Embodied Kinesthetic Arts Practices with Arboreal Kin

By

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ABSTRACT

Trees and forests are an important component of human and ecological health yet human destruction of forests continues at an accelerated rate. This research investigates embodied art practices as a means to shift human and tree relations from extraction to kinship. The investigation dances into the possibility that trees could be collaborators in an art-making process. The portfolio includes ten short video poems developed through a four-stage methodology of listening, tracing, translating and presenting movement investigations with trees. The portfolio is presented with reflections on the development of the work, field notes, contextual references and includes an informal artist's talkback. The portfolio includes a lesson plan for group investigations into human and tree relationships and an outline for group investigations with fellow artists. The potential of dance practices to develop kinship bonds with trees was revealed by the art-making process and demonstrates the capacity of arts-based methodologies to shift our human epistemologies and ontologies. Further research into this and other arts methodologies, particularly collaborative and improvisational approaches, could be of huge benefit in adapting to climate change and supporting multi-species relational shifts.

DEDICATION

This portfolio is dedicated to the Black Oaks, the Willows, the Cedars, the Mulberry, the Norway Maple, the Honey Locust, the White Oak, the Sumach, the Spruce, the Hemlocks, the White Pines, the Austrian Pines, the Red Pines, the Firs, the Hazels, the Cherries, the Poplars, the Birch, the Alders and the Yew.

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FOREWORD

This research portfolio completes a Masters of Environmental Studies degree along with fulfilling a self-directed plan of study entitled Embodiment and Kinship: Human and Tree Relations. The three main components of my plan of study are:

I. Human to Tree Relationships

II. Embodied Artistic Practices

III. Perspectives on Place of Human/Tree Interactions

My portfolio is an interweaving of all three components. Each artistic creation, presented as a video poem, is an expression of learning through movement.

Learning Objective I-1 *to create a deeper understanding of community relations among trees and people through story, theory and practice* is at the forefront of each piece presented in this portfolio.

I completed the requirements for the diploma in Environmental Education. Learning Objective I-2 *to develop and discover pathways to facilitate positive, embodied relations with trees and people* is embedded in the lesson plans I developed as part of the portfolio.

My portfolio is a direct result of Learning objective II-2 *to gather and develop my own embodied artistic practices that interact with the more than human world in order to further my teaching and artistic practice.* Writing this paper is directly related to learning objective III- 2 *to develop language and writing skills to express my ideas about embodiment, arts practices and trees.*

My artistic portfolio, created with trees, is a contemplation of the complexities of land and place. Particularly, my work with trees on the Haldimand Tract in Cambridge Ontario supported learning objective III-1 *to create a deeper understanding of place, the land on which I live and practice.*

There is an overabundance of apocalyptic stories being told through the ontologies of colonization, capitalism and the patriarchy. Artistic embodied practices are a way of igniting imaginations for alternate narratives. At this time of social change and climate emergency, I began my studies with a sense of urgency. In the simplest of terms, the trees have taught me to slow down, stay grounded, and keep growing. In my movement practice, I am dedicated to promoting paradigms of human and tree relationships that are joyful and uplifting.

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1. INTRODUCTION

I invite you to take a moment to imagine a tree and breathe in deeply in recognition of our relationships to the trees. I am writing these words next to a large Norway maple, here in Toronto/Tkaronto, Ontario. The Don/Wonsoctonach and Humber/Cobechenonk Ziibi rivers and Lake Ontario support our lives. I am grateful to be here on the traditional territory of the Mississauga's of the Credit where many other nations have resided and stewarded these lands.

In this paper I reflect on a portfolio of artistic work gathered through an art-making process that inquires into human and tree relations. I share the creative process as a methodology that I practice and offer some of the scholarly frameworks that I have been thinking with in the development of the iterative, emergent process involving questions about embodiment, kinship, art, and place-making. I share my curiosity with human and tree relationships that wonders into who we are together.

The portfolio includes artwork in the form of ten video poems that were developed through my methodology. These are investigations in translating and sharing embodied thinking/feeling/being/moving experiences with trees. I share my questioning of the artmaking process that arose through the documenting, editing and on-line publishing of the artwork. The collected work is displayed on a public webpage with individual pages for each video poem. The video poems are also archived at the York University Library. Each section of the paper contains a hyperlink to an individual webpage to view a video poem. The videos are best viewed in full screen mode with sound on. I include some written reflections from my on-site field notes. These reflections are presented in italics.

Two lesson plans for leading group interactions with trees are included with the portfolio. The first was a plan utilized for leading groups of artists through my methodology. I offer some observations that arose from a research session with a group of seven artists. The second lesson plan is a proposal for members of the public to experience components of the methodology.

Throughout this paper, I will borrow Robin Wall Kimmerer's suggestion of using ki/kin pronouns to refer to my tree dance partners (Kimmerer, 2017). I will borrow David Abram's term "more than human" (Abram, 1996) to refer to the trees and other intelligences and beings. These two specific uses of language gesture towards a nonbinary, non-hierarchical way of being with which I strive to navigate my research.

I offer ideas for further questioning and research and the potential of art practices to contribute to positive change. Overall, I argue that a paradigm shift in relational practices with trees is important at this time of climate crisis and environmental degradation.

The eco-services that trees provide for us are well documented. Popular apps like i-Tree will calculate the monetary value of a tree's eco-services for humans (USDA Forest Service, et al., n.d.). Our human futures have been paired with the wellbeing of our forests and our human mental and physical health is directly related to our proximity to trees (Nillsen et al, 2010). We are shifting our human commodification of trees from lumber to carbon sinks but this does not shift modernity's practice of commodification. I suggest that arts-based practices with trees have the potential to disrupt extractive, anthropocentric, colonial, capitalist views and create practices of imagining new possibilities.

I invite you to read this paper not from a linear logic but from a circular or spiraling logic akin to mycorrizal networks and the fascial networks of our human bodies–thinking with connections that are made and remade, spiraling in and out, around and with each other. These ways of thinking align with the extraordinary reality of the fungal communication networks of trees (Simard, 2021) and more than human fungal intelligences (Sheldrake, 2021). Spiral thinking is aligned with the new paradigm of anatomy that recognizes our human fascial networks as fractal motion that creates form (Gimberteau, 2015). The linear and fixed nature of text limits the expression of interweaving connections. I call on our imaginations to understand that the hierarchical numbering of sections and ordering

of parts are a translation of the embodied web of being-ness that was inherent in this research.

My work aligns with Embodied Cognition theory: we do not think only with our brains, but with our full bodies and environments (Clark, 1998). It is inspired by Donna Haraway's speculative investigations into thinking *with* others (Haraway, 2016) and David Abram's call to the senses, not sensible but *sensuous* (Abram, 2017). I hear Morris Berman's call to throw off the bindings of logic and to return to a holistic and animistic worldview (Berman, 1988). I've listened to Robin Wall Kimmerer's sharing of the Potowatomi prophecy of the Seven Fires which requests that we, humans, go back on our ancestral paths to find the relational tools we will need to move forward together (Kimmerer, 2013).

As I was thinking with stories, theories, arguments and scientific proofs, I visited trees. Thus, a spiraling thinking/feeling/being practice emerged from within a multiplicity of embodied ideas that think/feel/exist with sources and beings that continue to connect and reconnect in non-linear ways. Each section of the paper circles around a video poem. In the recorded dance movement experiences, I use and embody kinesthetic forms of thinking/feeling/being that were foundational to this research.

As you examine this body of work, I invite you to travel with the CORE exercises that I am developing as part of my deep listening methodology. CORE is an acronym for Clear, Open, Relax and Expectations; four fundamental, non-linear principles to begin a practice. The CORE exercises allow me to access a spiraling way of thinking that I feel was required of me. It is a practice that leads me to a way of being/thinking/feeling that has helped me feel as if I could be/think/feel with trees. The exercises help me attune to the core of my own point of view within the swirling vortex that can arise when attuning to a multiplicity of points of views. Each exercise is not only a metaphor but an embodied experience that deepens my philosophical approach. I have gathered and distilled the practices from decades of movement experiences in dance, Pilates, Mitzvah technique and other practices. I offer my CORE exercises here as a description of my process but

also in hopes that it will make our connection across time and space a more embodied and meaningful experience.

I begin with E for *Expectations—Try not to have Any.*
Take a big inhalation, hold for three counts and as you exhale imagine that you could let go of any expectations and see things just as they are.
Lessening our expectations of how things *should* be opens the possibilities of how things *could* be. This exercise disrupts my regular modus operandi of *doing* and shifts me towards *being*. It creates space to listen and consider another point of view. This exercise allows the *what if* or *why not* questions.

C is for *Clear your Mind*.
Swat your hand across the space in front of your face as if you could clear your mind of any buzzing thoughts.
The physical gesture, like swatting away a pesky mosquito, calms the too busy parts of my mind. It moves the seemingly perpetual to-do list out of the forefront of my thoughts and reminds me to sink back into a more indirect, open-ended way of being.

R is for *Relax your Body*.
Take a deep inhale and imagine you could gently compress all your muscles like gently squeezing a sponge. Exhale with a big sigh, with sound, and imagine releasing all the muscle tension, allowing your body to expand like a sponge opening back to its full size.
Emphasizing and then releasing the muscular compression of life's stress helps me to be in a more expansive thinking/feeling/being state. Releasing tension helps me to feel more grounded and thus more capable of considering other perspectives.

