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Earth Turning: Ecosomatic Exploration and Social Action Community Art Option 3, Community Engagement Project

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Earth Turning: Ecosomatic Exploration and Social Action Community Art

Option 3, Community Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

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Abstract

Ecopsychology emerged to redress harm caused by a long dominant western worldview that humans are separate from nature. Somatic psychology is premised on the unity of body and mind, which western thought also divided for centuries. The emerging field of ecosomatics supports embodied humans in relationship to the body of Earth. When utilized in psychotherapy, expressive arts, and social action-oriented community art, ecosomatic approaches facilitate an understanding of the continuity between inner and outer nature.

A one-day community workshop in ecosomatic practice and nature-based expressive arts was offered to explore embodied dialogue with nature. The workshop involved time outdoors as well as indoors. Activities included a sensory awareness exercise, Authentic Movement with nature as mover and witness, visual art, and dance. The workshop culminated in the creation of a Laban-style movement choir that evolved out of participants’ ecosomatic experiences. By explicitly facilitating an experience of shared embodiment with nature, the workshop became a form of social and ecological action as well as community art.
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Introduction

Advances in neurobiological research are increasingly providing empirical evidence for the essential indivisibility of mind, body, and emotions. Our brains can only develop properly through social contact (Schore and Sieff, 2015). We are wired to relate to each other; we need other humans in order to grow, develop, learn, and mature (Siegel and Sieff, 2015).

Yet, modern psychotherapy has yet to embrace an understanding that the healthy human also needs contact and connection with the living, non-human world. This awareness is the terrain of ecopsychology, a field still in its infancy, which arose out of the observation that western psychology had failed to perceive the significance of nature (the world beyond that of human origin) for well-being, including psychological health (Roszak, 1992).

Along with an understanding that the human-nature relationship is a lens through which to contextualize clients’ histories and present circumstances, ecotherapists—those workers who employ the insights of ecopsychology—are utilizing contact with nature as a path to wellness for their clients. In fact, a substantial research literature has sprung up over the last two decades, providing evidence of the therapeutic value of time spent in the outdoors and in contact with other life forms (Chalquist, 2009).

In the last decade, practitioners of expressive arts therapy, including dance-movement therapy, as well as body-based, or somatic, psychotherapy, have begun to incorporate ecotherapy approaches (Kopytin & Rugh, 2017; Beauvais, 2012; Burns,
In addition to the techniques employed by other ecotherapists, such as incorporating nature-based questions in assessment (Scull, 2009), and allowing the natural world to serve as a holding environment and co-therapist (Lundy, 2015), nature-based expressive arts therapists utilize nature as a source of materials and inspiration for expressive creation (Berger, 2017; Davis, 2017).

Somatic psychotherapists are turning to the natural world as a metaphor for the body, and as a space for witnessing and expressing embodiment (Beauvais, 2012; Burns, 2012). Practitioners of the emerging field of ecosomatics understand that nature, or the “body of Earth,” can be sensed and understood through one’s own individual body and as part of one’s own body. Just as somatic practice brings greater awareness to the inner life of the body, ecosomatic practice awakens people to the inner life of the “more-than-human” (Abram, 1996) bodies that also dwell on our planet.

A key critique by ecopsychology of modern, western society is that it continually pressures us to forget, or even disavow, our embedment in a dynamic, relational, embodied world. The separation of humans from nature is a root cause of human suffering, according to ecopsychology, and the ills it spawns include common afflictions of modern, industrial society such as chronic depression, anxiety, addiction, and suicide (Glendinning, 1995). The restoration of a conscious, embodied relationship with nature—including the “nature” of our own bodies—thus becomes an essential task of therapy. Stated more boldly, the enlivenment of the connections between humans and the more-than-human world is a crucial antidote to the wounding and fragmentation caused by our industrial, high-tech society.

Beyond the walls of the therapy office, practices for restoring these connections
include ecosomatic group work in natural settings and nature-based community arts programs. These group approaches help build a sense of embedment within a larger community. They can spark insight that creativity is an attribute of being human as well as of all life. When joined with an intention to hold social justice and ecological integrity as important values, community arts projects may serve as instruments of social transformation. Participants’ direct experience of connection, vulnerability, empathy, care, beauty, creativity and collaboration, with each other and with nature, is a strong foundation for living into different ways of being in the world (Junge, Alvarez, Kellogg & Volker, 1993; Kaplan, 2006).

A workshop entitled “Earth Turning” was conducted to explore the potential of group ecosomatic practice and nature-based community art to facilitate greater embodied understanding of the connection between the inner nature of the human being, and the outer nature of the more-than-human world. Participants created a movement choir based on what they had experienced in their ecosomatic investigations. The choir brought the group together in a culminating artistic effort. It offered an opportunity to manifest in movement how social change may be realized within a field of shared attention which is in turn embedded in a more-than-human world.

**Literature Review**

The basis for the Earth Turning workshop lay in a diverse array of disciplines. Subsequently, the topics to be covered in this review of relevant literature are wide ranging. First, the efficacy of ecotherapy, which is the application of ecopsychology principles to therapeutic work, is addressed. Second, the incorporation of ecotherapy approaches in expressive arts therapy is discussed. An emergent term for the melding of
these fields is nature-based expressive arts therapy. Up next for consideration are the body-centered fields of somatics and ecosomatics. A still-sparse literature in the fledgling field of ecosomatic expressive arts is explored. Finally, movement-based, social action-oriented community arts are considered. The “movement choir” is a malleable form with a rich history and great potential to engage and inspire people in issues of profound meaning and concern.

