” (20). In ecological performance practice, empathy contains kinaesthetic empathy. and also includes what David Abram refers to as reciprocity, “the ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it. It is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness—and often, even independent of my verbal awareness” (*Becoming Animal* 41). To recap, empathy is not only to imaginatively sense others’ existential experience from a first person perspective, but also involves perceiving the felt experience of motions of the other bodies, and includes the energetic interchange between human and nature.

Through empathy, we build an imaginative sensorial relationship with objects, creatures and living beings around us. In ecological performance practice, I encourage dancers to have interaction, exchange, and communication between themselves and nature, their body and other bodies, and their movement and movement around them. As the body opens and begins to directly experience the natural world through kinaesthetic empathy and reciprocity, the separation between body and earth dissolves. “We begin by listening to the earth, using the resources of the body. As we attend to underlying patterns, we recognize that the body



is a part of earth-inseparable. Each individual is not alone but a participant in local and global bioregions, just as every cell is part of us” (Olsen *Body and Earth* 227). In ecological performance practice, we practice empathy to recognize the earth as a body, and our bodies as a part of earth. Through empathy, we imagine the connection between humans and nature—experiencing the sensation of sand, water, leaves, and stones from an empathetic imaginative embodied perspective.

When we start to empathize with nature, we may encounter grief (Olsen 8). Empathy allows us to imagine the pain of a struggling seagull, an endangered species, and come to terms with the grief that is the natural result of empathizing with a natural world that we have harmed so deeply. When our animate sensorial imaginations engage with the natural landscape, we acknowledge that the earth and our bodies are not separate entities.

Moreover, as we establish the interconnectedness of self and environment through the act of empathy, we move on to how empathy will support the mover to explore the authentic expression of performance. According to Jess Allen and Bronwyn Preece in the article “The Moon as My Witness” moving authentically means: “attempt[ing] to access a way of moving that is not consciously willed, and that is immediately responsive to the impulses that arise in each moment” (231). In ecological performance practice, the dancer practices moving authentically by engaging their kinaesthetic empathy and imagination to move to patterns of natural surroundings. Nature inspires the mover, and they move when the impulse arises within their body. This idea is similar to *The Discipline of Authentic Movement*. “In Authentic Movement work the mover is invited to become aware of her inner impulses and to express them through her body” (Halstrup 292). This impulse derives from the reciprocity between the self and environment, which I will talk about more in chapter three.

I use the concept of witness that is rooted in the *Discipline of Authentic Movement* to invite the dancer to empathize with the natural vibrant patterns their body perceives. The witness: “with eyes open, intends to bring awareness to his/her judgments, projections,

and interpretations, in service of a desire to be only present” (Olsen *Body and Earth* 75). In ecological performance practice, the mover learns to move by witnessing the dynamic natural movement patterns in their surroundings. Through empathy, the mover explores an imaginative felt experience of a natural body like water, leaf, snails, ants etc. in result, the mover awaits their body to naturally respond to nature through movement. In ecological performance practice, through empathy, the mover is also aware that nature witnesses their movement performance. The mover learns to trust their performance by surrendering to the interconnectedness of self and natural landscape. This trust builds on the foundation of empathy because the mover experiences the world around themselves through their body.

## 2.2 Imagination

Imagination as an ability constitutes an important aspect of human identity. Imagination allows us to formulate creative ideas, solve abstract problems, and produce vivid experiences. Our imagination often draws inspiration from nature, yet its ability to form new knowledge can surpass the actual natural reality our body resides in. The contemporary Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari says that sapien’s ability to imagine allows us to create intersubjective realities, such as culture, symbols, arts, collective myth, law, currency, etc. (149). According to Harari, human history revolves around the webs of stories which come from imagination. He says that “it all began about 70,000 years ago, when the cognitive revolution enabled sapiens to start talking about things that existed in their own imagination” (156). With this use of imagination, humans create a type of reality that establishes and shares a common agreement on knowledge and information. Humans interchange feelings, information, and belief systems through their conscious body in these established intersubjective realities, and create the shared webs of meaning, including culture, religion, myth and symbols, that allow them to live and communicate. However, Harari says these webs of

meaning change throughout the course of human history, as the “meaning is created when many people weave together a common network of stories” (146). From Harari’s perspective, imagination as an ability separates us from other animals (150). He argues that human’s power of intersubjective realities gives competition over animals, as non-human animals can’t compete with living resources because of their lack of imagination. It is up to humans to ensure animals’ survival (151). As mentioned in chapter one, LaMothe, Abram, and Olsen also believe contemporary humans are responsible for ensuring an earth-friendly way of living. Therefore, as an artist, I believe that in contemporary time, our priority is to evolve an eco-friendly web of meaning in order to create a habitable ecosystem for living beings other than homosapiens.

In order to create eco-friendly webs of meaning, we can turn to a concept discussed by the late well-known American educational philosopher, author Maxine Greene, the concept of alternative realities. In Greene’s words, an alternative reality “makes possible the creation of ‘as-if’ perspectives, perspectives that can be opened metaphorically and, oftentimes, through the exercise of empathy” (65). Through the earlier discussion on empathy, we come to understand the interwoven nature of empathy and imagination. In the context of ecological performance practice, an alternative reality is an imaginative world situated only in a dancer’s performance practice, which draws inspiration from the natural world that the dancer’s body inhabits. In this alternate realm, the integration of imagination, empathy, and animal body empowers the dancer to experience a sense of interconnection between the self and environment. The practice of imagination first allows the performer to surpass intersubjective realities and then create an alternative reality where they can empathize with all living creatures on this planet earth. Here, LaMothe would remind us that: “What we create in and through the movement of our sensory selves is reality itself—the reality that is real for us. The matter we perceive as real is fluid or emergent by virtue of our participation in it” (*Why We Dance* 33). Our perception shapes our reality. By using our imagination and empathy to interact with nature, we come to understand that we are a part of nature,

and every move we create has an effect on nature. I will provide detailed examples on how I incorporate empathy into my rehearsal process in chapter three.

Moving forward, in ecological performative practice, one of the methods to encourage performers to tune in deeper into their bodily sensory participation in movement and the landscape they inhabit is through the incorporation of imaginative eco-poetic language. For example, I would include imagery-rich descriptive words in relation to earth elements to remind the dancer that we are a part of nature—water, fire, wind, earth, soil, wind, leaf, etc. Following what Olsen says in her article “Threshold: Moving Between Worlds” about how language influences how the mover participates in the world with their body, and through the act of creating structure with languages, we “notice how [the words] land in the bodies of participants and how long it takes for summation (transition) to occur” (213). Imaginative eco-poetic words assist and expand dancers to reimagine their relationship with their body in relation to earth.

For most of the time, I encourage the dancers to be in direct participation in natural surroundings, however, during studio practice, the mover has to incorporate recalling their direct experience of being in nature while activating their imagination to tune into the sensation of movement. To emphasize the idea of imaginative eco-poetic words shape our bodily experiences, the dance educator and independent scholar Johanna Kirk in her 2014 article “Experiencing Our Anatomy: Incorporating Human Biology Into Dance Class Via Imagery, Imagination, and Somatics” explores an experiential approach to introducing biological perspective in dance class as a way to encourage dancers to grow a deeper understanding of physical and cognitive abilities. In her article, she offers a somatic approach to initiate biological topics. Her language choices embody rich-imagery and metaphor, which “attempted to translate each system into a perceptible, sensory landscape with a solid and accurate topography that students could explore” (60). Using imagery approach to describe movements allows me to articulate the symbolic meanings, origins, and sensations within

structured improvisation and choreographic movement materials. Moreover, I encourage the mover to write down their bodily sensation during their writing exercise to further articulate the bodily sensation in an eco-poetic manner, which I will talk about more during chapter three.

