Connecting Mind, Body, and Earth through Authentic Movement with Nature as Mover and Witness: A Community Engagement Project

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Connecting Mind, Body, and Earth through Authentic Movement with Nature as Mover and Witness: A Community Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 5, 2021

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Dance/Movement Therapy

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Abstract

Ecopsychologists emphasize that humanity cannot be healed separately from nature. Research in this budding field indicates that communing with the natural world has a mutually positive effect on both the human psyche and the environment. This thesis explores the intersection between dance/movement therapy practices, which address the mind/body connection, and the tenets of ecopsychology, which address the connection between humanity and earth, to develop an ecosomatic community workshop that integrates the mind/body/earth connection. The practice of Authentic Movement, in which a mover and witness engage in a movement dialogue, was adapted to re-animate the natural world by including more-than-human beings in this conversation. A one-day community workshop was offered to explore the themes of embedment, communion, and mind/body/earth integration through an Authentic Movement practice with nature acting as both mover and witness. Participants gathered at the Fresh Pond Reservation in Cambridge, MA to engage in an Authentic Movement practice with a chosen more-than-human partner. Participants were all women, members of the local dance/movement therapy community, and students. At the end of the workshop, the participants shared a communal feeling of kinship with and responsibility to their more-than-human witnesses, each other, and with the greater natural world. The results of this one-day workshop indicate that through embodied communion with nature, one’s ecological identity can develop, thus contributing to healing both the individual and the world at large.

Keywords: authentic movement, ecosomatics, ecopsychology, ecotherapy, witness, ecological identity, more-than-human, dance/movement therapy
Connecting Mind, Body, and Earth through Authentic Movement with Nature as Mover and Witness: A Community Engagement Project

Introduction

Bodily separateness is an illusion; my skin is not separate from the air around it, my eyes are not separate from what they see.

- Anita Barrows, 1995

Through our bodies, we live in constant relation to our environment, yet much of our navigation through daily life is nearly automatic and lacks conscious connection. Western culture has severed humanity from nature, negatively affecting our mental health, contributing to isolation, loneliness, and the further exploitation of the earth (Barrows, 1995). For years, ecotherapists and ecopsychologists have argued that individual mental health and planetary health are inevitably linked and influence one another (Burns, 2012).

Ecopsychologists have theorized that humanity has slowly forgotten our connection to and empathy for nonhuman life, something that was inherently known by our ancestors and is still known and practiced by many Indigenous people and people of Eastern cultures today (Abram, 1996; Schroll, 2000). This amnesia extends into current psychological frameworks. For example, in Jungian psychology, the idea of the “collective unconscious” originally included animal and natural archetypes, but eventually shed those archetypes to concentrate almost exclusively on human and religious symbols (Metzner, 1995). Ecology and psychology are interconnected, and to awaken the ecological consciousness we have forgotten, psychologists of all orientations must understand the connection between mind, body, and earth.

The mind-body connection has largely been ignored in dominant Western society (Acolin, 2016). Yet the mind-body connection is an inherent quality of the human experience, of
human development. Consider how we expressed our emotions through our bodies in childhood, stomping and kicking our feet when angry, or jumping up and down when gleeful. Even in adulthood, many of our emotions are expressed through body language. When stressed, we tense our necks and shoulders, when anxious or sad, we calm ourselves down with deep breathing. Acolin (2016) outlines how common Western practices go against this nature. In classrooms, children are expected to remain still to learn properly. We have been taught to value our minds over our bodies (Metzner, 1995). Freudian psychology perpetuates this mind/body split, positing that our consciousness (ego) must overpower the unconscious, the instinctive body (id), to achieve psychological integration. Dance/movement therapy (DMT) seeks to address and heal this split, emphasizing that just as we navigate the outer world through our bodies, so too do we connect and relate to our inner world. The mind and body are inextricably connected and must be treated together.

In DMT, the body is a vessel that contains who we are, in which we relate to ourselves and one another (Kornblum & Halsten, 2006). Is not the earth but the greater container, the great vessel in which we navigate life? Just as DMTs restore the mind/body connection, they can also play an integral role in recovering the connection between mind, body, and earth. Currently, there is little research surrounding the integration of DMT and ecotherapy. Burns (2012) suggests that dance/movement therapists should expand upon the fundamental tenet of embodiment, the active process of being in and living through our bodies, to include embedment, the principle of “being in and living through embodied reciprocity with the more-than-human world” (p. 40). Communing with nature through embedment can expand the sense of self to include an ecological self, enabling better understanding of one’s impact on the more-than-human world and helping to integrate one’s mind, body, and earth connection.
Authentic Movement is a DMT practice that offers the opportunity to integrate DMT and ecotherapy. Both ecotherapy and authentic movement facilitate an “I-Thou” relationship: Authentic Movement between the mover and witness, ecotherapy between humanity and the world (Adler, 1999a; Robinson, 2009). In this paper, I introduce how practicing Authentic Movement with nature as mover and witness can reunite the connection between the body, the mind, and the earth. I conducted a one-day workshop to explore what effects witnessing and being witnessed by more-than-human beings had on participants’ felt sense of self and their sense of kinship to nature. Participants engaged in a gathering circle, an introductory communion with the surrounding nature, and an Authentic Movement practice with nature as mover as witness. By attending to the lived experience of more-than-human beings as a witness, the participants were able to create an embodied connection between themselves and nature.