The O of the core exercises is for *Open your Heart*.
Begin by gently tapping your heart by tapping your sternum, the front of your chest--your breastbone. Some people like to tap lightly, others more vigorously. Then gently pause and place your hand or fingertips over your heart. If you have a tree nearby, or in

your imagination, I invite you to see ki as if your eyes were rooted in your heart. This last step is important to invite the thinking mind to not only be in the brain.

At this juncture, I invite you to watch a short video poem. The video was developed from research conducted in High Park, Toronto, on February 28, 2023 with a small group of fellow artists. It was a crisp, cold winter day and the owls were hooting. We sat with a hemlock for a while before we were inspired to dance with the branches. I had been reading a book entitled *Hemlock-A Forest Giant on the Edge* (Foster, 2014) and I was particularly interested in visiting some living hemlocks. In the forward of this book, Robert Sullivan asks, " What do we do with the death of this species? Have we seen this before? And are we prepared to bear witness?" (Sullivan, 2014, p. ix). It is a grim foreboding. Our experience in High Park was not a lament for a lost species but an expression of joy and hope with a hemlock that is very much alive.
Inspired by the owls' hoots, I created a sound composition using voice and breath to amplify the sounds of wings and birds.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE Example #1

Suzanne and the Wings of Hemlock

Tsuga Canadensis. This is neither Shakespeare's nor Socrates' poisonous herb. This Hemlock is a sacred tree on sacred land inspiring flight, and hoots of joyous life. An ethereal moment of cold air and warm hearts.
http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/suzanne-and-the-wings-of-hemlock/

2. METHODOLOGY Creative Practice as Research

The process of art-making is a way of contemplating ideas (McNiff, 2008). Movement is my primary way of understanding the world and my research process draws on tools and

techniques from dance, music and theatre. My methodology with trees has a four-step process of 1. deep listening; 2. creating a trace; 3. translating; 4. sharing.

The CORE exercises are a prelude to begin a deep listening engagement with forests and with specific trees. My listening practice has an artistic lineage to Pauline Oliveros. Deep Listening arose from a period of artistic experimentation in New York City in the 1960's and included radical change makers in the Western art world such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Andy Warhol and Deborah Hay. These artists were part of a movement that tore down traditional paradigms of Western music, dance, visual art and theatre. I was introduced to the Deep Listening practice in the 90's through my work as a dance artist in Toronto particularly through musicians Anne Bourne, Micheal J. Baker, Katherine Duncanson, John Gzowski, James Tenny, Tiina Kiik and Garnet Willis. There was a surge of cross-disciplinary and collaborative, creative work in the city that inspired my foundational art-making practices.

The focus of Deep Listening is on receiving and perceiving the soundscape around you. Oliveros writes, "Deep Listening takes us below the surface of our consciousness and helps to change or dissolve limiting boundaries." (Oliveros et al, 2022, p.38). Inspired by this, I practice listening to trees with fully embodied capacity, listening with ears, eyes, nose, proprioception, interoception, kinesthetic awareness, histories and heritages. I use the term deep listening without capitals to express the inspirational roots of my listening practice and to be clear that it is not Oliveros's Deep Listening with capitals which refers to her influential body of work (The Pauline Oliveros Trust, 2020).

Andy Clark's neuroscientific research into embodied cognition suggests that human thinking is a process of engagement with the world. Our thinking is not only in our heads but also with our whole bodies, the specific places we inhabit and with the specific beings around us (Clark, 1998). Oliveros asked us to listen to the world, expand our listening and pay attention to emergent relationships of sound (Weaver, 2017). In this time of climate crisis, social injustice and the urgent need to make positive change,

embodied listening has much to offer as an inclusionary practice of embodied self, others and places.

This physical state of deep listening produces what Mary Overlie calls a *soft focus*. Overlie is a theatre artist and the creator of Viewpoints, a body of work that proposes experiential frameworks for performers to practice relational movement. Bogart describes Overlie's concept of soft focus as, "the physical state in which we allow the eyes to soften and relax so that rather than looking at one or two things in sharp focus they can now take in many. By taking the pressure off the eyes to be dominant and the primary information gatherer, the whole body starts to listen and gather information in new and more sensitized ways." (Bogart, 2004).

I engaged with a deep listening practice with trees in Toronto, Grey County, and the *rare* Research Reserve in Ontario and old growth forests of British Columbia. I gave myself an allotted amount of time for each session. Depending on the day and the other commitments of my life, I was able to commit 10 minutes or a few hours to the practice. I set a timer on my iPhone and set my phone to *do not disturb*. I began each on-site research session with the CORE exercises. I then practiced listening. I asked questions: What sounds were around me? How was I feeling? What colors, shapes, textures could I see? What movements were around me? What impulses were arising in me? If I lost focus, I took a break and circled back to the CORE exercises. Here is an excerpt from my onsite journal entry that reflects on a deep listening experience.

Entry November 29, 2023
I have to slow down, breathe, and emerge from the practicalities of my adult life. I wait and listen and wait and listen for the imaginative élan to carry me. I have to relax and peek out of the corner of my eye. I need to protect the moment from my desire to succeed. Like inviting a bird to land on my head, I disappear, yet am fully present at the same time.

The second step of the methodology is to create a trace of the deep listening practice while on-site with the tree. The trace is a key step in translating parts of the experience

into a tangible, lasting medium for further contemplation. A trace may be written text, a drawing, an audio recording or a video and is an immediate, personal interpretation. Here is another journal entry, an example of a trace created in text that describes another experience of the listening process.

Entry October 12, 2021
There seems to be a fine line between a grandiose experience and a grand experience. One moment I can be living in the moment of kinship with a tree and then I tell myself to take note how awesome it is that I am living in the moment with a tree and then as soon as I do, I am not in the moment anymore but I pretend I am because I am now looking at myself and I want to look good. I say to myself, "I am so living in the moment with a tree right now!" but I know that I am not fooling anyone, especially myself. And then I laugh out loud at myself which takes me back into just being with the tree without all the prideful preciousness.

For this portfolio, I focus mainly on the process of gathering on-site video recording traces. I have also created some in-studio research traces. The studio work was an opportunity to further explore questions that arose from the on-site experience. In both situations, the video traces, as documentation, were not intended as performative acts for an audience but were conceived as a way to record or remember the moving relationships that resulted from the deep listening practice. The documenting process re-imagines the experience into another media, and thus requires a re-interpretation of the somatic memory.

There are two troubling obstacles with this step. The first is that the process of creating a trace is an inevitable displacement of the deep listening practice. It takes you outside of yourself. I had to stop listening in order to focus on setting up a camera, framing the shot and pressing record. The documentation is not a recording of the deep listening practice. It is a trace. The second obstacle is the performative aspect of documentation. A video recording is a fixed medium that can be seen by other humans and thus implies the

potentiality of an audience. I delve into these troubling knots with a discussion of media translation in Section Seven of this paper.

The third step of the methodology is a reflective, transformative processing of the traces into a digital form. This step begins with a review of the digital trace material followed by a selection process of choosing ideas to develop into a finished video poem. The selection process is based on both technical and artistic choices. Lighting, camera angles, focus and background all influence the decision-making process but ultimately it is a surge of curiosity that leads this step of the methodology. The reflective, transformation of material is discussed with the example of video poem *Spiral Phloem*.

I experimented with various video-editing software. The most accessible was iMovie. I used this application to edit my early explorations and I soon bumped up against its limitations. I then experimented with FinalCut Pro to edit longer poems as the application felt somewhat cumbersome for the smaller video poems. I experimented with CapCut, an editing program that is user friendly and has easily accessible digital effects. However, the pre-fabricated digital effects often resulted in a Tik-Tok-esque glossiness that did not resonate with my aesthetic. My discoveries of the different aspects of each software influenced the creative process of each video poem. In Sections Seven and Eight of this paper, I further discuss the process with examples of specific video poems.

The final step of the methodology is crafting the traces into a shareable format. It involves final editing, the addition of music, the creation of titles, credits and contextualizing the piece for an audience. It is a sense-making process that considers how other humans may receive the work. This step, while physically removed from the embodied experiences with the trees, strives to honor and share the original intention of exploration. In this final step, it was important to remember the embodied experience of being with trees. It was also important to move away from the computer screen to consider the being-ness of the trees as part of the editing process. The Norway maple I can see from my window has been a constant companion.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE Example #2

Spiral Phloem

A digital duet inspired by a Pine tree living in Grey County, Ontario.

http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/spiral-phloem/

Spiral Phloem combines onsite deep listening traces with in-studio research traces. The on-site observation of the Pine tree's phloem inspired me to further research fascial flow in my own movement. The motion of the camera in the on-site video trace is intended to somewhat mimic the internal motion of fluid under the bark. Xylem and Phloem are the lifeline/pipeline tissues of trees. Xylem carries water upwards and Phloem carries nutrients generally downwards. The active phloem tissue is underneath the bark and as the tree grows in girth, dead phloem tissue becomes bark. I was fascinated with the spiral motions of the phloem that was archived in the bark of a Pine tree. I imagined listening to the movement patterns of active phloem tissue carrying fluid just underneath the surface of the bark. In the dance studio, I researched how I might also move with a constant spiral flow. Without music, I began moving slowly in relation to the fascia under my own skin. Fascia, like xylem and phloem, create form through flow. I let the motion flow from my plantar connection with the ground through to my head and fingers as well as in the opposite direction from head to toe. The investigation became increasingly complex as flow created motion and motion created flow. As I danced, the intellectual divisions between form, flow and motion became irrelevant. I edited the on-site and in-studio traces together using iMovie's split screen format to create a kinetic diptych. The digitized duet alludes to a kinship with the Pine tree that I still feel today.