To sum up, the use of imagination in ecological performance practice allows the mover to create earth-friendly webs of meaning through the process of getting deeper into their sensorial participation with earth through movement.

## 2.3 Animal Body

Humans are animals, and we have an animal body. We are two legged Humans are animals, and we have an animal body. We are two legged mammals who walk, run, and dance. However, we are desentized about our animal identity due to our obsession towards intersubjective realities. In the article “The Discourse of the Bird”, David Abram says: “Modern humans spend much of their time deploying a very rarefied form of intelligence, manipulating abstract symbols while their muscled body is mostly inert. Other animals, in a constant and largely unmediated relation with their earthly surroundings, think with the whole of their bodies” (263). Our imagination allows us to create intersubjective realities, yet, it shouldn’t diminish our animal identity. According to Sandra Reeve, humans have always perceived the body as object. The Cartesian belief of a disembodied mind exists independently without a body. Body as object serves “the needs and desires of the mind” (6). The view of body as object diminishes the body as a living system interacting with animate earth; it is an act of abandoning our animal identity. In the book *Becoming Animal*, David Abram says: “It [body as object] forces us to disengage from our bodily sense and to view this wild flourishing world as though we were spectators coolly observing it from outside” (63).

We empathetically imagine the vibrant movement patterns of earth with our animal body without any conceptual thoughts. Our animal body explores the interconnection between self and environment through the intercommunication of primary senses. As Abram describes: “we can sense the world around us only because we are entirely a part of this world, because—by virtue of our own carnal density and dynamism—we are wholly embedded in the depths of the earthly sensuous” (*Becoming Animal* 63). For example, our skin is the boundary of our body between the earth and also a way for us to connect with the animate earth with sensory receptors like exteroceptors<sup>1</sup>. As a human animal, we learn about the world around us through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. “‘Touch’ is used to refer to all the exteroceptors in the skin” (Olsen *Body and Earth* 57). When we learn to explore the animate earth with our senses, we return to our animal body. When we learn about our animal body through the experience of being directly outdoors in natural landscapes, our intrinsic intelligence guides us to find the interconnectedness of self and environment. For example, David Abram says: “...the convergence between my listening ears and my gazing eyes has brought me much deeper into my own animal body and my body’s world” (266). When we move, the intrinsic intelligence guides us to hear the sound of bird chirping, notice the waves of water, smell the texture of soil, and even feel the temperature of air with our skin. Our animal body moves us to living experiences that touch us. Along these lines, in the book *Why We Dance*, LaMothe reminds us that: “how we move influences how and what we sense. How and what we sense impacts how we move” (99). Practicing our animal body enhances our sensory awareness in relation to animate earth: when we move to the patterns of nature with our animal body, we come to realize the landscape our bodies inhabit shapes us, moves us, and makes us.

The founder of Body-Mind Centering, Bonnie Bainbrigde Cohen, developed a systematic way to study body and movement. This work draws “parallels between animal movement

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<sup>1</sup>“The exteroceptors, found in the skin and connective tissues, are responsible for monitoring the outer environment through ‘touch’, including several kinds of sensations such as pressure, heat, cold pain, and vibration” (Olsen 57).

and infant development movement” (Cohen) which allows the practitioner to gain a profound understanding in our human animal body. To be more specific, the first developmental pattern is cellular breathing, and it allows the practitioner to embody the biological concept where humans are complex organisms made up of trillions of cells (Hartley 84). Furthermore, Cohen introduces homologous push, homologous reach and pull, homolateral push, and contralateral reach and pull. For example, homolateral push allows us to draw movement patterns between infants five to eight months old to “amphibians and reptiles, e.g. lizard, alligator. Some mammals, e.g. camel elephant” (85). Responding to LaMothe’s idea of how our movement creates us, and Olsen’s perception (our awareness shapes the way we feel), I appreciate Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen’s research on developmental movement patterns as it draws a connection between human animals and other creatures on earth. Cohen offers a systematic developmental journey for adults to experience and reflect on their human body as it relates and interacts with the world around them. “The interchange of push and reach patterns modulates the dialogue between self and other, essential for effective functioning with the environment and community” (Olsen 14). As our negative impacts on nature reflect the disconnection between us and our human animal identity, in ecological performance practice, we will constantly remind ourselves about our animal body in relation to earth. The intrinsic intelligence of the body guides us to be interconnected with nature as the body is a medium through which we experience nature—body is a part of nature. Moving forward, in chapter three, I apply imagination, empathy and animal body to guide the performer to a self-exploration on experiencing interconnectedness of self and environment.

# Chapter 3

## REHEARSAL PROCESS

In chapter three, the reader will gain an insight into my rehearsal process. There are two characters/practitioners in this research project: Paloma and myself (Aliya). Paloma and I have worked together on several dance film projects over the course of two years, and all of the practices we have shared have been building toward this thesis research. Most of our rehearsals are spent walking on natural trail(s), dancing, and picking up trash. We have remote practices either conducted over video conference or phone calls. Moreover, we have personal movement training sessions where we practice performative rituals on our own time and then discuss our bodily experiences during our remote meet-up. We have explored many performative rituals together over the course of two years; however, for the purpose of this chapter, I will only introduce one of our practices, a performative walking ritual practice integrated with empathy, imagination, and animal body. I will include eco-poetic descriptive text and reflective journals (in italics) from the rehearsal process by speaking from a first person perspective to enable a real-time experience for the readers—including Paloma(P) and my(A) writings.



## 3.1 Ritual

I approach movement practice as ritual, which can be traced back to the lineage of American Modern dance. Artists such as Anna Halprin and many others<sup>2</sup> have incorporated ritual into their choreographic process (Novack 2005). “Halprin explains her concept of ritual as a nested relationship to sensory life, beginning with experience then moving to body, story, symbol, and finally arriving at myth” (Ross 53). Each movement practice is a performance, and each performance is a ritual, where I am bodily becoming in relation to the constantly changing environment I inhabit. Through my research, I will ground my understanding of ritual through Olsen’s lens. In *Body and earth*, Olsen defines the term ritual as the following:

A ritual is a focused container for the experience. Communal or personal, the precision and repetition of ritual create its charge effect. A simplified view of a ritual or ceremony of transformation shows three essential stages: preparation, enactment, and return, including completion and time for recovering. Thus, the end becomes the beginning, connecting to the future as well as reflecting on the past. (219)

In ecological performance practice, I approach rehearsal and performance with the same attitude: I perceive and experience dance through my body in performative ritual(s) that include Olsen’s preparation, enactment, and return (completion and recovery). The performative ritual(s) is an experimental and experiential session where the mover applies a wholistic understanding of imagination, animal body, and empathy into a moving experience.

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<sup>2</sup>These artists are: “Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Katherine Dunham, Erick Hawkins, and Anna Halprin” (Novack 2005).

## 3.2 Performative Ritual Practice: Walking

Walking is one of the activities we do everyday, albeit without paying much attention to the movement itself. In ecological performance practice, walking is an act of ritual that requires the mover to enact bodily becoming, consciously aware of every sensation and response of each movement their body creates.

During my personal practice over the period of production time from July 30th, 2020 to April 25th, 2021. I've committed to perform a walking ritual on a natural trail(s) daily to allow a transformative process: a sense of interconnectivity, or state of connectivity, between place and myself. Working with my collaborative dancer, Paloma, I approach this walking ritual in three ways:

1. I share a communal practice by taking part in a walking ritual I have designed with Paloma. This is an in-person rehearsal, following COVID-19 Guidelines, in which I walk next to her at a six feet distance to guide her on the ritual.
2. I assign homework by asking Paloma to perform the walking ritual on her own by writing her a letter with guidelines or instructing over the phone. I introduce specific ways of preparation, enactment and return. We usually discuss her embodied experience over the following rehearsal.
3. I encourage Paloma to explore her own pathway to a state of interconnectedness of self and environment through the act of walking. Then, we have a dialogue on her personal practice in the following rehearsal.