**Literature Review**

Although there has been little application incorporating nature into dance/movement therapy practice, there is a vast array of literature, research, and theories that lay the foundation for the Authentic Movement workshop that must be covered in this review. First, the principles of the emerging discipline of ecopsychology are explored, as well as the efficacy of ecotherapy, which is ecopsychology in practice. Second, the theories, practices, and effects of dance/movement therapy are addressed. Next, the budding exploration of ecosomatics in practice is explored, including the emerging practice of nature-based expressive arts therapy. Finally, the discipline of Authentic Movement and its relation to ecotherapy is discussed.

**Ecopsychology**

When the field of ecopsychology developed in the early 1990s, those who spearheaded the movement emphasized that psychological treatment should not separate the individual from
the systems within which they live. Hillman (1995) posited that humans cannot be studied, diagnosed, or healed apart from the Earth. Although a relatively new field, robust literature has developed, expanding upon this concept to include the symbiotic effects of building an ecological identity and communing with nature on the human psyche and the natural world.

Notable works by the trailblazers in this field are found in the volumes *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995) and *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind* (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009). Other prominent contributors to this field include Robert Greenway (1995), Sarah Conn (1998), Larry Robinson (1995), Ralph Metzner (1995), and Arne Næss (1995), to name a few.

It is important to note that the tenets of ecopsychology, including this ecological consciousness, were practiced in indigenous cultures long before they were written down in scientific and psychological literature. In their works, Abram (1996) and Schroll (2000) acknowledged the contributions of indigenous science to the field of ecopsychology. Schroll (2000) posited that ecopsychology is the Euro-American framework of remembering indigenous wisdom. Abram (1996) traveled extensively throughout Indonesia, Nepal, and the Americas, studying the shamanic practices, ecological knowledge, and oral storytelling of the indigenous peoples in those lands. Abram stated, “humans, in an indigenous and oral context, experience their own consciousness as simply one form of awareness among many others” (1996, p. 9).

The research surrounding the positive effect of nature on human health was extensively reviewed by Hansen, Jones, and Tocchini (2017). They reviewed research on ecotherapy practices, specifically the Japanese practice of Shinrin-Yoku (Forest Bathing), to clarify and explain the physiological and psychological effects of ecotherapy for further study and research. A prominent study in Shinrin-Yoku in Hansen et al.’s (2017) review is that of Morita et al.
They conducted a study in which 498 adult volunteers completed questionnaires on “forest days” (walking in the forest) and “control days” (no interaction with the forest). These questionnaires measured acute emotions such as hostility, depression, liveliness, and wellbeing. The researchers found that scores of hostility, anxiety, and depression decreased significantly and scores of liveliness increased significantly on forest days compared to control days. They found that for those experiencing chronic stress, forest bathing is therapeutic and can help reduce stress. The results of this study indicated that the simple act of being in and around nature is inherently therapeutic, and is accessible to all.

A similar study was conducted by Han et al. (2015) in which individuals experiencing chronic widespread pain (CWP) in Seoul, South Korea either engaged in three forest therapy camps, each lasting two days, or were assigned to a control group. During the forest therapy camp, participants were led through several activities indoors and outdoors, including walking in the forest, mindfulness meditations, psychoeducation, and bodily exercises. Han et al. found that the participants in the forest therapy group reported significant physiological and psychological improvements as compared to those in the control groups. Physiological improvements were evidenced by decreased heart rate and an increase in immune responsiveness, indicated by an increase in Natural Killer cell activity, in the experimental group. Psychological improvements were evidenced by a significant decrease in reported pain and depression from pre- to post forest therapy measurement and a significant increase in perceived quality of life as compared to the control group.