3. KINSHIP

In the feminist consideration of care for more than human worlds, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa points out that care is not always a pleasant consideration. She writes,

“Certainly any notion that care is a warm pleasant affection or a moralistic feel-good attitude is complicated by feminist research and theories about care.” (Puig de Bellacasa, 2017, p.2).

One spring day, I arrived at Toronto’s High Park Oak Savannah with the intention to practice deep listening with a particular tree. Upon arrival, I was very upset to see that the area my tree lived in had been sprayed with toxic pesticides. There were signs warning humans to stay out. My practice had led me to feel a sense of kinship with the Oak and the contamination felt personal. If pesticides were not safe for humans, how could it be safe for my tree? I felt concern for the squirrels, bugs, flowers, and birds. It wasn’t funny but I created this Charlie Chaplin-esque video as I felt the colonial and anthropocentric practice of spraying pesticides was absurd.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE Example #3
Oak Visit from Afar http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/2369/

As I began to consider kinship with a tree, I faced unpleasant feelings of care. The questions Puig de Bellacasa raises resonate with my investigations; “What does caring mean when we go about thinking and living independently with beings other than human in “more than human” worlds? Can we think of care as an obligation that transverses the nature/culture bifurcation without simply reinstating the binaries and moralism of anthropocentric ethics? How can engaging with care help us to think of ethical “obligations” in human-decentred cosmologies?” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p.13). Through my relationship with a specific Black Oak, I considered the small and large systemic challenges that the Black Oaks of High Park have witnessed and continue to live through. It seems a miracle that this small patch of Black Oak trees have survived.

The pesticides in High Park upset me but I also felt 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 Black Oak trees, I felt the loss of

entire ecosystems. In his historical account of colonization in Ontario, J.D. Wood writes, "The gradual obliteration of the forest was the most obvious aspect of the transformation of the landscape." (Wood, 2000, p.13). The relationship of colonization to deforestation is not unique to Ontario. Michael Williams describes a global trend of colonization, commodification and forest destruction (Williams, 2003). Jessica J. Lee writes about the loss of trees in Taiwan and the importance of moving away from capitalism to see trees as living beings,"...efforts to pull the trees back from total extinction depended upon a change of perspective." (Lee, 2020, p.237).

Gary Paul Nabhan describes a kinship with trees at the Mexican/American border where the American government built a giant wall in the middle of the Sonoran desert. He writes, *"One O'oodham woman stood over the mangled carcasses of three giant saguaros and moaned: They are killing our ancestors…for what? To put up metal where these lives once stood."* (Nabhan, 2021, p.79).

Nabhan clearly demonstrates that there are people that already see trees as kin. The objectification of trees is not a universal point of view. It also demonstrates the harm that comes from denying kinship with human and more than human others. How might a sense of kinship become a practice of care? Could dancing with trees be an expression of or a reaching towards kinship?

Lillian Pearce writes about Broken Hill, Australia, a toxic mining town. Policy makers, who live elsewhere, deem that the area is safe to live. Lead Ted is the teddy bear mascot used to teach children to wash their hands to avoid the mining industry's lead contamination. The issues of land, trees, people and privilege are complex. She writes, "We must reckon with our ancestral kin as they speak through our bodies of people and earth, in relationships of beauty as much as of contamination." (Pearce, 2021, p.94)

Nabhan and Pearce describe complex realities involved in a consideration of kinship. If one considers the world as animate and as kin, one cannot ignore the damage that human

extraction is creating. Our living human bodies are part of this world. If the bodies of our kin become contaminated, so, too, do our bodies.

4. EMBODIMENT

Enrique Salmon writes, “Perhaps when something is embodied this act is a sort of psycho emotional fertilizer that helps sprout a form of kinship.” (Salmon, 2021, p.16). With each tree I dance, a new relationship develops that feels like a kinship bond.

Dancing with kin is embedded in my movement practice. In her research into environmental education, Louise Chawla asks us to consider more deeply how influential childhood experiences have affected attitudes towards the environment (Chawla, 1999). I come from a tradition of childhood fairy tales, of talking trees, intelligent rivers, conversing animals and portals into alternate realities. In my childhood ballet class, we danced like butterflies, flowers and the zephyrs. In my teenage years I committed to modern dance where we rooted to the earth and opened our hearts to the sky. In my professional performance career, I learned the practice of becoming the essence of water, rock, air and fire. My world of dance is rooted in a practice of shape-shifting in relation to the natural world. I place my work within the framework of the feminist theory of the body in which a body cannot be separate from emotional, social, spatial, spiritual and psychological aspects of personhood but is full of “multiple and fluid possibilities” (Price & Shildrick, 1999).

As I enquire into embodied kinship with trees, I feel the wounding of deforestation and the commodification and extraction of tree bodies. As I begin to understand trees as kin, I see paper products, furniture, floors, apples, and almonds with increasing discomfort. If trees are kin, then this non-reciprocal, industrial extraction feels wrong. Even our Western style of outdoor recreation and mindfulness activities, such as forest bathing, hiking and camping could be seen as another form of anthropocentric extraction. Being with living trees is not only a pleasure for many people, but positively impacts our health and well-being. In a review of 201 studies related to human health and urban trees, Wolf

et al. conclude that, "Overall, we have found that exposure to trees is associated with multiple health benefits." (Wolf et al. 2020). The zeitgeist surrounding the conservation of trees is not about trees but about human usage of trees.

Dorceta Taylor writes, "The conservation movement arose against a backdrop of racism, sexism, class conflicts, and nativism that shaped the nation [U.S.] in profound ways." (Taylor, 2017, p. 9). Conservation and accessibility to forests are interwoven in harmful cultural and colonial paradigms. It should be noted here that forest conservation in Canada results in a greater loss of forests in the Global South (Guha, 2013). Without a reduction in our consumption of trees, we are turning other parts of the world into our sacrifice zone. What might change if trees could be seen through a lens of kinship?

How does one attempt to embody kinship with trees in such a context of difficult truths? My research has revealed a complex oxymoron: the more I dance with trees, the more relational joy I discover *and* more deeply feel harmful paradigms. Elizabeth Grosz notes the importance of the specificity of embodiment (Grosz, 1995). I am, as is each tree with whom I dance, a very specific being with particular experiences, ancestry, history and positioning with others in time and place. Joy Parr urges us to recognize that people make sense of the world "directly through their sensing bodies" and that "human bodies are conditioned by the circumstances of time and place" (Parr, 2009, p. 8).

5. PLACE

How does one move in connection to specific tree beings in specific places? Growing up in Cambridge, Ontario in the 80's I did not have the opportunity to learn about the Indigenous heritages of the place I was living. I was fortunate through a fellowship with the *rare* Research Reserve to be able to go back to Cambridge to conduct some of my research. The *rare* Research reserve's website describes the organization as;

> *"a community-based urban land trust and environmental institute that protects over 1,200 acres of highly sensitive lands across 7 properties in Waterloo Region*

> *and Wellington County. The organization manages over 12 kilometers of trails free and open for the public. We seek to make the world a more sustainable place. We believe we can achieve this by acknowledging that people are a part of the environment."* (*rare*, 2022)

As a child, I felt emotionally connected to the Grand River and the surrounding trees and land. I was excited for the opportunity to reconnect. I was also troubled by the complexity of issues I was discovering that are specific to this place. Land Rights is a key issue listed on the Six Nations website. The Haldimand Tract, the land six miles on either side of the Grand River, is governed by the Haldimand Treaty and was promised to the Six Nations people. My childhood home was within 6 miles of the river. I feel the weight of the colonial system that kept this truth hidden from me.

As Six Nations seeks reclamation and restoration for this land, their list of guiding principles of environmental stewardship, includes:

> *"To provide the non-Indigenous population with information and education on the many aspects of Haudenosaunee environmental concepts and to seek common ground."* (Six Nations, 2022)

This leads me to wonder, how might we seek to dance on common ground? This question is both a practical and metaphorical one. Practically, land use and land ownership in Ontario is embedded in a colonial past with a magnitude of abuse that I am only just beginning to comprehend. Historical enclosures, private ownership and the commodification of land determine who has access to land and trees. Oberg-Odorom confronts questions about the commons through a lens of social justice and power dynamics. He calls for a return to common land practices and writes that, "Capitalism and Imperialism continue to be the most enduring threats to the commons. To propose that capitalist institutions rescue the commons is, therefore, to issue their death warrant and expedite their extinction." (Oberg-Odorom, 2021, p. 205). Thus, acts of re-commoning land today require an emergent epistemology. Seeking common ground,

both practically and metaphorically, requires a radical shift away from Euro-centric colonial and capitalist thinking.

