

**Dancing an Expanded Habitual: Attuning to the More-Than-Human World**

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## **Abstract**

This interdisciplinary thesis explores dance creation-as-research and phenomenological methods to articulate an embodied dialogue with the more-than-human world. Drawing on original phenomenological writing generated through embodied research, the work argues for dance practice as a salient tool for reimagining traditional forms of knowledge production and enacts the speculative possibilities of our communicative capacity between human and more-than-human bodies. The project imagines and articulates how we can bring relational, responsible thinking and sensing to our everyday movements while navigating the ruins of the so-called Anthropocene. Using research-creation as a frame, this project posits that dance-based systems of improvisation have the potential to interrupt and inhibit our habitual modes of attention, expanding our capacity for interspecies dialogue and collaboration. The work engages with the fields of dance studies, research-creation, phenomenology and posthuman feminist theory, to create definitional anchors in dialogue with original, phenomenological writing. The research expresses a process of discovery through the lived body and articulates a practice that enlivens bodies and builds worlds, where thinking, practice, and theory can come alive inside everyday living. The research moves off the page and into the body, in the form of a site-adaptive soundwalk, as an embodied call to action for fleshy, earthly survival.

**Key words:** more-than-human, research-creation, site dance, phenomenology,  
**Anthropocene**

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**Figure 1** Amanda Acorn, dancing in savannah, High Park research documentation.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

I dance to undo and interrupt my habitual ways of knowing and being-with the world, playing between the visible and invisible to explore a nuanced dialogue between bodies, both human and more-than-human. In feminist scholarship, the term “more-than-human” is used critically to remind us “that the non-human world not only exists but has causal powers and capacities of its own” that co-create a complex web of interdependence, refusing the nature-culture binary (Rogers, Castree and Kitchin 2013). Using research-creation as a frame, this project posits that dance-based systems of improvisation have the potential to enact this refusal, interrupting our habitual modes of attention, and expanding our relational capacities. This thesis endeavours to articulate my processual site dance practice as a multispecies collaboration which attends to both this interruption and an expansion of sensory possibility. I propose that doing the embodied work toward this expansion offers a place to reflect, grow awareness, and cultivate relational dialogues. I articulate this through text in this written monograph and through a recorded “site-adaptive” choreographed soundwalk, which shares the embodied practice as an experiential engagement for the reader (Bernhardt in Blau 1989)<sup>1</sup>.

This research practice emerges from a moment of collective urgency, responding to a thrust to imagine the world and myself *in the world* differently. As the climate crisis emerges as one of the most urgent problems of our time, this research seeks to articulate practices of attunement, which explore where the body ends and the world begins, troubling the conception of bodies as hyper-individual and discrete entities, as perpetuated broadly by Western knowledge systems. This crisis has moved from a looming concept to a tangible phenomenon which is felt

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<sup>1</sup> I will expand further on the term “site-adaptive” in section 3.7. as a subset of the more commonly used category of “site-specific” within the site dance genre. As quoted in Blau, Bernhardt notes that “there are finer nuances, like ‘site-appropriate’ and ‘site-adaptive’”. For more see Kloetzel 2017, 6.

in the atmosphere and on the ground. As I write, in early June 2023, 400 wildfires currently rage across the Canadian provinces so wildly, that the sun shines a deep red in the evenings from the smog, and air quality is so bad, we have been encouraged to remain indoors whenever possible. If I must go outside, I am encouraged to wear N-95 masks or a respirator. This reality is a far cry from the naïve dialogues about repairing the hole in the ozone layer I recall from my childhood in the 1990s. The widespread use of the term “climate anxiety” is used to describe the increasingly common troubled mental states prevalent during this precarious and uncertain time.<sup>2</sup>

Before continuing, I would like to offer the reader some prompts to consider their sensing body in the *here & now*, so it may be included as a place to work and to think. Bring attention to your ears and *how* they are listening in this moment. What sounds inside the room you currently occupy stand out to you? Imagine you’re listening extends to the space outside, perhaps even miles away from where you sit reading. How far can your listening reach? Can you imagine that the skin on your arms or the back of your neck can also listen to the many registers of sound available to you in your environment? Can you imagine the world is speaking, reaching for you, sounding with you, resonating with you? Can you *listen* with your whole body, your cells listening to the rumblings of the earth below your feet? Turning your listening inward, can you hear the resonant sounds, rumbling, buzzing, humming, swirling *inside* your body? With this offering of attuning to new kinds of listening and sensing your skin, do you sense a shift in your attention or perhaps a shift inside your body as part of a dialogue with the world around you? Can you name what is felt? Perhaps a pulsing, vibrating, humming, or rumbling. How might

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<sup>2</sup> Climate anxiety is fundamentally distress about climate change and its impacts on the landscape and human existence. That can manifest as intrusive thoughts or feelings of distress about future disasters or the long-term future of human existence and the world, including one’s own descendants. (See Lowe 2023)

those subtle, felt sensations start to become a dance and start to move in the world? As the reader continues, I hope that this brief offering might continue to bring a sense of embodied aliveness and curiosity as active within the process of reading this text.

It is widely accepted, that we are firmly planted in the era of the so-called Anthropocene, the term used broadly to describe our current epoch, where human impacts on the biosphere have created widespread geological change and ecological disruption. The Anthropocene has brought our interconnectedness into focus, as our industrial, capitalist ways of life have come to inform the ways we move through the world. Our ways of living and engaging have altered the seasonal shifts, and weather systems triggering intensifying natural disasters the world over; floods, fires, hurricanes and tornadoes at a rate of increasing devastation. For Chakrabarty (2009), this ruin brings into view conditions for the existence of life beyond the logic of individual, social identities, which are “connected rather to the history of life on this planet, the way different life-forms connect to one another, and the way the mass extinction of one species could spell danger for another” (217). To navigate this epoch and our blasted landscape we need to “reopen our imaginations” to move forward with curiosity and responsibility (Tsing 2015, 5). This project works to do just that, moving from this thought to action through our curious and sensuous bodies. This moment necessitates new ways of thinking across disciplines, about the relationships between world and subject, nature and culture and mind and body. Dance scholar Sondra Fraleigh (2018) addresses these binaries, asserting that, “Phenomenologists explain that body and mind cannot be integrated, because they are not separate to begin with” (22). I follow Fraleigh’s line of thinking, reaching with dance to assert that the integration of body and mind, extends also to nature and culture, human and more-than-human.

This stark binary is a uniquely modern, Western construct. Indigenous knowledge systems and cosmologies the world over have long-held worldviews in which these opposing binaries do not exist. In the ancient worldviews of my own Celtic and Germanic ancestry, prior to Christianization, the lineages of many European peoples practiced land-based religions which deeply valued relational, embodied arrangements between the human and more-than-human world (Mattar 2012, 138-140).

This project seeks to explore a response to the discourse swirling around the Anthropocene at the micro-level, of the subjective *here and now*, through the responsive and relational body in dialogue with a site. It proposes not just ideas but practices with which to enact the possibility of interconnection and expanded relations. This project proposes a practice that cultivates a responsive body which is deeply implicated in and indebted to its environment. I suggest that this practice of embodiment has the potential to change how I move within and collaboratively build worlds, moment by moment, as I navigate the momentum of the rapidly changing landscape within the so-called Anthropocene.

This interdisciplinary study expresses a process of discovery engaging with dance studies, phenomenology and feminist posthuman concepts to explore what scholar Astrida Neimanis (2017) calls “phenomenologically crafted alter-imaginaries” which create tangible bodily openings, and embodied dialogues which are palpably real (156). I propose this begins with undoing my habituated ways of knowing the world and what has become second nature. I use the term “posthuman” in its feminist orientation, which differs from a use that aligns with a belief that modern technological progress and “technoscience might save us from our bodily vulnerabilities” (Neimanis 10). In its feminist use, the term acknowledges the body in all of its complicated entanglements, without looking to “techno-fixes” as a saviour in these complicated



times, rather it promotes an inclusive consideration of all worldly bodies as “connected, indebted, dispersed, and relational” (Neimanis 11). This is a practice which enlivens fleshy bodies, where thinking, practice, and theory can come alive inside everyday living and move out into the world through art and shared practice. Where these changes at the micro-level of an embodied attunement, can become new ways of being and moving together. What new openings, models, and paradigms might dance, as a practice of embodied research-creation, place in circulation if given the space to do so? This thesis uses feminist post-human phenomenology to explore these questions.

Using research-creation to disrupt conventional modes of coming to know, my procedural knowledge, my “data” is developed through site-based, embodied research which combines an experimental and fluid dance practice and phenomenological writing to describe the experience. The embodied research phase took place in High Park in the West-end of Toronto and extended through the Summer and early Fall of 2022, where a dialogic interplay between thinking and dancing was central. For 12 weeks, I explored the site, engaged in embodied practice, and developed sensory bodily attunements as I moved through the savannahs and woodlands bordering the park's Eastern edge. By the end of the process, I had created and documented an improvised dance-generating system which combines walking and dancing on-site, imbued with sensory and perceptual tasks as operational modes and language-based scores to guide exploration.

I argue that my improvised, site-based system orients the body to move with, in co-creation with the rhythms, utterances and vibrations of the rich flora and fauna which populate the park, creating what dance scholar Randy Martin (2011) calls a “social kinaesthetic,” where bodies learn how to move together in the world, as a kind of mobilization (34). I rely on Martin’s

social kinaesthetic in my discussion of what this practice might *do* in the world in Chapter 6. The writing documents this process of experimentation, articulates the formation and challenges of the project and forms the starting place for a reflexive process, from which to analyze and form the research findings.

### **1.1 A Starting Place: Background and Beginnings**

Using improvisation, scores and task-based creation methods, I generate iterative systems of emergence, to navigate the potential of this dialogue to ripple outward in the world through praxis. “Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions” (Obolensky 2010, 88). Writer and activist, Adrienne Maree Brown (2017) speaks to the power of emergence as a strategy for activating change and “the potential scale of transformation that could come from movements intentionally practicing this adaptive, relational way of being on our own and with others” (2). As an artist-researcher my dance practice includes somatic movement, improvisation, writing, and drawing as tools to explore the body as an empathetic and malleable system, wired for attunement. As a choreographer, I care deeply about creating intimate, sensorial encounters and responsive environments for shared, embodied exchange.

I situate my artistic practice within a lineage beginning with experimental dancemakers such as Anna Halprin, Deborah Hay, Trisha Brown and Meredith Monk, whose work emerged during the post-modern movement and often moved to sites and locations outside the proscenium theatre space. Embedded within this lineage is a dance which blurs “the boundaries between artistic disciplines, art, and life” (Bowers in Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009, 279). Site dance practice in North America evolved in the 1960s as a form of dance practice where choreographers interact with and create work in “natural, urban and architectural environments” and “has grown

substantially over the past half century, with site dance performances now appearing in myriad locations around the globe” (Barbour, Hunter and Kloetzel (2019, 4).

We can trace site dance back further to the founders of modern dance in the United States who often performed outside of the theatre spaces, such as Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis and the radical performance art Happenings of Allan Kaprow and others in the 1950s (Hunter 2015, 5). In Europe, the natural dance movement, and the explorations of the body’s relationship to the natural world as practiced in the German modern dance tradition by artists such as Mary Wigman, were important influences that cannot be overlooked (Hunter 5). In conversation and response to these innovators in Europe and North America, the Judson Church post-modern choreographers in New York City, pushed these developments even further, through experimenting with convention outside of theatre spaces. The choreographers of the Judson era “provide a useful point of departure from which to consider the evolution of contemporary site-specific dance performance” (Hunter 6).

The ethos of experimental dance as a tool to enact social change is also found within the Judson era of dance creators. In the first chapter in *(Re)Positioning Site Dance* (2019), Kloetzel discusses “site-specific dance as a form that enacts the political through practical and hands-on tactics performed in a variety of sites” (27). She proposes that “such activism was built into the postmodern experimentation of the Judson Dance Theater, and it is from this base that the site dance genre continued its politically oriented path” (Kloetzel 41). The next generation of choreographers to follow built “on the work of such dance artists as Steve Paxton, Lucinda Childs and Yvonne Rainer, site choreographers sought strategies that could transform habituated experience” (Kloetzel 31).

In Kloetzel and Pavlik's important 2009 anthology on site dance, they develop the hypothesis that choreographers working in this context share a clear link, which distinguishes them "from choreographers of all other dance genres: their interest in attending to place" (7). The term 'attending' suggests an active relation to the site, "referenc[ing] two equally important concepts, attention and tending" (7). The Latin etymology of the word attend is to "literally stretch toward" (Etymology Online). Embodying this idea, I stretch toward the site through the work of attuning to the more-than-human. Carrying forward this sentiment of active reaching for something outside of oneself, the practices of attunement wherein I embodied this sense of reaching and the resulting improvised systems that I will work to articulate, generate movement "through an "immediate process of 'transaction' with the site borne of being 'in the moment'" (Hunter 2015, 95).

Utilizing Kloetzel and Pavlik's framing of attending to the site through dance invites an opening, to expand relational capacities and embodied care through an "interest in process" (8). Site-based choreographer Sandra Reeve describes the opening that attending to site creates (2015, 311). Reeve states that "these movement dynamics challenge the notion that we are independent beings, who can exist separate from our context" (311). Through developing this sense of interconnection site dance practitioners' model "an interest in public involvement and a connection to place that inspires tending to that place" (Kloetzel and Pavlik 7). The existing literature on site-based dance practice works to "position and (re)position site dance as a critical and investigative practice through which human-world relations can be (re)articulated" (Barbour, Hunter and Kloetzel 2019, 5). This idea lends support to my argument for dance practice as an intervention and expansion of our habitual ways of moving in and with the world that I explore in this thesis. In Chapter 3, I will provide more context through a discussion of the

soundwalk as a site-adaptive practice and in Chapter 6 in the discussion of what site-based, embodied practice *can do* in the world.

My diverse training as a dancer and mover has informed my choreographic approach, having studied improvised jazz dance, contemporary techniques, somatics, experiential anatomy, improvisation, and influences from performance practices outside of dance, such as experimental sound art, installation art and performance art. I also consider my studies in meditation, mindfulness, and the energetic arts through Qi Gong, and Yogic lineages, as an influence in my practice of improvised, relational embodiment.<sup>3</sup> I am also in the process of studying relational Gestalt psychotherapy at the Gestalt Institute of Toronto.<sup>4</sup> Theories of phenomenology, embodiment, and feminist theory, are present as the theoretical underpinnings of relational Gestalt, and there is a resonance to be found between the practice of Gestalt and my choreographic practice. Although I won't be discussing Gestalt practice in the thesis specifically, there is no doubt the practice is of influence.

I come to this research as an artist practitioner, whose accumulated experiences are diverse in style, approach and method, and have informed my approach to somatic improvisation and my choreographic practice. My pre-professional conservatory training was grounded in the modern dance technique developed by American choreographer Martha Graham, whose esoteric imagery, informed by Eastern philosophies and rigorous transcendent forms, continues to feel alive in my dancing. Following the completion of my pre-professional training, I pursued studies

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<sup>3</sup> Qigong is an ancient form of physical and energetic cultivation practice from China, dating back 5000 years. The most used early name of the practice was dao-yin meaning "leading and guiding the energy".

<sup>4</sup> For more on relational gestalt therapy and its theoretical influences see, Yontef (2002).

in contemporary techniques, improvisation and somatics in Vienna, Berlin and Amsterdam over several years: Anouk Van Dijk's Countertechnique®, which is heavily influenced by the principles of Alexander Technique, improvisation with American choreographer Kathleen Hermesdorf and Canadian dancer Andrew Harwood, Axis Syllabus with Frey Faust, and release-technique with Damien Jalet, Angélique Willkie, Iñaki Azpillaga, and Bruno Caverna among others. In 2010, I joined the dance company Dancemakers in Toronto, under the artistic direction of Michael Trent, where the company cultivated a practice of improvised collaborative creation using the principles of The Viewpoints work, created by American choreographer, Mary Overlie. During this period of regular improvisation practice with others, I was influenced further by participating in the transformational somatic dance practices of artists and colleagues such as, Benoît Lachambre, Shannon Cooney's cranial sacral dance practice "Moveable Cinema/Dynamic Expansion", and projects with collaborator and colleague, Meryem Alaoui using Body Mind Centering®. When I began to develop my own choreographic projects in 2013, somatic improvisation was becoming central to the development of my newly formed choreographic practice and conceptually I was exploring the possibilities of the sensitive dialogue between bodies. My awareness of "performance-generating systems", through my proximity to the work of American choreographers such as Meg Stuart, Deborah Hay, and Jeanine Durning, and Canadian artists Dana Michel and Ame Henderson, was a profound influence in how I merged my interest in somatic exploration within systematic choreographic structures (Hansen 2022, 1). I have created and presented works in a variety of site-specific and site-adaptive contexts; abandoned bridges (2015), a sprawling field in a hydro-corridor (2021), the Atom-Blaster Pavilion at Ontario-Place (2016) and the walkway stretching over the former Toronto landmark, Honest Ed's (2018). I bring the breadth of this situated knowledge as a

dancer, performer, choreographer, collaborator, teacher, researcher, and Gestalt therapist in training to the research process as a starting place.

My most recent choreographic project, a group work presented along the shore of Lake Ontario titled *no place* (2022), explores the body in dialogue with the material world through emergent, relational practice and an evolving construction of space and place using curated materials, both natural and man-made. I began this collaborative project in 2017, where conceptually I was questioning the notion of Utopia and practicing togetherness, while situated in the shock and awe of the early days of the Trump presidency. Inside the work, the dancers explore modes of togetherness and build what we called “dancing sculptures,” created through a practice of proprioceptive, auditory, haptic and visual engagement with rocks, sticks, fabric, cinder blocks, buckets, plants and flowers. Stretching through the pandemic in a five-year



**Figure 1-2** Ann Trépanier with dancing sculpture, *no place* research. Photo Francesca Chudnoff.

development period, this practice of material, sensory engagement, which we came to call “vibing,” became central to the development of a performance-generating system for relating, building and vibrating with non-human agents, through dance. This encounter brought forward questions for me about systems for nurturing embodied relationality, the learned capacity of our sensory faculties and the habitual ways of knowing the more-than-human world in the West. These questions formed the starting place for this creation-as-research project. The writing in the chapters that follow is part of the evidence of the research inquiry, where I bring my experience as an artist-researcher, to unpack these questions, through a phenomenological articulation of dancing and collaborating with the more-than-human world.