Currently, there is little research to support the hypothesis that the effectiveness of current psychotherapeutic frameworks and pharmacotherapy can be enhanced by applying ecotherapeutic practices. Ecopsychologists have argued that ecology and psychology are
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intertwined and must be integrated into one practice (Metzner, 1995). Kim et al. (2009) conducted a study testing the effect of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) applied in a forest environment on the treatment of major depressive disorder. Participants engaged in four CBT sessions over four weeks in either the forest, the hospital, or through usual outpatient management. They found that CBT applied in nature, as opposed to CBT performed in the hospital or outpatient setting, had a greater effect on depression remission. Those in the forest group reported a significantly higher remission rate than those in the hospital or control group, as evidenced by a decrease in reported depressive symptoms, a decrease in salivary cortisol concentration (an indicator of stress), and improved scores on the Montgomery-Asberg Depression Rating Scale (MADRS). This study supported the ecopsychological principle that immersion in nature is fundamental to healing the human psyche (Hillman, 1995).

Greenway (1995) contributed to the budding research surrounding the effects of immersion in nature on the human psyche. He led multiple wilderness excursions over years, researching the effect being in the wilderness had on participants. Through data collected from questionnaires, interviews, longitudinal studies, and personal stories from over 1,380 people throughout the years, he found that participants developed an increased sense of wellness and energy, broke addictions, and practiced long-standing rituals or contemplative practices after the wilderness excursions.

The principles of ecotherapy extend into more focused practices, such as horticultural therapy, animal-assisted therapy, and nature-oriented guided imagery (Chalquist, 2009). These codified practices are nature-oriented and fall under the umbrella of ecopsychology, yet they are tailored to specific aspects of the natural world.
Horticultural therapy lends a therapeutic lens to the practice of gardening, and is a practice that is not only psychologically beneficial for individuals but beneficial for the community and the environment, as it can involve growing fruits and vegetables locally for the community, decreasing the need for factory-farmed food, thus decreasing the carbon footprint of the community (Chalquist, 2009). Chalquist’s review included studies indicating the effectiveness of horticultural therapy on treating alcohol addiction and substance abuse, decreasing stress, and increasing self-esteem in children and blind adults. Researchers have found that therapeutic gardening also has beneficial effects on the communication, emotional expressiveness, and engagement of patients with dementia (Fetherman, 2005; Gigliotti, Jarrot, & Yorgason, 2004). Elizabeth Messer Diehl (2009), a horticultural therapist, explained that these results are due to the physiological benefits of plants, including the sensory stimulation through plants’ fragrances, colors, and textures, the opportunity to nurture growth in another being, and the creation of a sacred, calming space.

Animals are equally a part of the greater ecosystem as humans. Proponents of animal-assisted therapy have suggested that animals have a healing presence for humans, particularly in children (Chalquist, 2009). Chalquist reviewed several studies and found that animal-assisted therapies appeared to have a positive effect on children, contributing to increased emotional balance, extraversion, and alertness, as well as decreased hostility and antagonism. The positive effects of animals were also studied with the elderly, as studies found interactions with dogs decreased agitation, aggression, and feelings of loneliness in Alzheimer’s patients. Chalquist further reviewed studies indicating that animal companionship can aid in patients recovering from various health conditions, such as heart attacks and other cardiovascular diseases.
The positive effects of nature have even been realized indoors. Segal (1999) found that nature-oriented guided imagery resulted in significantly deeper relaxation, as evidenced by lower heart rate and higher participant rating than guided imagery without natural images. The research suggests that the positive implications of interacting with nature on mental health are so prevalent that simply imagining nature can decrease stress.

The research reviewed in this section addressed how reconnecting to the natural world can alleviate physical and psychological symptoms, and how this reconnection can increase feelings of joy, self-esteem, and connection (Chalquist, 2009). Hillman (1995) asked, “How psychology ever got so off base [...] so divorced from the spirits of the surroundings?” (p. xxii). Current research addresses this question and seeks to heal the severed wound between humanity and nature. Ecopsychologists implore therapeutic practitioners to “consider the human psyche within the web of life” (Conn, 1998, p. 170). Implementing ecotherapy, alone and in tandem with other therapeutic frameworks, can help individuals build and maintain an ecological identity, benefiting themselves and the world. Ecopsychology highlights the mind/earth duality within the mind/body/earth connection addressed in this paper.

**Dance/Movement Therapy**

The American Dance Therapy Association defines DMT as “the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual, for the purpose of improving health and well-being” (ADTA, n.d.). Simply put, DMT is the practice of holistically integrating the mind and body connection to enhance the lived experience of individuals. DMT research has suggested that identity development is a bodily phenomenon, and that DMT interventions aid in identity development (Pass Erickson, 2020; Caldwell, 2016). One of the central tenets of DMT is that knowing the body is knowing the self (Levy, 2005).
Researchers have indicated that DMT enhances one’s sense of self and identity development through the mind/body connection, fosters the development of empathy and communication, and decreases symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses.

