

# Landscape in the figure: cultivating presence as nature

---

## Sue Hawksley

Independent researcher  
Adelaide, Australia  
sue@articulateanimal.org  
orcid.org/0000-0003-3130-8641

---

**Abstract** | This article asks whether we can make embodied sense of the Anthropocene, and if so, how we might locate ourselves in a more empathic relationship with the non-human world? By feeling, at the personal scale, the part we play in the natural systems that support life, we may become more able to make the necessary changes in our actions to address the global-scale degradation of nature. I discuss somatic and creative practices that offer tools for cultivating a sense of presence in and as nature, giving examples of artists' creative practices, including some of my own choreographic explorations aiming to embody the 'landscape in the figure'.

### KEYWORDS:

Presence. Embodiment. Creativity.

---

## Paisagem na figura: cultivar presença como natureza

**Resumo** | Este artigo questiona se podemos criar um sentido incorporado do Antropoceno, e em caso afirmativo, como é que nós podemos situar numa relação mais empática com o mundo não-humano? Se sentirmos, numa escala individual, a parte que temos nos sistemas naturais que suportam a vida, podemos tornar-nos mais habilitados para fazer as necessárias transformações nas nossas ações de modo a denunciar a degradação da natureza à escala global. Discuto as práticas somáticas e criativas que oferecem ferramentas para cultivar um sentido de presença na e enquanto natureza, dando exemplos de práticas criativas de artistas, incluindo algumas das minhas explorações que visam a incorporação da 'paisagem na figura'.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Presença.  
Corporificação. Criatividade.

---

## Paisaje en la figura: cultivar la presencia como naturaliza

**Resumen** | En el artículo se pregunta si podemos crear un sentido encarnado del Antropoceno y, de ser así, ¿cómo podemos colocarnos en una relación más empática con el mundo no humano? Si sentimos, a escala individual, la parte que tenemos en los sistemas naturales que sustentan la vida, estaremos en mejores condiciones para realizar los cambios necesarios en nuestras acciones para denunciar la degradación de la naturaleza a escala global. Discuto sobre las prácticas somáticas y creativas que ofrecen herramientas para cultivar un sentido de presencia en y como naturaleza, dando ejemplos de las prácticas creativas de los artistas, incluidas algunas de mis exploraciones destinadas a incorporar el 'paisaje en la figura'.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Presencia.  
Encarnación. Creatividad.

---

Submitted in: 08/15/2021  
Accepted in: 26/10/2021  
Published in: 02/12/2021

The Anthropocene is a concept that invites us to consider the impact humans have on the planet. All too often this highlights a mess of our own making in which our lives are now entangled and our future—and that of the planet—implicated. On a daily basis we contribute to and witness degradation, on a massive and accelerating scale, of the environment we depend upon to sustain our lives and those of non-human species. But a geological epoch function at scales of space, time and complexity that feel remote from our everyday lived experience, beyond our sensory capabilities; most of us can only conceive the Anthropocene as an abstraction. In his statement on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group report released on 9 August 2021, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres said it was nothing less than “a code red for humanity. The alarm bells are deafening, and the evidence is irrefutable... Global heating is affecting every region on Earth, with many of the changes becoming irreversible” (GUTERRES, 2021). A recent report suggests the scale of climate disruption and the magnitude of biodiversity losses is now even beyond the grasp of scientific experts (BRADSHAW et al., 2021). It is thus unsurprising that we seem, collectively, unable or unwilling to apprehend the scale and urgency of the ecological problems and existential threats we face. Further, an overload of bad news concerned with present and near future dangers, disasters, issues and injustices consumes our attention, exhausting our supply of energy and empathy. Nature/human dualism dominates our attitudes toward the natural environment, creating a sense of alienation and further blunting our ability to apprehend the situation. In the face of such a bewildering scenario, I ask if we can make *embodied* sense of the Anthropocene. By feeling, at the personal scale, the part we play in the natural systems that support life, we may become better able to make necessary changes in our individual actions to help address the global-scale degradation of climate and nature. I propose that somatic and creative practices may offer tools for cultivating a sense of presence in and as nature, and as such may help us better locate ourselves in a non-dualistic, more empathic relationship with our world. I include examples of several artists’ creative work which engage ecologically sensitive practices of yielding, deep listening, witnessing, and connecting, together with some of my own choreographic explorations aiming to embody the ‘landscape in the figure’.

### **Thinking and feeling our way there, creatively and somatically**

With a foundation in Judeo-Christian values, the predominant Western attitude toward the natural environment positions humans outside of nature, and assert mankind’s God-given dominion over it (ALBERRO, 2019). This anthropocentric view of ourselves as separate from nature has enabled us to consider the planet in terms of resource exploitation rather than as a living system of which we are part. Research in the fields of cognitive science and philosophy of mind have gone some way to change attitudes about a related dualism, that of mind-body.<sup>1</sup> Theories of embodied, enactive, embedded and extended mind indicate how bodymind (a term

---

<sup>1</sup> e.g., Maturana and Varela 1980, Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1993, Gallagher 2005, Wilson 2002, Clark & Chalmers 1998, Clark 2008, Hayles 2012, Thompson 2010, Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Noë 2004, Latour (2007).