This interdisciplinary research contributes a unique point of view within the discourse surrounding body-world engagement, specifically through dance practice. I have engaged with authors and artists who are exploring their respective fields in creative ways, which co-mingle to examine human and more-than-human relationships, and dance and embodiment as a tool to create social and relational change. Some of the artistic research referenced in the thesis approaches the discourse from the site-dance context (Hunter 2015, 2022, Kramer 2015, Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009), while others focus on research-creation and choreographic practice to specifically explore human and non-human dialogue (Aplin 2023, Kleinplatz 2021) and multispecies material collaboration (Koekkoek 2022).

Natasha Myers’ interdisciplinary research exploring kinaesthetic attunements to the more-than-human world was a big influence, which took place within the savannahs of High Park, and combines art, anthropology, feminist science and ecology to imagine modes of sensing to detune “colonial common sense” and reimagine responsible ways of being in and with the world (2018a, 60). I have taken inspiration from her prompt to “conspire with the plants to make



art like your life depends on disrupting the colonial common sense that would leave us all to die in the Anthropocene” (60). I also reference Anna Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015), as a useful source to turn toward the emergence of multispecies collaboration as essential to navigating our radically changing ecological landscape. I return to Tsing’s ideas and a discussion of Anthropocene discourse and engaging art practice in Chapter 6.

In the book *Bodies of Water* (2017), Astrida Neimanis rethinks embodiment as fluid and watery, to trouble dominant Western understandings of bodies, as “discrete and coherent individual subjects” (2). Her figure of human bodies flowing in rhythm with wet ecological matter; rivers, creeks, oceans, and wellsprings lends theoretical support to my explorations embodying more-than-human entwining and posthuman feminist worlding. Neimanis suggests we might understand feminist figurations as “*embodied concepts*” which “arise in response to a particular contemporary question or problem” (2017, 5). Further, she offers that, figurations are grounded in our material reality, and “are keys for imagining and living otherwise” (5). Her figure of watery bodies redistributes phenomenology’s subjective humanist commitments, alternatively proposing a shared inter-subjectivity with the more-than-human world, where “water is facilitative and directed towards the becoming of other bodies” (6, 3). This figure was helpful to me in opening the possibility of my own watery body in conversation with the Ridout Pond for example, as well as other shared embodiments in dialogue with savannah grasses, White Pine or Goldenrod towards a more-than-human bodily becoming. I work with Neimanis’ posthuman phenomenology engaging Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body, as well as Sondra Fraleigh’s extensive work on the phenomenology of dance, and Jay Goulding’s writing about Heidegger’s clearing (*Lichtung*). I bring these lines of scholarship into dialogue with my

own experiential descriptions, as theories and concepts which help to clarify, support and engage my findings. I introduce phenomenology as a methodology and the theories mentioned above more formally in Chapter 2 and discuss the theoretical know-how in dialogue with my own work throughout Chapter 5.

Midway through my research, I was excited to discover Pil Hansen's book on performance-generating systems in dance (2022), as her work and analytical framework gave me a more specific language to describe my systematic and emergent way of working, and how these intricate systems differentiate themselves from other improvised practices. Improvisation is an important component of the practice, however, the term on its own feels incomplete to describe the complex and rigorous mode of working and creating I employ which "draws on predefined and limited sources while working on specific tasks within constraining rules" (Hansen 1). Hansen writes that "dancers gain an increased ability to bring something repurposed or new into the world" which resonates with my own experiences of working in this way (3). Performance-generating systems, as a mode of creating and performing dance, are relatively new, having emerged in the last fifteen years or so and Hansen's book is the largest and most thorough research on this mode of working and includes writing about the practices of several Canadian colleagues whose work I have engaged with during my professional career (Hansen 2)<sup>5</sup>. This thesis contributes a unique point of view in its creation, discussion and articulation of my own performance-generating system in collaboration with more-than-human agents. I discuss

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<sup>5</sup> I understudied a solo work of Karen Kaeja's which was part of the initial research for the duet *Crave* in 2010 and worked with Ame Henderson in choreographic workshops, while in the company at Dancemakers, shortly thereafter. I also had the fortune of learning Deborah Hay's work with Christopher House and Jeannine Durning at Toronto Dance Theatre. Durning is a longtime collaborator and performer of Hay's work, who also uses generating systems in her own choreographic work and teaching.

my own system in dialogue with Hansen in more detail in Chapter 4. I argue for this mode as functioning toward expanding relational capacity and discuss the potential implications thereafter for operating in and within the world with deep attention. In the discussion of body-world engagement, this thesis contributes to a dialogue which moves beyond thought and the speculative conditions of materialism, as versatile, fluid and responsive which centers a practical experience of the body in direct dialogue with the more-than-human world.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 Overview of Chapters

This first chapter introduces my research and situates my artistic practice within the field of contemporary, post-modern site dance and contextualizes this project within the discourse of dance as research-creation and a practice of feminist ecological embodiment. I provide a brief overview of the five chapters that follow.

In **Chapter 2, Dancing-Thinking and Research-Creation with the More-Than-Human**, I outline two frames which I use to design and execute my study. I provide an overview of research-creation as a method broadly and lay out how I am using it as the guiding methodology for this project. To follow, I discuss how I am using improvisation as a paradigm for practicing phenomenology, which grounds the embodied practice, and as the method for how I am articulating my work. In the last section, I get more specific about how I am using phenomenological writing to articulate and evidence the research inquiry and describe the multi-modal documentation that was used. I situate my work and choreographic practice within this discussion of phenomenological creation-as-research.

Following in **Chapter 3, Procedural Knowledge: Modes for Opening Intersensory Dialogue**, I use phenomenological description to articulate the processual, evolving practice in

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<sup>6</sup> See Kramer, in discussion with Tim Ingold (2015, 9).

dialogue with my movement journals in four sections. In the first section, I discuss the site, Toronto's High Park, and the approach and considerations in undertaking the research at this particular site. In section two, I describe the modes and practices of attunement I developed and practiced which lay the groundwork and build toward the improvised system and dialogue with my movement journals. In the third section, I introduce how repetition was used and I discuss the utility and function of walking and roaming inside of the practice, in dialogue with Kramer's thoughts about walking as part of her work, *bodies, trees & things* (2015). In the last section, I introduce the creative component of the thesis, a site-adaptive, recorded choreographed soundwalk, providing some history about the form, how some choreographers have engaged with soundwalking and my reasoning for its inclusion in the project.

**Chapter 4, Earned Presence and An Expanded Habitus**, articulates a necessary step in the procedure, which re-orient the body to the more-than-human world, and discuss how the improvised performance-generating system works to inhibit, interrupt and expand my modern habitus. We might think of the habitus as “a durable set of dispositions that are formed, stored, recorded and exert influence to mould forms of human behaviour” (Navarro 2006,16). I explore how an embodied, communicative field with more-than-human bodies becomes possible and begins to take shape through this practice, reimagining and reforming my habitual modes of embodied attention. I discuss how “earned presence” is cultivated during the practice of the performance-generating system and is a useful tool and strategy that works to expand relational capacities in dialogue with Hansen (2022).

In **Chapter 5, Fleshy Overlaps and Arriving to The Clearing**, I articulate an original phenomenological dialogue as lived, with the more-than-human world and what this exchange makes possible with rigorous practice. I describe felt sensations, experiences and effect, bringing

my phenomenological descriptions into dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's "chiasm" and "flesh of the world" as a version of feminist worlding and connect improvisational repetition as a device to Heidegger's notion of "the clearing" (*Lichtung*). I articulate and discuss what happened to me through this practice and what I felt changed for me through this sensuous research practice.

In conclusion, **Chapter 6, Mobilizing Bodies in Anthropocentric Ruins**, argues for dance and creation-as-research as a practice and mode of production which transforms habits, mobilizes bodies, and has the potential to elicit change at micro and macro levels, hence building worlds. I discuss this site-based dance as a practice of multispecies collaboration and exchange and why this is an important and worthy topic for research-creation right now. I bring this discussion into contact with other work discussing the complexities of navigating the so-called Anthropocene and write from my own positionality as an artist-researcher. In the last section of this final chapter, I revisit the function and particularities of the creative component of the thesis, an artwork in the form of a soundwalk, as an example of an art object which mobilizes and expands moving, sensing bodies through a practice for everyday living, as we traverse Anthropocentric ruins.

## **Chapter 2. Dancing-Thinking and Research-Creation with the More-Than-Human**

In this opening chapter, I broadly discuss research-creation methodology as a model for academic research, followed by more specific considerations for dance-based projects. I discuss the use of phenomenological description as a method for evidencing the research inquiry, and the use of improvisation as “phenomenology in action” as a method (Fraleigh 2015, 19). I articulate my intent for the embodied practice and describe what the phase of embodied research looked like practically, including embodied practice, writing and documentation.

### **2.1 Research-Creation as Method**

“Research-creation” as it is widely known in Canada, is an emerging category within the social sciences and humanities which engages multi-modal arts-based practice as a method and substantial “evidence of a research inquiry” (Nelson 2013, 6). It is a method used to gain unique insights, which came to be defined as “practice as research” in the U.K and Australia, and “arts-based research” in the U.S., when arts practices came to be submitted “as research in academic institutional contexts” (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012 5, Nelson 24). In Chapman and Sawchuk’s (2012) essay “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and “Family Resemblances””, four modes of research-creation are discussed, “research-for-creation,” “research-from-creation,” “creative presentations of research,” and finally “creation-as-research”; where each mode interacts with creative practice toward different aims and outcomes for the researcher. Inside my own project, I am engaging with the “creation-as-research” which “involves the elaboration of projects where creation is required in order for research to emerge” and seeks to extract knowledge from the process (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012, 19). Therefore, when referring to my own project I use “creation-as-research” to describe the mode of research I undertook. Research-

creation is forming a “third species of research” alongside qualitative and quantitative traditions, with its own unique set of opportunities, considerations and challenges, for artist-researchers, institutions, supervisors, and examiners (Nelson 22). For Chapman, Sawchuk (2012) and Loveless (2019), research-creation functions as an epistemological intervention into the “regimes of truth” of the university which “configure the parameters of legitimate research questions as well as what counts as rigor or excellence” (6, 30). Loveless argues for a model of research-creation as an academic interdisciplinary “intervention”, where “artists bring history, ecology, activism, science, and policy together to invite us to learn from the speculative ways that art can imagine otherwise” (70). Nelson agrees with the view that if we engage with the continuum of evolving modern theories which challenge “fixity of the world and its absolute knowability”, research-creation has the potential to become a valid, and potent tool for troubling rigid relays of knowledge and forging new paths of discovery (41).

Robin Nelson’s (2013) book, *Practice As Research in the Arts; Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*, outlines a multi-mode, dialogical, dynamic approach to research-creation where “‘thinking’ is not constrained to the abstract and propositional but embraces embodied passions” (62). Nelson is an interdisciplinary, practitioner turned researcher based in the U.K. outlines a model for doing research where practical “knowing-in-doing” is central (9). He finds the intersections of practice (tacit, embodied, and experiential), critical reflection, reflexivity and the “distant knowledges” of theoretical resonances, from which to produce impactful and original research (9). Nelson posits that by insisting on rigor “which is consonant with academic research as established” while using experimental and emergent methods, research-creation is a space where research can be disseminated and reach new audiences, through films, performances, scores, installations and compositions; potentially extending the

social impacts and reach of research findings and insights (26, 41). While Loveless, Chapman and Sawchuk see research-creation as a tool for intervention within the academy, Nelson's model seeks similar aims but works to legitimize the form within existing frameworks, which involves a "reconciliation of the new with the old" (26). I ask if these two approaches may be applied simultaneously, even if at times at odds with each other, applying Nelson's practical, systematic methodological model, which has informed the approach to my project in design and structure, and Loveless' feminist ethos and urgent thrust, with which to intervene, experiment, and disrupt from within.

Nelson has outlined a model which is "consonant with academic research as established and meets its criteria" (26). For Nelson, research-creation projects include three components; a product (performance, score, recording) with a hard-copy record (DVD, CD or recording), documentation of process (photographs, video, sketchbooks, notes) and complimentary writing, which for Nelson includes a written account of process, conceptual framework and locating the work in a line of lineage with other practitioner-researchers (26). The process that the researcher undertakes, develops a mode of "thinking-doing," where practice and reading are engaged in tandem, working to undo the binary of "theory" and "practice" to explore how "one may be imbricated in the other" (29). The overlapping of these modes of practicing (process, reading and writing) may all three be considered modalities of researching between the embodied, experiential, intimate ways of knowing, reflection through thinking and writing, and the distal, external, conceptual cognitive practices. It is through this three-pronged approach that the researcher may discover resonances with theories and frameworks to be further explored and discussed in the "complementary writing". The writing of notes, scores or essays, forms part of the "multi-modal process aimed at the tricky business of *articulating the research inquiry*" (29).



Nelson considers all of these activities part of the development of “praxis,” where thinking and doing converge “in an iterative process of ‘doing- reflecting- reading- articulating-doing’” (32).

Nelson’s model hopes to address the challenge of making tacit knowledge, explicit; through the dynamic, dialogic encounter of our embodied cognitions, and a praxis engaging critical reflection and written “propositional knowledge” (39). Central to this approach is the acceptance that knowledge “is not fixed and absolute” (39). It is through a three-pillar approach to “knowing” through the “know-how, know-what and know-that”, that we can explore forms of messy, circular and fluid knowing located through research-creation which covers practical and theoretical knowledge (39).

Nelson refers to knowledge, which is gained slowly, and incrementally through repetition and iterative practice, know-how. Where, “Know-how is sometimes termed ‘procedural knowledge’ in contrast with the ‘propositional knowledge’ of know-that” (41). The specialist training, we may bring forward into a project, gained through years of practice, in my case through muscle memory and keen kinaesthetic attunements to the bodies of others, is a kind of ‘know-how’ which is “inscribed on the body” (42). Know-how is embodied cognition, which is intimate, intuitive and learned through doing. Through my intimate work with diverse collaborators over the years, and engaging with elements of experimental sound practice, installation art, visual and performance art traditions, I have come to heavily consider elements of these practices in my understanding of the conventions and aesthetic assumptions which are at play as part of my art practice. For example, through my collaborations with experimental composers, Christopher Willes, Germaine Liu, and Matt Smith, the value of the sonic as a choreographic, sensory, and experiential material has come to bear on how I consider listening and hearing inside of practice. Long before this site-based creation-as-research project I have

built sensory environments, which engage the body in dialogue with material objects, sound and light, cultivating a relational “know-how” with space and place.

Know-what emerges from know-how, through stepping back from the process, from a position of informed reflexivity and engaging in critical reflection of the processes of making and the modes of knowing at play (Nelson 44). Engaging reflexivity for Nelson includes reflection not only on what is being made and how it is developing but also on one’s position and relationship to knowledge systems, histories and identities. As a departure from the position of assumed objectivity, Nelson references feminist scientists such as Donna Haraway, whose “situated knowledges” or “standpoint epistemologies”, argues a counter-position, where our identities and experience “does – and ought to – influence our conceptions of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification” (Nelson 52). It is necessary to work with our positions and acknowledge they are not universally held, understood or experienced. Lastly, to achieve what Nelson deems a “profoundly critical reflection” we must engage playfulness in the know-how process as well as engage with a range of perspectives and viewpoints, promoting the interplay with fresh ideas in order to “dislocate habitual ways of seeing” (45).

Know-that, the most familiar form of “traditional academic” knowledge is the third pillar, completing Nelson’s model for research-creation. Through reading interdisciplinary writing from fields of research related to the research inquiry, resonances can be found in dialogue with the know-how and the emerging know-what. The interplay of these three pillars for Nelson forms a dialogic interplay and developing praxis where he holds process-driven research as a value for knowledge production, be made visible (46). It is through the dialogic nature of the encounter

between the three modes of knowing through research-creation, in an academic context, the researcher can contribute substantial new insights.

Perhaps it is within Loveless' proposed vision of research-creation as intervention, that dance finds its saliency as a practice of knowledge creation. Dance challenges the limitations placed upon it by the existing, dominant frameworks and models which govern the humanities and social sciences. The nature of iterative dance practice as research allows for an emergent complexity and the exploration of pathic knowledge. Pathic knowledge involves feeling, perception, or intuition, rather than cognition or deliberation, as a primary mode of coming to know the world, which is a challenge to track with language, to quantify or capture with legibility (Van Manen 2007, 20-21). While practicing research-creation, where "theory 'thinks' the world, practice 'grasps' the world—it grasps the world pathically" (Van Manen 20). Van Manen continues, "The pathically tuned body recognizes itself in its responsiveness to the things of its world and to the others who share our world or break into our world. The pathic sense perceives the world in a feeling or emotive modality of knowing and being" (22).

It's clear to me that dance, as a practice of embodied sensuous grasping, is well positioned to encourage further openings and expand our conceptions of *whom* we consider ourselves to be in dialogue with and *how*. This way of working, in complex and messy exchange, may contribute to undoing modes of attention and understanding which dominate our hyper-modern, individualistic world. If our everyday, relational actions have the potential to build worlds by developing new habits then perhaps it is through small, dialogic, embodied interactions that we might begin to reimagine what is possible for us, to say and hear, as well as our roles toward enacting and embodying such re-imaginings in the world. Loveless (2019), argues for research-creation's ability "to nurture our capacities not only to reflect and analyze but

to act and intervene” (101). It is artwork that works at “the micropolitical level of the here and now”, which engages in this work most acutely (Loveless 2019, 118). It is through working with a commitment to here and now action and intervention, that I ask what new openings, models, and paradigms might dance as a form of embodied, sensuous creation-as-research, place in circulation if given the space to do so. In the next section, I introduce how I am using improvisation and phenomenology as a research method and system of practice to explore this figuration of the body as fluid, attuned, responsive and entwined entity through dance practice.

## **2.2 Improvisation and Phenomenology as Method**

Following Fraleigh’s (1991) notion of dance as phenomenology in action, I use phenomenology as a methodology, practiced through the improvised movement systems at the core of my research. I also engage in descriptive phenomenological writing “of the world as it is lived” to evidence the practice (Neimanis 2017, 31). The improvised movement systems I developed in my practice are systematic, task-based scores, which “draw on predefined and limited sources while working on specific tasks within constraining rules” (Hansen 2022, 1). I improvise on the site within these systematic restraints, where movements and embodiments emerge in response to these conditions.