Acolin (2016) reviewed and distilled DMT theory regarding the mind/body connection into unique descriptive statements, then analyzed how empirical research from neuroscience supported those statements. She found substantial evidence that supports the claim that there is an inherent mind/body connection, in that an individual’s body reflects their mind, revealing inherent information about themselves. Additionally, she found evidence that body awareness can contribute to healthy psychological and cognitive functioning, although this evidence is mixed. Schilder (1950) expressed that “every emotion expresses itself in the postural model of the body, and that every expressive attitude is connected with characteristic changes in [...] the body” (p. 209). Berrol (1992) focused her research on these neurophysiological factors that validate the mind/body connection. For example, expression of anger results in muscular tension, and the display of sadness results in muscular release. This study emphasized the bilateral relationship between mind and body.

Dance/movement therapy researchers have suggested that DMT practices may enhance one’s capacity for empathy and communication (Berrol, 2006; Federman, 2011; McGarry & Russo, 2011; Sungupta & Banerjee, 2020). These researchers cited the discovery of mirror neurons as the neurophysiologic foundation for embodied empathy. The study of mirror neurons has indicated that when an individual observes another person engaging in a movement, the same sets of neurons are activated in the brain of the observer as in the brain of the person moving (Berrol, 2006). This discovery supported the Chacian DMT approach of mirroring, in which a therapist and/or group members mirror a patient’s movements to develop synchrony, connection,
and reflection (Federman, 2011). McGarry and Russo (2011) suggested that the act of mirroring enhances emotional understanding and the therapeutic relationship between therapist and client. This embodied approach to emotional understanding has been called “kinesthetic empathy” (Federman, 2011).

Sengupta and Banerjee (2020) conducted a study analyzing the effects of DMT as an intervention on the development of communication in children with autism. The researchers conducted 24 sessions of DMT for three participants aged between three and 11 years old. They found that for all three cases, there was an immediate positive effect on communication, as evidenced by increased scores on the Wessex Language Test. The results indicated that further, consistent intervention is needed to have a more permanent effect on communication skills.

Research has suggested that DMT can treat and positively affect individuals with physical, psychological, medical, or neurological illnesses (Millman, Terhune, Hunter, & Orgs, 2020; Koch, Kunz, Lykou, & Cruz, 2019). Results of these studies and meta-analyses of DMT interventions indicated that DMT is an effective therapy for decreasing clinical symptoms of depression and anxiety, treating trauma, and increasing general quality of life. In their meta-analysis of 23 DMT intervention studies, Koch et al. (2019) found that DMT interventions resulted in participants’ subjective well-being, including mood, affect, and body image. The systematic review conducted by Millman et al. (2020) highlights the strengths and weaknesses of DMT interventions in psychiatric populations. Notably, Millman et al. found that the implementation of DMT interventions resulted in reduced depressive symptoms, reduced negative and psychotic symptoms of schizophrenia (although the need for further research was indicated), and improvements in emotional regulation and self-awareness in those with autism. These studies have supported the use of DMT as an effective mental health treatment, as DMT
interventions have been found to have a “positive impact on perceptions of the self and the body, well-being, body image, relationship perception, and emotion in psychiatric patients” (Millman et al., 2020). The research on dance/movement therapy reviewed addresses the mind/body duality within the mind/body/earth connection outlined in this paper.

**Nature-based Expressive Arts Therapies**

The intersection between ecotherapy and expressive arts therapies is rich in practice and complementary to each other (Atkins & Snyder, 2018). Both practices are based in creativity, imagery, ritual, and connection to the profound. Yet, there is little research navigating this intersection. Sally Atkins and Melia Snyder (2018), two nature-based expressive arts therapists, have led the charge in advocating for the integration of expressive arts and ecotherapy.

Berger (2017) introduced “Nature Therapy” as a creative method to combine elements of expressive arts therapies and ecotherapies. The fundamental principles of Nature Therapy are the emphasis on “touching nature” and the triangular relationship between therapist, client, and nature. Berger suggested that “touching nature” is being in “direct contact with nature [to] deepen a person’s connection with his or her own nature” (p. 246). Berger suggested that this deep and direct connection with nature may inspire individuals to prioritize nature conservation and education. Berger introduced nature as a living, independent entity in the triangular relationship between therapist, client, and nature. He stated that in Nature Therapy, “nature plays an active role and has a dynamic life of its own” (p. 249). This positionality supported the principle of ecopsychology that psyche, consciousness, and mind exist in the more-than-human world (Adams, 2010). Berger (2017) reviewed how Nature Therapy can enhance art and drama therapy practices by including nature as the source of inspiration for, as well as the co-creator of the art, story, and experience. Within Han et al.’s (2016) study on the effects of forest therapy on
managing CWP, the researchers included music therapy and somatic practices such as mindfulness meditations and bodily exercises to enhance the therapeutic effects of the forest therapy camp. Matteson (2018) included visual art-making in her ecosomatic community engagement project, “Earth Turning.” The drawn images inspired further movement improvisation and creation in the workshop.