I employ to indicate that “body is ‘eminded’ and mind is embodied” (HAWKSLEY, 2012a, p. 14) needs a world. The brain-in-a-vat thought experiment demonstrates that a ‘disembodied’ brain still requires some form of interface to fulfil the role of a body—flesh or simulated—to provide input and output stimuli, in order to ‘exist’ in the world. Similarly, research by fluid dynamicists at MIT to develop RoboTuna, the first robotic fish, demonstrated the active role played by the water in the prodigious swimming ability of blue-fin tuna.<sup>2</sup> The tuna were shown to find, remember and harness specific vortices in their aquatic environment to increase their power and agility (TRIANTAFYLLOU & TRIANTAFYLLOU, 1995). “‘Embodiment’ here comprises fish-*and*-water” (HAWKSLEY, 2012a, p. 36). The synergistic elements of a body-mind-environment meshwork cannot be separated out. Heather Alberro argues that “to truly bring ourselves into harmony with the natural world, we must return to seeing humanity as part of it” (ALBERRO, 2019). We need to transform our attitude toward the natural world by cultivating a sense of embodied presence in and *as* nature, of our place—felt at a personal scale—as a dynamic bodymind-environment assemblage.

I suggest that the principles and practices advocated for by some creative and somatic approaches offer us potential tools for this. Creativity, according to Mark Sheridan-Rabideau, “is the cultural capital of the twenty-first century” (SHERIDAN-RABIDEAU, 2010, p. 54). Creative artists, he contends, pay attention to the world around them and seek innovative means to share stories and solutions. We need to equip and empower ‘artist-citizens’ to become agents of change. The relationship between artist, art and audience can produce unique perspectives from which to consider the complexities of the global situation and to imagine and map a more promising future. For philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, “when we truly engage our creative capacities, we are in fact on something akin to a playing field. We may know our goal, but not yet how to get there. We are thinking and feeling our way there creatively” (SHEETS-JOHNSTONE, 2013). Somatic practices<sup>3</sup> aim to cultivate mindful awareness of the cognitive, sensorial and emotional facets of lived experience. Somatic approaches offer practical tools for exploring body awareness; they pay attention to presence, lived experience, and to the intertwined relationships between self, other, and nature. This aligns with Robert Bettmann’s theory of Somatic Ecology in which he argues that to understand our relationship to nature we need to start with the body, “that part of nature which we are most intimate with” (BETTMANN, 2009, p. 75). Somatic approaches are a means to becoming attuned to embodied knowledge, which may help us think and feel our way toward a better apprehension of the dynamic bodymind-environment assemblage.

To understand our relationship with nature, we also need to know what we mean by ‘nature’. The word is fraught with vagueness and ambiguity and has diverse meanings, some including and some excluding humans (DUCARME;

---

<sup>2</sup> The original RoboTuna, known as Charlie, was developed at MIT in 1994 by a team lead by Michael Triantafyllou, and designed by PhD student David Barrett. See also ISLA, Damian. Robotuna Project to model real fish. The Tech online edition, v. 115, n. 49, 1995. Available at <http://tech.mit.edu/V115/N49/robotuna.49n.html> Accessed 21 September 2021

<sup>3</sup> Examples of Somatic practices include Authentic Movement, Body Weather, Bartenieff Fundamentals<sup>SM</sup>, Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method®, and Body-Mind Centering®

COUVET, 2020), but the most generalised current western usage designates “what is opposed to humans” (DUCARME; COUVET, 2020, p. 01) — plants, animals and places that are largely free of human influence.<sup>4</sup> Nature is often associated with a romantic ideal, of purity and wisdom, of remoteness and pristine places, of the country, sweeping landscapes and wilderness. ‘The country’ is often thought about in general terms as synonymous with ‘nature’, as a place for nature separate from humans. In addition to referring to nations and borders, the word (often used interchangeably with the word ‘countryside’) indicates rural districts and tracts of land outside of large urban areas. The country is objectified, a place where people go at weekends and for holidays, a place where one can walk, contemplate and play, or a place that one lives and works in, produces from or exploits. The human is located as a distinct figure in the landscape—a concept fuelled by images such as Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings, among them the well-known *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). By contrast, for Australia’s First Nations people, ‘Country’ acknowledges the land as a living entity and incorporates humans into its meaning. For the Gay’wu Group of Women – a group of five *Yolŋu* sisters from Arnhem Land, working together with three *njāpaki* (non-indigenous) researchers: “(t)o talk of Country means not just land, but also the waters, the people, the winds, animals, plants, stories, songs and feelings, everything that becomes together to make up place. Country is alive for us, it cares for us, communicates with us, and we are part of it” (BURARRWANGA et al., 2019, p. ix). More than that:

Country is the way humans and non-humans co-become, the way we emerge together, have always emerged together and will always emerge together. It is all the feelings, the songs and ceremonies, the things we cannot understand and cannot touch, the things that go beyond us, that anchor us in eternity, in the infinite cycles of kinship, sharing and responsibility. Country is the way we mix and merge, the way we are different and yet become together, are part of each other. It is the messages, languages and communication from all beings to all beings (BURARRWANGA et al., 2019, p. xxii).