I practice phenomenology through present-moment attunement and improvised dance practice, followed by reflective writing, to describe the phenomenon of the dance practice as “though seeing it fresh for the first time” (Fraleigh 1991, 12). Phenomenology as a method for transcribing experience through language, uses direct description, instead of analysis or explanation (Merleau-Ponty 1962, viii). This is achieved through “a direct description of our experience as it is” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, vii). In this accounting, “language stretches to

accommodate experience” (Neimanis 2017, 41). My improvisation practice in this research is process driven, rather than product-oriented, in that my aim is to describe and articulate an emergent practice of improvisation rather than a concern with documenting the process of composition of choreography or performance.

In Fraleigh’s extensive writing on the phenomenology of dance, particularly through the lens of somatics, we learn of the resonances present within phenomenology and improvisation, as a practice that “develops unpredictably, according to the contents of consciousness” (1991, 11). She calls on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, due to its present-centred descriptive aims, as when phenomenology is practiced “true to its intent, it never knows where it is going” (Fraleigh 11). Vida L. Midgelow (2018) further explores the generative intersections between improvisation and phenomenology to be “understood as methodologies that offer ways of revealing and constructing the world” (59). Midgelow moves beyond using phenomenology to illuminate and articulate the lived experience of dance improvisation, by proposing improvisation as a potent methodological paradigm for *practicing* phenomenologies (59). I echo her clarification, that improvisation is “generally a rigorous, focused, and purposefully pursued way of going about things” but is often misunderstood as an “unplanned, unpracticed, make-do activity” (2018, 64). As I have come to know and develop my improvised dance practice, I often describe it as one which requires a *soft rigor* built through systematic restraints and defined by its deeply considered, purposeful clarity while simultaneously employing a commitment to remain open to the emergent, the unknown and the mysterious. I apply this same soft rigor to this research-creation process, following the emergent as Midgelow suggests, where “the doing of a phenomenological study is itself improvisational” (2018, 61). Midgelow’s work in dialogue with Van Manen’s “process phenomenologies”, proposes an expansion to the conventional procedures

of phenomenology, which focus on language and writing-based descriptions as the main process and representation of research, moving phenomenology off the page (2018, 76). Middelow's paradigm and expanded phenomenological method "retools the phenomenologist as an embodied improviser" whose practices "cultivate an awareness of how to become attuned to inner and outer sensations" (76).

If I hope to discover things anew, undo the habitual and gain new insights, as I hope to do with this research, it is important that the methods and theories used also aim to offer new ways, to use Middelow's words, to "reveal and construct the world" (2018, 59). Concepts, as Elizabeth Grosz has articulated "are moveable bridges that help us imagine an otherwise; they don't solve problems but provide a way of orienting ourselves towards them" (Neimanis 2017, 41).

Neimanis' book, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017) proposes another expansion of conventional phenomenological methods which works to "put us in better contact with our bodies as implicated in those hard-to-fathom phenomena" (42). Neimanis deliberately embraces phenomenology "to underline the need to cultivate a phenomenological 'wonder in the face of the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1962:xiii) and a desistance from the mastery of more analytical approaches" (42). I resonate deeply with this aim, and it describes many of the challenges and curiosities I experienced while doing my research. These two methodological and theoretical approaches receive more attention and elaboration in the subsequent chapters, where I explore them in dialogue with my own research using phenomenological description.

## **2.3 Articulating, Evidencing and Documenting the Research Inquiry**

Following Nelson's model of knowing-doing, this section focuses on describing the research site and laying out the creation-as-research practice I undertook, which evidences the research inquiry. My goal is to draw out the practical methods used and documented through movement and writing practice. In the beginning stages of this research-creation project, I was able to engage with my practice as an artist to explore a dialogic engagement of "doing- reflecting- reading- articulating-doing", exploring theoretical resonances that came to inform the direction of this inquiry (Nelson 2013, 32). Initially, when planning my research, I intended to work in studio, for the practice phase of this project. Upon doing so, the environment of the indoor studio space, populated with a small selection of materials I had gathered, wasn't offering the immersion with which to fully explore the body in dialogue with living materials. I live in Toronto's West-end Roncesvalles neighborhood, about a 15-minute walk to High Park. I have lived in the area for the last six years and I walk there regularly. When contemplating an outdoor site that would provide the kind of immersion that I felt was missing in the studio, the large, sprawling woodlands and savannahs of High Park seemed an attractive and appealing site within which to practice, explore and dance with the more-than-human.

### **2.3.1 The Research Site**

High Park is one of Toronto's largest public parks and includes an array of public, developed leisure sites, however half of the park remains undeveloped and is designated by the city as an Environmentally Significant Area (ESA). These designated ESA portions of the park include wetlands and waterways, forested woodlands, and the rare grasslands that once covered the majority of Ontario, the black oak savannahs. The savannahs are transitional spaces between

open prairie lands and dense woodlands, containing tall grasses and forbs which thrive in the dry conditions created by open, full sun, wildflowers and shrubs, and black oak trees providing shade for a plethora of small plant species. Because of the wide diversity of plant life in the savannahs, these portions of the park are home to many species of birds, small animals, and insects. The savannah that sits on the eastern edge of the park, running along Parkside Drive gradually transitions to a denser woodland as you move westward into the park, with ponds and small waterways and a large, paved path used by many as a peaceful refuge within which to walk their dogs, ride bicycles and be amongst the trees. The savannahs and woodlands on the eastern side of the park are huge swaths of land where it's possible to experience a seemingly untouched landscape within the city. The land holds years of ongoing colonial history which I must contend with and acknowledge, as I engage with the site should I intend to be working with responsibility, positionality and accountability in this research.

High Park was “created” in 1876, but the lands that comprise the park were long a prime hunting and foraging ground, cared for by the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Anishinaabe Nations, who joined in a treaty to share in the stewardship of this territory under the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant (Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle, n.d.). The restoration and care of the ecological sites within High Park, currently fall under the purview of the City of Toronto's Urban Forest Management team, through “best management practices such as forest thinning, prescribed burns and controlling invasive plant species” (City of Toronto n.d.). Prescribed burns, a long-held, sacred practice used to sustain, maintain and enrich the savannah's resiliency disappeared from practice following colonization. The controlled burns were replaced with the use of dangerous pesticides to “control” non-native species. As a result of pesticide use and the loss of the burns as a tool to enrich the soil, the savannahs suffered the loss of many rare



species of flora and fauna over many decades. Across the savannahs and woodlands there are many fallen trees, marking the changing degradation of the landscape. A collective of Indigenous Elders, knowledge keepers, and community members from diverse nations, have formed the Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle (ILSC), to begin conversations with the city regarding the care and practices in use on this sacred land. In a call to action, submitted in the form of a letter to the city, the ILSC “offers the city a powerful path towards both healing its relationships with Indigenous peoples and taking meaningful action in response to the dire challenges of climate change and ecological degradation” (ILSC n.d.). The collective calls for continued and ongoing inclusion, and consultation with Indigenous land keepers are essential towards these ends. To restore the health and vitality of these rare grasslands, the city began to reinstate prescribed burns in the savannahs in the year 2010 following an accidental fire. In early April 2023, for the first time since the city began the controlled burns, a group of elders, activists, and allies were finally consulted with and included in the ritual of the burn, reclaiming it as a sacred ceremony for the renewal and regeneration of the land.





**Figure 2-1,** woodland at High Park, research documentation.



The stewards of the land face an ongoing, and contested control and management dispute with the city. An awareness of the land's colonial history, politics and the calls for sustainable restoration must be considered as part of the ethical practice of working with the site and its many diverse, living species. These current negotiations surrounding the maintenance and restoration of these sacred parklands are a microcosm of broader debates surrounding both climate and Indigenous justice. An in-depth discussion of Indigenous political issues sits outside the scope of this thesis; however, in a discussion of land-based practice, there is an intersection with Indigenous cosmologies, worldviews and traditions. My research runs alongside this dialogue, adds voice and amplifies an urgent call, led by Indigenous scholars, which embodies a remembering of place and body as deeply connected.<sup>7</sup> I engage the concepts of reciprocity and relationality through my own skin, my ears, and my intentions as I tread lightly through the park. I consider my impact and my privilege in practicing and dancing here. Rather than appropriating Indigenous knowledge I look to work toward, articulate and grow my own unique and particular embodied relationships with the land.

I discuss how working to unravel the tightly bound paradigms, borders of awareness and habitual modes of attention shaped by modernity might begin to gently undo harmful and transactional ways of relating, detuning what Natasha Myers (2018a) calls, "colonial common sense" (60). I explore this habitual unravelling to become more receptive and responsive and write from my own positionality, as a white woman with European ancestry, which I acknowledge is not universal. I work from my own embodied experience, as I grow and expand my relational bodily knowing.

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<sup>7</sup> See (Simpson 2014, 32, Linda Tuhiwai Smith 2021, 77, Kimmerer 2017, 133)





**Figure 2-2** fallen oak in the savannah, High Park research documentation.



### 2.3.2 The Know-How: Beginnings

As I begin to move into articulating the practice phase of my research, it feels important to say that a practice isn't formed over several weeks or months. In the introduction, I mentioned what felt like the most salient, practices of influence towards my artistic point of view. I bring all my situated knowledge and life experience into this research process, as a starting place. I explore improvised dance practice as an intervention to challenge and expand habitual ways of relating; to expand our sensory faculties and imagine and explore how the impacts of this intervention might move outward in the world, through praxis. These artistic aims animate my practice, my movement, and my questions for moving through this creation-as-research process "focused toward attitudes of attending and processes of opening" (Middelw 2018, 65).

Before continuing, Middelw (2018) suggests if we are to use improvisation as a useful methodological field, we need to define its scope (63). Improvisation is a wide field of dance practice which includes many techniques and frameworks for creation and performance. Inside my own work, I use somatically informed, performance-generating systems that engage improvisation to generate modes of engagement in compositional situations to build responsive choreographic scores. As referenced earlier, improvisation as I have come to know and employ it is a practice which necessitates and engages systematic clarity, rigour and a simultaneous openness to change. In this way, I employ soft rigor using scores or tasks to ground my engagement, and entering "a space, often with others and believing something (even if that something is "nothing") will happen" (Middelw 64). The processual evolution of the practice blurs thinking and doing, planning and executing, responding and resonating, through moment-to-moment responses to the environment or a set of conditions. This is a generative and relational space, where "the improviser seeks to let go of fixity through a deeply seated receptivity to self,

others, and the world” (Middelw 65). Middelw describes a generative and risky space where improvisation requires a “willingness to be vulnerable and assailable, enabling the improviser to follow routes and note emerging pathways—to catch and respond to that which becomes apparent and sparks the imagination” (65).

The practice portion of this research began in mid-May 2022 for a period of four weeks and then again from mid-August to the end of September. My intention to begin was to undertake a regular improvised practice in the park, followed immediately by a writing practice to begin to describe my embodied experience, as lived, including the process, tools, and practices of attunement I was developing, to connect materially and affectively with the environment. Throughout, I was documenting my practice through phenomenological writing, and periodic audio-visual documentation using photos and video. I would document the various sites, I visited throughout the park, features and details which sparked my interest or drew me into practice. The practice of filming video felt more fraught and complicated, as the time and intention to set up the camera often interrupt a spontaneous flow of moving or made me self-conscious, drawing my awareness away from my experience in the moment. In addition to trying to film myself in movement, I also filmed features of movement in the space that I was interacting with, using a hand-held ethnographic approach, such as tall grasses blowing and dancing in the wind, an intricate shadow pattern moving on a tree or my encounter with a deer in the woodland, for example. This ethnographic approach aims to provide the viewer /reader with a window into what I was seeing and experiencing in the environment during moments of practice.

In the process of keeping a movement journal, I was challenged by the process of articulating an experience, which often feels beyond description. There was difficulty to describe the sensory, pathic experiences that sit outside of language when words can feel so inadequate to

capture such liminal and transformative experiences. The process of attempting to track, bring language to, or describe had the impact of changing or flattening the experience. During the practices, in moments that felt particularly deep, which could feel almost trance-like at times, the awareness of the need to describe the experience with words would lift me out of such moments. Dropping into such transportive states necessitates that I arrest my analytical, categorical thinking to arrive at sensing and dancing “otherwise”. As I continued to reach toward my dance of the imperceptible, the kinds of noticing I am doing becomes even more difficult to name, articulate, track, and bring language to. “What follows also becomes more and more difficult to describe as I continue following this emergent track” (07.09.22)<sup>8</sup>. Throughout the process, I was also learning *how to do*, the practice of phenomenology. Upon reflection, I can see a gap in what I was able to describe and attempt to bring this quality of mystery, of working with the unknown, forward as a value in this research. I feel the inherent tension that sits within the endeavour, to legibly articulate my affected and embodied experiences. In the chapters that follow I work to straddle these opposing tensions to develop, “definitional anchors and experiential description” and “extract meaningful essentials, to communicate to the reader well-founded points of reference” (Fraleigh 1991, 13).

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<sup>8</sup> Note for the reader that this is how I am indicating practice notes within the text, followed by the date which the notes were made.

## **Chapter 3. Procedural Knowledge: Modes for Opening Intersensory Dialogue**

### **3.1 Know-How: Procedural Knowledge**

This chapter engages and evidences the “know-how”, procedural knowledge gained through the iterative practice of the improvised system generated through this creation-as-research project. In this chapter, I outline and discuss the modes which shape the improvised system and practice in dialogue with my practice notes. I posit that dance practice cultivates an articulate and responsive, sensory-perceptual system and opens new dialogues and articulations with more-than-human agents. I articulate the modes of practice which make this possible.

As referenced in the introduction, the questions that guided this academic project were seeded during the creation of my dance work, *no place* (2017-2022). The improvised systems in *no place* were a development of practices formed in earlier works, that I created and performed, both as a soloist (*you/me/us (prologue)*, 2013 and *multiform*, 2014) and as part of an ensemble (*multiform(s)*, 2015 and *Leisure Palace*, 2018). Having created and performed in these works, I held both the embodied, situated knowledge of having created the works on my own body and the well-articulated understanding and language required to translate, refine, and disseminate the practices further with my collaborators. With the creation of *no place*, I wasn’t dancing in the work myself, therefore reliant on the dancers’ own felt experiences of dancing with the materials during the development of the project. Beginning this academic research process, I bring many of the procedures forward from *no place*, to guide my explorations yet I am discovering them in my own lived body, and in this new context, for the first time. I encounter the challenges of the systems that the dancers had shared with me and discover how to bring language to my experiences through writing my practice notes and the reflections to follow.



With my focus gathered around articulating *the process*, rather than a concern with building a new choreographic work, I dig deeply into the experiential qualities and effects of the practice and arrest my aesthetic desires and concerns, which accompany artistic choice-making in the creation of performance work. This focus on the development and articulation of a practice results in movement which is somatically oriented, which does not attend to the legibility of what I was doing to others, or the need to communicate anything to an audience. My written notes reflect my focus on gaining clarity with the procedural steps I undertake to prepare and tune my attention to be available to a more-than-human dialogue, the articulation of the specific practices I engage, the resulting resonances of these practices and the affectual embodied outcomes.

### **3.2 Beginnings and Entering Practice at High Park**

During the research period I visited the park every other day during the week for several hours, depending on the day, weather, and my ability to engage successfully with the practice, ranging from two to four hours. In conceiving the shape of the practice in terms of *what* I would *do* when I got there, was not predetermined to begin, in that, I was committed to following an experimental ethos, where I brought forth reflexive questions emerging from the “know-that”, propositional knowledge “know how”, and my existing artistic practice into dialogue. The shape of what the practice includes morphed and changed throughout the 12 weeks in response to what I was discovering, noticing and engaging in through dance. I intended to practice in a consistent location in the park daily, which gradually evolved into a practice of roaming, walking and dancing, which moved through the park and engaged various sites.

The practice itself begins with leaving home, gathering the items I need to practice, the walk to the park, serving as a preparation for deeper attention and awareness. Walking became

central to the evolving practice, as I discovered its utility in accessing the body and arriving in the present moment. I live on Sorauren Avenue near Dundas Street, about a 15-minute walk from the park. Being that the research period stretched through Summer and into early Fall, the days were generally warm and humid. I would take the 15-minute walk to the park, most days entering through the savannah between High Park Blvd and Howard Park Avenue, on the eastern edge of the park, running along Parkside Drive.

The practice sessions occurred mostly within the savannahs and woodlands, along the eastern edge of the park from Bloor St to High Park Blvd, bordering the Spring Road ravine. The desired paths and trails in this section of the park tend to be less populated than the larger paved pathways, and I found myself actively seeking out quieter and more secluded areas of refuge. On either side of the walking trails, you find varied ecosystems; the higher and drier savannah with its mature, towering black oak trees (*Quercus velutina*), grasslands, small shrubs, and the occasional eastern white and red pine (*Pinus resinosa*). The more moist and cool woodland valleys of the ravine are more densely forested pastures with red oak and red maple (*Quercus rubra*, *Acer rubrum*), and a large variety of tall shrubs and spring flowering herbs (City of Toronto, n.d.). Here, you find a dense shrub layer, with beaked hazel, choke cherry, maple-leaved viburnum, mountain maple, nannyberry, red-osier dogwood, round-leaved dogwood and witch-hazel, thick with herbs such as blue-stem goldenrod and wild sarsaparilla, among others (City of Toronto, n.d.). Over the years, the park's many native species have been joined by invasive non-native species such as Dog-strangling vine and European buckthorn, which the Urban Forestry team now needs to reckon with managing as part of the evolving ecosystem (High Park Nature Centre, n.d.). The ecosystem is a mosaic of forested and grassy areas dense with diverse plant and animal life that populates its topography. I'm no expert in plant

identification however, through the process, I came to know the plants and trees in my own ways through smell, vibrational quality, texture, their unique temporalities and their emergent gestures, as they manifest in my own body.





**Figure 3-1** Desired path, High Park woodland, research documentation.

As I begin to articulate the elements of the practice, I ask the reader to keep in mind the cyclical, iterative nature of an artistic process. It is experimental, messy at times and amorphous. I have laid out the modes, tools and discoveries in an order that makes sense to me, to render the experience legible and understood, however, the artistic process is non-linear and the discoveries I detail here, arrived in fragments, bits and pieces. I have also structured the chapter and practices through the separate senses (visual field, deep listening etc.), yet wish to note that sensory perception inherently involves all of the senses at once, and what connects the senses is the body in movement (Merleau-Ponty 1962). I have separated the senses here to work towards legibility for the reader in my effort to be clear about the different tasks and scores I was working with, which might zoom in on a particular sense, one by one.