**Ecosomatics**

Ecosomatics is a nascent field that examines the integration of the arts, most notably dance, and ecology. Ecosomatics expands upon the fields of ecopsychology and somatics, such as dance/movement therapy, to investigate the embodied connection to the natural world (Beauvais, 2012). Currently there is little research and literature regarding ecosomatics, although two authors, dance/movement therapists Cheryl Burns and Jennifer Beauvais, explored the topic through theoretical positing and clinical application.

Dance/movement therapist Cheryl Burns (2012) presented a detailed vision of integrating DMT with ecopsychology, emphasizing the importance of creating an ecological identity. She stated that within the fields of DMT and body psychotherapy, “minimal attention has been given to the dynamics of being a body in relationship with nonhuman bodies” (p. 40). In her paper, Burns explored the expansion of the DMT principle of embodiment to include embedment in nature, combining DMT and ecopsychological theories to create an ecosomatic framework of the body in nature. Burns acknowledged the discipline of Authentic Movement as a practice that could be adapted to an ecosomatic lens, and suggested that “by authentically moving and/or witnessing in relationship with nonhumans, who are also movers and/or witnesses, one may experience impulses of multilocal transpersonal events” (2012, p. 47). This embodied practice,
presented as a theoretical idea by Burns, was the inspiration and catalyst for the Authentic Movement workshop presented in this thesis.

Beauvais (2012) addressed the earth-body split by combining Eugene Gendlin’s Focusing techniques and systems theory to create an ecosomatic approach of attunement to nature. Focusing is a somatic practice, similar to Authentic Movement, in which a Focuser (mover) brings their attention inward, acknowledging their body from an observably felt sense. This is done through a series of six steps, in which the Focuser: 1) scans the body for sensations; 2) chooses a specific sensation; 3) allows a word or image to arise from the sensation; 4) connects this word or image back to the body for a resonating signal; 5) internally inquires about the word or phrase’s context; and 6) allows an ‘answer’ to arise in the body (Beauvais, 2012). Beauvais explored Focusing techniques in the context of systems theory, a relational perspective that emphasizes sustaining equilibrium between interrelated and interdependent parts, or systems.

Beauvais (2012) combined the philosophies of Focusing theory and systems theory to create her ecosomatic practice, “Contact with the Ecological Facilitating Environment.” After engaging in the Focusing fundamental steps, a participant is accompanied into nature by the therapist, where they then apply the Focusing fundamentals to a “natural target that beckons” (p. 286). Beauvais suggested that this practice may “uncover suggestions for moving consciousness towards more embodied understandings of our relationships to … the planet” (p. 287). By engaging in simultaneous awareness of both the natural world and the inner world, the Focuser extends their sense of self to include their place in the natural world (ecological self).

Matteson (2018), created an ecosomatic community engagement workshop titled “Earth Turning: A Dialogue with Life Through Dance.” She offered various ecosomatic practices in this workshop, including a sensory warmup and Authentic Movement with nature as mover and
witness, culminating in a movement choir inspired by the outdoor experience. This workshop served to explore an “embodied dialogue with nature” (Matteson, 2018, p. 2) and facilitated social, ecological, and community action. Matteson cited both Burns’ and Bauvais’ works as influence for her capstone project. Matteson’s community engagement project served as a referential framework for the Authentic Movement workshop discussed in this paper.

**Authentic Movement**

Authentic Movement is a DMT intervention in which a mover expands and deepens their unconscious experience by moving from an impulse. The mover closes their eyes and waits in stillness until they are “moved” by an impulse (García-Díaz, 2018). In addition to the mover, a witness is present to silently observe, attune to, and hold the space for the mover. As a DMT intervention, one of the objectives of Authentic Movement is “the development of the inner witness, which could be described as the development of consciousness” (García-Díaz, 2018, p.18). Authentic Movement gives the mover an opportunity to explore and be witness to their inner feelings and thoughts, without judgment. The relationship between the mover and the witness is an integral aspect of the discipline. The witness is a participant/observer, accompanying the mover in stillness while awakening and concentrating on their own experience (Lavendel, 2017). The discipline of Authentic Movement allows for the mover to develop their inner witness, to allow their deep emotions, experiences, thoughts, and feelings to be seen.

Besides the structured format of Authentic Movement, there is no guide, image, or goal for the movement created in the practice. The movement that arises is natural, intuitive, and reflective of the internal self. Whitehouse (1999b) described the moment of being moved as “when the ego gives up control [...] allowing the self to take over moving the physical body as it will” (p. 82). This principle echoed Robinson’s statement that ecotherapy is inherently an
embodied practice, as “it takes an awakening of the senses, which is only possible when we fully inhabit the body” (p. 28).