This group of women generously share insights into ancient cultural practices and knowledges, but take great care to qualify that “You can use our words for reflection... You can talk about the very top layer but you need to be very respectful and aware of the limits of what we are sharing and what you in turn can share” (BURARRWANGA et al., 2019, p.xxv). This caution resonates for me. As a white British/Australian woman (I moved to Australia from the UK in 2014 and became a citizen in 2018) I am unsettled by the colonial history of Australia in which I am implicated through my cultural background. I feel how very far I am from being an authority on this particular land, and from the knowledge accrued by First Nations peoples living here sustainably for over 60,000 years—knowledge retained or being reclaimed despite colonial policies of dispossession and the disintegration of cultural ties. I have lived in many places over the course of my own life, so I am more of a traveller, perhaps always a visitor. It is not possible for

---

<sup>4</sup> Ducarme & Couvet’s detailed analysis of the origins and evolution of the word ‘nature’ highlights the implications of this vagueness and conflicting meanings for debate and policy-making in conservation science (2020).

me to know the depth of belonging felt by indigenous Australians, but reflection on the words and actions of the *Yolŋu* and other First Nations elders has taught me a great deal. While living here I have become deeply invested in landcare, and spend much of each day in the bushland. Through seven years hands-on experience and study (I now work professionally in landcare and conservation) and decades of experience in somatic and creative practice, my felt understanding of 'Country' and my relationship to it is deepening, albeit still 'top layer'.

My situation is unusual though; I am in a position to learn about the natural world and my relationship with it through living and working in, and being custodian of, a more remote part of it. Over half the world's population (including myself for much of my life) reside in dense urban environments and many experience the distress of feeling estranged from nature. How to address this? It is not feasible or helpful that we all head for the hills or to the 'wilderness', that idealised construct of a nature absent of humans, critiqued by ecofeminist theorist Val Plumwood (2006). A connection with nature is still to be found in urban environments. People are increasingly being encouraged to pause and take notice of how much nature is all around them in the city. The 'sit-spot' activity of finding a favourite place to return to regularly, in order to cultivate awareness by quietly observing nature, has gained popularity during the many lockdowns and restrictions of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed it is now recognised that cities play an important role in regional biodiversity, offering refuge for species which are under threat as their natural habitat is being cleared, fragmented or polluted. Endangered raptors such as peregrine falcons have been building their nests under the protection of skyscraper roofs and with abundant food sources such as rodents, pigeons and squirrels, they are flourishing (MARINELLI, 2021). Equally, experiences of nature can be brought to urban dwellers through creative projects such as the *EcoRift* project, which offers access to the sights and sounds of parks and nature preserves in southwest USA via VR headsets or mobile phones (PAINE, 2016).

Establishing a sense of connection with nature is good for our wellbeing. It also helps us develop a relationship with the natural world in which humanity is seen as, and feels to be, part of it. I will now discuss specific somatic and creative practices that encourage mindful awareness of self, of interpersonal connections, and empathic relationships with non-humans. Through activities such as yielding, connecting, listening and witnessing, these practices can be considered as "arts for living on a damaged planet" (HARAWAY, 2016, p. 69). I will also refer to an improvisation practice, *in-site*, which I developed in response to moving from the UK to South Australia, and a current work-in-progress *Dwell: landscape in the figure*, in which I seek to engage place as my teacher, to embody the environment and in so doing, to better understand place and my/our place in it.

## Yielding

Yielding, when considered as an ecologically sensitive and somatic practice encourages openness, receptiveness, adaptability and letting go. For British dance artist Tamara Ashley (2019)<sup>5</sup>, yielding practices encourage an attitude of perceptual

---

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Tamara Ashley "is a dancer, performance artist, yoga and somatic practitioner, teacher and

openness to the landscape, and the development of a relationship in which nature is regarded as a partner (ASHLEY, 2019). Yielding is cultivated in the Body Weather practice of Japanese dancer/farmer Min Tanaka. Tanaka's initial dance and movement training included study of Bon-Odori, Kendo and Modern Dance (STEIN, 1986), but early in his career he began to reject these codified techniques, looking instead to the non-skilled 'ordinary' movers, and the environment, for inspiration. In 1985, Tanaka founded Body Weather Farm outside of Tokyo with his dance company Mai-juku, with the aim of literally grounding their dance practice in organic, sustainable farming activities (FULLER, 2014). The daily movement practice was Body Weather, Tanaka's exploration of physical training, research and philosophy which "envisions the body as a force of nature: ever-changing, omni-centred, and completely open to external stimuli" (FULLER, 2014, p.198). I studied Body Weather in Paris and in the Alps near Geneva with Fabienne Courmont, who herself studied with Tanaka on the farm in Japan in 1984. Our days began with warm-up and centering exercises rooted in shinto traditions, followed by yoga-massage Tanaka® (COURMONT, 2021), a careful study of yielding through a sequence of gentle stretches, pressures and manipulations, and a conscious use of the breath. The core concepts being explored include exchange, release, balance, focus, respect, responsibility and care. Working in pairs, one person giving and one receiving, the yoga-massage unfolds like a slow, shared dance, which offers a dynamic exploration of body structure and use in movement. The receiver uses an audible, siffilated breath to communicate to their partner when they reach, and then perhaps extend, the physical limits of a fold or stretch. We then worked on perceptual exercises to attune our senses and attentional awareness, for example by using different qualities of touch to mediate an improvised dance. For this task, one person, the receiver, stands anchored but flexible, responding by yielding away from touch-point impulses given by their partner but always returning to a neutral stand, like a reed blown in the wind. Gradually, this response moves from the anchored point to travel across the surrounding space. This might then develop into a partner dance, each guiding the other through the space through touch. This involves pushing-while-yielding, with the delineated roles of giver and receiver gradually blurring into a shared intention to both lead and be led. With the focus on partnering, these exercises helped develop interpersonal relations. By attuning our bodies to recognise, receive and respond to multiple, diverse and subtle impulses, they prepared us for working in the natural environment, to develop human-nature relations. We did many nature walks, often blindfolded and guided by the touch or voice of a partner, moving slowly, actively attending in minute detail to the sounds and sensations we encountered, and responding through movement, sounds, words or drawings. This immersion in the natural environment was extremely important, taking the qualities of support, yielding, respect and care that were practiced in the yoga-massage and workshop exercises toward the development of an ecologically sensitive relationship with the land.