The application of empathy, imagination, and animal body is integrated into the walking ritual. As previously mentioned, the walking ritual involves three parts: preparation, enactment, and return. The preparation allows the mover to get into a performative state,

letting go of their daily reality, and enter into an alternative reality where they interconnect with the environment. The enactment involves the dancer moving with the patterns of nature and bodily becoming. Return requires the dancer to merge their intuitive and analytical aspects of body to write an earth-poetic reflective journal and then articulate their bodily experience through a shared dialogue. In the following sections, I will use a first person perspective interchangeably with the phrase “the mover” to run through a full performative walking ritual practice.

### **3.3 Part I: Preparation**

Preparation can be compared to Plié in the beginning of a Ballet class. Plié prepares the whole body into a jump by focusing on the relationship between gravity and the muscle engagement of the body. In ecological performance practice, preparation includes “exploration”, “intention”, and “entering the space”, and this stage lays the groundwork for the body to be emotionally, spiritually, and physically ready for the enactment of improvisation in a ritual practice. Preparation cultivates the mover’s ability to arrive at a performative state—the interconnectivity of self and environment. In this performative state, the mover is creating what Greene suggested as alternative reality when they communicate and interchange energy with nature through their animal body, imagination, and empathy.

#### **3.3.1 Exploration**

Exploration is a time where the mover pays conscious attention to their bodily sensations as they spontaneously interact with natural living things during a walk. My performative walking ritual starts from the moment I walk out of my apartment. The sound of the closing door symbolizes the beginning of a practice, reminding me that I am returning to nature.

The application of the animal body is to invite myself to heighten my sensory perception by first bringing awareness to my own respiratory system. I find myself in the breathing circle of inhaling and exhaling, bringing awareness to the texture of air entering my nostrils, witnessing the stream of air turn into a current as it passes through my nasal cavity into my whole body. My imagination allows me to bring the landscape into my body through the act of breathing. When I inhale, my imaginative eco-poetic imagery approach enables me to experience the land passing through my third eye, the top of my crown, the back of my head, neck, vertebrae, the bottom of my tail, and sends a fireball of energy into my reproductive system to remind me that I am alive. When I exhale, the ball of energy releases into energetic particles, radiating nourishment into every part of my inner body and passing through my skin, returning back to the land I inhabit. “[My] skin is both touching and being touched” (Olsen *The Place of Dance* 13). My animal body explores the feedback to the ground as I’m walking, and my imagination allows me to be consciously aware that I’m moving on the skin of earth. My sensory sensitivity heightens as my animal body directly participates in nature.

*P: When I reach out, the leaves do too, and they touch me- they touch me  
With curiosity and appreciation-we both realize we are not as different*

I always pick up a leaf, branch, or flower from the ground to remind myself of the interconnectedness of self and environment. By engaging my empathy, imagination, and animal body, I invite my tactile knowledge to guide me to feel the leaf patterns and to be aware the leaf also experiences me. “As soon as we acknowledge that our hands are included within the tactile world, we are forced to notice the reciprocity: whenever we touch any entity, we are also ourselves being touched by that entity” (Abram 58). The body is a medium through which I experience the landscape around me. The integration of empathy, animal body, and imagination allows me to feel the interconnectedness of the leaf and my body. Using my

animal body to be in deep presence with the leaf, I enter the beginning of an experience where I separate from all the conceptual thoughts and information about the body and earth. I allow the union of self and environment to be experienced through my body from a direct experience of being consciously in nature. Imagination, empathy, and animal body cultivate a sense of sensorial imaginative empathy, allowing me to surpass the limitation of my daily reality, ala Harari and Greene, welcoming me to empathize with other lives, human, and non-human, that I encounter during my walk. I am in dialogue with the trees, bushes, grass, water, and everything that inspires me. The walk is a performance where I witness and am witnessed by the trees, bushes, bugs, squirrels, and other living things.

In sum, the exploration process includes an interaction and communication with nature by activating my empathy, imagination and animal body. This process allows me to let go of my daily reality, and everything that has nothing to do with performance. As I am crossing the threshold of a performative state of interconnectedness of self and environment, I move on to the next phase of preparation: intention.

### 3.3.2 Intention

*A: Inhale: silently ask or visualize a thought pattern: who am I in relation to nature?*

In ecological performance practice, intention builds upon an inquiry between the self and environment. To expand on the idea of wholness and intrinsic intelligence we discussed in chapter one, which I start movement training by engaging imagination to let go of “the general idea people have about themselves; that is, it is a complex and dynamic system of learned beliefs and attitudes that one believes to be true about one’s own personal existence<sup>3</sup>” (Jackson et al. 2). I set intention by asking ontological questions like “who am I in relation

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<sup>3</sup>This is called constructed self-concept.

to earth?” to encourage myself to be open to receive new information in regards to the interconnectedness of self and environment from a human-animal perspective.

*A: Exhale - let thoughts dissolve into the body—surrendering into the landscape.*

As I learn my ecological aspect of existence through trusting my direct sensorial bodily experience, I let go of conceptual thoughts I learn about the self and environment as I empty the air out of my body. Through the repetition of inhale and exhale, my sensory awareness continues to enhance as my animal body is directly participating in natural surroundings with movement. I, the mover, don't need to know the answer to these particular inquiries at the moment. Through the act of asking a question, I invite myself into a performative state where I allow myself to be open to new sensory information that my animal body receives.

I apply Olsen's intrinsic intelligence, trusting my body to become a medium through which I can experience the presence of earth. I witness the emotion and sensation within my animal body as I walk on and within the skin of earth. My intention is to trust my intrinsic intelligence without the lens of conceptual thought. Through imagination and empathy, I dance with the intention of interchanging energy with the landscape I inhabit. I perform with the intention of creating an alternative reality where I am interconnected with the earth through my animal body. A deep kinship grows between myself and the world around me as my animal body directly experiences nature. Now, I am ready to “enter the space.”

### **3.3.3 Entering the Space**

The similarity between setting an intention and entering the space is that they both require me, the mover, to vow to move authentically. The difference is that the intention asks for my openness, and “entering the space” requires me, the mover, to be respectful to

the environment in which I dance. This place could be anywhere depending on my choice. Whenever I decide to move, my imagination allows me to draw an invisible boundary between the non-practice space and practice space. As I step into the practice space, I wholeheartedly focus and commit to the interchange between my animal body and this environment. In this alternative reality, my imagination allows me to acknowledge the living beings around me and I send a non-verbal signal to notify them that I am here. I imagine that my animal body emerges into an unknown territory where I have to generate a welcome and open energy to communicate that I simply want to share a dance with every living creature in this place.

*A: I share this practice with you (trees, bushes, flowers, water, rabbits, soils, rocks, snails, ants, lizards, squirrels)*

I stay in stillness, and through breathing I continue to experience the movement within my body. My imagination and animal body work together to explore the interconnectedness of self and environment. I plant my bones into the living soil beneath my feet. I yield into my body and surrender to that nature which I am a part of. My animal body guides me to find the fluid connection between the self and environment as I tune into my intrinsic intelligence. I inhale the landscape into my body, and exhale feeling prepared to move onto the next stage: enactment.

*A: I'm ready to move into the unknown with you as my witness.*

### **3.4 Part II: Enactment**

My animal body is hyper-aware of my surroundings as I am fully present, focused, and committed to experiencing the movement within the stillness; time ceases to exist for me,

I dwell only in the now. I have come to realize that I am embodiment of nature. The founder of Body-Mind Centering, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, defines embodiment as a thorough understanding of direct bodily experience in which the cells emanate the sensations of completion and wholeness through a being process (Cohen “Embodiment” 2020). I witness the movement in nature (e.g., the dance between a tree and air) and let their movement patterns stimulate my multisensory perception. I continue to stay in stillness until I experience the impulse of moving within my body.