Since its inception, Authentic Movement practitioners, researchers, and teachers have acknowledged the “third element” (Whitehouse, 1999a, p. 62) in the I-Thou relationship between mover and witness - that of the collective, of the container in which both mover and witness exist. Adler (1999b) proclaimed that “the human psyche cannot endure without belonging [...] we were born belonging to the earthbody” (p. 191). Thus, Authentic Movement offers an opportunity to be practiced through an ecosomatic and ecotherapeutic lens.

Tina Stromsted (2009) considered practicing Authentic Movement as a direct response to the numbness felt due to the destruction of the planet in the modern world and to trauma experienced in the body. In her experiences practicing Authentic Movement with breast cancer survivors, Stromsted found that participants felt a renewed sense of empowerment through the practice. Stromsted also spoke to her experiences teaching Authentic Movement to men, who often feel an even greater isolation from their bodies than women. She found that the men in her workshops were able to address body image issues, complicated relationship dynamics, and, gradually, were able to find a sense of ease within their bodies. The experiences Stromsted shared speak to the transformative power of Authentic Movement, specifically its effect on personal identity. She emphasized the need to engage in awareness and compassion with the planet, stating that “our attitude toward our body mirrors our relationship with the Earth’s Body” (p. 210). She further hypothesized that the lack of respect and negative attitudes towards our bodies is reflected in the ravaging of the earth and the overuse of natural resources. Stromsted then suggested that Authentic Movement can heal the relationship between humanity and the Earth, integrating body, mind, and spirit connection.
Traditionally, Authentic Movement is practiced between humans only. Burns suggested developing an Authentic Movement practice “in relationship with all aspects of the sentient world” (2012, p. 47). She suggested that by acknowledging the psyche, sentience, and life of the more-than-human world, one may be able to cultivate a kinesthetic sense of empathy for more-than-human beings. Authentic Movement can address the body/earth duality within the mind/body/earth connection outlined in this paper.

The literature and research above outlines how the connection to and immersion in nature benefits physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Ecopsychology philosophy emphasizes how connecting to nature not only improves the health of humans, but reciprocally benefits the natural world, the more-than-human beings, as this connection builds empathy and care for nature within humans. Dance/movement therapy is a discipline that seeks to honor, uphold, and deepen the body/mind connection. Authentic Movement, a creative dance and DMT practice, deepens this connection through the mover/witness relationship. These theories, principles, and practices were integrated in the creation of the workshop detailed below, in which participants engaged in an Authentic Movement practice in nature, being witness to and witnessed by the more-than-human world.

**Methods**

To further explore the principles of these disciplines in practice, I conducted a one-day workshop, offering an Authentic Movement practice in nature, with nature as both mover and witness. The fundamental tenets of ecopsychology, ecotherapy, and dance/movement therapy were explored and combined through this workshop. Robinson (2009) expressed that ecotherapy is inherently an embodied practice because “that is the basis of our life and the source of our connection” (p. 28). Dance/movement therapy is an embodied discipline, and more specifically,
Authentic Movement is an embodied practice in which one can fully inhabit the body, allowing for the connection to the earth.

**Participants**

Participants were recruited by direct invitation in a dance/movement therapy cohort group message, as well as through calls-to-action on social media. Participants received a detailed text message the day before the workshop which informed them of the general schedule and outline of the workshop, what to bring, and the specific location of the workshop. Seven people, ranging in age from early 20s to late 30s, participated in the workshop. Near the beginning of the workshop, a woman walking by joined the Authentic Movement session and stayed through the first half of the workshop. All eight participants were women.

I chose to conduct this workshop with fellow dance/movement therapy students because they were familiar with the Authentic Movement practice and had a basic understanding of the role of the witness. This was important because the role of the witness is to “respond to the mover’s expression of the physical, emotional, and imaginal elements of her journey without judgment or interpretation” (Stromsted, 2009, p. 202). In 2018, Matteson conducted a one-day ecosomatic workshop that included Authentic Movement, both in a traditional manner (human movers and witnesses) and with nature as mover and witness. She found that her participants, local dancers with no prior experience in Authentic Movement, were interpreting and ascribing motive to their movers when speaking as witnesses. Because I too changed the relationships between mover and witness in this Authentic Movement workshop from human/human to human/more-than-human, the participants needed to understand the fundamental principles and guidelines of being a witness.
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and per CDC and Massachusetts guidelines, I restricted the number of participants for this workshop to a maximum of nine people to maintain six feet of distance between participants. Participants were required to wear masks.

**Materials**

Drawing paper, colored pencils, and pastels were provided for the participants to artistically process their experiences. Participants were prompted to bring their own journals and pens to reflect and further engage with the experience. Additional pens and paper were provided for the participants.