**Ecopsychology**

Since the early 1990s, when Theodore Roszak (1992) introduced the term “ecopsychology” in his seminal book, *Voice of the Earth*, much of the work of theoreticians, investigators and practitioners in the field has been to determine whether and how nature restores health to human beings. A considerable literature has developed, bolstering the belief that contact with nature supports the well-being of individuals, and may, as well, lead to more pro-environment behaviors, such as taking action to protect imperiled habitat or reducing consumption of scarce resources. Some of the most important scholars to emerge in the last two decades are represented in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995); *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind* (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009); and *Ecopsychology: Science, Totems and the Technological Species* (Kahn & Hasbach, 2012). Other prominent authors in this expanding discipline include David Abram (1996, 2010), Thomas J. Doherty (2009), Andy Fisher (2013), Martin Jordan (2016), and Joanna Macy (1998, 2012).

In terms of empirical research, Hansen, Jones, and Tocchini (2017) have provided perhaps the most comprehensive review, to date, of the science documenting human health benefits of exposure to nature. Collectively, the studies they examined provided a
compelling and solid body of evidence that natural settings and contact with elements of nature have significant health-promoting effects, both physiological and psychological.

The review by Hansen and colleagues began with a search of databases using keywords “shinrin-yoku,” “forest bathing,” and “nature therapy.” Shinrin-yoku, also known as forest bathing, is a traditional Japanese practice that has been an important part of health care in Japan since the 1980s, and is also of significant interest to investigators in other countries of eastern Asia. Shinrin-yoku entails immersion “in nature by mindfully using all five senses” (Hansen et al. 2017, p. 1), and as such, is conceptual kin with what other researchers call ecotherapy.

Notably, Hansen et al. found that exposure to natural spaces had positive, measurable effects on human physiology as well as individuals’ perception of decreased stress. Nature therapy treatments appeared to have ameliorating effects on several chronic diseases, including coronary artery disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and diabetes type II. In terms of psychological impacts, time spent in natural spaces appeared to reduce feelings of hostility, depression, and anxiety, and improved sleep. For example, there was a significant difference in remission rates for depression between patients treated with a forest-walking based CBT program (61% remission) versus patients treated with traditional psychotherapy in a hospital-based group (21% remission) (Kim et al., 2009, as cited in Hansen et al., 2017). Other studies indicated that exposure to nature, particularly when combined with exercise, significantly reduced pain and its accompanying psychological distress. Sensory-rich contact with nature appeared to induce relaxation and a sense of well-being in study participants. For example, touching natural objects such as tree bark was significantly correlated with decreased blood
pressure, as compared to touching non-natural objects such as metal and fabric.

Hansen et al.’s work provided validation for an earlier review paper by Annerstedt and Hrborg (2011). In their survey of “nature-assisted therapy,” they found a “small but reliable evidence base” (p. 385) in support of treatments for a wide range of diagnoses, “from obesity to schizophrenia” (p. 385).

According to Atchley, Strayer, and Atchley (2012) exposure to nature may improve cognitive function. Their study showed a 50 percent improvement in performance on a test of creative problem solving for those who received the treatment of a prolonged stay in a wilderness area.

Kjellgren and Buhrkall (2010) compared responses of subjects who participated in a guided relaxation practice in a park with those who participated in a relaxation practice in a simulated natural environment. The indoor environment consisted of a windowless room with a slideshow depicting images of the park where the outdoor trials occurred. Outdoor relaxation practices were more effective in reducing stress and increasing energy level.

Some investigators have posited that physical activity is a confounding variable in studies showing the health benefits of time outdoors. Thompson Coon, Boddy, Stein, Whear, Barton, and Depledge (2011) concluded that the existing research did not yet allow for the effects of physical activity to be teased apart from the overall impact of time spent in nature. However, the studies they reviewed did show that subjects self-reported greater levels of enjoyment, energy, and a sense of well-being when they engaged in physical activity outdoors versus when they were doing physical activity indoors.

Exposure to nature appears to promote physical, emotional and cognitive health,
but what moves people to promote the well-being of nature? Kals, Schumacher, and Montada (1999) investigated the motivation behind behaviors supporting ecological conservation. They found that emotional affinity, indignation, and interest in nature were all strong predictors of willingness to commit to protection of nature. They recommended that interventions to promote affinity for nature should include experiences of direct, sensory contact with nature, in combination with dialogue that addresses nature’s “values and enjoyment” (Kals, et al., 1999, p. 198). Mayer and Frantz (2004) also examined the relationship between a sense of connectedness to nature and ecological behavior. The researchers found that the amount of time spent in nature was positively associated with a sense of connectedness to nature, and this sense of connection “leads to concern for nature” as shown by “a biospheric value orientation, ecological behavior, anticonsumerism, perspective taking, and identity as an environmentalist” (Mayer & Frantz, 2004, p. 512).

**Nature-based Expressive Arts Therapy**

Strands of thought within expressive arts therapies echo and complement ecotherapy perspectives. A key meeting place for these two disciplines is a focus on creativity. Expressive therapies pioneer Shaun McNiff wrote: “The art medicines generated by creative expression are innate aspects of nature” (McNiff, 2017, p. x).