In the context of Body Weather, and also Butoh dance practices, the notion of yielding also indicates 'emptiness'. Australian artist, dancer and researcher Gretel

---

researcher interested in exploring the moving body-mind for the development of creativity, freedom, self-expression and healing". See: <https://tamaracashley.wordpress.com/>

Taylor<sup>6</sup> describes an experience during a Body Weather workshop lead by practitioner Frank van de Ven tasked participants to 'empty' the self in order to perceive and embody it, to "dance the place, instead of merely dancing in it" (TAYLOR, 2010, p. 76). This task rendered her, and some other participants, feeling immobilized. She felt stuck by the problem of how, practically, to extract and 'empty' oneself of socio-cultural-historical context, to "overthrow personal identity" (TAYLOR, 2010, p. 86) in just a few minutes? Taylor is troubled by the idea that this can be achieved through an "empty-then-absorb approach" (TAYLOR, 2010, p. 82). In feminist and post-modern identity theories, bodymind is always storied, inscribed, it is never neutral, de-contextualised or de-historicised.<sup>7</sup> For Taylor's improvised dance practice, which she calls 'locating', imagery has become a powerful tool to help her engage the problem of 'emptiness' enabling her to feel her presence as a permeable body, which is available to yield to and embody place but without needing to be entirely voided in order to totally 'be' place. In my introduction, I proposed that we can cultivate a sense of presence as place. This does not mean I consider our presence is emptied, to be re-placed by place. Rather we can seek our connection to place with a disposition of openness and availability, a readiness to respond and adapt. By engaging all our senses, including the imaginative sense, we can explore a hybrid state of feeling as if we are inhabiting and being inhabited by the place. Presence as place does not deny our being there, fully historied and contextualized. It invites us to become more aware of our presence as a relationship — 'making kin' with place as Haraway suggests. It explores the "...relations of the world, including human and nonhuman beings, who are of the world as its storied and dynamic substance, not in the world as a container" (HARAWAY, 2016, p.96).

If we are to begin to develop our relationship with the world, we need to deeply feel the impact of our presence as part of the world. This can start by paying attention to the surfaces and connections between self and environment. In the early 20th Century physiologist Charles Sherrington defined different bodily perceptual-reflex systems, and proposed that we perceive the world at different levels and fields. The sense of proprioception derives information from position and motion, that of interoception from within the body, and of exteroception from external factors. We feel the contact of the surface field with the environment exteroceptively through cutaneous and sensory organs. However, when we involute our attention it becomes apparent that we interface to the outside on the inside as well; in the interoceptive field, Sherrington noted, "a fraction of the environment is more or less surrounded by the organism itself" (SHERINGTON, 1907, p. 470 apud HAWKSLEY, 2012a, p. 37). The inhalation and the swallow remind us that through the surfaces of our skin, alimentary and respiratory systems, the world is in us as much we are in the world.

---

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Gretel Taylor "creates site-responsive performance works and has evolved an improvised dance practice, which she calls 'locating'" See: <https://www.greteltaylor.com/about.html>

<sup>7</sup> I explored this concept in an earlier work, *Bodytext* (2010) made in collaboration with visual artist Simon Biggs and composer Garth Paine. The choreographic process interrogated the concept of 'body stories', and their 'excavation' through somatic movement explorations, aimed at enhancing awareness of habitual movement patterns, sensations and memories. The material derived from these movement explorations was crafted into spoken and danced texts, which comprised autobiographical accounts, embodied memories, descriptions of movements to be performed, or sensations relating to them.

## Connecting: place as teacher

For the full-time residents of the Body Weather Farm, farming was the primary form of training, although they also undertook the Body Weather workshop activities described earlier. Zack Fuller notes:

it seems clear that in order for farming to become training one must treat it as such – that is, engage in it with conscious awareness of the space itself, including the stimulations received by the body from the environment ... Rather than a training environment where the place is subservient to the needs of the people, the place functions as a teacher (FULLER, 2014, p. 199).

My own practice in landcare and conservation has become a large part of my movement training, with place as my teacher. The physical practices of landcare include digging, dragging, reaching, pulling, climbing, lifting, leaping, crawling. The attentional practices of landcare hone the capacity to shift from micro detail (grass, mosses, lichen, ants) to macro overview (ecological community, forest, weather).