I began the research phase by testing several sites within this area. I would choose a location which was off the major trails, that was remote, quiet and comfortable for my movement practice. My intention was to engage in an evolving embodiment practice followed by phenomenological writing immediately following, to document my experience. I begin with the assumption that there is communication and information to be received from the environment itself. I work with the assumption I am not the only being here with something to *say*, or with agency, desire, an energetic body, or a capacity for feeling. “I feel myself immersed in a living, breathing environment, as one being with many other beings” (31.05.22). Extending the recognition of personhood to non-human beings, while operating within a scientific, colonial worldview perhaps stands out as odd. In non-western systems of knowledge, Indigenous cultures hold reverence for the intelligence and sentience of the more-than-human (Kimmerer 2017). Potawami writer and botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2017) straddles and works with these two disparate knowledge systems and asserts that “paying attention to other beings, recognizing their



incredible gifts of photosynthesis, nitrogen fixation, migration, metamorphosis, and communication across miles is humbling and leads inescapably to an understanding that we are surrounded by intelligences other than our own” (377). I enter the site holding space for this non-human intelligence, a space to hear, feel, dance, and move with others. I am available to be moved by the weather systems, the gentle pulsing rhythms of the flora and fauna, and the deep rumblings of the ground. I attend to this possibility in the same way I would encounter moving with another dancer, I engage all my senses to take them in, using, sight, sound and touch, as well as the felt sense of another, which resists a rational and linear quantification. I arrive available to this possibility; however, I encounter that there is work to be done to prepare myself to hear and feel this sentient dialogue and to dance with the site. I use interventions, engaging the specific temporalities of the site; the visual field, deep listening, haptic sensitizations and imaginings which guide me closer toward engaging in a subtle and nuanced dialogue. In the next section where I discuss the modes, I developed and experimented with in building the practice, I include some of the written tasks and scores in italics, which emerged to guide my dancing.

### **3.3 Practices of Kinaesthetic Attunement: Modes of Practice, Strategies and Interventions**

#### **3.3.1 Slowness: The Temporality of Deep Attention**

*Move at the tempo of your awareness, the tempo of your presence. Yield to new tempos.*

In the first weeks of practice in early May, my reflections centred around the difficulty of cultivating the availability of awareness, in which exploring an embodied dialogue with the material world felt possible. I often left the sessions frustrated, and with the sense that I had failed in my efforts to attune to subtler realms of experience. I could feel in my body the way my habitual, linear, analytical thinking, kept me from sensing the phenomena I’d hoped to engage with. I noted in my journal how I experienced this effort; “I keep returning to my body on the ground, when I feel thought and analysis lift me out, floating above my body. This kind of

thinking moves at a different speed and rate. It is rapid, like a ping pong ball, rallying back and forth. Moving quickly between association, distraction, questions and judgement” (04.06.22).

Within this early phase of the research, the practice often began like a meditation or mindfulness practice, becoming physically still, slowing down, and observing the breath as a way of shifting gears, from habituated ways of noticing, thinking and sensing. During those early weeks, I had a few sessions where I felt I was able to enter what felt like a dialogue with the environment, but what emerged as the primary content during those first weeks, was an awareness of the necessity to develop strategies or interventions toward slowing down, softening, yielding. This slowing, as an essential part of undoing a habitual mode of attention, which kept a receptive, responsive, dialogic sensory system largely unavailable. I reflected on the value of this difficulty; “I struggled to slow down enough to enter something that felt like a genuine exchange... The difficulty is valuable in understanding and exploring this practice and *how* it becomes possible. Preparation is essential to allow for a slowing down of thought, attention, thinking, rushing, making sense of” (27.05.22).

The necessity of slowing down is not only about changing speed but also deepening attention. In the early weeks of the research, I often left the sessions frustrated, and with the sense that I was failing to attune to the subtler realms of experience. The habitual tempo that I observe in my daily living is one that moves with urgency. A tempo that responds to modern multi-tasking, optimization, omnipresent technologies, and the mediation between self and world through social media dictates the tempo of our attention, as part of the now inescapable “attention economy”, an “era of corporate targeting of our attention energy to feed the global processes of capitalization” (Doran 2017, 1). This temporality guides the nervous system into a buzzing state of activation. I can feel in my body the way my habitual, linear, transactional and

analytical thinking keeps me from sensing subtle phenomena of the outside world. I noted in my writing how I experienced this effort; “I keep returning to my body on the ground, when I feel thought and analysis lift me out, floating above my body. This kind of thinking moves at a different speed and rate. It is rapid, like a ping pong ball, rallying back and forth. Moving quickly between association, distraction, and judgement” (04.06.22). Within this earlier phase of the research, the practice often began like a mindfulness practice, becoming physically still, slowing down, and observing the breath as a way of shifting gears, from habituated ways of noticing, thinking and sensing. This process of slowing down, softening and yielding, I discovered is an essential intervention in undoing habitual modes of attention, which keep receptive, responsive, and a dialogic sensory system unavailable. I reflected on the value of this difficulty; “I struggled to slow down enough to enter something that felt like a genuine exchange... The difficulty is valuable in understanding and exploring this practice and *how* it becomes possible. Preparation is essential to allow for a slowing down of thought, attention, thinking, rushing, making sense of” (27.05.22)

I begin to cultivate this slowness to arrive to body thinking, by paying attention to breath and embodied sensations through techniques I use as part of a sensory “warm-up” of somatic practices drawing from Yogic lineage, breath and somatic movement modalities. These practices function to begin the shift of my awareness from the separation of the thinking brain and the body-brain, arriving at an awareness of a joined, integrated intelligence of the body. I attend to regulating my nervous system to arrive in the present. “To sense the subtler realms of the material and immaterial, I need to slow down, my walking, my thinking, my rate of perception. All needs to be *slower* should I hope to touch into accessing *more*” (08.09.22). With the intention to move into awareness and attention, I breathe, my eyes adjust, and my ears, my skin, all begin



to *focus* differently. I slide into a new rhythm of perceiving, a tempo which makes space for another, for noticing how we are together. What or who I am with is changing my experience, my sensation, my awareness, and my being. I am aware of myself not as a subject and what I'm with as an object but rather as *how* we are or *could be* together. To feel into and consider the affective qualities of this togetherness necessitates patience and deep attention. Time and space to feel and explore. Kimmerer (2017) refers to deep attention as a gift which draws us into deep relationships, "as information and energy are exchanged between the observer and the observed, and neither partner in the exchange can be anonymous" (374). The tempo of my noticing ebbs and flows, following curiosity and external stimulus, accelerating in moments then slowing again. I feel my body sliding into a new form of dialogue, my tissues responsive, in communication with outside forces, atmospheres and agents. To be present with deep attention and the somatic responses to these utterances from the environment, I insist on practicing the temporality of deep attention. I notice gravity acting upon the weight of the body, the way it rests on the ground, and the way my feet meet the surface of the earth. I notice the rhythm of my breath and my heartbeat. This noticing brings my attention to the now, and into my lived body so that I might begin to invite a slowing, a softening and availability, of both my awareness and my physical form. I experience the practice of slowness in deep awareness and presence, as interrupting a human-centered habitual state and begin yielding to the tempo of the park, the ground below, the trees, the grasses and the wildflowers in this diverse ecosystem. This deep attention allows for a speculative imagining, sensing for and moving with the temporalities of the ecosystem itself. As I slow down, I can begin to feel the temporal arcs and vibrational rhythms of the different more-than-human bodies in the park. The wavering, near stillness of the grasses, the hum of the Goldenrod, the differing tempos of the trees and the chaotic rhythm of the running

chipmunks. I discover that the more-than-human bodies in the park each have their own unique tempos and rhythms. One site I visited, again and again, was a particular white pine (which Dr. Sandilands helped me to identify by counting the 5 long and soft pine needles). The particular temporal rhythm of this tree, which I experience while, entwining moving and dancing with this particular tree body, is a slow rolling, waving, and undulating type of movement which I locate in my spine and allow to flow and trickle outwards to the limbs. I experience the tempo like a droning sound, a constant slow, vibrational tone at a low guttural register. The movement has some tension to it, resistance and consistency. It feels old, grounding, and widening. Through this intersensory play of sensing tree-tempos, and engaging sensory modes, I sense a felt resonance within, which produces the rhythm or sensation, flow or feeling.





**Figure 3-2** white pine, High Park woodland, research documentation.

### 3.3.2 The Visual Field

*Use the eyes of a sensitive observer. Imagine the eyes as soft puddles of feeling in your skull. Touch with the eyes and attune to pleasure through seeing. May your seeing awaken your skin. May your skin enliven your being.*

Engaging the visual field becomes another mode or tool, as part of the improvised system, with which to build engagement and deep attention *with* the environment. A continued dialogue using the visual field also functions as an interruption in navigating habitual impulses while moving. Often in somatic movement, the eyes can become passive as the dancer focuses on interoception (perceiving the inner state of the body). Consciously engaging both interoception and exteroception (perceiving stimulus outside the body) through the eyes interrupts this well-worn pathway of internal focus and offers new possibilities for a more complex sensory experience. I become deeply curious about the many available rich textures on the site. I see soft, fluffy poplar seeds floating in the air, damp mossy tree bark and piles of dry, sharp needles from several fallen white pines. Using what I am taking in through the visual field, and the sensations arising from this intersensory dialogue between outside and inside is one strategy with which to bring new information into the body, to circumvent old pathways and forge new ones.

“The senses are a way in. Being in motion is a way in” (30.09.22). I lean into the senses to continue this undoing, to recalibrate my attention and find *a way in*, a way in to dialogue. I work with the visual field as a source, borrowing a direction from a movement score of from American, post-modern choreographer Deborah Hay, “What if seeing could be like eating and it changes you?”<sup>9</sup> With this prompt, my eyes become a sensory organ of perception that is a direct

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<sup>9</sup> This score is written in a notebook from a workshop with Christopher House in 2017, sharing the work he did with Deborah Hay in his solo work titled *News*.



line to my cells and my dancing body, to produce a synesthetic change. Textures in the environment become felt sense on the skin, in my bones or fascia, depending on where I place my attention. The tight swirls of dense moss become a fast-moving undulation through the ribcage, and the rough intricate texture of oak tree bark becomes a rhythmical repetition in my knees. While in the woodlands, the way the light passes through the leaves overhead implies an energetic direction felt through a limb or the spine. The visual becomes source material to be translated onto, absorbed, and digested through, inscribed on the body. Through this process, of synesthetic translation, a resonance is felt. Anthropologist David Howes (2005) explains how synesthesia opens new terrains of the “inter-sensory”; “Synesthesia involves short-circuiting the conventional five sense model and experience of perception. It establishes cross-linkages between the modalities at a subconscious level, and so opens up a whole new terrain - the terrain of the inter-sensory” (12). From this inter-sensory resonance, a response is expressed through improvised movement, often beginning deep inside in subtle motions or vibrations that then grow and evolve. I’m guided by my curiosity, pulled toward textures, surfaces, beings, and creatures; “the visual suggests a rhythm, sometimes a feeling, or density” (30.09.22). What I see, moss, bark, or light in the canopy influences the body, through felt sensations, I am propelled into motion, or expression. Visual perception is in dialogue with the other senses and becomes a physical act that resonates through the body, moves my tissues and opens the felt sense to dialogue in connection with what is perceived.

### 3.3.3 Deep Listening

*Are you listening or hearing? Can you hear the inner workings of your body? Can you hear the future of this place? What do the trees sound like? Dance to the rhythm that you hear.*

Another mode or tool within the improvised system is working with “deep listening”, to engage with the sonic environment of the park as another entry point to the intersensory. Working with sound adds another layer of sensory attunement and engagement that considers the multitude of ways one could engage in listening with nuance, attune to subtlety, and use memory, imagination, and desire, toward a deepening, and articulation of the auditory field. I would be remiss not to mention my experiences with the work of pioneering composer, improviser and scholar Pauline Oliveros’ body of work as an influence in the development of this line of thinking (and listening) about sound. I was introduced to Oliveros’ work by long-time friend, collaborator, artist and composer, Christopher Willes. Oliveros’ *Sonic Meditations* are based on “patterns of attention” to explore ways of listening and responding (1984, 138). “The enhancement and development of aural sensation is one of their goals... The ear is the primary receptor and instrument; sound, both inner and outer, real and imaginary, is the stimulus of *Sonic Meditations*” (Oliveros 1984, 141). “Oliveros herself further separates Deep Listening into two forms: focal attention, discovering a certain sonic event and staying with its temporal shifts and changes; and global attention, expanding our listening to include all that is around you, and take that *inside* of you” (Kujala 2017, emphasis added).

Shifting from hearing (a passive action which is always happening) to listening (actively taking in, stretching listening), tunes my hearing towards an active register. In a large field surrounded by black oaks, a warm breeze blowing the flowering goldenrod and tall grasses, the humming and buzzing crickets and other insects create a sonic ambiance in my immediate auditory field. The hum and buzz rolls and intensifies, like sonic waves moving closer and

further away. Further in the distance but still audible, the rush of SUV's and city buses barreling down Parkside Avenue interrupt the droning soundscape created by my surroundings, drawing my awareness wider outward from the intimate poetry proposed by the environmental sound.

“Am I listening or hearing?” (18.08.22). Questioning hearing versus listening draws me in, towards what is near and stretches to what is far, entertaining impossibility. Considering sonic range, I become curious about penetrating sounds, turning my listening inwards. I use both focal and global listening. Can I hear my own heartbeat? Can I draw my attention toward the vibratory rumbling of sound as it moves into my ear or the ongoing dialogue between the trillions of cells *in* my body? Can I extend my listening further to attune to sounds far in the distance? Can I listen to the rhythms of goldenrod, to the oaks, the tall grasses? Can I hear *their* memories, what they might hear, into the near future? In the same way, I lean into my own body, I listen to *theirs*; can I hear the trillions of cells vibrating within them, humming, and buzzing with aliveness? In an articulated sonic world, as proposed by Oliveros we might enter a new paradigm through our sensitive and attuned listening, with which to build a new kind of intersensory dialogue. I continue playing with the interoceptive and exteroceptive dual awareness I described with the visual field, engaging with sound.

The sonic offerings of the park translate to the body through resonance and vibration. As sound is felt, it is deeply suggestive, and I experience it as a physical, and vibratory *movement*. On windy days the rustling of leaves creates an immersive, vibratory space that hums softly. Roaring cicadas pierce at a higher register and propose an almost electric sensation in my tissues. Sounds of city traffic, cars, sirens or passing planes overhead, create a sonic field that exists in the background, occasionally pushing into the foreground with more force or intensity. I allow all the sounds of the environment to land physically through my ears but as a felt sense. I

practice a kind of availability allowing sound to be felt, to resonate and to elicit a response. “I see and I feel it on my skin, I hear, and I sense vibration in my bones, I sense the energetic quality of the space and hold curiosity for how and where that reverberation might be felt” (18.08.22). I attune to this by reaching out and leaning in; “I lean in and notice what emerges. A sensation, an impulse, a pull toward or away, a rhythm, a tension, a softening” (30.09.22). The aural sensations that arise become emergent movements. I engage them, deepen them, dance them.

### **3.3.4 Haptic Sensitizations and the Accumulation of Modes**

*Can your skin hear? Can your skin see and take in the textures of the environment? Try to listen with your eyes, feel with your ears and see with your skin. What new information becomes available? Engage not knowing with deep clarity and soft rigour.*

“I reach out with my gaze. I extend outward with my ears. I smell the earth, the trees, the plants and shrubs, their pollens and essences. I open my skin to sensing and expand the border of my body into space.” (21.09.22). As I work with the environment, I play between connecting this outer stimulus and my inner world. The play of the intersensory engages seeing and hearing through my skin. What I see and hear becomes a felt sensation as if I’m touched by the environment through different registers. From time to time, I might engage touch and place my hands on a tree trunk or touch the tall grasses, or a plant lightly. Primarily my engagement with touch is through the imaginary, visualizing contact, or sensing a touch which is not physical but energetic.

There is an interplay between the visual, sonic and haptic articulations and as I begin dancing and moving with this stimulus, I engage the three modes to circumnavigate my habitual impulses and trained pathways. A part of my attention sits like an analytical eye toward patterns that feel well-worn and familiar. The labour of deep concentration, multi-tasking and decision-



making in awareness, necessary to hold the plethora of sensory and perceptual information involved in the system and engaging an in-the-moment embodied analysis of *how* I'm responding, produces a state of sensory saturation which can become disorientating. This is a disciplined labour and I posit that it is the sustained effort to engage and navigate multiple modes of sensory input that leads to the possibility of expanded relational dialogues. I must hold *soft rigor*, engaging the tasks with curiosity and a simultaneous acknowledgement that part of what I'm doing is exploring not-knowing (in ways I've traditionally come to know) and engaging this not-knowing with clarity (if that's possible). This requires holding multiple, simultaneous, complex and sometimes conflicting tasks inside of the body within the dance practice. The work to engage these simultaneous modes of engagement, in sustained effort, allows for an opening to new forms of active, embodied communication with the world. I return to these dialogic encounters with more depth in Chapter 5.

### **3.5 Repetition: Patterns, Loops and Cycles**

*Insist and adapt, insist and adapt, insist and adapt. What is changing as you insist on continuing? How are you evolving? What is acting upon you? How are you moved by others?*

Sustained repetition has been a central structure of exploration since I began my choreographic practice. I have explored repetition as the central mechanism in the improvised systems in the works *multiform* and *multiform(s)* (Acorn 2014, 2015), and it continues to be a useful device with which to explore research-based practice as choreography. In the practice of co-creating and intertwining with the more-than-human, repetition allows me to observe change, and explore the translation of making the *invisible* and imperceptible, *visible* through form, and movement (enacting it). Through sustained repetition, I amplify the smallest impulse and explore where it can go and how it evolves. I walk through the park. I'm drawn to a texture, a plant, a quality. I

engage the modes of attunement described above, seeing and hearing through intersensory engagement, sensing, and feeling for another. What emerges in the body, becomes central and I focus my attention and awareness there. The feeling gives way to a movement, and I allow a repetition, a cycle, a loop, or a pattern to grow and evolve through an amplification of sensation. I stay with the ever-evolving repetition as long as I can, allowing for emergence and change through insistence. I return to a deeper description of repetition as an essential element of the procedural system to intervene in habitual impulses in Chapter 4 and as an improvised practice of arrival to otherwise states in chapter 5.