Some expressive arts therapists have felt called to repair the divide between the human and more-than-human worlds. According to nature-based expressive arts therapists Sally Atkins and Melia Snyder, the exclusion of nature from therapeutic practice reinforced an “oppression of subjugated groups and the privileging of the dominant group” (Atkins & Snyder 2018, p. 37). In order to overcome the helping
professions’ “legacy of anthropocentrism” (Atkins & Snyder, 2018, p. 37), the authors proposed an “eco-social justice framework for the field of expressive arts” in which the reclamation of the arts for the well-being of all is joined with ecotherapy principles of reframing pathology, understanding reciprocity between humans and nature, and drawing on the powers of resilience inherent in living systems (Atkins & Snyder, 2018).

A rich sub-discipline has begun to emerge at the confluence of expressive arts therapies and ecotherapy. For example, “Nature Therapy” was developed as a method in which nature variously played the role of co-therapist, sanctuary, mirror, and source of materials for art and drama-oriented exploration (Berger, 2017). Direct contact with nature was key, as it “can deepen a person’s connection with his or her own nature” (Berger, 2017, p. 3). Berger noted that these intimate experiences with nature sometimes led people to take an interest in nature conservation.

Groundswell was an educational, environmental, and therapeutic program that employed art therapy, community arts, and horticulture to support healing and change in program participants (Whitaker, 2010). The “multiple subjectivities” (Whitaker, 2010, p. 125) of the natural landscape were inherently interactive, and manifested their dynamic relationships through constant motion. Observation of and engagement with this “movement through a living landscape” (Whitaker, 2010, p. 125) led participants to new connections of sensation, image, feeling, and thought.

**Somatics and Ecosomatics**

Somatics is based on the firsthand knowing of the body from within (Hanna, 1991). The field of somatics brought the body into the study of mind and consciousness (Wozny 2006). The somatic perspective is foundational for body-based psychotherapies,
such as dance-movement therapy (Burns, 2012), as well as for dance forms that emphasize self-awareness, autonomy, and “listening to bodily cues arising from breath, touch, and movement” (Batson, 2009, p. 1).

Ecosomatics is the firsthand knowing of the body of the earth, from within our earthly bodies (Bauer, 2008) and ecosomatics has brought nature into the study of the human body-mind. Dance artist Andrea Olsen said “Body is part of Earth…Bones, breath and blood are the minerals, air, and water around us—not separate but same. This isn’t metaphor…it is fact” (Schell, 2005, p. 3).

Somatics investigates and attends to sensation, perception, and inner impulse—the embodied self. Ecosomatics investigates the experience of the embodied self, connected and continuous with an embodied nature. “While somatics develops our kinesthetic and sensory perceptions, ecosomatics also includes the environment and one’s awareness and relationships with the outer world” (Bauer, 2008, p. 8-9).

The ecosomatics literature is still sparse. One of the few to venture into this territory is dance-movement therapist Cheryl Burns (2012). She explored how ecopsychological insights contributed to an ecosomatic understanding of the body’s embedment in nature. Embodiment of self occurs in a field of embodiment: bodies of other humans and of “soaring hawks, reaching pines, oozing sap, falling cliffs, and drifting clouds” (Burns, 2012, p. 40). The ecosomatic view has crucially expanded body-based psychotherapies to elicit a felt sense of “living through embodied reciprocity…with the more-than-human world” (Burns, 2012, p. 40). Burns presented a number of “embodied embedment practices” (2012, p. 48) designed to cultivate a lived, immediate sense of being in mutual relationship with the more-than-human world. One of the forms
Burns discussed was Authentic Movement, developed by dance-movement therapy pioneers Mary Starks Whitehouse and her protégé, Janet Adler (Adler, 2002).

Authentic Movement is a structured format in which a mover is guided by inner impulses from “personal body narrative, sometimes from sensation, sometimes from a place that is known and can be named, and sometimes from a place beyond words” (Marcow-Speiser & Franklin, 2007, p. 69). Simultaneously, a witness watches the mover while tracking their own inner flow of sensations, feelings, and thoughts.

Although it is traditionally practiced among humans only, Burns raised the possibility of Authentic Movement engaged with “all aspects of the sentient world” (Burns, 2012, p. 47). Such a practice of Authentic Movement with nature has actually long been a part of the work of Alton Wasson and his collaborators, Mary Ramsay and Daphne Lowell, founders of Contemplative Dance (Wasson, 2005). “In the same way that we take turns witnessing and being witnessed in the studio,” Wasson wrote, “I offer the exercise of witnessing something in nature and inviting something in nature to witness us” (Wasson, 2005, p. 13).

Beauvais (2012) used the Focusing theory and techniques of body-oriented psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin, along with Object Relations Theory, to craft an ecosomatic practice she called “Contact with the Ecological Facilitating Environment.” According to Beauvais, humans develop their embodied, implicit knowledge of their place in and relationship to their surroundings through an “ecological facilitating environment,” analogous to the facilitating environment that exists within the relationship of primary caregiver and infant. Just as there is within Object Relations Theory a dynamic, embodied interchange between caregiver and child, in which bonding, growth,
learning and maturation unfold, so too does the human develop in “an earthly facilitating environment that both mirrors its ability to sequence through energetic and physical blocks to wholeness, and…implicitly mentors us on how to sustainably exist in relationship with other Earth systems” (Beauvais, 2012, p. 285).

Like Authentic Movement and Contemplative Dance, Focusing invites an oscillation of awareness. The Focuser first scans the body and notices sensation before allowing a preliminary image or word to arise out of the sensation. The Focuser consults the “felt sense” in the body to determine the aptness of fit between sensate experience and the symbol that has shown up to represent it (Beauvais, 2012).