**Process**

On Sunday, March 7, 2021, participants met at the Fresh Pond Reservation in Cambridge, MA, specifically just outside Lusitania Field, in a clearing filled with trees. The workshop began with an opening circle, including a general introduction to the workshop, a Native land acknowledgment, and introductions. Participants introduced themselves with their names, pronouns, and three words to describe how they felt in that moment. I led the group in a series of three collective breaths to attune to themselves, the surrounding nature, and each other. Next, I read Mary Oliver’s (2006) poem, “When I am Among the Trees” (See Appendix). Following instructions, participants spent five minutes walking around, introducing themselves to their more-than-human witnesses, communing with the nature around them, and finding a clearing to settle for the Authentic Movement practice.

I then led the participants in an Authentic Movement experience, first as movers with their chosen more-than-human being as witness, then as witnesses to the more-than-human being. It is important to note that I am not a trained teacher of the discipline of Authentic Movement. I facilitated this Authentic Movement workshop based on my previous experiences.
in the practice and the literature I have read. I informed the participants that while Authentic Movement is practiced with closed eyes, safety is the priority, and encouraged the participants to open their eyes during larger movements to remain physically safe in the space. I prompted the movers to close their eyes, to tune to their presence and the presence of their chosen witness, and to allow movement to flow up and through them, knowing that this is an act of “beingness, not doingness.” After nine minutes, I reminded the participants verbally that they had one more minute to conclude their movement. After the first round of Authentic Movement ended, I prompted the participants to share with their witnesses their experiences, verbally or through written or artistic representation. Next, I prompted the participants to shift into the witnessing role, to observe and attune to the dance of their more-than-human mover. After ten minutes of witnessing, I prompted the participants to share with their movers their observations, experiences, and feelings, verbally or through written or artistic representation.

The workshop concluded with a closing circle. Participants shared aloud their experiences, feelings, and response to the practice with the group. Participants discussed common themes, and some shared excerpts from their journals. I read Mary Oliver’s (1979) poem “Sleeping in the Forest” (See Appendix) and ended with an embodied goodbye, in which we touched our hands to our heart centers, to the earth floor, then gestured to each other in gratitude.

**Notable Observations**

When I arrived at the clearing, I noticed an erected easel and canvas (see Figure 1), made up of branches, leaves, flowers, pinecones, and more found nature. I incorporated this artistic celebration of nature to be the workshop’s centerpiece, the altar we greeted and gathered around at the beginning and closing of the workshop.
During the first Authentic Movement round, a woman walking by on the trail stopped and watched the participants moving. She then slowly approached the clearing, closed her eyes,
and began to dance. After I guided the participants to begin sharing with their witnesses, she approached me and inquired about what I was facilitating. We quietly discussed the purpose of this workshop, after which she asked if she could join for the next portion of the workshop. Midway through the witnessing round, she gestured to me a thank you and bowed goodbye, then continued on her walk.

While the participants were engaging in the Authentic Movement practice, I gathered my observations in a notebook, writing down any themes, words, or thoughts that came up as I observed and witnessed the exchanges between the participants and the surrounding nature. After the participants verbally shared with the group, I later created a word cloud of common themes and words that were said to synthesize my observations for further artistic exploration.

**Findings/Results**

Common themes emerged as the participants shared their experiences in the workshop. Participants spoke of a sense of companionship and kinship with their chosen witnesses, as well as a feeling of hope, comfort, and connection when communing with the more-than-human beings around them, particularly in the context of increased isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Multiple participants mentioned a newfound appreciation for the resilience of nature, naming the increasing destruction of the natural world through deforestation and climate change. A discussion then ensued surrounding environmentalism and how engaging directly with nature could restructure and reinvigorate eco-activism. Ecopsychologists have emphasized the pressing need for humans to develop their ecological psyche in order to address and heal the separation between humanity and nature (Hillman, 1995). I was surprised to discover the participants speaking to this ecological identity in such a short amount of time.
After conducting the workshop, I engaged in movement improvisation in response to these themes and images, as well as in response to my observations and feelings as facilitator. I then drew a visual representation of those themes and my movement experience. A week after the workshop, I created a collage as an artistic response to the literature and thematic elements that arose in the workshop.

Figure 2 (see below) is a soft pastel drawing, titled “Reunion”, representing the felt kinship, empathy, and connection to the surrounding nature that the participants expressed at the conclusion of the workshop.

Figure 2.

*Soft pastel on paper, March 2021: Reunion*
Figure 3 (see below) is a digital collage, titled “Channels of Life”, depicting the patterns shared between humans and nature. Janet Adler (1999b) asked the question, “Can we remember that the basic structures of our planet are repeated in the basic structures of our bodies?” (p. 193). The images of a human bronchial tree, a dried riverbed, and a tree are overlaid in this collage to represent these shared structures.