*A: I hear it, smell it and see it. Wind asks me to dance, and the invitation comes from the moving green foxtails.*

The impulse usually derives from the interchange of energy through the form of movement between myself and the landscape. My animal body feels the touch from wind, and I move naturally following the direction of force. I dance to affirm that I am a part of nature. I, as Abram notes, am engaging in reciprocity. I return into stillness as the ripple effect of moving sensation dissolves into spacetime. I begin to listen, see, and experience the movement patterns in nature once more. I see a tree whose name I don't know. I begin to dance to the interaction between the wind and the leaves, how they are rhythmically moving, singing, and speaking as one. My movement unfolds naturally and spontaneously with their patterns. LaMothe says that “[This] process is never simply one of ‘imitation.’ It requires that a person perceive a movement pattern and be moved by it, that she feel in herself the possibility of animating a similar pattern, and follow the impulses to move that arise within her” (“Can They Dance?” 105).

*P: I responded with my heart, I just wanted to pet them and thank them and myself*

The importance of staying in stillness until nature moves me is to enhance my sensory



perception. This perception “is [an] ongoing interwavement: the terrain [entering] into us only to the extent that we allow ourselves to be taken up within the terrain” (Abram 58). I give all of my movement energy to the landscape. As I explore the depth of my sensory perception, I welcome nature to open my animal body. I move authentically because I trust my instinct of movement as it interchanges with nature. I refuse to move abstractedly or unemotionally. I am not a hired body; I am bodily becoming in this more-than-human-world.

This particular stage can be challenging as it requires the mover to be patient. When the impulse doesn’t arrive, or takes time to arrive, we must not become anxious or frustrated or give up. I sometimes encourage Paloma to use the simplistic movement form to respond to movement patterns at the slowest speed she can possibly go. As previously mentioned, as trained dancers, our body education tends to focus on training a hired body. We need to cultivate what Olsen describes as intrinsic intelligence, by engaging in slow and simplistic motion that responds to stimulation of natural movement patterns. In this way, the mover has to be consciously aware of their breathing and the sensory experience of their bodily movement. This exercise requires intense focus, concentration, and patience in each movement. The mover is not encouraged to move unless to follow their impulse of interacting with the patterns of nature.

### **3.5 Part III: Return**

*P: All of these things came one together when I am seeing my pen and what my eyes see as who I am, but I am not who I thought I was.*

Olsen reminds us that return is essential as “the end becomes the beginning, connecting to the future as well as reflecting on the past” (219). Each practice allows me to either deepen or rediscover meanings I learned from previous experience. Ritual practice allows me

to experience the concept of death and rebirth each time when I start and end the practice. Each performative ritual practice allows me to enter into the unknown without preconceived notions—performing the interconnectedness of self and environment through my body.

I leave the place where I have shared a movement practice by offering gratitude to the place. The gesture is to pick up the trash I see. My repetitive act of picking up the trash towards the end of each performative walking ritual causes my body to feel unsettled as I had just completed an intimate exchange between my body and earth. Each time when I see a piece of trash lying on the ground lifelessly, it triggers me into reflecting about my personal impact on the earth. As previously mentioned in chapter one, Olsen reminds us that we often encounter the experience of grief when our animal body is directly in nature. I find the act of picking up the trash as a representation both for my gratitude to the inseparable connection between body and earth as well as a reminder of the monumental gap between human and nature. After I complete the action of picking up trash, I move onto the earth-poetic journals.

The writing happens towards the end of a ritual, symbolizing a completion. I refer to the process of writing as an earth-poetic journal practice. The mover writes in the form of prose, poem, storytelling, line, words, shapes, etc., yet: “the intention of the one who writes is to translate experience into words and/or to clarify experience to make it conscious not to write poetry that is beautiful or awesome” (Adler 154). The mover welcomes the unknown and explores the embodiment of thought patterns unfolding non-linearly in front of their gazes by allowing the stream of consciousness to dance onto the papers. “As we allow our curiosity to guide our experience, writing becomes a process of discovery” (Olsen *BodyStories* 59). As the mover listens deeply into their body, the writing flows onto the paper naturally without any force. There is an impulse to write down the bodily experience of a movement practice into a written form; Janet Adler calls this experience ‘embodied text’ in her book *Offering from the Conscious Body*: “Words that are needed in the body

knowing, birthed into consciousness and arriving into the world in a shape, named, and offered, can be expressions of devotion” (153). The embodied text, storytelling, or earth-poetic journal practice all share a similar belief: the mover expresses their experience through writing, where body and mind are linking together to create a sense of balance. Andrew Newberg, Eugene D’aquili, and Vince Rause wrote in their research book *Why God Won’t Go Away—Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*: “the generation of human conscious awareness, in all its multilayered fullness, depends upon the harmonious integration of both sides of the brain” (23). Earth-poetic journal practice is essential in the process of delving deep into our body to describe a sensation that feels like there are no words to describe.

When we complete the journal entries, Paloma and I usually end our practice by having a dialogue where we verbally share, discuss, articulate, reflect and contextualize our bodily practice in reference to David Abram’s work *Becoming Animal: an Earthly Cosmology*. This book is required reading for this rehearsal process. To have a fully embodied understanding of sensory participation with earth through movement, I believe contextualizing and reflecting our bodily experience is essential. The dance educator Rachel Rimmer-Piekarczyk in the article “Self-Somatic Authority: Exploring the Cultivation of Somatic Intelligence through a Dialogic Approach to Self-Reflection in Dance Technique Learning” explores the idea of including self-reflection and dialogue into technique class in higher-education. She investigates her methodology through conducting an action research module with students in which she proves that including self-reflection and dialogue approach into technique class helps students to develop their somatic intelligence. She suggests that the somatic-based pedagogies require the students to actively participate in the practice. The conversation between Paloma and myself allows me to witness her self-reflection on her bodily experience in each performative ritual. We discuss her personal walking ritual, her bodily experience of researching information online regarding the human impact on the environment. Having a dialogue approach also allows me to check in with her personal movement practice as well.

*P: It is crazy how some days the planets seem so far away and all of the trees  
and all of the people walking around seem like distant strangers and  
today we all met again and it had been as if we were never apart.  
they knew me just as I knew them- we were all the same when we danced.*

# Chapter 4

## CONNECT/disconnect

### 4.1 Artist Statement

CONNECT/disconnect is a conceptual and experiential movement, video, and object installation. This creative project is an embodiment of my thesis research: ecological performance practice. The culmination of ecological performance practice allows me to explore the outcome of my practice through a visual platform. In this nonlinear and impressionistic narrative, I investigate the connection and disconnection between humans and the animate earth from a mover's perspective. As previously mentioned in chapter three, through ritualistic performance practice, the mover's imagination, empathy, and animal body allow them to experience bodily becoming, as they arrive at a state of interconnectedness between self and environment. This introspection is displayed by Paloma wandering in a dreamscape. In addition, I am a human animal who spends the majority of my time in front of the screen, and this behavior deeply impacts the way I perceive the world around me. I explore the aspect of disconnection through the medium of installing screens and trash in my room. In order to maximize the idea of disconnection, I explore the layers of presenting footage within

a screen that is within another screen and that is within another screen. All of Paloma's performances are presented on these multiple screens to experiment with the idea of whether or not the interaction of her movement energy between the self and environment will be shown through the layers of screen.

## **4.2 Project Summary & Choreographic Process**

There are four themes in this artistic exploration which are presented in a nonlinear manner: "Becoming Animal", "Who Am I?", "We Are Movers", and "The Memories of Nature." In the following paragraphs I will break down a few selected conceptual explorations behind each theme.