### **3.6 Beginning in Movement: Walking**

*Walk at the tempo of your sensory awareness. Use your walking to fully arrive at availability and porousness. Use each step to yield to the ground.*

When I began this process, I approached the practice sessions by committing to a single site or location each day. I would find a place to begin, sit or lie down and attempt to open my awareness to the environment, and the bodies that surrounded me in the park. Several practices during these early sessions ended as I described earlier, with frustration as I faced my inability to slow down my thinking and enter the practice. I began to feel the pull to enter the practice in motion, to wander and walk the site, guided by curiosity and an enlivened sensory apparatus. During the walk to High Park, I begin to recalibrate my attention, my awareness, my body, and this journey is part of the beginning of the work and practice. By beginning in motion, my nuanced and sensitive awareness feels easier to reach. So, alternatively, I punctuate the dance practice by walking. Wandering the site, practicing active deep listening, with my ears, my eyes and my skin. Sensation opens. I notice more. Through movement, with a simple pedestrian gait; noticing gravity, movement of my joints, and shifts of weight through the terrain of the park, I

begin the slide into a dialogic exchange with the environment. I posit that it is through attending to *movement*, that this dialogue becomes possible; “By being in motion, I allow for other ways of being to show up” (18.08.22). In her dissertation, Paula Kramer (2015) speaks similarly about the function of walking as a practice of arrival, “as a way of making contact with one’s material context and as a process for making work” (144). My walking allows for a gradual arrival to meet the environment while also arriving at a body which is *walking with* and eventually *dancing with* the environment. Kramer describes how walking as a form of arrival functions in her practice, “I thus understand practices of walking to offer a way of arriving within a geographical territory whilst simultaneously arriving in the territory of one’s (outdoor) body. An unknown area is made familiar through moving within it and at the same time the physical material of the body that enables this movement begins to rise or speak” (2015, 146). For me, walking is an essential tool for bridging the gap between my body and the world. Walking functions like a facilitating agent, or a lubricant that makes accessing my attuned and sensitive body possible. From this attuned, sensitive body, my “outdoor body,” I feel I can more readily reach for, receive, and participate in a dialogue with the more-than-human bodies in the park.





**Figure 3-3** woodland, High Park, research documentation.

I wander, awakening to the site, and to my body. I'm drawn to more secluded parts of the park, where I can practice without the heavy foot traffic of dog walkers and visitors. Upon reflection it's clear to me that during the research phase, I rarely practiced in wide open or exposed spaces, or the more developed parts of the park. I was pulled to be surrounded, enveloped and as close as I could be to the more-than-human bodies in the park, without interruption. Amidst my wandering *something* draws me to a specific clearing in the woodlands, I feel pulled by this *something* and I begin dancing with the felt sense that emerges in this place. I recall something about the way the light was coming through the trees on a particular day, pulling me towards the secluded pocket or clearing. Following walking, sliding into movement feels easier, and responding movements begin to grow, change and evolve. I discover that more sensory-perceptual information is available once in movement. The body becomes more sensitive, receptive, and articulate. "Once movement comes in, I notice further availability of sensation, phenomena, input. Movement, dancing, and improvising allows for further, deeper openings" (07.09.22). I'm experimenting and exploring, carried by impulses both within and without. I experience a state of saturation, where input rushes in, senses begin to blur, and resonances move faster. I feel my body like a porous sponge or permeable entity where sight, sound, smell, touch and a sense of the otherworldly join and overlap, to extend the realm of what is possible to sense and know. "Once I'm in movement, improvising, experimenting, exploring, it's as though the depth of perception expands beyond the visible toward the imperceptible" (30.09.22). The improvisation follows an emergent track, following non-human rhythms and polyrhythms, flows and tangents. As I follow these tangents, my body expands in all directions, a lateral widening, a sinking below the ground, extending upwards into the air, reaching upwards toward the indescribable.

By the end of the research phase, the practice vacillated between walking practice, in deep awareness and interludes or moments of settling into improvised movement in a fixed location. The walking practice in combination with the kinaesthetic modes I described above, supported an entry into dancing with the more-than-human bodies in the park, by softening and yielding my habitual attention toward the stimulus, utterances and vibrations offered by the site. I pendulate between walking and dancing. I walk and dance a quick, pulsing, movement with dense moss, I walk and dance a floating, but rooted bodily wave with a field of tall grasses in the savannah. The improvised movement emerging from this practice of intertwining bodies vacillates between small micro-movements barely visible on the outside, cyclical looping gestures and larger movements that appear more like “dancing”.

### **3.7 Soundwalk: A Way of Coming to Know the World**

As a secondary medium in addition to this monograph, I have created and recorded a site-adaptive, choreographed soundwalk. The term ‘site-adaptive’ was introduced in 1989 by Elise Bernhardt, founder of Dancing in the Streets, a New York City community-based dance organization, committed to presenting site-specific dance performances (Blau 1989 in Kloetzel 2017). Site-adaptive work reimagines the site-specific form as mobile and malleable, where “site-specific art focuse[s] on the physical and phenomenological readings of a site” (Kwon in Kloetzel 2017, 8). Choreographer and researcher Stephan Koplowitz “asserts that site-adaptive work “consists of two types of touring site work: pieces that utilize a set structure or score with content that adapts to sometimes quite different sites and pieces that are adapted for a series of similar sites and employ similar content” (Kloetzel 2017, 14). My soundwalk is an example of the first type of site-adaptive work Koplowitz identified as a work which adapts to differing



outdoor sites. A group that employs the site-adaptive framework is Eiko and Koma, two artists who began to experiment with performing at several similar or “generic” sites in the 1990s (Kloetzel 2017, 13). In their work *River* (1995), they float down a river on driftwood at sunset, engaging in movement “in relation to the log and one another” (Kloetzel 13). The work has been performed in eleven different bodies of water in the United States and Japan (Kloetzel 13). Like *River*, the score of the soundwalk was created in response to the site-specific practice which developed in response to the particularities of High Park, yet I chose to create a structure and score which is adaptive to different outdoor sites. I will discuss the reasoning behind the choice to frame the soundwalk in this context further in Chapter 6.

The walk engages inter-sensory modes of attunement, embodiment tasks and improvisational prompts supported by a sonic landscape created by producer and sound designer Matt Smith. I was interested to explore this medium as a choreographic dialogue with both tactile and poetic offerings, as an artistic extension of this emergent creation-as-research process where “the audience member can experience the site/work phenomenon on a fundamental, corporeal level enabling the individual to access a different type of knowing based on whole-body experience” (Hunter 112). Soundwalks are a sonic medium, described as a walk with a focus on listening to the environment and that were first developed in the 1970s by the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer. Visual artists and composers have used them as a medium, most notably Canadian visual artists Janet Cardiff and Georges Bures Miller and pioneering composer, Pauline Oliveros, whom I mentioned in Chapter 3. “Soundwalking” was an integral component of Oliveros’ work, where participants are invited to explore and attempt to understand, “the sociopolitical and sonic resonances of a particular location via the act of listening” (Kujala 2017). Research and work on soundwalking continues in 2023, through Simon Fraser

University's global World Soundscape Project (WSP), which began in the early 1970s with a team of researchers, under the guidance of Schafer (Kujala 2017).

The influence of soundwalks as an artistic modality in dance in Canada is evident as choreographers engage and reimagine the concept of the soundwalk as a participatory choreographic engagement (Justine Chambers 2018, Cara Spooner 2012, Susan Lee 2011) that might “shuffle context, broaden participants perception and draw attention to the many choreographic acts of the everyday” (Chambers n.d.). In 2015, Vancouver-based artist Justine Chambers' project *Choreography Walk* (2019), engaged eight dance/performance makers to develop fleeting choreographic works that “respond to ‘choreography as a way of seeing the world’” (Chambers). I chose the creation of a soundwalk as a medium because walking became so central to the research as a useful tool and portal to expanding my (outdoor) body while exploring an ecosystem or environment and extending my research practice as choreography. As an everyday embodied action and mode of locomotion, transportation, exercise and leisure, I see walking as a vehicle which can carry the practice and invites participants to consider how it might continue forward in the everyday.

I had previously explored applying a choreographed score to a walk with a group of collaborators during a phase of choreographic research early in the pandemic in April 2020, as we explored ways to continue working together during the height of covid lockdowns. This walk disseminates the practice to others beyond the written monograph. In chapter 6 I discuss the content of the walk in more detail, as part of the discussion of the impacts and outcomes of the research. In the chapters to follow I combine the procedural knowledge, the “know-how” with the “know-what”, my reflections and the theory of “know-that” to articulate further the affects of



the dancing practice, to create definitional anchors, discussing the impacts of practicing these engagements to enliven bodies and build worlds.

## **Chapter 4. Earned Presence and an Expanded Habitus**

### **4.1 The Habitual and Attuning Otherwise**

In this chapter, I explore how an embodied, communicative field with more-than-human bodies becomes possible and begins to take shape, inhibiting and intervening with habitual modes of attention. The chapter articulates a necessary step in the procedure, as part of the articulation of the practice, which posits that attuned, improvised dance systems are a way of undoing modern habits of attention and in this specific practice, to re-orient to the more-than-human. This re-oriented notion of the habitual, using dance enacts what Hansen describes as “relational capacity building”, which has the potential to “gently begin to address interpersonal, intergenerational, and environmental dissociation” (2022, 6, 3). I continue to dialogue between my experiential writing and movement notes to explore habitual modes of somatic attention before, during and after the period of research to explore this expansion of relational availability. I posit that this work inside of dance may be transferable to participants available to engage and experiment with a practice of “earned presence” through perceptual kinaesthetic attunement and embodiment practice (Hansen 2022, 5).

The challenge I encountered, to slow down in beginning this research, highlights a modern habitual mode of attention and awareness. I also encounter habituated impulses in movement, formed by my training, choreographic tendencies, and embodied, lived patterns of comfort. In Pierre Bourdieu’s model of *habitus* (1977), where our bodily orientations toward the world have been built through what is our familiar, learned cultural and social understandings, through our constructed, lived sensory worldview and embodied ways of knowing the world, “we can link habits to what is unconscious and routine, or what becomes “second nature”” (Ahmed 2006, 129). We might consider our collective habitus, in the West as having formed in

dialogue with conventional scientific logic, and a colonial, capitalistic worldview, privileging individual humanist commitments, and dualist mind-body, nature-culture delineations. Through this habitus, we register and engage the body as a mechanism, a machine, and nature as a resource to be mined and extracted from.

The practice becomes a place to observe these habitual commitments and develop a reflective awareness of the senses and body in motion. I feel my speed, my short attention span, my transactional nature and the ways this rate of engagement holds me in a specific rhythm and parasympathetic nervous system state. The practice is a place to examine these embodied, relational habits and enact the possibilities for moving, sensing and dancing otherwise. Dancing with the site is a place to explore, “the possibilities that art can bring to the dialogue between humans and their environments” (Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009, 22). Middelow (2018) speaks to what iterative practice can offer, exploring improvisational possibilities which are born of habit “while at the same time repeated engagement illuminates and potentially alter habitual responses in creative and insightful ways” (66). I begin with exploring the broader habits of attention and awareness I experience and shift to discussing habits in movement as they show up inside dance practice. I posit that through attending to both realms of the habitual, using an improvised system of practice, an enduring shift to habitual responses and relational awareness is possible.

## **4.2 Habitus and Alternate Forms of Attention**

In chapter 3, I explored the necessity to slow my racing attention, instead moving at the rate of my awareness and presence, as essential to begin to undo the habitual. The labour of cultivating the temporality of deep attention, functions as an intervention towards this undoing, towards building new relational modes and habits for seeing, listening, dialoguing, and dancing with. My

everyday quotidian and habitual mode of attention moves with urgency, racing and lurching forward, out of the present moment. This sense of urgency is reflected through a mind-body process, which is transactional, disassociated, lacking awareness from present experience and moves with a disengaged restlessness. I feel this habitual rhythm pulling and pushing my attention, my body and my nervous system daily, and it is through practice with the more-than-human that I am able to find alternate rhythms, flows and tangents. To imagine how our habits could transform through this reaching for more-than-human bodies, we might follow Sara Ahmed's thinking, where our bodies follow and take the shape of the actions in which we engage; "If habits are about what bodies do, in ways that are repeated, then they might also shape what bodies can do" (2006, 130). Following this, a mind-body process of urgency shapes engagement and what my body "can do" and to *whom* it is available. This artistic experiment which takes place in immersion with more-than-human bodies allows for ways of thinking, sensing and dancing with other beings, which transcend and challenge this formed modern habitus "through imaginative, poetic, sensory, and empathic contact" (de Souza Junior 2021, 6). This practice necessitates noticing and engaging with what has become second nature; my "dispositions, and tendencies, acquired by the frequent repetition of an act" and with iterative practice, work to bring awareness *toward* these habits (Ahmed 2006, 130). Through practice, I work directly with re-moulding these forms of behaviour; massaging them, moving around them, considering them, engaging them, in a collaborative co-labour with the environment imagining and constructing new possibilities, where my body might take on articulated shapes of new relational actions (Ahmed 130). The action, in this case, is the dance practice, which is formed in response to the utterances of the flora and fauna bodies in the park.

I experience a sense of embodied, fleshy inter-sensory saturation, which I describe as “joyful disorientation”. “I experience effort, I reach for bodies, textures, sensations. Things begin to blur into one another, responses become instantaneous, and the effort softens. I feel as though my sensory organs are everywhere, my skin can smell the air, my eyes can feel the heat, and my ears can see the clouds. This is disorienting but also deeply pleasurable. Moving from this place of saturation I feel a kind of bodily attention which is so joyful” (19.08.22). A form of re-orientating which is both pleasurable and challenging in some ways, as I experience a mode of relational being which is drastically different from my everyday habitual mode of sensory engagement. A colleague once described a kind of “perceptual drunkenness” akin to chemically assisted psychedelic experiences where the world is felt deeply in the physical body in ways which circumvent conventional logic and norms of the everyday. My bodily orientations have been built through what is *my* familiar; a constructed lived sensory worldview and embodied ways of knowing and moving through my lived experience, learned cultural and social understandings, embodied training and perceptual skill building. In my practice, I look to trouble the inherited ‘familiar’ (to me) frame of the material West, and orient counter to the dominant logic, of modern, late-stage capitalism, with its troubling “hierarchical oppositions between persons and things, minds and bodies, cultures and nature(s)” (Astor-Aguilera and Harvey 2019, 2). Instead, I embrace a relational ethos of the messy, amorphous, and emergent logic of life. I posit that it is possible to develop skills and systems with which to practice so that we might stop overlooking the difficult-to-fathom, seen and unseen phenomena which surround us. These engaged practices have the potential to transform our transactional bodies, our relations and by extension our worlds.

### 4.3 A System for Intervening and Inhibiting

My performance generating system engages critically with observing habituated responses using the practices of attunement to engage inter-sensory possibility, increasing awareness, receptivity and sensory articulation. The practice utilizes scores to shape and form responses, followed by a sustained repetition of the emergent movement, used to observe iterative change. The cognitive focus required to manage multiple tasks within this process of continual self-analysis and the navigation of choice-making brings about new alternate pathways to be with and dance with the more-than-human world. The system demands critical observation of habitual impulses and embodied memory, gained through the habitus (including years of formal movement training), through implicit and explicit learning. Upon noticing habitual impulses, I engage with present moment stimulus offered by the environment; the way the light comes through the canopy of the trees, the sound of a woodpecker nearby, the felt pulse moving from the ground into my feet, to interrupt, intervene and inhibit these impulses, making a different choice when they arrive. The practice engages with constant discovery and change, as one of the scores I utilize; “insist and adapt, insist and adapt” demonstrates and demands of the mover. In short, this work to stay with and to listen to the qualities and affects of the bodies within the site, offer a pathway to reshape, retool and reimagine my habitus.

I experience the practice as a potent tool to navigate and transform my habits, cognitive processes, and develop a heightened presence. This experience is echoed loudly in Hansen’s thorough research on performance-generating systems as a transformative practice. In a mixed method study combining dance studies, educational psychology and behavioural economics (2019), she found that engaging in multiple competing tasks as part of a score can disrupt and manipulate the implicit processes cultivated through dance training and choreographic learning;

“When redirecting attention, shifting between task parameters, and working actively on the problems these tasks present it is not possible to rely primarily on memory. The added task continuously renews the dancers’ attention to present sensory information and keeps them consciously at work” (47). This “conscious work” heightens executive functions which include “fluidity, attention, attention shifting, inhibition, problem-solving, and cognitive flexibility” (46). These functions “support a person’s ability to sustain attention over time, control the direction of their attention, regulate and plan their behaviour, consider options, manipulate conditions, and shift between parameters (e.g., task rules and conditions) in order to generate new responses” (47). The work to inhibit habitual responses “triggers a process of unlearning and adapting memory, again through conscious attention” (49). Hansen’s discoveries with this research resonate with my lived experience of engaging and practicing my system, where I observe “a recalibration of kinaesthetic perception that leads to different response possibilities” (49). For me in this research, the recalibration allows me to hear and sense others reaching for me and I begin to consider and embody a response through dance.

#### **4.4 Considering Knowing and Not-Knowing**

I excitedly move towards not-knowing while in practice. It is something which I find deeply liberating about engaging in art practice, in that it allows me to be with the emergence of the moment and the excitement of novel discovery. I cannot “know” if the white pine tree, I am dancing with is reaching for me in some capacity, which I might not have the ability to understand. I imagine it is reaching, I sense a kind of “touch” and I feel *something* as a result of arresting rational logic. I choose to go with to explore what is possible in this place of discovery. This is a commitment to sit in wonder, awe, surprise and mystery, as essential to dissolve my



siloed ways of sensing and arrive at these otherwise places. This is a conscious labour and something to intentionally *work on* and *with*. The willingness to engage with new forms of knowing, and not knowing provide another opening to engaging phenomena which by our Western, scientific metrics remain unreachable and imperceptible. I return to the necessity of engaging curiosity as I consider how my sensory systems open to such porousness, articulation and possibility. Loveless (2019) discusses curiosity as an essential “libidinal drive” inside of research-creation which “hovers at the intersection of knowing and not knowing, belonging and not” (47). The capacity to be with these liminal states of transition and swim in *not knowing* is essential to begin to undo the modern habitus I described. Rather than working to make knowledge legible to “scientific rationalism”, what if we stay for a while with what we imagine to be impossible, unknowable, and or out of reach? (Myers 2018b, 75). Alternatively, this staying with not knowing and accepting possible failure or critique, opens us to new registers and responses in the body, new ways of seeing, hearing and sensing. Myers (2018b) speaks about the necessity to engage the unknown as an ethic and responsibility, she writes, “Not knowing is not about cultivating ignorance or indifference. Rather it is a capacious and humbling space that offers some refuge from the hubris of knowledge systems—like ecology—that are bound so tightly to colonial conquests, discursive regimes, cultural norms, and moral economies that have too long dictated what is good, valuable, and true” (76). This is a paradigm shift in a way of doing and knowing which leaves me with a sense of possibility and hope, considering what we might discover if we move through the world with this kind of openness or perhaps simply to notice what has been with us all along. Bringing us closer to these unknowable phenomena which our habitual, learned ways of engaging, have kept at a muted distance. My hope is that this practice contributes to this act of collective reaching toward the unknowable and allows more-

than-human bodies to come closer, to being heard, felt and seen. I return to a discussion of not knowing, as a valuable form of discovery in dialogue with phenomenology in the next chapter.