Figure 3.

Digital collage, March 2021: Channels of Life

Through facilitating the Authentic Movement workshop and engaging in the artistic practices described above, I was able to further understand and deepen my connection to nature and my ecological identity. As a member of the DMT community and the greater community at
large, I learned that connecting to nature requires an embodied conscious connection. I now consider nature not as a place or destination to which I go, but as a friend whom I visit.

**Discussion**

Dance/movement therapist and founder of Authentic Movement Janet Adler wrote, “As the Western world has developed, we have increasingly been urged first toward the question: ‘Who am I?, forgetting about the essential relationship between the individual and the interconnectedness among all beings” (199b, p. 191). This Authentic Movement workshop was offered to explore how connecting to nature in an embodied way develops and strengthens the connection between body, mind, and earth. This project was based upon the principles and philosophies of both ecopsychology and dance/movement therapy. Participants shared that they had previously felt disconnected from nature and the world-at-large, exacerbated by the isolation experienced in the last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After witnessing and being witnessed by a more-than-human body in the workshop, the participants expressed a renewed feeling of connection, communion, and kinship with the natural world. The results of this workshop indicate that communing with nature can help build an ecological identity, as the participants described a felt sense of belonging and responsibility to the more-than-human world.

There were a number of challenges and limitations that presented when conducting this workshop. First, the COVID-19 pandemic limited the amount of people that could participate in the workshop. Further iterations of this workshop could include a greater number of participants to gather more data. Additionally, the workshop was conducted for an hour and a half on one day in March 2020. Afterwards, participants expressed a desire to have engaged in the material for longer. Due to the rich nature of this topic, it would be preferable to conduct a full-day workshop at a more favorable time of year for being outside. With more time allotted, I would conduct
multiple rounds of Authentic Movement, including a more traditional Authentic Movement practice in which the participants would witness and be witnessed by each other in pairs. The inclusion of this practice, in addition to Authentic Movement with nature as witness, would be able to address the differing themes that arise with different witnesses. It may also prime the participants to more effectively interact with a more-than-human witness/mover, having practiced with a human.

All the participants in this workshop were dance/movement therapy students and familiar with the discipline of Authentic Movement. If I were to conduct this workshop again, I would conduct it with participants outside of the dance/movement therapy field to observe the effects of this engagement on people with no prior Authentic Movement experience, perhaps even no prior experience with the expressive therapies. This population would be more representative of the population served in expressive and ecotherapeutic clinical practice, thus may speak further to the integrative effects of witnessing and being witnessed by nature on the individual.

I propose further research to explore the long term effects and associations that a similar workshop would have on an individual’s felt connection to nature. How might a participant feel one week, one month, or one year after a workshop such as this? With additional events, locations, and follow-up communications, how might a participants’ worldview evolve and develop? Further iterations of this project could include multi-day workshops across different natural locations and the creation of a community group to engage in similar processes and conversations.

Authentic Movement in nature is an ecosomatic practice that can offer a way to heal the mind/body/earth disconnection by fully immersing individuals in and communing with nature. This practice can be a tangible intervention that integrates DMT and ecotherapy by bringing
awareness to the lived experience and psyche of the more-than-human world, achieving the intention of ecotherapy to “re-animate the world, restore its soul” (Robinson, 2009, p. 27).

Ecopsychologist Larry Robinson wrote of the purpose of ecopsychology, stating “the intention here is to develop an ‘I-Thou’ relationship with the world: one in which there are no inanimate objects, but only multiple, interacting subjectivities, each having the capability of acting in its own right” (2009, p. 28). When we build a relationship with the natural world, we awaken our ecological self. Through this awakening, we are better equipped to protect and nourish ourselves, and in reciprocity, protect and nourish the natural world.
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Appendix

Poems read during the workshop

When I Am Among the Trees, Mary Oliver (2006)

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, “Stay awhile.”
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, “It's simple,” they say,
“and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine.”

Sleeping in the Forest, Mary Oliver (1979)

I thought the earth
remembered me, she
took me back so tenderly, arranging
her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds. I slept
as never before, a stone
on the riverbed, nothing
between me and the white fire of the stars
but my thoughts, and they floated
light as moths among the branches
of the perfect trees. All night
I heard the small kingdoms breathing
around me, the insects, and the birds
who do their work in the darkness. All night
I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling
with a luminous doom. By morning
I had vanished at least a dozen times
into something better.
Student’s Name: Helen Berger

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Connecting Mind, Body, and Earth through Authentic Movement with Nature as Mover and Witness: A Community Engagement Project

Date of Graduation: May 22, 2021

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Meg Chang, EdD, BC-DMT