### **4.2.1 Becoming Animal**

There are three scenes that show in parallel three different screens on top of trash and books. In this digital era, trash no longer simply means physically materialized objects—by throwing the screens on piles of trash, I reflect the digital trash in this fragmented and broken reality I live in. Each scene explores a different yet relevant topic and all represent my confusion of being a human-animal. One of the scenes is Paloma crawling around in a room that is full of trash. Another one is Paloma polishing her nails and applying make-up on her face. The last one is called "confusion," where Paloma questions the limitation of learning knowledge through books, as well as the frustration of her inner experience when she finds herself lost in a dreamscape (nature).

## 4.2.2 Who Am I?

The culmination of the performative walking ritual we discussed in chapter three results in a theme I call “Who Am I?” All of the footage that was taken in nature represents Paloma entering into a natural dreamscape, exploring her human-animal identity in relation to earth. Paloma’s inner experience of connection and disconnection to the landscape is portrayed through the act of walking, dancing, and voice-over. In this particular theme, viewers experience how Paloma trusts her body as a medium through which she experiences the interconnectedness of self and environment.

As mentioned in chapter three, during the rehearsal process, Paloma and I committed to writing reflective practice journals which eventually led to an accumulation of creative materials for monologues that are used in this film. Most of the footage that appears in the film was recorded throughout the rehearsal process. Each rehearsal, I reminded Paloma that the performance itself is a practice and the ritual itself is a performance. I encouraged Paloma to dance authentically by being truthful to the interaction between herself and nature, with the camera as her witness. By the same token, because I consider the camera itself as an extension of my body, I filmed all of the B-rolls over the course of my personal walking ritual practice where my camera and I witnessed the movement of nature.

In the article “Technology as Collaborator in Somatic Photographic Practice”, visual artist and movement researcher Anne Scott Wilson explores the concept of somatic photography through collaboration with technology. According to Wilson, the experience of dance can transform into visual arts. During the process of creating the project *Fly Rhythm*, Wilson responds to light through movement and with her custom made camera, an artistic experiment she refers to as somatic photography. Expanding on Wilson’s idea of somatic photography, in ecological performance practice, I believe that I, as a mover, experience the world through my body. When I approach camera movement, I consider the interac-

tion between me and my camera as if we are collaborating on a performance practice where we witness the world around us together. My movement practice allows me to view the phone/camera as an extension of my body and each time I approach the camera/phone I move with an intention to witness the movement around me. In Appendix C, the reader can find an exercise description that I call “camera/seeing.” In this exercise, I dance with the phone/camera, and as a result, the possibilities of movement expand. While I am bodily becoming, the camera/phone is both as my collaborator and a witness to my performance.

Eventually, the theme “Who Am I?” ends with me lying on top of trash, books, and screens. I watch Paloma while she is on one of the screens continuing to share her experience of being in nature. There are three other screens simultaneously being shown. One is a close-up of Paloma’s feet walking on the top of books that symbolize stairs. Another is Paloma fighting against the idea of reasoning and books with her animal body by breaking through a wall of books, performing unsettling animalistic fighting movements. The third is the “confusion” scene which was previously discussed in “Becoming Animal”.

### **4.2.3 We Are Movers**

“We Are Movers” is where we explore the means of being a mover by experiencing the world through our animal body, imagination, and empathy. For example, some of the footage incorporated into this theme shows the depth of movement within a flat screen. Responding to my direct sensorial participation with earth and my confusion of being a human-animal in this digital reality I live in, I create an experience where I dance to a TV screen, mimicking the vibrant patterns that I find in nature in the form of kaleidoscope. Through an abstract approach, I present how my body experiences the depth, texture, light, rhythm, shadows, and latency of movement. Additionally, as my animal body dissolves into a digital screen, I start questioning again who I am in relation to earth in this digital reality.



In another scene, Paloma and I share a duet in two different spacetimes. I dance behind a screen that shows a montage of Paloma's solo dance. All of the footage is either derived from guided improvisation conducted remotely over Zoom during nine months of practice, or, from an exercise called "video-response" where we regularly recorded our personal movement practice in a creative and somatic manner and sent it to each other. I collected all the footage and edited it into a short dance video that is used in this scene I call "the duet."

#### **4.2.4 The Memories of Nature**

I want to say a little about the background of this scene first. Paloma and I collected non-biodegradable domestic trash within our own family and friends' households for over nine months. In less than three months, I already began to see a mountain of trash piling up in my workroom. This frustration led me to continue researching my direct bodily experience with nature in the "walking" ritual. Eventually, the trash took over my whole room and made me wonder if one day nature will actually become human memories. This thought led to an idea of using my imagination to live in an alternative reality where nature only exists in my memories of the past. Thus, I created another performative ritual that I call: "Touching", and in the end, the culmination of my bodily experience extended to the theme "The Memories of Nature".

As part of my pre-work for performing this theme, I rehearsed the touching ritual by myself in my home studio, and sometimes Paloma and I met over Zoom to practice together. Similar to the walking ritual, there are three stages: preparation, enactment, and return. During the preparation stage, I cultivated my intrinsic intelligence by inhibiting my body through the act of breathing. I first cleaned the practice room to remind myself that this was the beginning of a ritual. I set an intention to be present, focused, and open for this performative practice. I experienced the changes of sensation within my animal body in

comparison to being directly in nature. I spent a considerable amount of time warming up my body to cultivate a sense of being in the present moment. I entered the practice space by acknowledging that every object (including camera) in this practice room was a witness for my practice, just as I practiced in the walking ritual with the grass, leaves, trees, dirt, etc. During the enactment stage, I placed all the domestic trash in my practice room. I spent hours touching the trash with my whole skin—walking on the trash, laying inside of the trash, and moving around the trash and etc. I witnessed the changes of emotion and sensation in my animal body. Often I found myself in confusion and conflict with my relationship with nature. I used my imagination to go deeper into my animal body by recalling kinesthetic memories of dancing in nature. Using my imagination and empathy, I danced as if I were the creatures that have been deeply impacted by human garbage. I moved with a sense of loss, shame, anger, frustration, emotionlessness, and displacement, etc. I ended my practice with the stage of return, where I intentionally and slowly cleaned up the trash in my practice room. I wrote down my experience and reflected in my journal, similar to the walking ritual I discussed in chapter three. Additionally, when working with Paloma, we ended our practice by discussing our experience of dancing with trash, as well as the connection and disconnection between our relationship with each other over the remote practice.

The repetition of performing the touching ritual during each rehearsal has led me to discover the final idea of “The Memories of Nature.” For example: I perform the act of wrapping myself with a plastic bag that comes from the “touching ritual” to symbolize me empathically imagining the pain of the animals who have lost their habitat due to human impact on earth. This action leads to the ending credits scene where I project the stock footage of overcrowding trash mountains onto the wall and my body, and simultaneously have trash being thrown onto my body. In this alternative (at least for the moment) reality, nature only survives in human memories due to our neglect, disconnection, and destruction on earth.

# CONCLUSION

The choreography itself is a ritual practice. I start the process of choreography by asking who I am in relation to earth. This ritual offers me a space to explore meanings as a messenger of nature. Through integrating Practice as Research into the rehearsal process, I expect the choreography to develop naturally and organically. I collect the creative materials such as monologues, camera and body relationships, and inspiration for the creative project from ecological performance practice. After each rehearsal, I witness the fragmented images regarding the creative project that appear in my body and I write them down on paper. I feel I travel back and forth between known (the writing process) and unknown (the movement practice), and such progress eventually allows me to find a throughline for script development. As I peel away the layers of feelings and analyze them, I come to know the deepest self and perform authentically. I am a mover and I experience the world through my body. As a choreographer and an educator, I explore teachings that invite Paloma, the performer, to also experience such feelings in her own way.