#### **4.5 Articulation and Growing a Sensitive World**

I discover that more sensory and kinaesthetic information is available once in practice, in movement and in dance. The body's sensory organs become more sensitive, receptive, and articulate, seeming to grow bigger and further reaching. This shift acts as yet another aspect of undoing the habitual and re-orienting to this heightened mode of relating. "Once movement comes in, I notice further availability of sensation, phenomena, input. Movement, dancing, and improvising allows for further, deeper openings" (07.09.22). I experiment and explore, carried by impulses both within and without. As part of my joyful disorientation, I experience a state I would describe as sensory saturation, where input rushes in, senses begin to blur, and the affectual resonances seem to move faster. I feel my body like a porous sponge or permeable entity where sight, sound, smell, touch and a sense of the otherworldly join and overlap, to extend the realm of what is possible to sense and know. I sense a widening of awareness. "Once I'm in movement, improvising, experimenting, exploring, it's as though the depth of perception expands beyond the visible toward the imperceptible" (30.09.22). My body expands in all directions, a lateral widening, a sinking below the ground, extending upwards into the air, reaching for things I'm not sure I can accurately describe with language. The practice follows a complex, emergent track, following non-human rhythms, polyrhythms, flows, and tangents. Through the expansion and "articulation" of my sensory organs and my "learning to be affected", the practice "is a progressive enterprise that produces at once a sensory medium and a sensitive world" (Latour 2004, 210). For Bruno Latour (2004) "articulation" is "to be affected by

differences”, “to have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning ‘effectuated’, moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or non-humans” (205). Latour’s conception of articulation resonates with my experience with this practice: I felt my body, and my sensory organs grow more articulate and expansive with practice. It is with my growing, evolving, articulate sensory faculties that I can sense and dance with others, my body and sensory organs grow to be affected by these differences.

During this practice, I become aware of a habitual numbness to the accumulation of the environmental disturbance continually unfolding all around me, while I/we navigate this challenging moment of human geological disruption. Along with the felt bodily sensations I experience; it is impossible in moments not to feel a sense of loss and grief pulsing throughout the changing landscape. I work to notice this strange new world and I stretch my “imagination to grasp its contours” (Tsing 2015, 3). The Ridout stormwater pond at the north end of Spring Creek emits a strong sulphurous stench in the warm summer months and along heavily used paths visitors litter their used masks, trash and dog poop bags. The park is littered with fallen trees, some literally hanging onto each other for life, others long fallen, rotting and strewn across the paths, waiting for removal or to be left to become a part of the forest or savannah floor. During this process, I experience another kind of articulation, not only sensory but an emotive awakening, where my numbness to this sense of loss begins to thaw. There is a complexity that opens, that widens where there is excitement, possibility and beauty, and I simultaneously experience the darker registers; loss, grief, irritation or even anger. In colleague and artist-researcher Julia Aplin’s creation as research MES thesis, exploring her dance practice with “arboreal kin”, practicing with the trees in High Park, she describes feeling “the disrespect of humans who let their dogs off leash to dig up the delicate sandy soils. Of course, many humans

care about the park but I witnessed people littering, and even pulling down living branches. On a larger scale, spending time with this small patch of surviving trees, I felt the loss of entire ecosystems” (forthcoming 2023). One particular day during practice when I was having a challenging time focusing, I found a moment of earthly connection at the Ridout pond. I was aware of these two competing registers, drawn by the water’s fluid and calming quality, and simultaneously taking in its problematic and toxic odour. When I pay attention, what arrives is an awareness of the degradation, abuse and disregard for more-than-human bodies. The awareness, acknowledgement and inclusion of this sense of loss is essential to begin to engage more responsibly and ethically with our changing world.

Through this process of articulation, a relational dialogue with the world becomes available. The impacts of this are lasting. It seems once I have opened this door and had this experience of both wonder and loss, I cannot unknow it. This earned presence, to use Hansen’s term is enduring long after practice. It’s as if I carry this newly formed sensitivity, curiosity and articulation forward with me, beyond the research period, extending into my everyday actions and interactions. It is through a rigorous engagement with this emergent and iterative practice of embodied relationality, that I begin to unlearn, undo and inhibit my habitus, and reach for an expanded habitual; reforming what becomes second nature. I consider myself in relation to. I pay attention more deeply. To arrive in these states, I employed ways of doing, moving and dialoguing that necessitate deep curiosity, decision-making, care and openness to explore, arresting what has habitually formed, as a way of moving through and sensing in a human-centric and hyper-individualistic world. I return to Ahmed, quoting Merleau-Ponty, to consider that “the habitual body is a body that acts in the world, where actions bring other things near”, as a gesture of the ways we can grow *with* things, with other bodies (2006, 130). With this practice

I am looking to do just this, to grow *with* other bodies rather than trample *over* them. This process of bringing things near builds alternate pathways to habitually formed ways of being, growing an articulate and responsive body in dialogue with a sensitive world filled with living more-than-human others.

The word curiosity appears over and over in my practice notes, and the cultivation of curiosity itself is perhaps central to this practice of enlivening bodies and building worlds. Attending to my curiosity, as a libidinal drive, I'm reminded of the root of the word curiosity, which is "to care" (Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, 1996). In this research, driven by embodied curiosity, attending to the practice of sustained deep attention and holding space for both grief and wonder, translates to a cultivation of *deep embodied care* for the other. For Anna Tsing (2015), our curiosity is "the first requirement of collaborative survival in precarious times" (2). To add this thought, I return to Kloetzel and Pavlik's hypothesis of site dance practice as a labour of attending to, where choreographers "establish a connection to place that inspires tending to that place" (2009, 7). For Kloetzel and Pavlik, "the concept of tending to place suggests a stewardship component to the site process" (2009, 7). To explore the kind of tending I experienced rooted in care, curiosity and reciprocity, we might look to the meaning of 'attend'. Emerging from the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century, which is to "take care of, wait upon", as helpful in working to attune to, pay attention to and deeply consider the places where we walk, dance, work and play (Etymology Online). Privileging this sense of care, I dance an expanded habitual where an individual, discreet, transactional body becomes an attentive, curious, relational being who actively moves with others and is deeply aware of their impact on and in space. I revisit to the notion of cultivating responsible engagement in Chapter 6.



**Figure 4-1** Ridout pond, High Park research documentation.

## **Chapter 5. Fleshy Overlaps and Arriving to The Clearing**

### **5.1 Phenomenology in Action as Worlding**

Through developing a practice of phenomenology in action, I articulate the experience that emerged through body-world attunement, deep listening and inter-sensory play. I describe an emergent and affective experience, a co-labour with the environment that brings me *somewhere*; somewhere unfamiliar, somewhere otherwise. I will describe the relational patterns that emerged for me, first describing exchanges and dances with the more-than-human, followed by a description of how this improvised dance system functions as a practice to arrive at new states, an altered engagement with the hard-to-fathom world, shifting my habitual awareness.

I explore my practice in conversation with existing phenomenological concepts as definitional anchors that resonate with my experiential writing. Throughout my coursework, during my first year of study, and into my own research and writing, I had the opportunity to fluidly move between embodied research and practice. The two concepts I describe and discuss in this chapter were being worked on and developed while I was reading academic texts. I would discover concepts which I found helped to describe and communicate the ways in which I was experiencing these elusive experiences and how they were functioning. These theoretical anchors support this figuration of improvised, embodied practice in dialogue with the more-than-human world, as an intervention “affecting relational change” and a process of feminist worlding (Hansen 2022, 3). I continue to articulate this worlding process of enmeshment, where “Reparative acts of becoming-with invoked through performative and somatic dance practices engage dancers, material entities and audience members in experiences that, temporarily, configure the world differently” (Hunter 2022, 316-17).



As I introduced in Chapter 2, Fraleigh and Middelow's work connecting improvisation and the phenomenology of dance grounds the practice, as does Neimanis' posthuman feminist phenomenology in *Bodies of Water* (2017), which speaks to "a deep attentiveness to the ways in which I am embodied, and to how this corporeality matters in/as the world" (30). I articulate my experience and use Neimanis's text to explore resonances with Merleau-Ponty's work on the body, specifically the concepts of chiasm and flesh of the world as a version of worlding, where the body, in co-creation with the world, is "constantly transforming" (Neimanis 48).

Additionally, I expand upon the use of repetition in practice leaning on Heidegger's concept of the clearing (*Lichtung*) using Jay Goulding's, hermeneutic phenomenology<sup>10</sup>, as a "portal to other dimensions" (Goulding 2021). I pick up Goulding's prompt to move from rehearsing these concepts to focusing on what to "do with them by *moving through* phenomenology to thought", and from thought to improvised embodied practice (Goulding 2021, 1, emphasis added). I explore the concept of the "clearing," which for me, emerges through rigorous repetition inside of improvised systems of dancing, as a space of possibility and stillness. I arrive to an otherwise state, outside of my familiar, bringing "shape to the invisible—not simply the visible" (Goulding 2021, 14). These concepts describe different aspects of the practice and provide definitional anchors reflected within my own research process and assist in discussing the resulting insights that emerged.

Through my practice notes, I share what I saw, felt, intuited, heard and danced through my lived body, in an attempt to articulate this seamless flow. For Fraleigh (1991) one of the central "purposes of phenomenological description is to build toward meaning" where "others

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<sup>10</sup> Goulding's hermeneutic phenomenology, largely explores the resonances between the work of Martin Heidegger and Daoist philosophies, see Goulding, *Cheng and Gadamer: Daoist Phenomenology* (Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 2021)

may be able to see what you see, or at least understand what you see” (14). To explore the spaces between the known and the unknown, “the hard-to-fathom phenomena” I look to phenomenology as a field of inquiry to articulate experiences and phenomena that live outside Western scientific norms where “the world is a seamless flow of visible and invisible” (Neimanis 2017, 43; Goulding 2003, 390). I use phenomenological description and with curiosity and play, I “dig down” into language and my moving body, to dialogue with phenomenology’s rich and complex offerings. I use hermeneutics to interpret text, explore the spaces between, see beyond where I am, and break linearity to find what lies underneath language (Goulding 2021). I propose a resonance between hermeneutics and the functions of improvised movement toward these ends, as a form of excavation, allowing for altered ways of being to emerge. Like phenomenology, this practice does not look for the definitive and absolute but rather remains with questions, offering the possibility for generative, expanded ways of being.

The first section of the chapter focuses on what dialogues the entwining of bodies makes possible, and follows with a discussion of where I *arrive*, through a practice of repetition. In line with Neimanis’s thinking, I lean on Merleau-Ponty to understand what it means to be embodied in this shared world and imagine phenomenology as compatible with the post-human feminist project as an embodied experience which “can be *accessed*, *amplified*, and *described*” (Neimanis 2017, 49). I have worked to *access* procedural knowledge through practices of attunement, to *amplify* through the generation and repetition of improvised dance systems and *describe* this process through experiential writing.



**Figure-5-1** Amanda Acorn dancing with poplar seed, research documentation.

## 5.2 Entwining with the More-Than-Human

“I can feel the environment reaching back, creating a resonance within me. Vibrating inside me” (21.09.22). Through kinaesthetic attunement to the world, and dancing my improvised system, I experience the expanding articulation of the body, as an act of reaching and widening. Through the process of attuning, it becomes possible to meet, entwine and engage in dialogue with other beings. There is a felt effect of this attuning to the environment in High Park with all its bodies. A field of resonance exists between us (me, the bodies of the seen and the unseen) and in this field, I sense “things,” the immaterial, “hard to fathom phenomena” (Neimanis 2017, 43). I follow and respond to the smallest flicker of an impulse moving through my body, a somatic logic that flows between my body and the bodies that surround me. I follow the rhythms that I feel from the earth, and the ground, I dance with that rhythm, exploring the overlap (chiasm) of my body and the propulsion emerging from where we meet. Standing in the savannah, under the hot sun, “a subtle energetic quality emerges from the meeting of body and ground, body and wind, body and grass... The rhythmical quality I sense is a slow rolling hum, a spiralling, a consistent vibration” (04.06.22). Dancing these practices of entwining, I genuinely feel an exchange, where a dialogue, a communication of sorts has occurred between my feet and the earth below.

In the first section of the chapter, I focus on my experiences of entwining with more-than-human bodies and the resonances found with Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of flesh of the world and chiasm, as a co-labour of movement generation, which produces relational change. Through a continuation of these intersubjective exchanges and co-creations, new worlds may be built through transforming dialogues. Neimanis uses the language of feminist scholars Karen Barad and Donna Haraway to describe “co-worlding” as a collaborative process that is always

emergent (34). Our “various bodily interfaces – biology and mood and culture and context – are always co-worlding the phenomenon we come to know as our bodies (Neimanis 34). Through shifting the way I pay attention, and whom my attention is with, I experience this act of embodied co-worlding through a dialogic dance practice. Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to understand what it is to be embodied is a helpful source for “developing a posthuman understanding of corporeality, but also offers a method for getting back to the body through the resources of our bodies and their various kinds of experiential knowledges” (Neimanis 2017, 44).

I explore this embodied interrogation as a generative mode, a being that hums with aliveness, in curious dialogue with bodies, both human and non-human as “open and permeable” (Neimanis 48). I propose that the body I arrive to practice at the park with is not the same body with which I leave. This encounter, this co-labour of permeable bodies changes me. This altered, articulated body brings the resonances of my dancing partners with me when I leave them. I must also imagine that I leave my own resonances there, on site, shared with the beings in the park. I extend the bounds of my sensuous body and sentient knowing to generate a system of practice that reimagines and reconstructs what is possible within embodied relationships. Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm “presents us with a body that emerges from various debts and connections to other bodies, whereby bodies are always chiasmically entwined with the world” (Neimanis 43).

In this pressing moment of environmental precarity “a posthuman phenomenology can put us in better contact with our bodies as implicated in those hard-to-fathom phenomena” (Neimanis 43). I experience the ability of my body to engage with and respond to these phenomena which begins our collaboration into what is possible. I cultivate a phenomenological “wonder in the face of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xiii). I not only cultivate but practice this wonder in action, as I follow my bodily curiosities. An arresting of analytical approaches

becomes possible through the practice of an improvised movement system, which allows me to not only imagine but embody my “lived experience as decentred” (Neimanis 42). I work actively to decenter myself as the primary motivation for this practice as I begin moving. I endeavour to practice a kind of surrender to what I feel, sense and receive from the oaks, the wild grasses, and the sounds of the roaring cicadas or birds overhead. I slow down, I wait for input from the environment, and I allow myself to *be moved* by what appears to me as I listen deeply, look with synesthetic curiosity, and sense the aliveness of my permeable skin in contact with the oak leaves, bark or reaching roots. As I reach toward and for these more-than-human bodies, they become an extension of my skin, my own sensory organs grow to include them more fully.

In my movement notes, I write of this mutual entwining, “the movement of the space became my movement. My movement became the movement of the space” (06.09.22). Inside these practices, I feel a palpable exchange, where dialogue has occurred, in a body which is constantly transforming. “For Merleau-Ponty, the same operations that enact an embodied consciousness also guarantee that the body is never a static or stable entity,” which speaks to this state of constant becoming (Neimanis 48). “This understanding emerges most strongly in what Merleau-Ponty (1968, 149) calls the flesh of the world – a ‘mesh’ of elemental being in which all beings participate, entangle, and entwine” (Neimanis 48). He also refers to this intertwining of bodies as “chiasm – not a ‘fusion or coinciding of’ body and world, but rather, an ‘overlapping or encroachment’ such that ‘things pass into us, as well as we into the things’” (Ponty 1968 cited in Neimanis 2017, 49). I experienced this co-labour, this fleshy overlap of bodies during practice, what Neimanis imagines as Merleau-Ponty’s version of worlding, “a co-labour of body and world” (49). Through these exchanges, both material and immaterial, I can feel the environment

reaching back towards me, a mutual reverberation “creating a resonance within me. Vibrating inside me” (21.09.22).

I’m both curious about and cautious of the impact of my presence as “overlapping or encroaching” to use Merleau-Ponty’s words (1968, 133). In my notes following practice, I write; “What is the impact, the reverberation of my presence? As I’m reaching for deeper listening to the space and bodies around me, am I also deeply felt by the space, the bodies here?” (06.09.22). I sense that my presence is also felt. I have an impact here. I’m greeted by and acknowledged by creatures in the park; small, tiny caterpillars crawl on my t-shirt, squirrels and chipmunks pause on their paths to acknowledge my presence. I had an encounter in the park with a deer, one day in early June, the only time I’ve seen a deer in the park. I was practicing deep in the Woodlands on the eastern border of the park, between Bloor and High Park Boulevard, on a day when I was particularly struggling to arrest my thinking, analytical brain. I was seated on a log with my eyes closed, trying to drop into embodied listening and I heard what I assumed was a dog off-leash approaching on a trail but instead opened my eyes to see an adult deer about 15 feet away from me. I sat in stillness while we looked at each other for a long while. I could sense the frozen state of the animal, as it held its body completely still. The deer didn’t seem to take a breath or move its eyes for several minutes. I felt the same paralysis in my body as we occupied the space together. I was cautious not to startle the animal, so as to continue with this rare moment of proximity to such a creature. I had never seen a deer in the park before and was surprised and somehow touched by the encounter. I gradually softened my breath and began to move my eyes. I practiced my sensing-with, with this creature’s body, attuning to it, reaching for it, while also remaining still to not frighten it away. After a long while of sitting with the deer, in this soft observation, I carefully changed my position, facing it more fully with my whole body. Shortly



thereafter, it gently began eating leaves and grasses again and softly traversing through the woodlands. In this and the other exchanges I am describing, I engaged responsibly with care, at least I endeavoured to engage in this way, so as to not disturb or cause harm.