Affricca Taylor calls her approach to environmental education *Common Worlds.* She writes, "As a notion that infers collectivity, it [*Common Worlds*] offers to expand our horizons of understanding about inclusivity and belonging…" (Taylor, p 110). The commons is a powerful metaphor for inclusivity and belonging–a place we can respectfully come together. Dance is also a powerful metaphor for creatively connected relationships. Metaphorically and literally, how can we seek to dance on common ground?

The question resonated with me as I engaged with deep listening practices with a cedar tree living at the *rare* Charitable Research Reserve. The following is an edited trace of the experience.

My interoceptive attunement revealed a queasiness, heaviness in the bones and retraction of my chest. As I allowed my perception to widen and include others, it felt like a healing process. Through observing a cedar tree, I saw a fresh greenness, soft bark and a swaying in the wind. Through observing the gentle motion, my heart relaxed a little and the soft forest floor seemed to absorb some of the weight. This particular piece of cedar root seemed to be looking back at me. It seemed like a friendly creature. I wondered what it would be like to be in kinship with this imagined creature and observe the forest together. The act of moving and relating to the cedar root shifted my somatic state and changed my thinking. The weight of the questioning was still there but the way forward had the possibility of being healing and joyful.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE Example # 4
Cedar Root Creature http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/2362/
My parents immigrated to Canada in 1964. Almost 60 years later, I
am circling back to Devon in search of ancestral understandings.
Diana Beresford-Kroeger defines the Celtic concept of *mothaitheacht*

as a recognition of the sentience of trees and a "feeling in the upper chest of some kind of energy or sound passing through you." (Beresford-Kroeger, 2019, p.80). Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her retelling of the Seventh Fire Prophecy, calls on readers to find our ancestral tools so that we may all move forward together. (Kimmerer, 2013, p.368). I take this invitation literally and with the idea that *mothaitheacht* could be one of my ancestral tools, I spent a few days in Devon, U.K. walking the land and deep listening with the ancient trees of Dartington Hall. I did not feel an invitation to dance but to witness. I came to realize that deep relationships with trees and place require more than just a few days. Despite my British heritage, it was clear that I was a visitor in the English forest. On my last day there, as I was lugging my suitcase across the cobblestones, I was stopped in my tracks by the light dancing with a Beech tree.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE Example # 5
Dance of Beech and Light http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/dance-of-beech-and-light/

MOVEMENT as form of THINKING WITH OTHER

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone contemplates the intelligence of the body and the importance of the moving body to thinking. She refers to recent research on embodied cognition and theorizes that movement of body and environment create cognition (Sheets, 2015). Could it be that animating the cedar root with movement expanded my way of thinking? How does an embodied experience of *mothaitheacht* change cognition?

Andy Clark's research theorizes that embodied cognition is a way of creating a wider range of cognitive options. We can think more expansively when we cognitively engage with our whole bodies, other organisms and the places we inhabit (Clark & Chalmers,

1998). Our cognitive capacity increases as we embody the world around us. Dancer and scholar Celeste Snowber explores, "...dance as a way of knowing, inquiry, embodied understanding and, ultimately, what it can mean to think on our feet and get our feet in our thinking." (Snowber, 2012). How expansive could our cognition be if our feet, our fingers, in fact our whole bodies, could think in collaboration with others? How might an expanded definition of cognition, one that goes beyond brain-only thinking change perceptions and create more inclusive paradigms?

6. SHARING METHODOLOGY WITH COMMUNITY

In writing about Mulberry Trees, Sandilands asks, "Why are we not listening to them?" (Sandilands, p.28). I also wonder: What if we could listen together?

I have occasionally over-rationalized my desire to share dance with trees by framing it as a means to create environmental awareness and support responsiveness to climate change. This is not untrue but the deeper truth is that dancing and playing in the forest is a delight and joy that I want to amplify with others. I align my research with the nine climate change educators who came together in 2019 and created recommendations for education. Recommendation 9 states, "Climate change should be imaginative, exciting, hopeful, playful and climate change education needs to be vibrant, engaging and inspiring." (Alsop et al., 2019, p.8). I called my group research sessions *playdates.*

What if we could generate a co-presence of embodied consciousness with trees? Inspired by Robin Wall Kimmerer's suggestion to, "look to our teachers among other species" (Kimmerer, 2013, p.9), I was curious to find out what might happen if we listened to the trees together. I didn't want to predict what the trees would teach us or how we should receive it.

I invited a trusted group of friends and artistic colleagues to join me in a research framework for an exploration. I choose colleagues who know me and who would be open

to moving with trees. In addition, the invitees all have experience with deep listening or similar practices either through music, movement, dance, theatre or meditation. In particular, I reflect on one of the groups that met on April 1, 2023. There were seven of us; myself, a visual artist, a writer, a visiting scholar, a composer, an herbalist and a psychotherapist. I was honored to have such generous and accomplished people to join me for a playdate. We followed a framework outlined in Appendix A. I followed the ethical standards of York University.[1] The group met in the High Park Oak Savannah for two hours.

I acknowledge that High Park is a place of complex histories and the Oak Savannah is a rare ecosystem–one of the few savannah lands left in Ontario. In an environmental history of Toronto, Jon Johnson writes, "Unfortunately, although savanna was once a relatively common part of Toronto's ecology, it is currently an exceptionally rare and threatened ecosystem here." (Johnson, 2013, p.64). He also writes, "First Nations and savanna environments engaged in a mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationship, each helping to maintain the health and integrity of the other." (Johnson, 2013, p.67). The Oak Savannah is a place I often circle back to visit, bringing my thoughts and questions with me. I feel emotionally connected to High Park and the trees there. I was compelled to choose this location for group practice because I was interested in connecting some of my tree relationships with some of my human relationships.

There are four qualitative observations about sharing the methodology that I will discuss here. The observations are focused on understanding the facilitation from the perspective of the human participants. Firstly, I find it interesting that the group intuitively decided to explore separately from one another. Secondly, I'm interested in the feeling of safety that being in a group allows in a public space for these explorations. Thirdly, our discussion revealed a need for more specific frameworks for some people to feel more settled in the exploration. Lastly, I'll reflect on the process of documenting an explorative experience.

[1] The research was approved by the York University Ethics Review Process for Research Involving Human Participants for Research Involving Human Participants and followed the Research Ethics Policies and Guidelines. Application #20211009

It was interesting to me that after the initial group attunement including the CORE exercises each human participant moved away from the group and towards their own individual interactions with a tree. All participants remained in my visual range and were each absorbed in a relational practice. After about 20 minutes, some individuals had clearly finished their exploration and came back to the original location. Others I called back to the circle after 30 minutes. On this day, individual explorations within the group context were rich and varied.

Perhaps the influence of other humans is distracting to tree and human relationships. Yet, being part of a group supported the exploration. The human participants shared their thoughts on the feeling of safety that being in a group provided. Participants expressed that knowing that others were around them playing with trees gave them the freedom they needed to explore relational movement. Dancing with trees doesn't follow modernity's rules of proper behaviors, categories, individuals, reductionism, labeling and standardized production. Like spiraling mychorizzal thinking, it can be "unruly" (Tsing, 2012).

I have observed a common tendency towards discomfort with invitations to do something, or observe someone doing something outside the usual range of human movement. For example, I consider standing, sitting at chair height and forward locomotion to be usual human movements in a park setting. In this research group, individuals were very comfortable engaging in movements and relationships that were outside the range of normal. We were moving backwards, sideways, very slowly, very quickly, inverting, rolling, and wiggling. Exploring with a group of humans seemed to normalize our unusual behaviors. As a solo human exploring this practice with trees, one is vulnerable to the eye rolling of other humans passing by. As a group, we felt secure to explore freely. Even the passers-by seemed more at ease by a group exploration. Some even paused to witness what we were doing. There was a strong interest from participants

for a regular practice of this kind of group exploration with trees. Perhaps practicing unusual behavior in public spaces is a practice of shifting societal norms?

Within recent years there has been an explosion of apocalyptic narratives and yet there is also a tendency to diminish or actively deny the magnitude and complexity of our current climate and other issues (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). I think that engaging in aesthetic embodied practice with trees can be a form of social learning that we can call on when facing the hard truths of our current situations. I argue that imagination is a practice. The more we practice the more we can imagine alternate narratives. Dancing with trees is a practice of imagining—of doing things differently. Perhaps ongoing group practice could develop kinship relations with far reaching resonances? For example, moving upside down to relate to a tree shifts the cultural norm of upright human perception. How might intentional changes in perception and motions of kinship affect policy making and education?

Each human participant easily created a kinetic relationship with the trees. Yet, in our post-exploration verbal discussion, some participants expressed a concern that they were unsure what was expected of them. They were wondering if they would be asked to remember what they did or if I would be creating choreography from their movement. On one hand I am curious to be more specific in leading a group exploration. On the other hand I am curious to allow each group to choose and see how the practice may unfold each time with different participants.