In the article “The Messages Behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals”, Robin Lake discusses the heritage of authoritarian pedagogy and its hidden curriculum in the Western Concert world. He examines certain well-known choreographers’ rehearsal practices and points out how their abusive behaviors negatively impact dancers. Lake encourages those who work in the dance field to incorporate elements from progressive and interactive methods

of teaching into their rehearsal room (2005). Expanding on Lake's thoughts, as a contemporary choreographer, educator, and director, I aim to create a workspace that puts an end to hierarchy, where I am not a teacher, guide, guru, director, etc. As I work with Paloma, an undergraduate student performer, I consider her as an equal collaborator whose creativity needs to be nourished. In the most exploratory process, I invite her into a dreamscape where I am a facilitator of her own relationship between the self and nature. From the first day of the rehearsal to the end of the production, I constantly remind Paloma that she is an independent artist who has her own history with dance. I encourage her to bring her own unique artistic voice and depth into the production. I remind her that the learning objective of ecological performance practice is to offer a path to the interconnectedness of the self and environment, yet this path is only one of the many directions. She is welcomed to find her own path during the rehearsal process.

Concerning performing authentically, in chapter one, I discussed how ecological performance practice addresses the disconnection of hired bodies. In ecological performance practice I create an exploratory space where the performer experiences the interconnectedness of self and environment. I believe moving authentically as a human animal means to have a genuine sensuous participation with the earth through movement. "Our bodily selves are movements of connecting, relating, and interacting with incalculable dimensions of existence extending far beyond our sensory range" (LaMothe 78). The mover explores the existential experience by inhabiting their body. The mover approaches the ritual with a performative attitude, which means the dancer has to devote themselves to the expression of authenticity that is rooted in *The Discipline of Authentic Movement*. Through ritual practice, the mover heightens their bodily sensory awareness, practicing the ability to stay in the present moment, and is focused and conscious of the movement they are creating while adapting to the environment they inhabit. The mover learns the interconnectedness of self and environment through guidance, exploration, experience, research, disciplined self-practice, vulnerability, and courage. There is no "marking" movement in performative ritual

practice because every rehearsal is a performance. Through direct sensuous participation with earth and constantly becoming patterns of sensation and response, the mover surpasses the training of hired body.

In the process of exploring the authentic expression, the mover's intrinsic intelligence guides them to return to their animal body, expand their imagination, and strengthen their empathy. The mover performs the interconnectedness of self and environment with nature as their witness. In chapter one, we introduced Olsen's Perception, an essential concept in her book *Body and Earth*, where she reminds us that our perception shapes our view of the world. The mover's animal body, imagination, and empathy remind them that they are human animals living in a more-than-human world. The mover surpasses their intersubjective reality and creates an alternative reality where they communicate with nature through the energy of movement. Through ecological performance practice, by constantly walking in nature, picking up the trash, and dancing in the trash mountain, the mover gets to reflect on their relationship with earth. LaMothe describes this reflection as *ecokinetic*:

It is knowledge, as we shall see, about how to move in ways that grow healthy bodily selves, establishing loving connections, heal pain, resist forces of oppression, discrimination, corruption, and ecological destruction and, in all, cultivate a mutually nurturing relationship with the earth in us and around us. (*Why We Dance* 8)

As mentioned in chapter one, Abram, Olsen, and LaMothe believe that the negative impact humans have on earth can be reduced if we return to our body. My experience of ecological performance practice has deeply impacted my relationship with earth. I have started to reflect on our lifestyle as contemporary human beings by paying more attention to how I can reduce my own trash. My animal body reminds me to make earth-friendly conscious choices in my daily life. I have stopped using disposable pads, tampons, plastic grocery

bags, plastic trash bags, packaged cleaning products, plastic bottles, etc. What I'm doing in this project is not enough, but this work serves as an alarm for both you and I in this more-than-human-world that is on the way to becoming uninhabitable for every living thing on earth.

As an ending of this choreographic ritual, Paloma and I spend an afternoon picking up the trash around our living community.

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# Appendix A

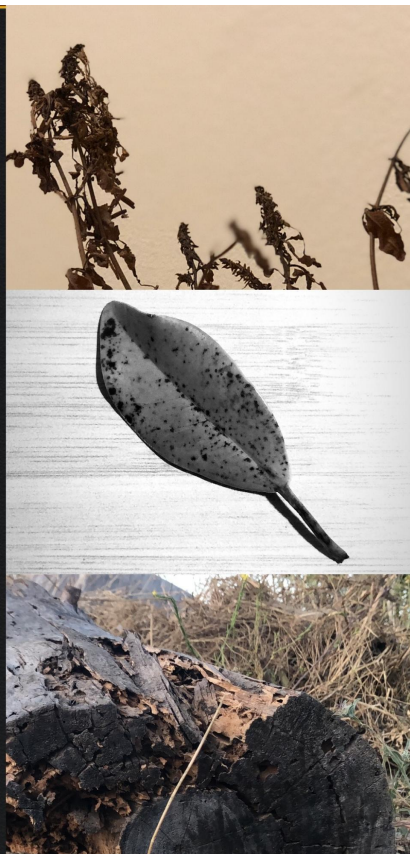
## Selected Earth-Poetic Journal From My (Aliya) Perspective

September, 2020 To a  
Wildfire that caused by a  
Gender Reveal Celebration

It was the first snow she  
saw in the summer. Black  
snow seeped through her  
skin and buried the river.  
Somebody threw a fire brick  
to the sun and lives  
spiraled toward the sky.  
She inhaled, and witnessed  
a blackened snowflake swirl  
up into her lung. The  
mountain is waiting for an  
answer, and so she sang  
silently: "--- ---  
-----."

When the beat stops, she  
becomes a plastic bag,  
dancing with a waste of  
snow, lifeless.

She was never born nor  
died.  
AK



This reflection symbolizes the beginning of my thesis research project; I write it right after my performative ritual practice in Yosemite. I am in the middle of practice and suddenly the entire sky is filled with ashes and I can't breathe nor keep my eyes open because soot keeps entering my lungs and eyes. I keep on dancing to process the emotion of anger, frustration and grief. Returning Irvine from Yosemite, Irvine experienced a few more times of air pollution due to again human caused wildfire. I feel an urge to respond to my frustration of our impacts on the environment through the only medium in which I know: art.

To you,

Are you a friend? Maybe figuring out your identity isn't a priority for this conversation. I'm writing to you to express and document my gratitude for today's practice. I take the leaf with me, it lays next to a piece of discarded candy wrapped paper next to a giant tree in the park. I feel I have to take the leaf with me, it feels like a sort of protection for the purity of my being. I end the practice like how I usually end. I pick up the trash I see around the place.

I haven't mourned him for a while, I cried for him yesterday, today. I danced for him today. I felt him through the movement of leaves.

I will die one day, and I hope I die beautifully like a leaf falls/returns to soil. I hope my death contributes to the circle of life. I think I understand the death of nature through my understanding of death from my unborn brother, late father, late grandmother. Of course the list goes on, the death of my friend, friend's father, mother, sister, friend.

The droplet of rain rhythmically penetrate into my whole body, I don't feel cold at all. I am here, present. I can understand the tree in front of me through a human body. I imitate its pattern to honor it's existence. I bend my knees to humbly acknowledge both of our existences. Who am I ? I am a tree that grows in a public park. AK, 3/13/2021

## Appendix B

# Paloma's Reflection on Ecological Performance Practice

These past two years of my life, I've learned to trust myself as an artist and as an enthusiastic person. Especially as I am now looking back at the beginning, I feel like I kind of lost some of this enthusiasm, thinking that it wasn't helpful. As if some of that enthusiasm and curiosity was simply ignorant. That curiosity, though, led me to a lot of discoveries. In this practice- I get to remember it and honor it through my embodiment. I learned that this connection is possible at any time- a connection to the truth. I have learned, or believe, that this truth, is always inside of a breath. The truth is inevitable, anyways, and there's an opportunity to embody its peace by just allowing it to be. It is also available when the body is being inside movement. This movement is always present anyway in the simple expansion of the lungs, or in a huge expression of the shoulders, as these senses are the truest expressions.