In Beauvais’ ecosomatic practice, a participant is first tutored in Focusing fundamentals, then guided to a natural outdoor location by a therapist skilled in Focusing technique. There, the Focuser/participant allows themselves to be drawn to a place or natural object. The therapist encourages the participant to engage in an oscillation of “sensory awareness…from the target to responding internal felt senses” (Beauvais, 2012, p. 286). The external environment becomes, in essence, an extension of the body.

**Ecosomatic Expressive Arts**

Indigenous peoples have long utilized the healing and transformative capacities inherent in conscious, embodied contact and creative, artistic collaboration with nature (McNiff, 1988). In contemporary applications, however, the blending of ecosomatic exploration with expressive endeavor is unusual. An internet search for journal articles or book titles with the words “ecosomatic” and “art,” or “ecosomatic” and “expressive,” for example, turned up no relevant results. However, there are clearly pioneers in this field, though they themselves have not used the same terminology.
Two of the most prominent trailblazers in this realm are the mother-daughter duo, Anna and Daria Halprin, co-founders of the Tamalpa Institute, a movement, dance and expressive arts therapy education program based in California (Halprin & Kaplan, 1995). Anna Halprin’s ecologically-oriented, community dance works are discussed in the next section on social-action community arts but collectively, Anna, Daria and Tamalpa have been highly influential in the field of expressive arts and somatic movement education for decades. The institute’s affinity for natural spaces and focus on the human-nature relationship is longstanding (Halprin & Kaplan, 1995).

Another ecosomatic expressive arts pioneer, Jamie McHugh (n/d), reflected on the Tamalpa approach in his essay “Embodying Nature.” He wrote of taking Tamalpa students to Point Reyes National Seashore where they engaged in movement practices on the beach. “Returning to a direct sensory encounter with the natural world…can awaken a powerful passion and connection” (McHugh, n/d, p. 1). McHugh and his students then found their way into a single, all-encompassing dance.

Other innovators who are applying ecosomatics and expressive arts to healing and transformative action are Rachel Kaplan (2018), Matthew Nelson (2018), Nala Walla (n/d), and Ariana Candell (2018). Together, these and other practitioners echo ancient practices as they create contemporary spaces for renewal of the human body-mind, embedded in and becoming awake once again to the more-than-human world.

**Social-Action Community Arts and the Movement Choir**

When the work of reconnecting human and nature, body and mind, through ecosomatic practice and expressive arts is taken out into the wider world, beyond the private realm of psychotherapy and into the public sphere, the gifts of embodied contact
with inner and outer nature become seeds of change for communities.

Collective, collaborative art offers potent opportunities for community healing and social change (e.g., Barratt, 2010; Elizabeth & Young, 2006; Faigin & Stein, 2014; Thompson, 2012). A number of artists, healers, and activists have addressed the linked crises of human-caused environmental harm and fragmented, distressed human communities by facilitating participatory creative works. These may occur in public spaces where they can be witnessed or joined by others (e.g., Gerity & Bear, 2007; Wallenberg, 2017; Young, 2006).

As a visionary creator of collective dance for social transformation, choreographer Anna Halprin has been highly influential. Halprin wrote about what motivated her, beginning in the early 1970s, to facilitate works that engaged large numbers of people who were not professional dancers. “How a dance looked or how it might be received by an audience was not on my mind. More important was how it felt to the performers and how they were able to use the experience of its creation and performance in furthering their own personal, artistic, and communal growth” (Halprin & Kaplan, 1995, p. 228).

Halprin discovered that when groups of 50-100 people moved together in common purpose, something remarkable showed up: “…an amazing force, an ecstatic rhythm…[p]eople began to move as if they were parts of a single body, not in uniform motion but in deeply interrelated ways” (Halprin & Kaplan, 1995, p. 228). Halprin connected this organized energy of the group to natural rhythms and the geometry of living systems, as well to the power of ritual among tribal peoples, who used dance, music, and other expressive practices in support of shared purpose.
Halprin’s *Planetary Dance* is a global peace dance that has taken place since the early 1980s (Halprin & Kaplan, 1995), and from its origins in the San Francisco Bay Area has spread to dozens of countries and hundreds of locations around the world (Nixon, 2018). Humans’ sacred connection to place and to Earth lies at the heart of *Planetary Dance*.

Halprin believed that, whether in workshops or large public rituals, participants needed to work with the material of their own lives, “so that the transforming power of dance would have the opportunity to effect real-life changes for them” (Halprin & Kaplan, 1995, p. 229). Yet, collaborating in shared space, participants created a dance that served something greater than their individual selves, and which connected them with a “life force…nourishing and necessary—the right of all living beings, not just artists” (Halprin & Kaplan, 1995, p. 229).

Decades before Halprin facilitated collective dances and rituals in public spaces in the United States, dance artist and movement theorist Rudolph Laban developed the “movement choir” in the early twentieth century in Germany. These dances were designed to create a space where “people could take pleasure in a mystical merging with a mass in a cultic celebration” (Kew, 1999, p. 77), and they hearkened back to a Dionysian “festive culture” (Kew, 1999, p. 77) that existed in ancient Greece.

Laban’s approach to dance was deeply informed by his faith in “harmony,” which at its most fundamental was “the balance of the inner and outer aspects of the individual” (Pratt, 2017, p. 593), and was outwardly expressed in movement. Laban, like Halprin, believed that dance was not only for the professional artist, but for everyone. Much like Halprin, as well, Laban’s interest was in movement that came out of an inner impulse and
motivation, rather than a compulsion to match an external standard.