There is a troubling issue with documentation. The group was aware of my methodology and ethically prepared to be videotaped. They knew that any documentation might be turned into video poems and were aware that at any stage in the process they could withdraw permission to record or use footage from this exploration. Even so, the awareness of documentation affected the exploration to some extent. Some participants expressed a certain pressure to find something interesting for me to document. Participants raised concerns that knowing that what they were doing would be recorded somewhat took them out of the moment of connection. Things change when there is an audience. Even an imaginary future audience can inhibit actions and expression.

Despite questioning the process, I nevertheless feel it is important to document the deep listening practice. I feel that digital media can reach a larger audience and perhaps the traces of the exploration may inspire others to notice trees. However, the conundrum is that documenting seems to change the deep listening practice. Future research might involve inquiring into different approaches to documentation.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE Example # 6
Each of Us Together
http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/each-of-us-together/

7. TRANSLATING EMBODIED RELATIONAL PRACTICE to DIGITAL MEDIA

I started creating short videos for social media as a quick and easy way to share ideas from my teaching practice and my work as a live performance artist. During the pandemic lockdowns of 2020, when all live theatre performances and in-person classes were canceled, I started to experiment with videos as a way to connect people through the challenge of isolation. At the time, it seemed that many people were also experiencing a detrimental lack of interaction with the more than human world. My video making practice became a way to share human and tree connections. My iPhone made it easy to shoot footage anywhere at any time. I had the resources of computers and digital applications and I had the time to explore.

The medium of video allows a certain close up and altered perspective that live performance does not. Video can bring together different moments of time and space to demonstrate connections in non-linear ways. For example, the video poem *Spiral Phloem* is an opportunity to closely compare tree and human form in motion.

Video expresses things differently than other mediums. While media studies are beyond the scope of my current research, I would like to note that my use of video as a means of

art-making is a complex translation of experiences and perception of which I am only peripherally aware. This research is a translation of embodiment into a visual format and unlike the living relational motion of the original exploration it is digitally fixed and repeatable. Marshall McLuhan would call it a "different geography" and one in which "the body in extension now that technology stands revealed as the out-ering of our wits or senses and therefore our selves" (McCluhan, 1997, p. 3). The videos of embodied practice are not embodied practice but are something else.

Video, like dance, is a form of non-verbal communication that translates the embodied relational practices more easily than text. It is different than in-person experiences but it retains some of the movement expressions in which I am most interested. Nevertheless, using video to create a trace of a dance belies the ephemeral quality of dance. One of the very reasons I am drawn to dance as live performance is because the form is created in a shared moment of time. When the dance is over, like the moment lived, it is gone. There is a part of me that despairs that these videos can't be that. And yet, there is a part of me that delights in the expressive potential and the accessibility of the video poems. The visual medium is well suited to express some of the ideas that have developed through my research. In addition, it has a great potential to make visible parts of the experience that couldn't be seen in person.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE Example #7

Big Things Around Us

http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/big-things-around-us/

The forest inspired a sense of awe as a living entity that is much bigger, much older and much slower than me. I was not interested in anthropomorphising the forest, but in experiencing movement at a scale of big and slow in relation to smaller creatures. Am I to the forest as the bacteria in my body are to me? Can we sense each other? I used instudio research footage to create the moving shadow over the on-site footage from a group exploration and edited the scales to create a visual contrast of size.

MY BEST MISTAKES with TECHNOLOGY

There are two things in particular I'd like to mention about my creative process with the medium of video. The first is that digital technology is not intuitive for me and thus, secondly, my mistakes are often the best part of the discovery process.

I do not have any formal training with technology and many early videos resulted from happy accidents that furthered my technical skills and fed the creative process. For example, in the video poem *A Whole Universe unto Itself* it was through a happy accident that I discovered the camera angle that made me look as if I could float. I temporarily put my iPhone down as I re-arranged my footing to video record a different idea and the iPhone slipped off the log. When I bent down from my perch higher on the log to replace my iPhone, the camera was still recording and it looked like I was floating towards it in an anti-gravity environment. It was so delightful that I spent a lot of time finding more shots, playing with different angles, movements and directions to amplify the idea.

I combed through the footage that I felt most believably looked like floating and edited the best of it together to create the short video poem. As the anti-gravity dance video played on my computer screen it merged with the idea that a tree is a whole universe. The *Blue Danube Waltz* by Johann Strauss infiltrated my brain— a kick back to my pop culture memories of Stanley Kubrick's 1968 movie *2001: the Space Odyssey* when the same waltz supported the scene of astronauts floating in the stars (Kubrick, 1968). The reference to outer space felt appropriate: I was in awe of the tree.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE Example #8
A Universe Unto Itself http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/2364/

8. SHARING METHODOLOGY; A LESSON PLAN with WIDER COMMUNITY

Leduc mentions how his daughter returns from outdoor experiences with a sense of awe. “When my eight-year-old daughter returns from such an excursion or camp, she comes back with questions and teachings that fill her with awe for the kind of world she lives in” (Leduc, 2016, p.164). Leduc’s calls for a reawakening of our embodied participation in a world that “appears luminously splendid and enchanted.” (Leduc, 2016, p.174). What if we could normalize living with a sense of awe?

I am curious to share deep listening movement practices as a way of noticing, being and relating to the more than human world. I am curious to share my awe of trees. Appendix B is a lesson plan designed with activities I developed through my deep listening methodology and present with a pedagogical lens. This lesson plan differs from the deep listening methodology in four significant ways. The invitations are more precise, the explorations are for a shorter length of time, there are more opportunities to process experiences in community and there is no documentation of the experience. Because this lesson plan has removed the documentation step of the research methodology, it is a means of sharing the process of art-making without necessarily requiring a product of art. It invites participants to be immersed in relationships not outcomes.

The lesson plan is aligned with the writing of bell hooks. She writes, “Aesthetics [then] is more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming.” (hooks, 2009, p.122). The specific places we inhabit influence how we think and who we are. The lesson plan uses art practice as a means of noticing and wondering about trees in outdoor locations.

Quite literally, we have more creative ideas when we are physically outside a box (Lueng et al., 2012). I suggest that outdoor experiences foster creative thinking perhaps because it offers time with places that are less predictable. Indoor environments are mostly square

rooms, straight lines, level surfaces, standard sizing and conveniences that reduce our movement and thus also reduce our way of thinking. Our stairs are regulated for height and width and do not require embodied attention. Conveniences such as car key fobs, escalators and furniture are designed to make life easier by reducing our range, diversity and effort of movement (Bowman, 2016). Less convenient environments require cognitive attention and adaptation.

While there is a lot of information and statistics about the importance of trees there seems to be very little environmental education research about relational practices with trees. Most environmental education programs focus on information and science (Reid, 2019) but I believe it is our emotional connections and our felt relationships that will make a positive difference (Suanasee, et al, 2021). How could environmental education also include arts based relational learning? How could epistemologies go outside, literally and figuratively? How could education include more than human ontologies? This lesson plan was developed with these questions in mind.

Scalabrino writes, "Like never before, a mass transformation in the worldview of adults is needed as there is not time to wait for our children to undo the damage that our ways of being in the world have produced." (Scalabrino, 2022. p.737) There is a sense of urgency for us, the adults, to change our ways. Sherre Wesley writes about the important role arts could play in adult education; "Through the arts, people holistically learn, interact with greater multicultural diversity than elsewhere, and form connections with others. Participating in the arts gives adults experiences, contexts, and tools to help them reexperience, revision, and reconceptualize multicultural diversity in their lives and communities." (Wesley, 2007, p.13). Multi-generational learning through the arts could clearly play an important role in environmental education. I framed this lesson plan for adults but it could be easily adapted to multi-generational participation.

This lesson plan was imagined for able-bodied people who can access a park with trees. It is my hope that this lesson plan would eventually adapt to different peoples and situations and ideally welcome anybody who would like to dance with trees. Further research into

critical disability theory and other frameworks around accessibility would be necessary in creating future adaptations as would consultations with individual participants and their communities.

9. ARTWORK DISCUSSION: Gingko and Cathedral

The process of working with digital media raised some existential questions for me. How is the digitized dancer an expression of embodiment? How is the digitized recording of myself related to my embodied self? What is it like for an audience to view a dance in two dimensions? In my live performance work, I do not interpret work for the audience. I interpret work *with* the audience. Each audience is a unique entity that breathes life and new perspectives into the performance. How can I understand my work without the live energetic interaction of an audience? I do not attempt any answers but present these next two videos for contemplation.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE Example #9 Gingko
http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/gingko/

I created the trace footage for Gingko at the IGAC Studios in Toronto where there is a row of gingko trees in the courtyard outside the windows. As I was dancing, I was looking out the windows and watching the wind play in the leaves. I sat on the windowsill and started dancing with the trees from window to window. Later at the computer, I was learning to edit in Final Cut Pro and trying to create a split screen. This technique was easy on iMovie and difficult to figure out on Final Cut Pro. It was during the frustrating search for split screen that I figured out how to arrange the screen into three parts! Then I realized with this technology it could look as if I had cloned myself! I worked to edit the raw footage to make it look like there were three of me moving at the same time but differently. John Gzowski created the accompanying musical score after the video editing was complete.

At the time of creating this work, I was deeply immersed in a book called *Gingko:The*

Tree that Time Forgot by Peter Crane (Crane, 2013). The dance was influenced by many of the ideas and information presented in the book. I wrote the following text as an accompaniment to the video.