Throughout my research I began questioning, how the non-human beings in the park, were receiving me and my dancing *with* them. Did they invite this exchange? Would they invite me to convene and communicate with them? Choreographer and researcher Sasha Kleinplatz explored the notions of consent-based unison as part of multispecies dance practice in her MA research project, *We Move Together or Not at All: Consent Practice as Choreography and Its Flourishings* (2021), where dancers performed in a greenhouse with various forms of plant life. Kleinplatz asked similar questions with this project, wondering if/how the plants could consent to be part of the work she was undertaking (42). It seems impossible to answer these questions definitively, yet in my own practice, I continued to pause to wonder and await a kind of felt “response” of sorts. For Kleinplatz, this consideration informed the direction of her work, the choreography, scoring, performance and technical management of her project (42). I can’t know how my presence lands with the other, but by engaging in this practice, asking these questions and awaiting a response, what was previously a one-sided awareness becomes an exchange rooted in care, where I am cultivating a more responsible, curious, and reciprocal relationship with the living world.



**Figure 5-2,** Amanda Acorn dancing in the savannah, research documentation.

Over time, the field between my physical body and the bodies of the environment seemed to grow smaller. I came to know the sensation of porosity, the border of the body becoming more open. With every practice, this became easier to connect with the bodies around me, my skin, more open and my senses more articulate and available to experience a relational change. “I’m observing the space between myself and the entities which populate this environment. I’m attending to the *space between* as an extension of two overlapping, meeting bodies” (25.05.22). This is a space which is co-created. A space where the environment comes to act upon my body, “in a space where I act upon the world and the world acts upon me” (31.05.22). I felt shifted, physically by these exchanges, sensing my nervous system in response, I felt different afterwards. I felt more settled, grounded, and present. I imagine a sensitive, embodied human presence which has the capacity to impact the “nervous systems” of the more-than-human world, to a similar effect. What if our bodily presence had the capacity to *support* the vitality and vibrancy of place as an act of reciprocity? What would the potential impacts of this be?

### **5.3 Repetition and Improvising to the Clearing**

As I have introduced, repetition is a central pillar of the practice, and here I posit that repetition itself is an important mode that brings me into otherwise states. The sensations, rhythms, and vibrations that arrive because of this entwining multispecies dialogue become movements which I follow, repeat and experiment with. This movement feels not mine alone, but rather a shared expression, a collaboration developed through entwining with the various bodies, I am dancing with. After practice and dancing in a small clearing in the woodlands, I write, “I sense a moving momentum that is dialogic, not fixed or linear” (06.13.22). This is a momentum that is unpredictable, and responsive to present conditions. When I am in the throes of improvised

dancing, I am following an emergent and non-linear logic, an embodied felt sense that moves through my tissues in dialogue with the environment. “This dialogue attends to the present shifting moment, my curiosity and the emerging evolving impulses at play” (06.13.22). I dance with felt energies and impulses, engaging both tangible physical sensations and imagined forces, which push and pull my body into space by these felt currents. I move through loops and repetitions, like a revving engine, building kinetic energy from which to be propelled into space and beyond. Repetition is a central theme which appears at different scales of amplification in my body. Repetitions evolve as larger cycling and looping patterns, offering sweeping movements through space and directional pulls, connecting outwards, as well as smaller vibrational and revving micro-movements at a small scale. These micro-movements are more contained in the body and work with the subtlety of the cellular, for example. I imagine the cells of my left lung, in dialogue with the cells of the tree bark, as a somatic prompt. The specificity and depth of this proposal guide my attention to the minutia of something perhaps, or previously through to be impossible to sense and move from.

This dancing inquiry unfolds as I repeat what is emerging; looping movements with deeper attention, following sensation, following a flow, repeating the loop, allowing for change, all the while insisting on unending repetitions. I repeat to myself the direction “insist and adapt, insist and adapt, insist and adapt...”. I employ soft rigour inside of the repetitions, a practice of unrelenting specificity which also allows for responsive and fluid change. The repetition exists as a kind of expanding excavation, a cyclical dance which digs down into my body, my experience, and my sensation. The repetition of these vibrational, rhythmic loops and patterns, expands my capacity to sense my interiority and the sensitive outside world; deepening, and digging into, what is emerging both within and without. These loops and repetitions lull and soften a cognitive analytic

chatter, edging closer towards a “clearing”, a space for quiet, for illumination, for a break in density, which brings spacious, non-linear truths into being (Goulding 2003, 362). “I feel myself *with* these vibrations, affected by what I can sense in my body and in space, an imperceptible life force, energies and currents within. These currents present within me as sensation, movement, pulls and pushes, spirals and pulses. Tiny micro-impulses that feel almost cellular. They grow and amplify by paying attention to them and by responding” (09.21.22).

Heidegger’s concept of the clearing (*Lichtung*) operates as another definitional anchor to describe the state in which I arrive through my improvised practice. Heidegger uses the metaphor of a happened upon clearing in the woods, an open space where the light shines through and there is space for Being, a space “from which to cultivate stillness at the centre of motion” (Goulding 2003, 364). The etymology of the word *clear* comes from the French word, *cler* (of sight) meaning pure, bright, and the Latin, *clarus* (of sound) which means bright, illustrious, pure, and loud (Skeat 1888, 113). “As I dance and move these bodily sensations grow, expand, become more pronounced, beginning to follow a track of their own. Surprises emerge, and change takes place. I lose track and find myself in places I couldn’t anticipate” (21.09.22). I connect Heidegger’s clearing to *where* I arrive through following the improvised system, an otherwise state of awareness, transcending the habitual, where what is hidden, forgotten or taken for granted can come to light. Where what is perceived produces something in me through a practice of attuned bodily relation to it. In this practice of improvising, I intentionally engage with the *spaces between*; knowing and not knowing, doing and not doing, seeing and not seeing, hearing and not hearing. From these spaces between knowing and doing arise emergent, potent embodiments which dwell inside these spaces. From this mode of body thinking I can perceive, create, respond, and move differently, I can “understand by not understanding, do by not doing,

see by not seeing” (Goulding 392). I dance and follow non-human rhythms and tempos. This is a mode which re-orientates temporally, spatially, and affectively, allowing for openings, where I happen upon my own clearings. As a result, realms beyond rational certainty come closer.

As I write these moments, they feel obvious in their descriptions but my lived experience of them is profoundly touching to me. To be moved in these ways, where I can arrest my thinking, and follow different logics, I sense the possibilities of opening to new ways of being. “I feel pulled by different areas of the savannah. The way the wind is moving a field of tall grasses, calls me into it. I go and stand in the grasses and pause, waiting for a resonance, a call, a pull, to present in my awareness. I immediately feel and sense the sway of the grasses, acting, pulling and drawing my body into a shared dialogue” (09.15.22). I sway and undulate, I move at rhythms and tempos co-created with the grasses. “The experience of moving with the grasses makes me aware of myself as part of the environment. I move with, sense with, sway with” (09.15.22). I feel freedom in these moments of a kind of call and response. These moments of contact in this otherwise state, to listen and see and feel in this way, is a profound relief. A relief to yield to these places between, to slow, to wait, to arrest my habitual thrust and engage in these sensitive moments of engagement.

Embodied creation as research processes, as lines of fluid and non-linear inquiry require different perspectives about what it is to gain knowledge. Examining what it is to know through the body, we might look to the etymology of the word understand. To know is to understand, *under* meaning to be below, beneath or within, and *stand* meaning to be stationary or still, to rest, endure or remain (Skeat 1888). To understand is then to be beneath or within, in stillness, in rest. What a beautiful re-framing for embodying understanding, through this body thinking, not as an action-driven or willful exertion but rather as something we allow through quiet receptivity. For me the soft rigor of the improvised practice allows me to arrive in such a place. From this place of quiet

receptivity, I have access to a way of being that is in dialogue with a deep knowing, growing from my bones, flesh, fascia, and cells. To begin to touch into unseen realms, to attempt to know them, I must first unknow them in the ways I have come to habitually understand them. I get quiet and slow down, there is a rigorous process of attuning to and navigating my habitual impulses, I loop and repeat to arrive at a quiet receptivity, where I can let my body, in dialogue with others, do the thinking.

This practice of phenomenology in action asks us to explore beyond our preconceived, fixed ideas and individual embodiments. Enacting these practices mobilizes curiosities, embodies emergent discoveries, and moves them into circulation. In short, I feel changed by these fleshy exchanges in that I have room in my awareness for other bodies, not just to see, smell and acknowledge them, but to feel them reaching towards me, I take this in and relationally engage in the present moment. This engagement produces a shift in temporal rhythm which moves differently, attends to change, and creates more space for others. Space for a pause, a reflection, a consideration, an invitation to move forward together with a changed body. In the concluding chapter, following these descriptions of experience and of change, my attention turns toward what these cultivated practices can *do* in the world.





**Figure 6-1** trash left behind in woodland, High Park, research documentation.



## **Chapter 6. Mobilizing Bodies in Anthropocentric Ruins**

In this concluding chapter, I explore the impacts of this creation-as-research practice, extending out into the world through art and knowledge and why this matters now. I have described how I experience my practice of dancing with more-than-human bodies, as a co-labour of our overlapping flesh. The project imagines and articulates how to bring relational, responsible thinking and sensing to our everyday movements through the world while navigating the ruins of the so-called Anthropocene. I have argued that this dance practice forms new relational habits and described the embodied effects of entering into this multispecies dialogue.

The work enacts change at micro and macro levels, through forming new habits, first at the personal level for me, the practitioner and artist-researcher. It also acts as an intervention through creation-as-research at the institutional level of the academy. As for the macro, I speculate that if the practice were to be engaged with by many, the work has the potential to exert an impact, by re-orienting how bodies move together in the world. Martin proposes dance as a mobilization, using the analogy of the political protest, where bodies gather, have a shared embodied experience and leave altered, through a collective assemblage which invites us to take a different course, to move otherwise (2011, 30). He proposes that the dance in its practice and performance builds a social kinaesthetic that, “assemble[s], adhere[s], pass[es] through, align[s] and locomote[s]” (Martin 2011, 34). I consider the soundwalk as an experiential, site-adaptive choreography for solo audience members to walk and dance, align and locomote with the more-than-human. I engage with Kloetzel’s analysis of site dance practice as “active and probing” in order to “illustrate the political potential of site dance practice” (2019, 27).

I work to bring what Neimanis calls “theoretical agility to Anthropocene thinking” to unpack ways forward, using positionality and reflexivity to critically consider how power and privilege are integral to thinking through interconnection (2017, 165). As I conclude my research

and writing, I explore how this work extends outward and its potential impacts on relational, social and environmental change and how the creative component of this project, a choreographed soundwalk, works to disseminate and extend the impacts and reach of this interdisciplinary research.

### **6.1 Moving Inward and Outward: The Micro and Macro**

This dance practice mobilizes bodies in the here and now, as a practice that cultivates a responsive body that is deeply implicated in and indebted to its environment. It would be naïve to claim this practice and other practices like it as a singular solution to addressing the climate crisis, in a pragmatic or overt sense. This work does, however, contribute and run alongside a growing discourse and dialogue surrounding ecology and the role embodiment can play to re-orient the ways in which Western culture at large must urgently engage more responsibly with the natural world, many of whom I have referenced in this thesis.<sup>11</sup> If we hope to problem-solve the conditions of colonial and capitalist logics which have slowly produced this crisis over time, in any lasting capacity we must look to the *relations* that underly and have produced said conditions in the first place (Moore 2015). What are the relations which underly extractive systems? Human-centred, hyper-individualist values and systems have resulted in the continued extraction and commodification of the natural world with little consideration given to the impacts. I frame the cultivation of a responsive body as a possible beginning towards undoing this individualistic and transactional relational attitude. To engage in this labor of sensuous attunement, to develop embodied, relational dialogue with the living world, to sense and acknowledge my implication, is to begin to unravel my constructed worldview as part of the capitalist, colonial project. To be implicated is to acknowledge my responsibility and impact and

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<sup>11</sup> See Fraleigh, Myers, Neimanis, Harraway, Kimmerer

begin taking ownership of these entanglements. The felt sense of my implication within the environment brings my responsibilities as a visitor to the forefront. I shift my embodiments and actions to be more responsible toward tangible, potential outcomes on the land in which I live and work.

Many scholars have argued that the concept of the Anthropocene is inadequate in its scope, with its simplistic, stark nature-culture binary and universalist narrative when describing its impacts and also fails to consider the nuance and complexity of its wide implications (Chakrabarty 2009, Haraway 2016, Neimanis 2021, Head 2016). In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway alternatively proposes an epoch which suggests a “more enmeshed model of geo-political, geo-human engagement through which change may be invoked through a micro-macro set of relations between species and earthly ‘critters’” (Haraway 2016 cited in Hunter 2022, 33). As we cannot leave out the earthly critters, it is also problematic to speak of humanity as a monolith, while discussing the contribution to and impacts of this epoch as universally felt across continents. In analyzing how humanity has stumbled upon becoming geological agents of change and what should be done to combat and respond to this crisis, Chakrabarty (2009) “calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity” (222). The Western world must acknowledge these imbalances of power and privilege and take accountability and action in recognizing how our ways of living touch the lives of others, through the complex webs of our interconnection, economically, socially, politically and ecologically. “Across the globe, imbalances of power and dominant geo-political systems perpetuate environmentally and ecologically damaging practices such as deforestation, mineral and resource extraction that disadvantage certain groups (largely Indigenous and global majority populations, women and the poor) whilst advantaging others (largely white Western and male)” (Hunter 28). We are currently

living amongst rapidly accumulating geological change and it is from the reality of this position, that we must collaborate to figure out how to move forward. Tsing (2015) looks for what is emerging despite our changing geological context, for what is thriving, where “in a global state of precarity, we don’t have choices other than looking for life in this ruin” (6). As an artist-researcher, I endeavor to hold space for this complexity, to imagine ways forward and following Tsing, simultaneously accept the basic reality and “*possibility* of life in capitalist ruins” (2015 emphasis added). It is clear there is an urgency with which humanity must engage and act to respond to the conditions we are grappling with. I propose this begins with micro-movements, our sensory attunements, considering the ways we see, listen and acknowledge the world around us and respond, “bit by bit”, as Loveless suggests (119). Following sensing and responding, *act* we must.

It is my responsibility to tread softly within the park's delicate ecosystem and I felt this responsibility more acutely throughout this research. Through an invitation to find new depths within and toward others through this work, situated, embodied values and relational considerations emerge. Evidence of the historic lack of responsibility of visitors is everywhere if I’m paying attention. Sections of the park are fenced off to allow for the regeneration of plant life in sensitive and overused areas from excessive foot traffic and dogs running off-leash, or piles of garbage and dog poop bags left on tree stumps and gathering in waterways. It’s imperative to be honest with ourselves about our human impacts, as Stacy Alaimo challenges us to consider, the implications arising from what she describes as our “toxic bodies” (2010, 22). An acknowledgement of this impact may “provoke material, trans-corporeal ethics that turn from the disembodied values and ideals of bounded individuals towards an attention to situated, evolving

practices that have far-reaching and often unforeseen consequences for multiple people, species and ecologies” (Alaimo 2010, 22).

This practice is an intervention that employs multispecies collaboration to produce new ways of being in the body and with others. This phenomenological, creation-as-research moves in two directions, “intuitively inward through experiential descriptions and objectively outward toward theory” to create shared and nuanced understanding (Fraleigh 2018, 22). The complex problems of our modern era require multiple points of view that reflect this complexity and propose experimental strategies for engagement, problem-solving, and responses that offer change, at many registers, personal and systemic. It is through the hard work of earned presence and practicing soft rigour I expand my relational capacity and acknowledge my entanglements. This labour and acknowledgement builds toward lasting change, altering well-worn pathways, by opening imagination and possibility. One might criticize the intangible impacts of work such as this, at a time when urgent action and concrete policy changes are desperately needed within institutions and systems of power to address systemic harms and move toward more just futures. However, I do believe and have argued that this project contributes to developing deep attention, for multispecies meetings which grows the collective capacity for reciprocity, deeper relationality and relational accountability. These relational shifts contribute towards transforming our socio-cultural, socio-political engagements, through expanding embodied responsivity and exploring moving in the world otherwise. Following this same thread, Haraway similarly advocates for research practices that exist outside dominant frames to build connection and “new practices of imagination, resistance, revolt, repair, and mourning and living and dying well” (2016, 51). The forms in which this research project has taken shape, its embodied methods and

original artwork extend the potential impacts of this work to reach a broader audience outside the academy.

This is a practice that opens me to be in a relationship with the world that surrounds me differently. Thinking through dance provides a container that moves and keeps moving, I push and pull ideas, examine and explore a labor in collaboration, which through practice and repetition, moves beyond the ephemeral to become “inscribed on the body” (Nelson 2013, 42). The effects I have described throughout these chapters resonate with what Loveless (2019) argues research-creation has the potential to *do*, at its best: “to render each of us a little more capable, a little more care-filled, opening us onto new webs of sensorial attunement and nurturance” (107). May our practices, theoretical and kinetic, “persuade us to care and to care differently” and begin to be activated, articulated and ripple outward, playing out in our institutions, communities, relationships, and webs of connections, both human and non-human (Loveless 2019, 107). Indigenous cosmology carries a similar ethos while looking through a different lens. In “Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation” Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014), asserts that the power in theories/stories which move from “the ground up”, through the body, rests in their “living resonance within individuals and collectives” (7). In Nishnaabeg thought “theory” is not only for academics but for everyone and “it is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence and emotion, it is contextual and relational” (2014, 7). I imagine that art objects and practices could operate in similar ways, with a spirit of generosity to circulate concepts with potency through lived bodies and communities.

Kloetzel and Pavlik (2009) write about the potential of site-based dance practice to replace “indifference with interest” (3). As an example of this circulation through dance, site-based work may engender “more active commitment towards our communities” (3). Through

their research and interviews with choreographers working to link site, art and community, Kloetzel and Pavlik discovered that these artists “make remarkable strides in enlivening the relationship between people and place” (2009, 6). In my research, I endeavour to circulate embodied concepts and enliven the connection to the more-than-human world through the soundwalk specifically and will continue to do so through my continuing and evolving practice, performing, teaching and community engagements in the future.