Laban saw “meaningful symbolic collective activity” (Pratt, 2017, p. 594) as a basic human need that was not being met in an increasingly urban and industrial society. Movement choirs drew people from all walks of life and were accessible to all skill levels. Participants engaged in both improvised and choreographed passages. Initially, audiences were barred from viewing the movement choirs because they were not meant to be public presentations. Eventually, performance became a bigger aspect of the movement choirs, however, and some were huge, involving thousands of people (Pratt, 2017).

Laban’s movement choirs had different themes, but all were conceived in the spirit of celebrating the individual’s place in a larger collective or community (Pratt, 2017). Laban wrote: “The main aim of a movement choir must always be the shared experience of the joy of moving. It is to a great extent an inner experience and, above all, a strengthening of the desire for communion” (Laban, as quoted in Crewdson, 1998).

Laban saw the movement choir as an expression of and homage to the unity of life. Harmonious patterns found in nature were the same as those found in the human form, and vice versa. To move the human body in rhythm with other humans and the living world beyond the human was to experience those harmonies directly.

As a form for community-created art and social transformation, the movement choir lives on in large-scale actions and coordinated dance events co-occurring around the globe (Eddy, 2011). For example, the site performances designed by dance-movement therapist Marylee Hardenbergh have centered on the need to protect safe, clean drinking water and to honor the iconic bodies of water around which so many human communities
are located and on which they depend (Global Site Performance, 2017). Hardenbergh and other Laban movement analysts also created Global Water Dances, which are movement choirs performed on the same day each year in dozens of locations around the world (Global Water Dances, 2017).

Somatics educator Martha Eddy wrote about considerations for creating contemporary movement choirs, and the diversity of purposes, places, and participants that characterize them (Eddy, 2011). For example, choirs may be issue-driven or not, have audiences, or not, occur outdoors or indoors, may have simple or complex movement patterns, and may use space in clear and deliberate ways. Eddy observed that what movement choirs exemplified was a process in which “self expression and group cohesion could be in dialogue” (Eddy, 2011, p. 1).

Improvisational opportunities in a movement choir can amplify the importance of attending to this dialogue. Meanwhile, a basic score holds it all together. Eddy quoted dancer Gretchen Dunn: “Improvisation, especially in a group, is a joy because you can play off one another—ignore, mirror, play with” (Dunn, as quoted by Eddy, 2011, p. 2).

There is a transcendent potential within the movement choir. It can be a powerful form of community building, at once somatic, expressive, and generative of a shared awareness field. Halprin wrote about a “life force” emergent from a large group moving together. Another writer said: “I found myself thinking of the movement choir as a force of nature or an energy field that’s ever-present in our lives but completely unknowable…choirs at their best can make us understand the word ‘harmony’ in a profound way” (Veltman, as quoted by Eddy, 2011, pp. 3-4).

Summary of the Literature
Scientific research on the application of nature-based therapies shows tangible benefits for physical health and a sense of well-being. However, ecotherapy does not simply utilize nature as a resource for the restoration of mental or emotional health. When people experience themselves received by and embedded in a larger, more-than-human world, a reciprocal impulse of care for nature often emerges.

Nature-based expressive arts therapy enlists the bounty and dynamism of nature in the quest—through creativity—for grounding, insight, symbolic imagery, and other therapeutic values. Connection with nature is felt in the body in ecosomatic practice. When somatic and expressive approaches are interwoven, a vivid dialogue between inner and outer natures, between the receptive, witnessing self and the active, moving self, can emerge. Nature becomes, variously, a holding environment, a co-therapist, a partner in moving/witnessing, a guide, a stage.

The somatic practice of Authentic Movement may be extended to the more-than-human world, creating an ecosomatic, or ecologically embodied, practice in which the bodies of more-than-human beings, and the body of Earth, more generally, are felt through sensorial, sensuous, kinesthetic experience (Bauer, 2012; Wasson, 2005). Gleanings from ecosomatic exploration may be brought to a collaborative art project that embodies, like an ecosystem, an open-ended process in which individuals remain distinct, yet are part of a greater whole. The movement choir is a fitting form to hold the dynamic energies of people relating consciously to each other and to the more-than-human world. With its philosophical roots in ancient folk festivals (Kew, 1999), and modern manifestations in outdoor dance rituals and cause-oriented public performances (Eddy,
2011), the movement choir is a flexible model that lends itself to social action efforts
directed at greater harmony between humans and nature.

Ecopsychologist Andy Fisher asserts that ecopsychology is necessarily radical. By
recognizing the “everyday social forces that violate our nature” (Fisher, 2013, p. xiv),
egcopsychology calls upon its practitioners to not only “go to the roots” (Fisher, 2013, p.
xiv) of harm, but to also speak and act for change. A movement choir can be a means of
witnessing wounds that have arisen from those violating social forces (e.g., polluted
water, endangered species, a serial killer on the loose). It can also be an experiment in
embodying an alternative to a society that violates our nature. A dance in which humans
and nature are understood to be in a collaborative, creative process, in which both
witnessing and moving, receiving and offering, are vital components, is one way to begin
to manifest a different relationship between world of humans and the more-than-human
world.

**Methods**

In order to explore these ideas, a one-day workshop was offered, incorporating
somatic awareness, movement, visual art, nature-based practices, and social-action
oriented community art. The workshop took place in the Champlain Valley of Vermont
in late February 2018, and was entitled “Earth Turning: A Dialogue with Life Through
Dance.”