One could imagine that the Gingko tree's resurgence is a good story. It is one of very few species that have been "saved" from extinction by humans. About 250 years ago, Gingko was first catalogued by Western botanists. It was thought at the time that Gingko was confined to a small area of China. Gingkoes now live all over the world, planted in cities and towns across the globe. Gingkos are popular because they can survive harsh conditions. And their unusual leaves are very pretty--small fans that turn golden yellow in the fall. Gingko has other oddities, too. It is neither a flowering plant nor a conifer. It is a dioecious species, meaning individual trees are either male or female but Gingko has been known to partly switch genders for unknown reasons. Male Gingkos release motile sperm that the females receive on a drop of watery fluid on a special stalk at the base of their leaves. The females produce nuts, which when ripe, I am told, smell like human vomit. I have not, yet, personally experienced this special tree scent. Here in Toronto, many of the Gingkoes are male and are rumoured to be clones. While one can say humans have saved Gingko from extinction, one could also speculate that humans have manipulated Gingko, creating a monoculture from a single tree from a single species because it is useful to us. Outside the window of the studio, there is a row of male Gingkoes. They are magnificent, resplendent green with shimmering vivacious leaves. I wondered what it would be like to live next to your clone. In my movement exploration, I wondered what it would be like to move as the essence of a Gingko goddess. Audacious, I know. I used editing techniques to clone the goddesses. It is thought that Gingkoes have about 250 million years of experience as a species. The cloned dancers fade in and out of reality as I imagine the trees might move in and out of their past, present and future. The dancers join together in partial unison and individual expression in the same way the Gingkoes each move in their own way with the same breeze. While I question the selfishness of saving a species to harness it for our own human use, I am grateful for these trees outside the window—grateful for the profound aliveness they exude and the delight of dancing with them. Peter Crane, in his botanical biography of Gingko writes,

*"*Trees, especially trees like gingko, which connect us to the deep history of our planet, ask us to reflect more often and think more carefully about all we will lose when the short view rules our world and everything in it." *(Crane, 2013, p.277).*

The final video poem of this portfolio is a culmination of ideas entitled *Cathedral.* It is an investigation into the feeling that the trees and forests with whom I have danced are a part of me. The trees have affected me emotionally, physically, psychologically, intellectually and spiritually.

I created the on-site traces by walking slowly along forest trails in Vancouver and Sechelt B.C. and Toronto, Grey County, Cambridge, Ontario. The in-studio investigation was an abstract kinesthetic processing of embodied information that I had received from forests.

Ursula Le Guin expresses an unusual shift into movement perspectives in her short story *Direction of the Road*. Through text, she describes the interaction of tree and car movement from a tree's perspective. (LeGuin, 1975). I was similarly interested in shifting perspectives of motion. I was interested in using digital technology to visually express the feeling of forests moving through me, not me moving through the forest.

I began by digitally removing the background of the studio footage so that the human dancing image could move into different forest backgrounds. However, the result was that the dancer look displaced and the perspectives of distance were disorienting. The dancer was disconnected from the ground and it felt very inorganic. The process led me to realize the value of juxtaposing a studio exploration with forest footage as two separate, yet connected realities reflecting the differences of tree and human being-ness in kinship.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE Example #10
Cathedral http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/cathedral/
I wrote the following text to accompany the video poem.

The title Cathedral is a reference to my reverence of the forest as a place of spiritual connection. Peter Timmerman suggests the image of our earth as seen from space can be "a focal point for dreams"(Timmerman, 1999, p. 26). And so may it be with a tree– an arboreal focus for meditation. He writes, "the most radical act possible is to sit in a quiet place for an hour attempting to clear your mind.". To that most radical of acts list, I would like to add dancing with trees. I suggest that these simple radical relational acts have potential to ignite significant positive change. These practices may de-centre anthropocentric thinking and gesture towards non-hierarchical opportunities for imaginative liminal thinking that may lead us towards more equitable futures. With Cathedral, I was interested in using digital technology to visually express the feeling of forest moving through my body, not my body moving through the forest. I was interested in inquiring into the feeling that the trees and forests with whom I have moved are a part of me.

10. ARTIST TALKBACK

I'd like to circle back to my roots as a theatre artist and imagine this part of my paper as an Artist Talkback. The Artist Talkback is a tradition in Toronto's small and mid-size theatres. After certain performances, the artist or artists come back on stage after the curtain call to speak with audiences and receive questions. There is usually a mediator, a generous and knowledgeable person who fields the questions and leads the informal conversation. I have imagined the questions an audience might ask after seeing the video poems.

Why do you like to work with trees?

I've always liked trees. I like their green-ness, their largeness, their rootedness, their expansiveness…They are like the whales of the plant world. I am drawn to human mythologies around trees. Lately, I am curious how trees have a sentience that is both in the earth with the worms and fungal networks, in the same horizontal plane as human awareness at trunk level, and also have a sentience that expands upwards into the sky with the birds. I find it fascinating to imagine how it might be to exist in all these places

at once as one being. I've always been a mover, as long as I can remember and dancing is my way of investigating and exploring ideas. Trees are great producers of the oxygen we breathe and truthfully we cannot live without them.

Climate change is directly related to deforestation (Buizer et al., 2014). The statistics on global deforestation are alarming. Global Forest Watch uses complex analysis systems to track global loss of forests. They report that, "Tree cover loss has been rising in recent history, from 13.4 Mha of tree cover loss in 2001 to 25.3 Mha in 2021." Furthermore, they report that one third of the loss is "Permanent conversion of forests for commodity production, including agriculture, mining, or oil and gas production." (Global Forest Watch, 2023).

There is a complexity of issues surrounding trees including land relations, economic and ecological issues, deforestation and landslides (Lehmann et al., 2019), food security (Pimentel et al., 1997), water cycles (Sheil, 2018) and breathable air. We need forests. Dancing is my way of paying attention and hopefully, an invitation to other people to take a moment to notice a tree.

How do you make your videos?

I always start with an in-person tree visit. I have a personal process of asking permission of the place and the trees and I often begin with cleaning up garbage. I move into my CORE exercises to remind myself to be present. Then I begin a deep listening practice that I inherited from my artist mentors with a lineage to Pauline Oliveros. While this practice is often applied to sound and music, I am investigating with a full sensorium of listening with trees. Can we listen to trees with eyes, ears, nose, touch but also with kinesthetic, proprioceptive and interoceptive sensations? My research begins with embodied listening and, more often than not, becomes a dance. If I feel that I've found something interesting, I will record some of the results of my practice with video on my iPhone. Another component of my practice is research in a studio where I dance to further understand on-site discoveries.

I spend time at the computer to review and edit the video. The editing process is a bit tedious for me. I have developed some basic editing skills that when combined with good luck feed my process. In the editing stage, I play around until the shape of the work reveals itself in a sort of performance. I work to refine it until I feel it might be done. Then I do not watch it for a few days or a few weeks. When I return to view the work, I have a new perspective and shape and re-shape the work further. The decision that the work is ready to be shared is not based on logical information but is a practice of listening to the work itself.

Do you really think trees are sentient and know you are dancing with them?

I like this question as it leads me into existential territory. How can I ever really know what is real? There is scientific evidence that plants can see, feel, hear and think. They do it in completely different ways than humans. New popular scientific research such as Suzanne Simard's work in tree communication has raised the Western world's awareness of the being-ness of trees (Simard, 2021). Writers like Peter Wohlleben who wrote the popular book *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Wohlleben, 2016) and Daniel Chamovitz author of *What a Plant Knows* (Chamovitz, 2017) bring forward ideas about plant intelligences. Sria Chatterjee writes about other artists who credit plants as participants in the creative process. She raises an important point that, "plant sentience and other ways of knowing and relating across species need to be understood within the context of colonial and extractive histories." (Chatterjee, 2023). I acknowledge the complex aspects of politics, culture and philosophy surrounding the question. Do the trees really know I am dancing with them? When I am practicing deep listening with trees, dancing with trees, I am completely convinced of their different-than-me sentience and intelligence.

Who wrote the music for the videos and how do you choose the music for each dance?

The music is usually the very last part of the process for these video poems. I do not dance with music when I am on-site with the trees and I don't usually play music when I

am working in the studio. I find that the music distracts me from focusing on the ideas. But in the videos, I feel music is necessary for the ideas to really resonate. The music makes the video come alive. I am very fortunate to be married to composer John Gzowski who has been an artistic collaborator for decades. He is often with me through the whole process of a video poem. For example, with *Gingko*, he was listening to me rave about Gingko trees over morning coffee, through dinner and into the evening. When I completed the editing process of the footage, he composed the music for the dance. In the video poem *Cedar Creature*, I used a piece of music that John had written a few years earlier for a different project. It has just the right tone of gentle suspense and happily, he granted me permission to use it.

When I was working on the video poem *Spiral Phloem*, I was also investigating Hildegard Von Bingen's music. Puppeteer Clea Minaker inspired me to research Hildegard's work and I was obsessed with her musical melodies that spiraled around a drone. I liked the idea of using a drone as a simple, grounding through line to support all the spirals in motion. I used my accordion to create the drone and added a bit of reverb to make it sound more full. You can hear more of Hildegard Von Bingen's music in *Cathedral* with singer Jess deKort's interpretation of *O Virridissima Virga* recorded specifically for this video poem.