In 2014 I moved from Scotland to live in the Adelaide Hills in South Australia. This particular corner of the Mount Lofty Ranges is declared one of the few 'biodiversity hot-spots' of Australia. While very close to the city of Adelaide, there are numerous Conservation parks and the area is home to an impressive array of indigenous plants and animals. But despite environmental protections, these are fragile ecosystems, which display evidence of the pressures caused by agriculture, housing and industrial development. Many species are classed as vulnerable, threatened or critically endangered, unable to cope when too many of the factors necessary for them to survive are altered, reduced or eradicated by pollution, clearance, disturbance, inappropriate fire regimes, and introduced plant and animal species. Our property has a small remnant of reasonably intact native vegetation and a larger paddock in very degraded condition. As current custodians of this land, we have embarked on a project to rehabilitate it, with the goal of offering better housing conditions for non-human critters, and contributing to the general health and wellbeing of the planet. Initially, the time I spent outdoors in the bushland and paddock was bewildering. Immersed in its strangeness, I experienced a sense of displacement, dislocation, alienation. So much was new to me, unfamiliar and unknown; I lacked way markers and did not know what signs to look and listen out for in order to recognise dangers such as snakes, spiders and stinging ants. But equally, there were elements familiar to me but seeming out of place here, such as introduced blackberries, dandelions, pines, olives, roses, rabbits, blackbirds. The uncanniness of it left me feeling immobilized, rather like Gretel Taylor in the face of the 'empty the body' exercise mentioned earlier. To break this inertia and move toward a creative exploration of this feeling through dance, I developed a multi-threaded improvisation score, the practice of which is something like a meditation or a self-portrait, reflecting my sense of perturbation and alienation. The three improvisation threads follow i) a mapping of the site, ii) a reflection upon the unsettling impacts of moving home and of settlement in general, and iii) a memory of the place I left behind. They can be selected in any order and improvised upon for any duration. The first thread, *in-site*, draws on observation of the environment—its space, time, forms and dynamics—from the dual perspectives of one's presence in

the site and of the sense of embodied presence of the site in self. *Inhabiting and being inhabited by*, a theme I return to in my current work-in-progress. This is then disrupted by the second thread, *un-settled*. The improvisation follows the in-site score, but at every impulse to move one does the opposite, reflecting both how the landscape and ecology have been disturbed, and my own unsettled-ness. The third thread, *in-limbo*, is a response to the event of moving home. It refers back to previous places and projects, recycling memories and choreographic materials which are incorporated into the *in-site* score, with the aim to create 'pockets of the past' which punctuate the present.

These dance improvisations are underpinned by the principles of Authentic Movement, a somatic movement practice founded by Mary Starks Whitehouse. Influenced by Carl Jung's notion of 'active imagination', Authentic Movement proposes commencing from stillness, focusing attention towards felt impulses or urges to move, and then allowing one's movement to follow those impulses. The *un-settled* score proposes that at every impulse to move one pauses, then does the opposite movement. In practice, this proposition is fraught with irresolvable questions. What constitutes 'opposite'? If the felt impulse is 'right elbow pulls sharply back', would the opposite action be 'right elbow pushes slowly forward'? or should it be the 'left elbow'? or could it be 'right knee' instead, to move into the opposite upper-lower body half? This decision-making takes time, pausing to think makes every movement more considered, and risks creating paralysis-by-analysis. Initially, dancing this score feels very disorientating, there is formlessness, aimlessness and broken flow. However, over time I come to a realisation that although my movement choices are being made through unusual decision-making pathways and the usual flow of improvisation is fractured, the actual moves themselves are nonetheless familiar, because they are still within the range of physical possibilities of my moving body. The *un-settled* practice becomes a metaphor for finding the familiar within the strange, while the observational activities of the *in-site* score encourage paying attention to presence in place and place embodied, letting the place and the body function as teachers.

## Witnessing & Listening

A core aspect of Authentic Movement is the support offered by one's partner who assumes the role of non-judgmental 'witness' rather than critical audience. The mover often works with closed eyes, so one practical role of the witness is to keep them safely contained in the physical space and avoid obstacles. After the mover has completed their dance, the witness reflects (verbally, or through movement, writing or drawing) on their own affective responses to the experience. This is not a critique, nor an attempt to analyse or explain; rather, their account of how they, the witness, were moved helps the mover understand the impact of their moving presence. According to dancer and researcher Shaun McLeod (2016) the exploration of one's capacity to witness in an impartial, unconditional way is as valuable as exploring one's own movement. The interpersonal relationship that emerges through these exchanges can be extended toward a means to explore the human-nature connection. Dance artist Joanna Stone<sup>8</sup> describes her experience of dancing Authentic

---

<sup>8</sup> Joanne Stone is a "New York City based performer, teaching artist, and writer" with a focus on environmental dance practice. See: <http://www.jostonemovement.com/dance>

Movement during a workshop led by Abbi Jaffe at Earthdance Retreat Center, USA, with a tree as her witness. Initially she found herself awkwardly trying to mimic or personify the tree but felt unable to establish any sense of empathy. She then shifted her focus toward the activity of witnessing; stilling her movement, she first stood with the tree as its witness, then she began to move quietly with closed eyes, letting the tree be her witness. As she did so,

I understood how dancing with the environment through movement activities that require trust, 'listening', understanding, and connecting encourages empathy between species. I understood that I cannot know what the tree needs or experiences and all I can know is what I experience, but in doing so I can understand my reciprocal role in an ecosystem (STONE, 2015).

This is an interesting change of focus. Of course, we cannot know what another life form might see or make of our dance activity. In the case of a tree, it is unlikely there is sentience. But even to entertain the idea that it makes a difference already makes a difference; to let ourselves feel as if nature is our witness helps develop a sense of connection and empathy, a recognition that we are in this together.

Witnessing can also be thought of as 'somatic listening', a full-bodied aural attentiveness to self and environment. Composer and sound artist Garth Paine's durational listening practices involve lying on the ground for several hours at a time, listening and recording the surrounding sounds through ambisonic microphones and binaural headphones. These have led him to propose the term somaphony to describe the impact of deep, durational listening on one's body, and to acknowledge "the individual listeners' role in constructing the sonic world around them" (PAINE, 2016, p. 365). Through his extended deep-listening practices, Paine has

come to think of sound as a vibrating energy field, a viscous material, that has surface, texture, mass, and density—physical qualities that most other media do not have and that, when considered over time, present a complex and multidimensional morphology (PAINE, 2016 p. 363-4).