In general in my practice, there can be a disconnect. In my technique classes, or just in my everyday life, I forget about my body. I feel confused, I feel like a liar- like I'm not

living how I feel. Maybe it's because I'm trying to dance, live, somewhere else- my past or future or my teacher in front of me. I've been practicing using the tools I've learned these past two years of moving my body to tears or to its innate dance by allowing the truth of the breath to come in. In this dance, I notice my resemblance to the trees and am inspired by the sun- I remember that we are touching and dancing together, I am never alone and I am always understood.

I remember a particular moment where Aliya led me through a meditative dance practice and I discovered the possibility of conversation in my simple body. I thought it would be so hard to touch the trees that were seemingly so far outside my window, but nothing had felt so simple, true, and natural as that hug we shared. I journaled afterwards and found a confusing but naturally poetic form of sharing:

There was an intense focus on the places but it wasn't hard.

I felt like everything is my friend and we talked of many things at the same time- but we also talked of nothing and rather shared together, there was no space in between us so we danced together and we hugged.

I forget that all of us are just as huge as one another and there is no or there is- it just was grey and by that i mean colorful but not also. It wasn't some place I knew but had forgotten how all the trunks and leaves and pillow are my friends.

I even spoke to the plants and the big gods above but I knew I was loved and appreciated I was human and got to touch upon the earth and breathe with the "lungs".

Emotions don't have the words but they can also exist in compartments inside my body.

Now I go through it without the words and instead a method of a backbone literally I remember what it felt like.

This time I began "alone" and then I met everyone- we had a dance party- they were always there but I had never seen them dance- once I saw them I knew they wanted to dance so we did it was nice to get to know/witness everything. I'd never seen them so happy.

I even touched the sky and moved the clouds. I wonder if anybody outside saw how they danced with me. Sometimes I'd forget to trust what I felt even though it changed my gaze, the smells and even my heartbeat.



We wanted to feel all others.

We are all touching each other all the time, when you see me dance you want to join, when I hear you sing I want to sing.

Then we all smile, laugh and hug.

I also remember the first time we rehearsed together at Aldrich Park in Irvine. The instructions that evening were to explore the park and then come back to journal an experience of freedom. I had heard a lot of freedom, and I did feel that I was free. I have felt this before, when I was young. Looking to find that freedom very purely made me think it might be complex- but running across the field was just enough.

I love to be free Is there a right way to be free?

That's when I would get stuck and the times in between those moments were the most free.

The times I felt I was practicing the most freedom was when it got risky- when I almost fell down the hill or balanced on one leg on the tree.

I really wanted to talk to everyone, but I felt nervous and less free. I started to sing and then I got nervous but I kept going and I was slowly breaking more free (to me it's the same as everyday but moments- I want to make it all free?)

I loved to run and when I got tired I wondered why my body made me slow down when I wanted to keep going- but maybe this tiredness + muscles tightening was an expression of my freedom.

I loved the open fields and the scary cave if I went in- I'm freer.

I remember being told to be very mindful of entering the space beneath the tree as well as the beginning and end of our story together. This wasn't the first time I did this. When I was younger, I often spoke to everything and played, I felt like I had traveled back in time and the tree was my sibling.

when I was young, I felt huge.

What was near was just as big as me; beyond, I did not see.

Mushrooms became homes and rocks family, the seeds were not divorced from me.

I was an image of mother and father, everything yearned for my foster. and so it was easy to love, easy to care for me and the grasses thereof.

then, I grew.

and somehow in this view, everything became much bigger than me. but today under the tree, I saw those near, they longed to interfere, to speak with me once more in our secret language of adorn, but I do not remember it,

and now I am much too small.

A challenge for me in this process was dancing in general. There's a very transient way in which I love to move, but like I stated in the journal entry above, there's a feeling that it is not the right way- I've learned so many ways to move "correctly". Moving, then, in that more correct way made me sad as I was not being honest. When I am honest there's that flood of connection with my natural dancing body. I remember a specific time where I practiced in my room instead of the living room. Throughout the entire warm up, I was quickly and constantly shifting between connect and disconnect. I felt ashamed as the rehearsal had already started, time was being invested in me, and it wasn't just a practice for myself- it's collaborative, but I could not connect. I felt hopeless, but also motivated to keep trying. It still wasn't working and I did not understand what was wrong (with me). Then, I decided to connect to that disconnection and confusion through empathy, which made me emotional. I was then given permission to turn off my camera. I continued crying on my own and tried to connect this emotion to movement. It was difficult and emotional, but I feel that at finishing, it brought a lot of lightness and clarity when I honored my disconnectedness and felt the shame that can come from that. The rehearsal was ended early and this is what came out:

When I was told that my cries weren't real, that I was feeling what they said, that I was

asking for attention and I was okay, and crying over a toy or a chore gone wrong was wrong- spoiled.

I never cried over a toy or a “no”, I cried of betrayal.

I cried because I thought my parents wanted me to be happy but they weren’t showing me.  
I cried because they didn’t believe me. I cried because they were sad too.

I cried because I betrayed them too.

I didn’t understand what they said, but their faces changed to squeezed eyes, brows, when I cried too loud or refused their words. I wouldn’t have done it if I knew. I’m sad they thought I knew- that I did it on purpose, that a toy was more important than their smile, but they didn’t understand me either.

To me, it was important to meet something new and discover what I could play, what I could do, where I could take it. It was important that I could show my sister what I found and with it, she could guide me even further.

These movements I made sometimes hurt my parents, they just wanted to hear me, but forgot to see me. Slowly I learned how to move the feelings to my words instead. My vocabulary grew and they listened. They would finally understand I didn’t want to hurt them. They would finally understand what I was learning and I could understand them too since they didn’t do much movement when I was little, but I didn’t know how to read.

Spinning as I used to is just as funny if done in the right time,

but movement needs permission now, feelings need words to explain, my own body has become invisible in my eyes, but when I see others cower and hunch in sadness, shrink in timidity, look left when lying, stand tall in family- I know what you mean. I know you are speaking the truth without the words we learned. I know it is true and even more than true than the heartbreak you told me rather than the heartbreak you showed and I felt.

We cried from this, we cried from the crunch of your belly and how when mine mimicked, I felt that too and I was heartbroken, crunched with you. I’d hoped for our expansion of the torso and arms, our hug could heal and our body’s understanding soothes one another through the touch of our skin the literal meeting of our hearts here, the mere bones in our body, muscles, skin, organs help us understand and empathize with all bodies of this world, even these where the bones manifest as tree branches, lesson plans, and the bug’s anatomy-  
our physicality understands

I came back to myself to understand.

and when I feel what I feel I cry or smile. and if I believe a toy is more important than the truth- I feel betrayed that I didn’t believe myself. I’m sad I thought I did it on purpose and instead of playing or discovering something new- I copied, I hid my tantrum and let go

of the toy.

I forgot what I wanted to tell you,

what I wanted you to understand, but when I'm asked to remember it hurts to see the truth, it hurts I didn't listen to what my body was feeling. I felt like a liar.

So I squeeze so hard- I cry so hard and then I lengthen my torso with my arms found wrapped into my back and I begin the journey of letting go of what I've been told, holding on to my bones, to remember what I meant to say so long ago when my body spoke the truth, I understand that all I wanted was to love and to learn.

My body knows what to say and what it is saying. I begin to believe it.

I felt like a liar but I am just learning the truth I always knew.