**Participants**

Participants were recruited by advertising to the local dance community. For
about a month leading up to the event, the facilitator promoted the workshop by making
spoken announcements at local weekly dance gatherings, distributing a 5”x7” flyer at
dance venues, posting a notice on the Vermont Dance Alliance web site calendar, creating a Facebook event page, and making direct Facebook Messenger and email invitations to about 75 people. Participants signed up for the workshop in advance. Orientation letters were sent via email to all participants several days prior to the workshop. The letters included information about what to bring for the day, as well as a general outline of the day’s activities.

The flyer, Facebook event page, and Vermont Dance Alliance calendar posting included the following descriptive paragraph:

What sustains and restores life in the face of danger and loss can be discovered through deep dialogue with our embodied selves and the body of the living world. In this one-day workshop we will explore, through dance and other creative practices, the messages arising from our wise, wild bodies, including other beings with whom we share this Earth. This is a community arts project intended to serve not just people, but a changing planet.

In the promotional texts, information about the date, location and the facilitator was included. The workshop was offered on a “by donation” basis.

**Materials**

For the visual arts portion of the workshop, materials included oil and chalk pastels, felt-tip markers, and several drawing paper pads of different sizes. Blue painter’s tape was offered for participants to use to hang their art on the windows in the workshop space.

For the movement choir portion of the workshop, musical instruments were made
available and included several percussion instruments, rattles, a pair of wooden claves, and two frame drums. Participants were invited to bring their own instruments if they wished.

At the beginning of the workshop, participants were asked to find an object outdoors in nature that they could bring indoors for the day. Among the pieces brought in by participants was a piece of tree bark, a branch with dead leaves, a small bush complete with roots, and a small shelf fungus.

Procedure

The workshop took place at the “Common House” building at a co-housing site in a rural area in Charlotte, Vermont, about 10 miles from downtown Burlington. The day began with a welcome to the workshop, and an orientation to the indoor space and the land. Participants introduced themselves one at a time with their names, a description of a habitat their body felt at home in, and one thing they were curious about.

Following introductions, participants were guided through a 30-minute sensory awareness warm-up while lying on the floor. It ended with a kinesthetic exploration of participants’ own hands. Participants were invited to let their hand movements take on the movement qualities of an animal—perhaps an imaginative one. They were asked to witness this “hand-creature” for a few minutes.

In the next phase, participants went outdoors for about 20 minutes. Participants wandered on the land and introduced themselves to the outdoor space. They were directed to invite some object or “nature piece” to be brought indoors for the day. These nature pieces would be witnesses to the workshop. This outdoor interlude concluded with a brief ceremony in which each participant stepped forward in a standing circle and
completed two open-ended sentences. The first was “I am the one who…” The second sentence was “This [referring to the nature piece] is the one who…” Each participant shared a movement that reflected an aspect of their nature piece or their initial experience on the land. The rest of the group mirrored the movement in response.

The next phase involved Authentic Movement indoors. The ritual for each round began with the group standing in a circle. Participants were invited to “Notice who is here.” Then participants were asked to observe and “Honor the open space.” The ring of a small “energy chime” marked the beginning and end of the movement time.

After lunch, the next phase was Authentic Movement outdoors. Participants were first witnesses to the elements and living beings on the land. Then, in a second outdoor round, participants paired up and moved off to different locations on the land where one at time, each person became a mover, being witnessed by nature. Meanwhile, the other participant was charged with being a witness to both the human mover and to nature. This afternoon outdoor session lasted about 50 minutes. An airplane exhaust cone struck with a drum beater served as a bell to alert participants to the start and end of the movement rounds outside.

Once back inside, participants integrated their outdoor experience by making drawings. Participants hung their visual art on the windows, then worked individually with their art images to create a 10-15 second “micro-dance.” This micro-dance was intended to reflect or encapsulate their ecosomatic experiences outdoors.

The micro-dances became seeds for the next phase: the creation of a movement choir. First, participants each shared their micro-dances and then found a partner based on the micro-dance that felt most distinct from their own. These dyads created a third
dance to share in the final “performance.” Dyads were given a prompt to consider in the development of their choreography: “How do we meet or create change in the world?” Percussion instruments were made available for participants to play during the movement choir. Several participants brought additional instruments, as well, including a djembe, rattles, a frog guiro rasp, and a cowbell.

The workshop concluded with a closing circle outdoors, during which time participants completed the statement, “We are the ones who…” The participants returned their nature pieces to the land before making their departures.

Several poems were read at transition points during the workshop. The readings offered a few moments of rest for the body, and evoked themes of the day, as well. The poems were Poem (the spirit likes to dress up) (Oliver, 1986), Two Kinds of Intelligence (Rumi, 2000), Second Witness (Rogers, 1994), and The Way In (Hogan, 2008). These poems may be found in Appendix A.

**Results**

Fourteen people, ranging in age from early 30s to mid-60s, participated in the Earth Turning workshop. There were eight women and six men. Most regularly attended a 5Rhythms®-style weekly dance event in the area, and were familiar with a variety of “conscious dance” and other movement practices. All arrived on time and stayed through the entire workshop, which ran from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Three rounds of Authentic Movement, drawing, and the movement choir occurred inside. Outdoor movement occurred on the land surrounding the building where the workshop took place. Outdoor spaces included lawn, hardwood forest, and dormant farm fields. A small fenced area close by contained a resident flock of chickens and a couple
young goats. The day’s weather was moderate for mid-winter in Vermont: high of 41° F and partly cloudy. The ground was mostly snow free; some of it softened to mud by midday.