Somaphony is a direct experience of the materiality of sound, and a state of listening to a soundfield as an entire gestalt. In shorter active-listening sessions, a blindfolded listener may be guided by a partner, who also acts as scribe to note down the listener's descriptions of what they hear, rather than simply labelling the source 'bird', 'koala', 'plane', 'wind' etc., the aim is to describe the material qualities of the sounds. I first undertook this exercise at Bundanon, NSW in 2012 during an artist's residency with Paine, visual artist Simon Biggs, and dance artist Lucy Boyes as part of our research and development for an immersive performance work, *Crosstalk*. Lucy and I spent time with Garth in the vibrant bushland of the Bundanon estate, practicing this exercise. It quickly revealed to us how little vocabulary we have to describe the material qualities of what we hear. A few examples from our notebooks include, "long and uneven and shallow ... short and fragile ... silky ... deep and grainy ... sharp, quick, hollow, brittle... raspy, a bit gritty" (Lucy), or "syrupy ... pained collapsing ... rectangular and jaggedy ... smooth with small bubbles ... small and fragile" (Sue). We also drew 'sound-maps' based on what we heard while sitting in stillness with eyes closed, listening to our surroundings. This exercise again drew

attention to how dynamic, unpredictable and constantly changing the sonic environment is. Some sonic elements occurred only once, others recurred from a similar direction but might be quieter, or shorter. Faced with the challenge of mapping this dynamic immersive experience, we were helped by the idea of somaphony, which considers that we subconsciously listen to “the entire soundfield as a single gestalt” (PAINE, 2017), and we can apprehend it in an embodied way.

Through his research at Arizona State University’s Acoustic Ecology Lab, Paine applies the insights gained from his durational deep-listening practices toward a better understanding of environmental change. He considers the impact that alterations to an environment’s sonic signature can have on animals’ ability to hear vital sounds such as oncoming dangers, alarm calls, or mating calls. Most creatures are adaptive to normal seasonal changes in the acoustic environment, such as foliage falling or waters freezing, but human intervention and climate change often bring about more radical and sudden changes to the acoustic environment. For example, the reverberant qualities of a rocky area will be dampened if an invasive weed rapidly increases plant density. Conversely, clearance of vegetation, perhaps by over-zealous weeding or bushfire, removes the dampening effect, and the heightened reverberation of the newly exposed rock could be perceived as deafening for animals. Erick Greene, Professor of Biology, University of Montana, has extensively studied animal, and particularly bird, communication, noting that the sounds they make communicate much more specific information than we formerly appreciated. Alarm calls in particular can indicate details such as whether the danger is small or large, ground-dwelling (such as a snake) or airborne (such as a raptor), then whether that raptor is perching or flying. This sonic information is often shared across a network of different species; “so, around here, squirrels understand bird-ese, and birds understand squirrel-ese, they all make the same basic sort of sound in response to the same sort of predator” (GREENE, 2016). Manmade noise-pollution such as the sounds of airplanes, roads, power-tools and heavy mining machinery all impact the sonic environment. This can cause animals to change their calls in a bid to adapt to this changed acoustic environment. Where things get really noisy, it affects animals’ ability to correctly hear the information relayed in their calls—the “shared distant early-warning system about predators” (GREENE, 2016)—often tipping the balance, Greene notes, in favour of the predator. The arts of listening to and recording sound, Paine suggests, can raise our awareness of such issues, promote stewardship and may help mobilize people around issues of climate change (PAINE, 2018). Through full-bodied listening—somaphony—we might learn something of what the ecosystem requires from us for a sustainable future.

### **Cultivating a sense of presence in and as place**

Here I discuss how I engage these ideas on yielding, connecting, listening and witnessing in my current work-in-progress *Dwell: landscape in the figure*.<sup>9</sup> This is a screen-dance work focusing on threatened ecological communities in South Australia, developed by myself (concept, choreography and performance) with video-artist Richard Hodges, dance-artists Tammy Arjona & Billie Cook, and composer/sound artist Jesse Budel. The central concern of this work is habitat, with a focus on specific

---

<sup>9</sup> This project was made possible by the Australian Government’s Regional Arts Fund, which supports the arts in regional and remote Australia.

threatened ecological communities, and the potential impacts of their loss. This is explored through dance, sound, and image deriving from three diverse habitat types—coastal, heathy stringybark woodland, and wetland—with consideration for particular threatened species that live there. The Adelaide Hills and Fleurieu Peninsula regions of South Australia are a declared biodiversity hotspot containing unique ecological communities, yet nearly all have been affected by human activity. Especially at risk are those species with niche needs, which cannot yield and adapt to changing circumstances if the habitat becomes climatically unsuitable. The sites we engage with for *Dwell* provide great habitat for certain non-humans but can be very challenging for humans. In Morialta Conservation Park, the major vegetation group is heathy stringybark woodland; the thorns and spikes of kangaroo-thorn, iron-grass, prickly geebung and cone-bush (those common names give a clue!) offer great protection to small birds such as the endangered Chestnut-rumped Heathwren, but are difficult to negotiate and often painful for humans. Restoration efforts have improved the health of wetlands at the Tolderol Reserve on the Fleurieu peninsula, but with this improved health comes a marked increase in the numbers of venomous snakes residing there. The coastal habitat of Goolwa Beach is busy with dogs off-leash, eager to pounce on a deep-listening dancer, or off-road vehicles driving along the sand making eyes-closed somatic improvisation practices more risky. But the risks posed by dogs and 4WDs are so much greater for vulnerable beach-nesting birds such as the Hooded Plover. Our small somatic experiences give us insight and promote empathy for their precarious housing situation.