How has your work with trees changed you?

My time with trees has helped me see things more fully. I have a deeper sense of darkness. I care more and it can be painful to care. But I also have a greater sense of lightness and connection. To help explain, I'll share a poem I created from my field notes:

Tree Time

I often feel like a squirrel when I arrive.
My mind twitching like a fluffy tail.
I try to immerse myself into a slower pace.
A more patient place.

A more expansive space.
At first, my tree doesn't seem to be doing much.
I try to do the same.
The wind blows in the branches.
I let it blow across my cheeks.
The snow lands on the boughs above.
I let it land on my shoulders.
I am a different mammal when I say good-bye.
A whale? A Loris?
A Hispaniolan solenodom?
But truly, I think I am just more human.

Do you think anyone can dance with trees?

Neuroscientist Kara Patterson who researches the benefits of dance for people with Parkinson's disease states that, "Dance is for anybody but it is not for everybody." (Patterson, 2021). There are many psychological, religious, cultural, physical barriers to dancing. I believe anybody who wants to dance can dance even if you just dance in your mind. For example, you can follow the graceful arch of a branch with your eyes and feel like you are dancing. But not everyone wants to dance. For example, there are Canadian cultural barriers that stop men from dancing. There are many reasons people might not want to dance. But I'd like to point out that, for humans, there are many psychological and physical benefits to dance (Wargo, 2021). There are also many psychological and physical benefits to being outside in green spaces **(**Kardan et al., 2015). Dancing in green spaces seems like a perfect match to me.

The nodes of connections with which my research practice with trees is currently moving, guide me towards thinking with webs of connection. Nature isn't elsewhere, nature is not other (Cronon, 1996). How can we dance together here and now? For me, these words from Robin Wall Kimmerer, are not a metaphor but a calling; "I want to sing, strong and hard, and stomp my feet with a hundred others so that the waters hum with our happiness.

I want to dance for the renewal of the world." (Kimmerer, 2013 p.251). I can imagine a hundred of us dancing by the river. How might that change us? For anyone who is curious and inspired to dance with trees, or rivers, or lakes or any other beings, I encourage you to give it a try.

10. FURTHER QUESTIONS

My investigation, like mycorrhizal networks, suggests many possible connections and directions for further inquiry that could be far reaching.

One important thread of inquiry is directed towards understanding power relations and questions of authority at the intersections of human and tree interactions. Peluso delves into the power dynamics of access to nature and property relations (Peluso, 2019). Research into power dynamics and ethical frameworks would be a rich source of further investigation and supports questions such as; how do we know a tree is consenting to participate? How can we be respectful of tree being-ness in relationships that are not easily defined by the laws and regulations of Canada? For example, all of my human participants had five pages of text requiring no less than five signatures to indicate their consent to participate in my research. The trees and their well-being were not part of the ethical discussion. As I look towards a more equitable existence and better understandings of the intersectionalities of humans, how might more than human others be part of the process? How may tree beings be more considered in the decision-making processes of humans? I acknowledge that the power dynamics within our own species is unbalanced. How might embodied empathetic work with trees contribute to building our capacity for better relationships with our fellow humans?

Building relationships with Indigenous peoples is an essential thread of inquiry. How to explicitly make specific and meaningful connections with Indigenous lands and peoples? For example, The Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle calls for Indigenous stewardship of the High Park Oak Savannah. (Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle, n.d.) *Protect the Tract* is a project promoting Indigenous land stewardship on the Haldimand Tract

(Protect The Tract, n.d.). In 2021, CBC reported that, “The Haudenosaunee Confederacy Chiefs Council, the traditional government of the Six Nations, made a call earlier this year for a moratorium on development of the area.” (Histrova, 2021). An important question I am thinking with for future projects is: How may arts-based investigations contribute to Indigenous led projects?

Further research into my ancestral relational practices with trees would be of benefit to me personally. What is my ancestral connection to land? How did my ancestors relate to trees? In addition, how can this work support others to bring their own specific identities to the enquiry while respectfully acknowledging we are on Indigenous land?

Hierarchical, colonial decisions, made in places removed from the living forests, have inevitably led to deforestation. The forests of the Blue Mountains, for example, have been destroyed not only by colonial commodification and but also by colonial attempts at stewardship (Langston, 1995). If we are to have forests, we need more people to be in living relationships with trees. How can this work equitably support more people to be in relationships with more trees? How can we reduce barriers of access? What paths are already available to support this practice?

Deep listening as a practice to support liminal thinking could help navigate climate change. How can deep listening help us imagine differently? Change is difficult. Liminal thinking is disorienting. As we face the challenges of climate change many of us are feeling destabilized. It is clear that eco-anxiety is a real and detrimental issue for youth (Léger-Goodes et al. 2022). Embodied practices like the CORE exercises and deep listening practices have the potential to help regulate our nervous systems and help to more calmly contemplate alternate realities for living. How can mindful embodied practices strengthen our capacity to cope with change?

Other literature provides insight into the ‘psychological benefits’ of green spaces in urban areas, for stress levels, health and general well-being **(**Kardan et al., 2015). How then, can deep listening with trees in green spaces further the mutual health and well-being of

humans and more than humans? How can we creatively adapt green spaces and outdoor experiential learning to be more equitable and accessible?

More research into fields such as eco-somatics, plant humanities, community engagement, theories of care, relational practices, power dynamics, environmental humanities and embodiment practices would further support the inquiry. What networks already exist between scholars and artists working in these areas?

I clearly see how arts-based creative processes can facilitate relationships. I also envision art products as a way to support and amplify relational thinking. I envision performances, events and workshops that bring people and trees to be together in-person. The organization SCALE-LeSAUT has a mandate "to foster a coordinated, artful and impactful response to the climate emergency from Canada's arts and culture sector." (SCALE/leSAUT, 2021). How could arts organizations contribute to positive change? And how may further research increase the efficacy of the arts?

The common model of performance in Canada is Euro-centric and hierarchical. How can multi-species perspectives and environmental thinking-- particularly ideas around the commons-- contribute to how arts organizations operate? More research into the intersection of environmental thinking and artistic production would be a rich inquiry.

More research into other art methodologies for multi-species relationships would be useful. For example, as part of a research playdate, a writer expressed a curiosity to write a forest narrative; a musician wanted to investigate the sounds of movement with the trees; another participant became most interested in relating to fungus. How to facilitate non-prescriptive frameworks to encourage individually specific curiosities of relational imagining? What would be the result of normalizing curious practices?

Collaborative cognition is an important part of growing towards a future that moves away from harmful paradigms. Collaborative thinking cannot be standardized but perhaps an open approach could become more explicit and intentional. In the context of the

university, this group of scholars says it well; “A genuinely inclusive and adventurous approach to the environmental humanities might also facilitate collaboration with partners outside the academy, where much of the work of adaptation to environmental change, mitigation of ecological damage, and transition to new social structures must take place. If the environmental humanities gain enough traction, they could initiate a renovation of the university with far-reaching consequences for how knowledge is organized, produced, disseminated, and understood. Whether this potential is realized will depend on how we take up the challenge.” (Bergthaller et al., 2014 p. 261).

The most essential question I will continue to investigate is; **How may we dance into the future?**

The word, **how,** implies an unknown procedure. It is a posture of open palms and raised eyebrows with a slight lift of the shoulders. We do not have a procedure for dealing with climate change. We must listen, collaborate and improvise. **How** may we dance into the future?

I choose the verb **may** as an alternate to the more common verb *do*. *Do* implies an industriousness that no longer serves humanity. I believe that existing in opposition to the pressure of production is important. We need to un-do. What if we could inquire, imagine, enjoy, allow and visit? The verb **may** involves an invitation. It asks permission. It does not prescribe or instruct. May, the month of spring, is the essence of rejuvenation. How **may** we dance into the future?

A dance into the future cannot be a solo. I use the pronoun **we** to invite collaboration. It is intended to acknowledge the complexity of a multitude of diverse individuals with specific and unique relationships. From my own kinetic node of the matrix, I acknowledge other individual beings, human and more than human, differently in motion with me. A collaborative dance practice requires a process of listening to a multiplicity of perspectives. The only way forward is together.

I use the word dance both as a metaphor and as an embodied action. In both aspects I imply motion, relationships, effort, skill, grace, creativity, versatility, responsiveness and energetic commitment. It is a radical alternative to industrious productivity. How may we **dance** into the future?

In an unprecedented time of climate change, full of dire predictions of disasters, the future is unknown. Dancing **into the future** entails ongoing acts of creative adaptation to emergent states of being.

I circle back to here and now and turn to my neighboring Maple tree.
How may we dance into the future?

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Appendix A

GROUP PRACTICE of Methodology

aka Playdate with Julia Louise and the Trees

I engaged with this 90 minute plan on three separate occasions with three different groups. It is a brief outline of open-ended deep listening practice with trees intended for a group of people with experience in deep listening or similar artistic practices.

Meet at Designated Meeting Place

I chose an easy to access locations for bikes, cars and public transit.

Walk to Location

I chose locations in urban forests that were known to me and that were within an easy 510 minute walk.