Participants spontaneously created movement sequences in each of the three, indoor Authentic Movement rounds in the morning, and in each of the two, outdoor Authentic Movement rounds in the afternoon.

Every participant then generated one or more drawings. The images displayed a wide range of styles, from abstract to representational. Plants, animals, human figures, and what appeared to be meteorological and geological phenomena were among the subjects depicted. Some images were made of only three or four muted hues; others were vibrant, highly saturated, and composed of many different colors.

The drawings became source material for participants’ creation of individual “micro-dances.” Paired movers then synthesized their individual dances into brief duets.

The workshop culminated in a movement choir incorporating the choreographed duets. The choir began with all participants standing together in a circle. Each pair stepped into the center in a sequence determined by the facilitator, and enacted their choreographed dance. After all the dyadic dances had been performed, the group improvised an ending together. All participants engaged in this improvisation either by dancing in the center of the space or playing a percussion instrument at the outside of the circle. By the close of the choir all participants stood in the circle again. The facilitator striking the large exhaust-cone “bell” in a slow, steady rhythm marked the final moments of the choir.
The day following the workshop, the facilitator created a drawing and a movement improvisation dance as an initial response to the experience of leading and observing the workshop. Later, the facilitator later created two more artistic responses to the workshop. The three visual art responses may be viewed in Appendix B. Figure 1 is a drawing in soft pastel representing an energetic “tree-body,” with roots/feet, heartwood/heart, and expansive branches/limbs. The movement improvisation was a kinesthetic rendering of this image. Figure 2 is a collage depicting the exile of nature and the regenerative possibility of communication with a more-than-human world. Figure 3 explores the sensuality, fluidity, and vibrancy of immersion in ecosomatic consciousness.

**Discussion**

The Earth Turning workshop was a social-action community arts workshop offered with the goal of exploring the potential of group ecosomatic practice, expressive arts, and coordinated movement to facilitate greater embodied understanding of the connection between the inner nature of the human being, and the outer nature of the more-than-human world. In the process of developing and facilitating the workshop, a number of issues arose.

Choosing an optimal location was challenging. The site needed to have an indoor movement space large enough to accommodate a dozen or more movers, while also being situated close to a natural outdoor space. The indoor and outdoor spaces had to be sheltered enough so that deep somatic and ecosomatic work could occur free from loud, human-made noises or the distractions of cars or people passing by. In the end, the chosen site worked well. The indoor space was beautiful and private. The land around the
building was rural, with diverse natural spaces as well as wildlife and farm animals to observe and move with.

The different practices offered throughout the day helped achieve the goals of the workshop to varying degrees. The sensory awareness warm-up appeared to gently facilitate more conscious, embodied arrival. The Authentic Movement practice seemed rich and deeply engaging for movers. The work of speaking as witnesses, however, seemed more challenging. The morning’s Authentic Movement rounds began with the facilitator serving as witness to the entire group, and then after the moving portion of the round was completed, demonstrating how to speak as a witness. In keeping with the form, “judgments, projections, and interpretations” (Adler, 2002, p. 66) were excluded from the witness statement. The facilitator verbalized only what could be known from her own bodily experience.

It seemed that despite the instructions and modeling, however, most participants included interpretations when they stepped into the role of speaking witness. While difficult to gauge from the position of a facilitator, it appeared that when participants were speaking as witnesses, they sometimes veered into ascribing motive to the movers, or constructing stories out of what they observed. This seems to be a common phenomenon among less experienced witnesses. Adler made clear that “conscious speaking requires study and practice” (Adler, 2002, p. 65). While most of the participants in the workshop had considerable prior experience as movers in general, few had studied Authentic Movement for any length of time. Developing witness skills takes practice, and doing a brief demonstration at the beginning of the workshop was not sufficient for participants to grasp the nuance, rigor, and self-awareness involved in being a witness.
The danger of premature interpretation, whether in witnessing other humans or nature, is that people stay in their habitual patterns of perceiving, understanding, and relating, rather than being open and available to seeing something new, fresh, or challenging. When speaking as a witness to a mover, the overly interpretative witness may inadvertently undermine the mover’s process of somatic self-understanding, or project an inaccurate story on the mover’s journey. This same dynamic can show up when people adopt the role of witness to elements of nature.

Yet, despite the problematic ways in which some participants appeared to hold the witness role, a number of people volunteered after the workshop that doing Authentic Movement outdoors, and specifically, moving in and with nature, was the most powerful and revelatory part of the workshop experience for them. Thus, there appears to be important value in simply going outdoors and moving with heightened attention to one’s surroundings, even if participants still bring substantial preconceptions about nature to the practice.

One challenge in designing the workshop was finding a way to transition from the somatic/ecosomatic practice of Authentic Movement to the collective creation of a movement choir. The intermodal expressive arts process that was offered was lively but also somewhat chaotic. Participants seemed to dive energetically into the drawing practice, and most readily produced a brief “micro-dance” from their images. However, some participants volunteered later that the dyad work, in which they were charged with choreographing a third piece out of two quite different dances, was perplexing and stressful. Nonetheless, the diversity of the choreographed pieces was striking, and the problem of bringing two dances together and making them one seemed to elicit creative
problem solving skills. At least several partners also appeared to find stronger personal connection in the choreographic process.