I feel like one of the biggest processes I've experienced these past two years is forgiving myself for forgetting my body. It is emotional to let go of the stories and reasons why I might be disconnected, because of what happened, or is going on that doesn't feel like it's allowing me to connect. Then, because of the unconditional forgiveness and love that the audience, the aliveness of everything around, is giving to the performer, it is disappointing to not acknowledge that and to not be part of it, because of some story in my head. So there's that disappointment of having forgotten in the first place and then the remembering the unconditional love this audience has for you- it can break one's heart. It also, however, reminds and allows one to practice that forgiveness with oneself for not believing the truth of one's movement, not honoring the breath. So that was the challenge in my own heart- was realizing this and working to heal and forgive it.

It can be kind of emotional and hard to remember the animal body again. For example, when we did the crawling animals, it felt like that's something that I haven't connected in so long- the more primal side of myself. I feel like there can be a lot of shame in the primal side of the self, so that was particularly challenging when it comes to a specific activity that we did together. I also remember the flies around us, they were a little bit annoying, but also served as a reminder of these stories that blur the distance between what you've always

been (the truthful, loving animal body) and what you think you are.

In terms of discipline, it can be much tougher to begin my walks when I know it is for the practice. I know that the goal is to connect, so a false complexity begins to build, like my first rehearsal of freedom, with the pressure of needing to have success with the limited time I have allotted to walk. Adversially, when I'm in the mood to go for a walk for just myself, the act is so simple that I can connect much quicker without thinking. There's an effect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation at play- the hardest part is stepping out the door and the rest of the walk becomes relaxing and feels how it does when I enter my parent's kitchen.

I naturally tend to draw, so when I am about to head home, on my own terms, I'll draw. I still naturally implement the ideas I've learned from these practices when doing these walks "separate from the practice". For example, I exit my building with respect and truly step into the area with kindness. Like when you walk into a classroom, for example- especially as a teacher, you acknowledge the students. By simply looking at the students they understand that you see and are excited that each one of them is there. I was reminded to implement this to the space outside, so I would always begin and end all of my walks in this way. Then, when it came to the journaling portion, if I was doing so out of a natural need to express myself, it was easier, but when it's for the practice more discipline was asked of me- which was okay as it pushed me creatively and the words came. Just like beginning the walk is the hardest part, picking up the pencil is tough, but the words always end up flowing freely and curiously.

While I'm writing, I also understand the preciousness of the post walk moment where everything is fresh in the mind, and I hope to honor that while I'm writing. Usually, though, I am doing so in the time allotted, so I don't really get the freedom of writing for as long as I want. Sometimes, I wouldn't be able to finish, I would try to summarize things quickly, or just find a way to say more with less. The writing would often start off quite calmly

and then feel rushed as I hoped to express each part of the fleeting feelings. Sometimes the homework or walks wouldn't happen and that felt pretty bad- it feels bad to not do what you said you were going to do. I feel like that was something that was hard throughout this process, missing certain things and then trying to implement them into my life and calling that a "homework".

Many things have changed in my relationship to nature during my time with Aliya. I think that it also depends on the different seasons of these years. When we first practiced together, for example it felt like a coming home. I did not feel that I had to learn, but that it was an unleashing of expression. I felt very curious and childlike most especially in those first few weeks. Connecting was natural and it didn't feel like work or discipline, but just a gentle reminder. It wasn't something that I would write about, doodle about, or anything- it was just an experience. The practice, then, was writing. It's sort of like looking to books for reminders of things we innately understand and deepening it. Still, though, we have always known.

Now, I feel that I could more successfully express myself by writing- especially for academia (because of my school work too). The book, *Becoming Animal* made me realize the possibility for expressing these feelings which inspired my own writing and sense of efficacy. In the beginning, then, it was unexpressed but understood. At other times, especially more difficult ones, I did not practice my connection as I used other methods to cope and hope for healing. So, in these past few years it has shifted in intensities. I feel like nature for a while has been a sort of peripheral aid for me. Still, though- I always had a deep relationship with the ocean and trees. I used to speak to the ocean. As I grew up, I updated it on my pubescent development which was quite an intimate experience. I knew I could also talk to the trees and the birds and I often did, but now I feel like my relationship with nature can be better explained, especially after reading the book that expresses these feelings in a concise way that someone else could easier understand.

A lot of times, the truth was in the simplest ideas that one notices at a young age and then forgets- like the growing and shrinking of our shadows in relation to the light as we move. Now, I have further honed into this curiosity. For example, when I can't fall asleep, I keep my eyes open until they get tired enough to fall, in this process, I notice the creepy shadows from the moon's light I used to be afraid of and the shapes available there. In short, I am now allowing the simplicity of nature to exist with me and be just as curious as I used to be. I see my cat and I see another roommate, my empathy has been nurtured. I see the birds laughing with each other and it reminds me of family.

I feel very proud because my dad has always been a recycler, even though at the beginning, I felt it was a huge hassle. Because of the discipline he taught me, though, I now feel proud and excited to teach my roommates to recycle. Then, though, there's that realization that yes it is being recycled and we are trying our best, but a lot of it won't be recycled or useful. This land and its animals are still severely affected. It's a strange balance between my ego, I'm doing this because I am a recycler, but I still am only being semi-responsible and very micro affective. Even the efforts one takes aren't very helpful.

In this empathy with the bodily earth and my own body, it is heartbreaking. As this relationship grows, the heartbreak does too. I feel very helpless and when one doesn't feel a sense of competency, it can disintegrate motivation. At the same time, though, I feel the innate morality of picking trash up from the ground (knowing it is a very miniscule act). Then, though, I still throw it away- taking it back to the earth, in a poorer area of people and animals, which is disheartening. I don't know what or how to advocate- for politicians, I guess. Some specific moments I felt heartbroken were after outdoor practices, in deep empathetic connection, picking up a piece of trash was emotional. I remember once, a cup that was almost integrated into the floor. I didn't know whether I should pick it up or not. When I picked it up, I noticed that it had already become a home for different insects and plants that I took away. I felt bad that I did, but also sad that this plastic was their home.

I am still very confused about it.

There's a few contribution choices I can make: I can become an environmentalist or an author, politician, advocate. In my personal passions, though, with children and education, I believe there's a place for me to help. I feel like the more children have a chance to practice and be empowered by their natural empathy, like in these practices, they can connect that empathy to nature. So, for now, that's what I'm studying. I am even more confused than I was before our practices and reading on the evolution of my relationship with the earth and the trash.



# Appendix C

## Selected Rehearsal Practice

The learning objective of the following exercise is to explore the idea: phone/camera as an extension of our body. We have been both practiced remotely and in-person following the COVID-19 guidelines.

### **Preparation: 20 mins**

- Clean the room; acknowledge the space.
- Constructive rest position:
  - Physically being close to the window or balcony—Threshold between the shelter and nature)
  - Physically being close to the window or balcony—Threshold between the shelter and nature)
  - Bring the camera next to the body —an extension of the eyes/body.
- Breathing:
  - Witness movement of body: ribcage, diaphragm, patterns of thoughts.
  - Witness the movement of nature: clouds, trees, and anything. Let thoughts dissolve into space.
  - Aware that the camera is breathing with us, and witnessing the movement of earth.

**Enactment: 20 mins**

- Text:
  - Ground the body onto the floor–earth, gravity.
  - Let the thoughts come out of the body naturally: speaking–air, water.
  - The sound is moving into space and returning to the body–awareness.
- Duet:
  - Moving away from the camera, move while deeply inhabit the body.
  - Moving into the camera, the camera witnesses us, and we are a part of the earth.
  - Still in our own body.
  - Moving with the camera, slowly and intensional with the camera movement. Still in our body, and aware that the phone as an extension of the body will see and feel through the space.

**Return: 10 mins**

- Writing
- Dialogue

# Appendix D

## Supplementary Files

To request access to supplementary files, the archive of rehearsal process, and film footage of CONNECT/disconnect, please contact Aliya Kerim at [akerumuj@uci.edu](mailto:akerumuj@uci.edu)