The choreographic processes for *Dwell* draw on many of the somatic approaches outlined earlier; exploring how the space, structure, dynamics and diversity of the locations form and inform movement, and embodying what it could be like to live in such environments. One's partner acts as scribe, guide, witness, and/or lookout.<sup>10</sup> The dancers aim is to *inhabit and be inhabited* by each location. They connect with place by collecting sensorial snapshots of their presence in the different environments through repeated active-listening sessions. At times lying, sitting or standing (depending on the risks) they pay attention to and note the qualities of what is heard, and their felt-experience of being immersed in the sounds, smells, and tactile sensations. They begin to open up their visual and kinetic perception, taking in glimpses of the surroundings and making micro movements toward stimuli from the world they are in. Use of breath helps involute attention toward the internal surface contact with the environment—the world in them. Use of touch helps to draw the interoceptive sense to the surface; the receiver aims to both push against the point of contact from their partner, and to yield to it, generating a feeling of the cells of the body pressing out against the space, an experience of internal 'hydroscopic pressure' that brings about a sense of the mass and volume of their presence.<sup>11</sup> Engaging the imaginative sense, they hold in mind a 'flagship'

---

<sup>10</sup> The role the witness plays in keeping their partner safe can be especially important in the Australian bushland. I have a vivid memory of opening my eyes at the end of a solo active-listening session shortly after my arrival in Australia, to find a Pygmy Copperhead snake at my feet, observing me. Startled by my realisation of their presence the animal darted away, but I could have been less fortunate. Joanne Stone, the dance artist referred to earlier, no doubt chose a tree to be her witness rather than a venomous snake for good reason! We can't presume to make kin with all creatures in the same ways.

<sup>11</sup> I explored this process for a previous work, *Traces of Places* (2012) in which it led to "a felt-sensation of the space having density, which became a physical tool in the process of recapturing and inhabiting the kinaesthetic memory of an imagined place" (2012b, year).

animal which inhabits the particular ecological niche. The aim is not to mime that creature, but to develop an empathic understanding, imaginatively asking *what if* our lives depended on the specific attributes of the habitat? With an attitude of perceptual openness, they explore witnessing and being witnessed by the environment aiming for an embodied apprehension of the relationship that connects humans and nature, “the way we are different and yet become together, are part of each other” (BURARRWANGA et al., 2019, p. xxiii).

Importantly we adjust our creative and somatic practices to respect that these sites are threatened refuges. With so few remaining examples of these richly biodiverse ecosystems, we recognise the need to take care and cause minimal disturbance to the already precarious lives of the inhabitants. We don't just dance about as if our presence would not be felt, we adapt and minimise our movement to respect the vulnerable status of the ecologies we are exploring. The dancers take their embodied experiences as well as written, drawn or movement reflections, and recorded footage by the video and sound artists, to be developed choreographically in the less critical environment of the studio. This will be crafted to create a screen-dance work as a means of bringing a nature experience to people, including urban dwellers. It aims to raise awareness and build empathy by highlighting the precariousness of existence where niche environments are being lost, and to motivate audiences to become more curious and caring for their environment. Importantly, the project does not present the dancers in the location as ‘figure in the landscape’; rather it aims to embody and evoke the ‘landscape in the figure’. Presence as place.

### **Making embodied sense**

The scale of the existential threats we face from climate disruption and biodiversity loss associated with the Anthropocene can seem beyond our grasp. For many, the situation is too big and abstract, they feel unable to make a difference. But we cannot ignore or be resigned to climate changes ensuing from human activity and global warming. Collectively, we can and must advocate governments and corporations to bring about the big political and policy changes. We can also make a difference by engaging these concerns through somatic and creative practices, which offer tools to help us cultivate mindful awareness of ourselves and a sense of presence in and as nature. If we can feel, at the personal scale, the part we play in the natural systems that support life, we might be better able to grasp the urgency of the situation, and take action for change. Learning to listen, yield, witness and connect to nature around and in us, including in urban environments, might help us make embodied sense of the Anthropocene. Thinking and feeling our way creatively, through sensory and imaginative engagement, might facilitate a deeper apprehension of the impact of our presence and development of more empathic relationships—making kin—with the natural world. We can get a feel for how to care for nature by getting a feel for and caring about ourselves as a part of nature.

## References

ALBERRO, Heather. **Humanity and nature are not separate**: we must see them as one to fix the climate crisis. *The Conversation*, September 18, 2019. Available at <https://theconversation.com/humanity-and-nature-are-not-separate-we-must-see-them-as-one-to-fix-the-climate-crisis-122110> Accessed: 26 July 2021.

ASHLEY, Tamara. **Yielding as an ecologically sensitive and somatic practice**. *Somatics Toolkit*, Coventry University 2019. Available at <http://somaticstoolkit.coventry.ac.uk/yielding-as-an-ecologically-sensitive-and-somatic-practice/> Accessed 3 August 2021.

BETTMANN, Robert. **Somatic ecology**: somatics, nature, humanity and the human body. VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, Saarbrücken, 2009.