A loose score for the movement choir had been conceived prior to the workshop, but an ending had not been determined. The plan had been to have the dyads step into the group circle one at a time to perform their dances. After that, the group would collectively improvise an ending. However, in retrospect, the group needed more direction in order to remain cohesive and complete the choir within a limited time frame. It is possible that a group with more practice moving together could have maintained greater cohesion. Or, improvisation could have more successfully been incorporated in the choir if there had been a structured format within which spontaneous movement could occur, such as having individuals take turns leading the group.

As it was, the outcome of the choir was complicated by the inclusion of percussion instruments. When each dyad was dancing in the middle of the group circle, the rest of the participants were playing drums, rattles, etc., on the outside. The rhythms generated by the group inadvertently started to dictate the movements of the dancers, rather than allowing the dances to unfold as they had been designed. Also, some participants found the percussive sounds harsh, and they later reported it distracted from their ability to remain consciously connected to their inner experience and the group. Finally, once a rhythm was established and all the dyad dances were complete, some participants were unclear whether they could set down their instruments to join a mass improvised dance in the center of the circle. Some participants joined in; others did not. This likely led some individuals to feel to a sense of disparity in the group.
In order to re-establish group cohesion and bring the choir to a close, the facilitator decided to take up the large “bell” and strike it slowly and steadily. This action had its intended effect, as the entire group eventually joined the beat and followed the facilitator’s lead as the tempo slowed to stillness.

Some participants found the outdoor movement portion of the workshop particularly exciting and impactful. With so many activities packed into one day, a better format for this work would be a weekend-long program, preferably at a more favorable time of year for being outside. One full day could be spent on moving/witnessing with nature, and a second day could be spent on creating a movement choir.

This investigation found that ecosomatic expressive art is a vivid and promising modality for use in community-based art and social action projects. Understanding nature as source, holding environment, mover, witness, partner, and fellow participant in a larger system of interdependence and reciprocity is vital to the mending of the human-nature division. Expressive art and ecosomatic practice can be channeled into a movement choir in a natural space or with elements of nature present. Laying the groundwork with sufficient embodiment practice, and planning a score that can hold the diverse energies of people and place, is crucial.

Philosopher and early ecopsychologist Paul Shepard wrote “…we must affirm that the world is a being, a part of our own body” (1996, p. 114). When people consciously join with each other and the natural world in shared, coordinated movement, a potent knowing of relationship and belonging emerges. With recognition of the shared body of humans and nature may come understanding that caring for one part necessitates care for the whole.
References


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Poem (the spirit likes to dress up)
By Mary Oliver (1986)

The spirit
likes to dress up like this:
ten fingers,
ten toes,

shoulders, and all the rest
at night
in the black branches,
in the morning

in the blue branches
of the world.
It could float, of course,
but would rather

plumb rough matter.
Airy and shapeless thing,
it needs
the metaphor of the body,

lime and appetite,
the oceanic fluids;
it needs the body’s world,
instinct

and imagination
and the dark hug of time,
sweetness
and tangibility,

to be understood,
to be more than pure light
that burns
where no one is —

so it enters us —
in the morning
shines from brute comfort
like a stitch of lightning;

and at night
lights up the deep and wondrous
drownings of the body
like a star.

Two Kinds of Intelligence
By Jelaluddin Rumi (2000)

There are two kinds of intelligence: One acquired, as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts from books and from what the teacher says, collecting information from the traditional sciences as well as from the new sciences.

With such intelligence you rise in the world, you get ranked ahead or behind others in regard to your competence in retaining information. You stroll with this intelligence in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one already completed and preserved inside you. A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness in the center of the chest. This other intelligence does not turn yellow or stagnate. It’s fluid, and it doesn’t move from outside to inside through the conduits of plumbing-learning.

This second knowing is a fountainhead from within you, moving out.

Second Witness
By Pattiann Rogers (1994)

The only function of the red-cupped fruit
Hanging from the red stem of the sassafras
Is to reveal the same shiny blue orb of berry
Existing in me.

The only purpose of the row of hemlocks blowing
On the rocky ridge is to give form to the crossed lines
And clicking twigs, the needle-leaf matrix
Of evergreen motion I have always possessed.

Vega and the ring nebula and the dust
Of the Pleiades have made clear by themselves
The constellations inherent to my eyes.

What is it I don’t know of myself
From never having seen a crimson chat at its feeding
Or the dunnart carrying its young? It must be imperative
That I watch the entire hardening of the bud
Of the clove, that I witness the flying fish breaking
Into sky through the sun-smooth surface of the sea.

And I ask the winter wren nesting in the clogged roots
Of the fallen oak to remember the multi-toned song
Of itself in my ears, and I ask the short-snouted
Silver twig weevil to be particular and the fishhook
Cactus to be tenacious. I thank the distinct edges
Of the six-spined spider crab for their peculiarities
And praise the freshwater eel for its graces. I urge
The final entanglement of blade and light to keep
Its secrecy, and I beg the white-tailed kite this afternoon,
For my sake, to be keen-eyed, to soar well, to be quick
To make me known.

The Way In
By Linda Hogan (2008)

Sometimes the way to milk and honey is through the body.
Sometimes the way in is a song.
But there are three ways in the world: dangerous, wounding,
and beauty.
To enter stone, be water.
To rise through hard earth, be plant
desiring sunlight, believing in water.
To enter fire, be dry.
To enter life, be food.
Appendix B

Art Responses to Experience of Facilitating Earth Turning Workshop

Figure 1. Soft pastel on paper. “Tree-body,” Feb. 2018

Figure 2. Collage on matte board. “Urgent Message: Ishmael,” April 2018
Figure 3. Oil pastel on paper. “Immersion,” April 2018