Opening Circle

5-10 minutes

Introductions and Orientation to location

Land Acknowledgement

Protocols and Guidelines for Engagements

CORE Exercises

Listening *5-10 minutes* deep listening practice

Listening...to breath, to somatic information, to feelings/emotions, to each other, human and not-human, to sound scape, etc.

Exploring

Maximum 30 minutes

While continuing to listen, the exploration phase includes following impulses, imaginings or connections.

Do what you feel compelled to do. (sound, move, sit, write, sing, observe, breathe, meditate, sleep, dance… or do nothing…or…?)

Discussion

15-30 minutes

In a circle participants share experiences.

What did you think/feel/notice/ask/question/explore...

Documentation

Participants are invited to share any discoveries with video documentation.

Closing Circle

Participants are invited to share any closing remarks.

Gestural offer of gratitude to the trees and each other to close the experience.

Appendix B

LESSON PLAN

A 90-120 minute lesson plan for a workshop with for the general public to engage with open-ended artistic practice with trees

Dancing with Trees Workshop is for people who already know they love to dance, have an affinity for being outdoors and love communing with the more than human world.

Alternate title-Movement Mediations with Trees Workshop is for people who might be new to moving mediations and are curious to explore arts-based imaginative ways of relating to nature.

Environmental Education Philosophy

My teaching philosophy is a series of *what if* questions-- frameworks for discovery in real time and space that allow open-ended play for individual curiosities within community. My focus is on co-creating a joyful present-- a presence of embodied consciousness alive in motion with the world.

Objectives

Objectives are woven into each activity

-to move in community with each other, human and non human

-to attune to the teachings of the non-human world around us

-to invite an embodied memory of moving in connection to place and others

-to invite an enjoyable, art-based outdoor experience

-to raise awareness of green spaces

<u>Opening Circle</u>

Rationale: To begin the experience as a group and to **create a sense of community and responsibility for self and other**

Welcome

Introductions

Site Specific protocols

Land Acknowledgement

Briefly share the overall outline of the Workshop

Gentle Start

Rationale: to ease into communal movement, to attune to the living world around us

Gentle Sways, Reaches and stretches. This may include things like shoulder rolls, arm circles, ankle circles, and side bends. Naming the trees around us by species name

CORE Exercises

Group Icebreaker Movement Game

Explorations

Rationale: to play with different invitations to connect to the trees around us

Drawing from a variety of activities the group is led through three to five explorations with trees. Which activities are chosen depends on the group, the weather and the location. Some example activities are:

- Tree Tracing
- Branch Balancing
- Spiral Dance
- Tree Charades
- Leaf Hands
- Tree Breathing
- Moving like Trees-spiral, bend, torque, shimmy…
- Moving in Tree Time
- What are the Trees Teaching Us?

Reflections

In-between each activity we will use the Think-Pair-Share strategy of reflection. Participants are invited to take a moment to reflect on the experience.
They are then invited to share a reflection (a feeling, a question, an emotion…) with another person. The group is invited to reform the group circle and offered an opportunity to briefly share thoughts with the group. The next activity is introduced in the circle.

Closing Circle

Rationale: to wrap-up the experience in a connected and meaningful way The closing circle begins with movement--sways, reaches and stretches similar to our first series of shoulder rolls, knee bends and arm circles. Each participant is offered an opportunity to share *in a few sentences,* an insight, a thought, a feeling, a colour, a message, an idea, an image or a gesture. Participants do not have to share anything.
The circle ends with a gesture of gratitude to each other and the trees.

Appendix C

CATALOGUE OF VIDEO POEMS

1. Suzanne and the Wings of Hemlock

URL: http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/suzanne-and-the-wings-of-hemlock/

Length: 0:24

Date of Filming: February 28, 2023

Location: Toronto, Ontario **Credits:**

dance by Suzanne B. Siskind and Hemlock soundscore

by Julia Aplin

Short Description:
Tsuga Canadensis.
This is neither Shakespeare's nor Socrates poisonous herb.

This Hemlock is a sacred tree on sacred land inspiring flight, and hoots of joyous life. An ethereal moment of cold air and warm hearts.

2. Spiral Phloem

URL: http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/spiral-phloem/

Length: 0:42

Date of Filming: January 3, 2023 Grey County and February 28, 2023 Toronto

Location: Grey County Ontario and Toronto, Ontario

Credits: dance by Julia Aplin and Pine sound by

Julia Aplin **Short Description:**

An investigation in form, flow and motion.

3. Oak Visit from Afar

URL:http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/2369/

Length: 0:52

Date of Filming: August 1, 2022

Location: Toronto, Ontario **Credits:**

dance by Julia Aplin Music

by John Gzowski

Short Description: One spring day, I arrived at Toronto's High Park Oak Savannah with the intention to practice deep listening with a tree. There was a particular tree I had been practicing with for a few months. I was very upset to arrive at the park to see that the area that my tree resided in had been sprayed with toxic pesticides. There were signs warning humans to stay out, as the chemicals were harmful. My research had led me to feel a sense of kinship with my tree and this contamination felt personal. If pesticides were not safe for humans, how could it be safe for my tree? I felt personally concerned for the squirrels, bugs, flowers, birds I had met. It wasn't funny but I created this Charlie Chaplin-esque video to describe what I felt was a ridiculous situation.

4. Cedar Root Creature

URL:http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/2362/

Length: 0:24

Date of Filming: August 7, 2022

Location: Cambridge, Ontario **Credits:**

Animation of cedar root by Julia Aplin

Music by John Gzowski

Short Description: I was just quietly sitting in the forest when it seemed that this piece of cedar root beside me started "looking" at me. It seemed like a friendly creature. I wondered what it would be like to be in kinship with this imagined creature and look at the forest together. As puppets do, the cedar root creature seemed to develop a character of its own. Imaginary creatures and kindred spirits are everywhere.

5. Dance of Beech and Light

URL: https://youtu.be/nsKHecsm2tU

Length: 0:51

Date of Filming: May 30, 2023

Location: Dartington Hall, U.K
Credits:

Danced by Beech and Sunlight

Sound score by Julia Aplin

Short Description: At the end of May, 2023, I spent a few days in Devon walking the land and visiting trees at Dartington College. I did not feel an invitation to dance but to witness. Deep relationships take more than just a few days to develop and despite my British heritage, it was clear that I was a visitor in the English forest. On my last day there, as I was lugging my suitcase across the cobblestones, I was stopped in my tracks by the light dancing with a Beech tree.

6. Each of Us Together

URL: http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/each-of-us-together/

Length: 1:32

Date of Filming: April 1, 2023 **Location:**

High Park, Toronto, Ontario **Credits:**

Danced by Suzanne Barnes, Suzanne B. Siskind, Juliet Palmer, Bañuta Rubess, Margo

Zalite and the trees of High Park, Toronto.

Voice over by Julia Aplin

Short Description: What if we could create a joyful present-- a presence of embodied consciousness that is alive in motion with the trees?

7. Big Things Around us

URL:http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/big-things-around-us/

Length: 1:32

Date of Filming: March 11, 2023 and April 15, 2023

Location: High Park, Toronto, Ontario **Credits:**

Danced by Suzanne Barnes and Julia Aplin with High Park

Music by John Gzowski

Short Description: The forest is a living entity that is much bigger, much older and much slower than me. I was not interested in anthropomorphising the forest, but instead was experimenting with experiencing movement at a scale of big and slow in relation to the smaller creatures that are part of me, like for example, the mitochondria in my cells.

8. A Universe Unto Itself

URL: http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/2364/

Length: 1:05

Date of Filming: March 19, 2022 **Location:**

High Park, Toronto, Ontario **Credits:**

Danced Julia Aplin with Black Oak

Music The Blue Danube by Johann Strauss II

Short Description: A tree can encompass a whole universe.

9. Gingko

URL: http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/gingko/

Length: 3:20

Date of Filming: August 16, 2022 **Location:**

IGAC Studio, Toronto, Ontario **Credits:**

Danced Julia Aplin with Gingko Trees, IGAC Studios, Toronto, Ontario

Music by John Gzowski

Short Description: This video was created from an embodied contemplation with Gingko trees. The in-studio footage was filmed at the IGAC Studios in Toronto. There is a row of Gingko trees in the courtyard outside the window. During a break, I was looking out the windows and watching the wind play in the leaves. It seemed strange to me that the trees were all male clones. I sat on the windowsill and started dancing with them from

window to window. Later, at the computer, working on different footage, I was wondering on tree being-ness and wondering what it would be like to have or to be a clone.

10. Cathedral

URL: http://upwardspiral.me/dancing-with-trees/cathedral/
Length: 7:18

Date of Filming: January 2022-April 2023 **Location:**

Various Locations Ontario and B.C.

Credits:

Danced by Julia Aplin with Forest Cathedrals in Ontario and B.C.
Music *O Viridissima Virga* by Hildegard Von Bingham, performed by Jessica deKort

Sound Design by John Gzowski

Short Description: The title Cathedral is a reference to my reverence of the forest as a place of spiritual connection. I was investigating spatial relational movement. I was interested in using digital technology to visually express the feeling of forest moving through my body, not my body moving through the forest. I was interested in inquiring into the feeling that the trees and forests with whom I have moved are a part of me.