BRADSHAW, Corey J. A.; EHRLICH, Paul R.; BEATTIE, Andrew; CEBALLOS, Gerardo; CRIST, Eileen; DIAMOND, Joan; DIRZO, Rodolfo; EHRLICH, Anne H.; HARTE, John; HARTE, Mary Ellen; Pyke Graham, RAVEN, Peter H.; RIPPLE, William J.; SALTRE, Frédéric; TURNBULL, Christine; WACKERNAGEL, Mathis; BLUMSTEIN, Daniel T. **Underestimating the Challenges of Avoiding a Ghastly Future**. *Front. Conserv. Sci.* 1:615419, 2021. Available at <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcosc.2020.615419/full> Accessed: 31 July 2021.

BURARRWANA, Laklak; GANAMBARR, Ritjilili; GANAMBARR-STUBBS, Merrkiyaawuy; GANAMBARR, Banbapuy; MAYMURU, Djawundil; WRIGHT, Sarah; SUCHET-PEARSON, Sandie; LLOYD, Kate. **Songspirals**: sharing women's wisdom of Country through songlines. (ebook) Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2019.

COURMONT, Fabienne. **Danse de l'Être® / Isness Dance**. (Website) 2021. Available at <https://dancedeletre.org/> Accessed: 22 July 2021.

DUCARME, Frédéric & COUVET, Denis. **What does 'nature' mean?**. *Palgrave Commun* v. 6, n. 14, 2020. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0390-y> Accessed 22 September 2021

FULLER, Zack. **Seeds of an anti-hierarchic ideal**: Summer training at Body Weather Farm. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*. v. 5, n. 2, pp. 197-203, 2014.

GREENE, Erick. **Robot Raptors and Bird Banter**. Interview by Natasha Mitchell on *Life Matters*, ABC Radio National, Mon 11 Jan, 2016. Available at <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/robot-raptors-and-bird-banter/6924790> Accessed: 13 July 2021.

GUTERRES, António. **Secretary-General's statement on the IPCC Working Group 1 Report on the Physical Science Basis of the Sixth Assessment**. United Nations, 9 August 2021. Available at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/secretary-generals->

statement-the-ipcc-working-group-1-report-the-physical-science-basis-of-the-sixth-assessment Accessed 11 August 2021.

HARAWAY, Donna. **Staying with the trouble**: making kin in the Chthulucene. (eBook) Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

HAWKSLEY. **Dancing to an understanding of embodiment**. (PhD Thesis) Edinburgh College of Art thesis and dissertation collection, Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh, 2012a. Available at <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/7918> Accessed 15 August 2021.

HAWKSLEY. **Traces of Places**. The Peripatetic Studio, 2012b. Available at <https://twopoint5.co.uk/tps/traces-of-places/> Accessed 15 August 2021.

MCLEOD, Shaun (2016) **The ethos of the mover/witness dyad**: an experimental frame for participatory performance. Published online: Australian Dance Council - Ausdance Inc, 2016. Available at <https://ausdance.org.au/articles/details/the-ethos-of-the-mover-witness-dyad-an-experimental-frame-for-participatory> Accessed: 27 July 2021.

MARINELLI, Janet. **Urban Refuge**: How Cities Can Help Solve the Biodiversity Crisis. Yale Environment 360, Published at the Yale School of the Environment. July 1, 2021. Available at <https://e360.yale.edu/features/urban-refuge-how-cities-can-help-solve-the-biodiversity-crisis> Accessed: 31 July 2021.

PAINE, G. **Ecologies of Listening and Presence: Perspectives from a Practitioner**. Contemporary Music Review, v. 35, n. 3, pp. 362-371, 2016.

PAINE, Garth. **Listening to nature**: How sound can help us understand environmental change. The Conversation, December 21, 2018. Available at <https://theconversation.com/listening-to-nature-how-sound-can-help-us-understand-environmental-change-105794> Accessed: 27 July 2021.

PAINE, Garth. **Acoustic Ecology 2.0. Contemporary Music Review**, 2017. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2017.1395136> Accessed 27 July 2021.

PLUMWOOD, Val. **The Concept of a Cultural Landscape**: Nature, Culture and Agency in the Land. Ethics and the Environment, v. 11, n. 2, pp. 115-150, 2006.

SHEETS-JOHNSTONE, Maxine. (2013) **Movement as a Way of Knowing**. Scholarpedia, v.8 n.6:30375. Available at [http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/Movement\\_as\\_a\\_Way\\_of\\_Knowing](http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/Movement_as_a_Way_of_Knowing) Accessed 27 July 2021.

SHERIDAN-RABIDEAU, Mark. **Creativity Repositioned**. Arts Education Policy Review, v. 111, n. 2, pp. 54-58, 2010. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10632910903455876> Accessed 15 Aug 2021.

STEIN, Bonnie. **Butoh**: Twenty Years Ago We Were Crazy, Dirty, and Mad. TDR, v. 30, n. 2, pp. 107-126, 1986.

STONE, Joanne. Environmental dance: listening to and addressing the big questions gently. In: STOCK, C.F., GERMAIN-THOMAS, P. (Eds), **Contemporising the past**: envisaging the future, Proceedings of the 2014 World Dance Alliance Global Summit, Angers, 6–11 July, 2015. Available at

<https://ausdance.org.au/articles/details/environmental-dance-listening-to-and-addressing-the-big-questions-gently> Accessed 25 Sept 2021.

TAYLOR, Gretel. **Empty? A critique of the notion of 'emptiness' in Butoh and Body Weather training**. Theatre, Dance and Performance Training, v. 1, n. 1, pp 72-87, 2010.

TRANTAFYLLOU, Michael & TRIANTAFYLLOU, George. **An Efficient Swimming Machine**, Scientific American v. 272, pp. 64-71, 1995