## **6.2 Dancing to Form a Multispecies Social Kinaesthetic**

Throughout this process, as I have posited, I developed the capacity to wait for, sense with, and move with the more-than-human bodies on the site. This is not a small shift of attention. This requires, repetition, conscious work and produces earned presence. At the micro level, I interrupt, undo and expand my own individual, habitual sensuous engagement which begins to create a capacity to engage with the more-than-human world. I have articulated the ways this work changes what my body *does* and by extension what my body *can do with* and alongside others. I move differently *with* the environment; my body expands and articulates. The way I move with tall grasses is particular. The way I move in the dense woodland has a specific tempo, texture and rhythm. What emerges from this being-with is specific to each unique body, in this process of more-than-human dialogue. The emergent movement in each exchange has its own tempo, texture, quality, and shape. This process of thinking through, dancing through, cannot happen in individual isolation but rather points to, explores and questions the potential for an active multispecies collaboration, through an assemblage of bodies resonating together, with their differing histories, perspectives, and agencies entwining.



The work proposes that site-dance practices of embodiment, animate both an artistic and activist impulse, which extends beyond the moment of the performance or the practice, where dance becomes inscribed on the body, throughout and within bodily tissues. This process of exchange and attending to the site helps dance artists to “make changes where they see stagnation” (Jacques in Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009, 240). In Barbour, Hunter and Kloetzel’s anthology, *(Re)Positioning Site Dance* (2019), Kloetzel’s chapter, “From recontextualization to protest: 50 years of site dance practice in North America”, is very relevant. Kloetzel argues that the site-dance genre has embodied such an ethos from its genesis, stating that “in many ways, such activism was built into the postmodern experimentation of the Judson Dance Theater, and it is from this base that the site dance genre continued its politically oriented path” (41). The activist impulse in this project, is to reach for environmental change through this social kinaesthetic and its mutual becoming, by “opening the channels of communication between people and place, subverting our ingrained notions and fostering an alertness to new perspectives” (Kloetzel 48). My practice and its resulting artworks are a place to activate and circulate this impulse, offering relational experiences in the here and now. “As in activism, site work can bring attention and hope to an issue” (Jacques in Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009, 240). Through my work with the more-than-human I engage change at the personal level where I learn to pay attention to, and attend to the site, and from this altered sense of presence, therefore, I move forward differently within it.

Randy Martin (2011) argues for the saliency of dance to reflect and enact new possibilities in the world cultivating this particular social kinaesthetic (34). Thinking through and with dance “forces our attention on how space and time are accomplished, on how agency (the forces that bear a critical idea) and history (the material embodiment of possibility) are

intertwined” (Martin 32). Through dance I circulate and mobilize ideas through my body, moving from thought to action, the theoretical stories I lay out become kinetic. This dance as a form of art making and research expresses articulates and “crafts its own pathways and agency in the world, moves us toward what we imagine to be possible and desirable” (Martin 30). This dance proposes a practice or an event where bodies gather, with multispecies collaborators and in co-creation with a willing audience, moving us into new shared experiences and relationships ripe with possibility. Martin beautifully articulates the living resonance that Simpson describes, as dance sets in motion and “moves into the world pressing our surround to be otherwise, while it figures a taste of what world we might have if it were left to our own creative designs”(30). Dance practice is a place to mobilize, gather and embody the world we desire and explore our “capacity for realization” of such a world (Martin 32). We move, feel and transform together. I enact possibilities by sensuously entering into the site and its bodily “effects felt as conditions of perception” (Martin 31).

### **6.3 Multispecies Relational Collaboration**

This practice reveals what is possible when I listen to and sense the world in all of its aliveness, its non-human sentience with my whole fleshy body; engaging in a practice which brings attention to, interrupts and intervenes in habitual responses. The practice has taught me how to pay attention to others. While practicing deep attention, I slow down and wait to be invited or pulled. I pause and re-consider the impact of my presence on more-than-human beings. The growing awareness of expanded, reciprocal ways of being with others, is an outcome of this inquiry. This is an undoing of a familiar way of being which decentres individual desires and acknowledges the ways in which we can work to sustain each other. It is my responsibility to

care for the land which sustains me and gives me life. This body is full of life-sustaining microbes and fungi, and I depend on plants and animals to stay alive and well. In the spirit of reciprocity, I would like to give back in such life-sustaining ways to the landscape and lands that surround me. This project proposes a practice and creation of artwork that nurtures developing a kind of multispecies capacity for listening to, sensing and collaborating with the more-than-human through dance.

I experiment with these emergent possibilities to produce experiential artwork, through multispecies dialogue exploring actualizing and mobilizing these concepts. With art objects, we can continue to try the concepts on, experiment with them, embody them, employ them, and see what they *can do* when activated in time and space. The choreographed walk in this project is such an experiential object and an example of this kind of art making. Dance artists combine dance with other mediums to create works that explore how the body and the world meet. Dance artist Sarah Koekkoek's project *simbi.dik* explores the possibility of more-than-human collaboration using photography, installation and dance performance (2022). Koekkoek has created a homemade kombucha bio leather, made of a symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast. Through a multi-species collaboration of cultivation, care and nurturance, the artist has created a series of self-portraits, where the leather and her human form meet, using the leather as a filter or intermediary between herself and the camera. The work proposes that the process of making the leather, creating images and movement are specific to the multispecies collaborator, in this case, a nurtured culture of bacteria and yeast. The images will eventually be part of an installation and live dance performance which further engages and experiments with this multispecies collaboration in real-time. The work reaches to inspire and empower others to consider and explore their own relationship with more-than-human agents (Koekkoek 2022).

As I cultivate a practice that considers collaborators that extend beyond the human body, I cultivate deeper attention and care toward the living world. I learned that my habitual modes of attention are not deeply attuned to more-than-human others. I'm easily lost in my own mind, in my own inner world. With practice, I have learned to begin not only to think of more-than-human others but to sense, feel, consider, wait and be "moved" with them. I frame these labors of attention and embodiment as reparative acts which engage participants "in experiences that, temporarily, configure the world differently" (Hunter 2022, 316). Cultivating a sensual relation to place and its diverse inhabitants through dance, "provides the groundwork for inventive future interactions" (Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009, 19). Practicing the soft rigour alive within this practice, my habitual modes of attention are re-formed, which alters the ways in which I tread and move through and attend to the world.

#### **6.4 Soundwalk: An Experiential Artwork and Invitation**

I palpably experience this re-configuration of the world as I transform the way I engage relationally, and I hope to invite others into this experience through the creation of the site-adaptive choreographed soundwalk which combines sensory invitations, sonic landscapes and the poetic imagining of worlds. I propose that to walk and dance this system is to "locate our repertoires of engagement as already in motion" and find ourselves in a sensitive world (Martin 2011, 30).

The walk allows a participant to explore and embody invitations, movements, sensitizations and images which experiment with sensing and moving with the more-than-human world. I endeavor to offer a space to experience and to reflect, rather than a didactic work which tells the listener what to think or feel. I'm interested in carving out the space to experience, to

come to one's own conclusions through the sharing of the practice itself. Rather than create a soundwalk which is specifically created for High Park, I wanted to create a site-adaptive work that could be used in a multitude of locations, so as to encourage the possibility of engaging in this work anywhere that more-than-human bodies can be found. I also felt that creating a walk that could be used in any location, removes a hierarchy about the kinds of public spaces where one could experience the kinds of dialogues I describe. In an effort to create a practice which speaks to the choreography of everyday actions, as a place where interspecies dialogue could occur, the listener doesn't need to endeavour far from home in order to engage in these transformative practices. The choreographed walk could take place in any location of the audience members' choosing, their own backyard, neighborhood sidewalks, alleyways, or nearby parks. The walk is an invitation to experience a gesture toward "the so-much-more out there", leaving behind the modern logic of mechanistic and one-sided engagement (Tsing 2015, viii).

In creating the soundwalk, I worked intuitively, drawing from the writing and my experiences in High Park as source material, to build an experiential landscape for an audience member/participant to engage with. Upon reflection, and in thinking more deeply about my motivations for creating a site-adaptive work, it is the intrinsically reflective, phenomenological nature of this study which influenced me in making this choice. The academic research and embodied work undertaken as part of this thesis exists as part of an iterative process and line of questioning, which began before my research in High Park. I explored these questions with my collaborators, in studio spaces in Toronto, on a farm in residence outside of Ottawa, walking the alleyways in my neighbourhood during Covid lockdowns, and in our *no place* presentation beside Lake Ontario. Therefore, the practice feels as though it was born of and occupies space in a multitude of sites. My work privileges the experiential transformation for a participant with the

aim of broader participant/audience outreach. It is my intention that the soundwalk is available to be engaged with by individuals, living outside of the Greater Toronto Area, with or without access to High Park. The action of attending as suggested through the soundwalk, can be accessed anywhere. The soundwalk is available to download in a digital format which can be revisited and repeated as many times as the audience member might like, building their own iterative relational practice.





**Figure 6- 1** fallen trees in woodland, High Park research documentation.



## **Chapter 7. Conclusion or an Opening**

Drawing on the metaphor of the clearing, once more, a space in a dense wood, where light can pass through, with this practice I experience a moment of stillness and possibility inside a chaotic present. I propose that to conclude my articulation and discussion of this practice, instead of framing this conclusion as a finite ending, it might function also as an opening, a clearing, and a space for light, where I/we attempt something that by modern metrics and value systems seems impossible. Beginning from that place of attempting to reach the unfathomable, I find a possible beginning.

Inside this beginning, I have developed, created and articulated a system of practice with which to interrupt my habitual, learned ways of sensing and engaging with the world. I discovered the impacts of engaging in the practice over time contribute to the formation of expanded relational, embodied habits which resist dissociation, disengaged awareness and an individual transactional ethos. Through practice, these modes have become inscribed on the body and cultivate the possibility for ongoing experimentation, curiosity and wonder, practiced within dance, where human and more-than-human relations can be mobilized into embodied everyday living. The practice opened a sense of acknowledgement, grief and loss as I engaged with presence within a radically changing landscape. Within this multispecies collaboration, we (myself and the more-than-human) practice ways to move together, within this changing landscape, and new social kinaesthetic reclaim a kind of lateral, distributed engagement (Martin 2011). Here lies an opportunity to begin, moment by moment, to unravel the tightly bound paradigms, borders of awareness and limited modes of attention as shaped by the modern habitus, through a movement system which is co-created with the more-than-human world. The practice mobilizes and dances these concepts through my fleshy body and the bodies of others.

This interdisciplinary project contributes new knowledge that includes original phenomenological writing about performance-generating systems in dance and the speculative outcomes of this site dance practice as a potent tool for embodied change. The cumulative and circular process consisted of first, creating, building and engaging in an embodied practice with the more-than-human world, second articulating, describing and thinking through the practice in writing this monograph and third, creating and writing a choreographed soundwalk for others to experience a poetic and sensory embodied practice. This circular process allows the work to continue somehow, both through my own practice and future choreographic projects as well as extending outward to others through independent engagement with the work; walking, dancing, buzzing and humming-with the more-than-human in the world.

Throughout the writing of this thesis, I have articulated the modes of embodied practice itself, what I experienced throughout the research period, describing the dialogues the practice made possible, and posited what these dialogues open up as a result. Framing this project within creation-as-research allows for my choreographic practice to be considered a viable form of academic research which contributes knowledge. The creation of the soundwalk as an extension of this work, moves the research off the page and into the body and a site of the listeners' choosing. This has immense value both as a research tool and toward disseminating the practice. The frame of creation-as-research also makes space for a non-linear process and embraces the unknown, the mysterious, and the unquantifiable, as viable approaches to express and explore. These approaches have value toward discovering and generating new modes of moving otherwise.

Considering more concretely how the emergent "data" from these co-creations could be applied in other fields, is a potent direction for further interdisciplinary research, imagining

creative ways forward as we navigate the Anthropocene. This creative thinking will require the kinds of reaching for new methods and knowledge as the “crisis of climate change calls on academics to rise above their disciplinary prejudices, for it is a crisis of many dimensions” (Chakrabarty 2009, 215). Further research is required to understand where this practice of expanded relational capacity might lead us concretely in our actions and living. In further research we might explore how to apply these articulated, habitual, relational arrangements across fields, to explore what kinds of impact this might have. If we move forward conspiring and collaborating with the more-than-human, what might ecological, social and cultural policy look like informed by such enmeshments? What does an economy built from those policies look like? How are cities organized and built if we begin the planning process from these relational considerations? It seems challenging to imagine, yet if we hope to build and create new paradigms, we must dive headfirst into methods which allow for and value occupying these difficult-to-fathom places of not-knowing, for failure even, acknowledging them not only as acceptable forms of research but perhaps essential for our earthly survival. I may not know, in the present what those new systems or policies might look like, but I do know what my body feels like and moves like when collaborating and conspiring with these bodies, as I have described in these pages. I propose this emergent, relational and fleshy embodiment practice is perhaps, a place to begin.

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## **Appendix A – Link to Soundwalk and Transcript**

<https://www.amandaacorn.me/soundwalk-thesis>

## **Soundwalk Transcript**

### **Instructions**

Choose a place you enjoy walking to do this soundwalk. It may be a place you walk often or a route new to you. Please take pauses, stops or rest anytime you'd like. If you want more time with an instruction pause the recording during your walk. You might bring a notebook with you and following the walk write down some emerging images, sensations or thoughts from your walk/dance. This soundwalk is an invitation to notice, sense, move and dance with the world around you.

#### **i.**

Find a place to begin standing or seated with your feet touching the ground.

Stand or sit and imagine your feet softly receiving. Your feet are receptive, open and soft. Breathe as many breaths as your feet would like to breathe. Take your time.

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Sense your feet held by the ground below. Imagine the earth below you breathing. Sense the inhale and exhale of the ground. And your feet also breathing in time with that breath.

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Take a deep inhale wide into the base of your lungs. Soften your exhale. Then take another.

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Breathe with your feet and the ground as long as you'd like. Sense the possibility of this exchange.

A breathing dance between your feet and the ground.

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When you're ready begin walking.

Find a pace in which you can continue to sense your feet.

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Can your walking be a dialogue with the ground beneath you?

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Imagine all of the feet who have walked on this ground before you, through millennia.  
Thank those who walked before you with your feet.

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Imagine and notice how the ground has been reshaped and changed, through time and thank the ground for its resilience.

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Imagine the ground your own ancestors walked,  
What was their speed, their rhythm, their tempo of walking?  
Thank your ancestors with your feet.

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Each step is an exchange of a deep inhale or exhale with the ground below.  
Allow the rhythm of this breath, to guide your pace.

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Experiment with slowing down and speeding up.  
Take pauses, to stop and start.

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Can your walking be a form of dancing?

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. Can you feel your body arriving to the world as you walk?

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Arriving to the bodies, things, creatures, shapes, and beings where you are.

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Imagine the world is reaching for you. Imagine the world is inviting you to sense and move with.

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If you were to reach back with your whole body, what would that reach look like?  
What would that reach feel like?

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## ii.

As you continue walking, bring your awareness to your eyes and how you are seeing.

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As you walk use the eyes of a sensitive observer.  
Recalibrate your sensitive seeing.

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Soften the space at the backs of the eyes. Breathe into the backs of the eyes.

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Imagine the eyes as soft puddles of feeling in your skull.

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Touch with the eyes and attune to pleasure through seeing.

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May your seeing awaken your skin.  
May your skin enliven your being.

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Can you move into very close proximity to something and take it in, in all its detail? Its colour, texture, movement, and specificity.

Stay with this thing as long as you like.

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Refocus your eyes on something far in the distance, on the horizon from where you stand. Can you still look for detail and nuance from here?

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Allow your eyes to softly take in the periphery. A wide-open field of vision.

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Look for a more-than-human body. A tree, a rock, a plant, a flower, an animal.

Take them in with your sensitive eyes.

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Find a texture you would like to savour.

The texture of the world is inviting you.

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Savour this texture with your eyes and feel it on your skin.

Can your skin digest this texture, eat this texture.

Digest it through your cells.

Move it through your tissues. Notice where it wants to go in your body. Follow it as you move it through your body. Follow its curve or arc or line, its stops and starts.

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Notice the movement of the wind, through the trees.

Can this movement of the wind be an invitation to dance-with? A suggestion of a rhythm or pulse.

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### iii.

As you continue walking and seeing, bring your attention to your ears.

Notice them. Perhaps touch them.

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Notice the sounds.

Are you listening or hearing?

Actively Listen for sounds near and far.

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When you bring your awareness to listening have you stopped seeing? Can you bring attention to both with equal value?

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Listen for sounds of human, plant, animal and perhaps machines. Notice what is loud or barely perceptible. Perhaps the imperceptible requires taking more time, and perhaps imagination.

Take time to identify the qualities of the sounds that you hear.

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Listen to your feet in your walking. Breathing, walking with the ground. There is a resonance available in dialogue with gravity, the way your feet touch the earth, and reverberate through your tissues, your bones and your fluids.

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Can you turn your listening inward now to the inner workings of your body? What do the cells of your lungs sound like?

Can you listen to the sonic resonance of your moving, walking, dancing, fleshy body?

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Turn your attention to the trees. What do the trees sound like? Dance the rhythm in your walking, that you hear from the trees.

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Can you hear the future of this place? What does it sound like 100 years in the future? Or 1000 years.

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The sounds of the world, past, present and future are inviting you.

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As you listen to the future, or the trees or the inner workings of your moving body can you continue your sensitive seeing?

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Can your skin also listen? Can your skin see and take in the textures of the environment?  
See with the skin on the back of your neck, the pit of your elbow, and the palm of your hand.

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listen with your eyes.  
Feel with your ears.  
See with your skin.

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You might also invite touch into your walk. Perhaps pause before doing so to ponder whether this is invited. Waiting for a response of some kind before doing so.

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Notice the wind on your skin or move your fingers across some tree bark, a bush or some grass.

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What new information becomes available with this touch?

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Notice if frustration or boredom arrives. Embrace new ways of knowing. New ways of seeing, listening, walking and moving.

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Be okay with not knowing or with new kinds of knowing arriving.

Might your walking and seeing and listening and touching become a dance?  
It doesn't have to look anything like dancing to anyone.

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It could be a tiny dance, a micro dance, a pulsation of aliveness in your cells.  
Invite dancing to arrive at the tempo of your awareness, the tempo of your presence.

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Yield to unfamiliar and strange tempos offered by the more-than-human bodies around you.  
Tempos from the trees, flowers, wind, and other earthly creatures where you are.

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Can your senses stay this alive, this attuned, this articulated as you're dancing?

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Perhaps dancing arrives as a surprise, perhaps you are already dancing. Invite your questions to  
be a part of the dance.

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Your dance might be big or barely visible.

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Sense the rhythm in the bodies around you, seen and unseen.  
Dance that rhythm.

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Notice when your seeing, listening or sensing, moves away from you. Notice when thinking  
interrupts.

Tune your attention by moving back towards the senses.

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Follow your walk or your dance for as long as you'd like.

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