

## Sensuous tracings and ecologies of connection

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### Abstract

This article began its life as a presentation at the Leap Dance Symposium at the University of Otago in November, 2019. It is an autobiographical and auto-ethnographic tracing through a life of moving and dancing that has become an eco-somatic sensing, searching, surfacing, spiralling and intertwining of actions and ideas. There is a deliberate focus on my own personal story, and while I acknowledge that there are many others in the field working in a similar manner, this article does not set out to examine the work of others in any depth. Mention is made of artists and students who have influenced the direction of my life in dance. Although the length of my involvement in dance has seen me engage with a wide range of aesthetic, educational and philosophical concepts over more than five decades as an artist and educator, the focus of this article traces an eco-somatic journey.

### Introduction

From my beginnings as a farmer's daughter, athlete and physical education student, I trace my life as an artist and educator from the late 1960s until the present in 2020. This includes my work with Origins Dance Theatre, my role in establishing the National Diploma of Contemporary Dance (now the Bachelor of Performing and Screen Arts-Dance at Unitec), my education and employment at the University of Otago and my current research into intuitive movement practices and eco-somatic improvisation.

Over many years my interest in the dance discipline has broadened, and academic boundaries have dissolved, as I have fostered relationships with other 'bodies' of knowledge. This eco-somatic inter-weaving includes the human physical and neurological sciences, plant physiology, ecology, geography and environmental activism along with other visual, digital and theatre arts and the humanities and social sciences.

While this is basically a personal story, a summary of a life still being lived, it fits within the methodological parameters of auto-ethnography (Madison, 2012). A poetic performance ethnographic narrative falls under this umbrella as an investigative method of research and allows the researcher to reconceptualise past

and current experiences (Denzin, 2003), since it is an investigation and reconceptualising of past and current experiences.

Now in my 70<sup>th</sup> decade, I acknowledge that the complexity of a life lived in dance cannot be told in one article, or by one person. I have therefore chosen to focus on what I have termed ‘Sensuous Tracings’, or the somatic memories that were imprinted in my childhood and yet still surface today as I perform and teach improvisation. In order to allow other voices to speak, I have included recollections from individual students (with their permission) who represent particular eras of my teaching career. The term ‘ecologies of connection’ is an acknowledgement of the inter-wovenness between my pedagogical principles, my artistic practice and the ideas and philosophies that continue to inform my thinking.

## **Sensuous Tracings**

My passion for dance and performing began when I was cast as a pigeon-toed daffodil in a yellow and green satin tutu at age five, standing on stage in the Piopio Town Hall. I was raised alongside a river as a child, the Mokau River in the King Country, where I spent my life outdoors, climbing trees just to feel part of their swaying in the wind, running up and rolling down steep grassy hillsides, helping my farming parents with the animals and watching the exuberant play of young lambs in spring. Every part of my life was tied to the land. We should never underestimate the importance of these early sensuous experiences. They remain embedded in one’s body memory, and surface at unexpected moments in one’s dance.

My interest in dance was ignited again at New Plymouth Girls’ High School by Mrs Lagore, the daughter of an early Austrian Mendel creative dancer who had brought the form to Aotearoa New Zealand in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Back then I performed secret private improvisations in the forest surrounding our boarding school; my dance is still informed by the vegetal and animal world. My performance prowess was in athletics and the sensuous pleasure of running fast and jumping high. Gymnastics provided an opportunity to excel in the more dance-like ‘free standing’ category. But it was upon arriving at the Otago School of Physical Education in 1967, and upon entering the dance studio and meeting the dance lecturer (the late John Casserly), that I realised this was what I would spend my life studying. No classical beginnings for me. Dance was part of an interdisciplinary programme where it was one offering included in a raft of subject matter from anatomy and physiology to practical sports and outdoor education experiences such as swimming and wilderness camping. The director, Professor Phillip A. Smithells, was an inspired educational

philosopher. I was impressed by John Casserly's artistic collaborations with painters and poets. The University Arts and literary fellows at the time included Ralph Hotere and Bill Manhire. I gained my choreographic and performing experience by choreographing large musicals as part of the annual university capping reviews. Among these were *Jesus Christ Superstar*, a collaboratively devised work called *IAM* based on the McCahon painting of the same name, and others. These massive undertakings saw me engaging with musicians, singers and dancers, musical directors and producers (once while hugely pregnant and, later, with a baby on my back as I worked). I had become a mother very early while still a student and so my awareness and interest were also drawn to children's dance and dance for disabled children, an interest that I maintained throughout many years as I offered parents and pre-schooler dance classes and a post-natal 'Mothers and Babies' dance programme in the 80s. Later, as the lecturer in the Dance and Community paper at Otago University, I again worked with large groups of disabled children as part of a programme that introduced students to various dancing demographic sectors. An additional part of the course investigated dance's role in the broader non-human community as environmental activism. My interest in dance's role within the eco-socio-political community has, at times, placed me outside of the mainstream professional dance world.

In 1973 my husband, children and I found ourselves in Seattle where my husband had applied to study post-graduate bio-mechanics and where I took both ballet and African dance classes in between parenting duties and, at the University of Washington, discovered Releasing Technique with Joan Skinner, an early innovator in non-codified, somatic dance training. Joan Skinner's more individualised and internalised first-person movement research practice gave me my first insight into a more poetic image-based approach to movement invention and dance training. We did not use the term somatics in those days, but Joan was at the forefront of this movement in the sixties. Her innovative and creative movement pedagogy, such as her poetic imagery and one-breath compositions, have informed my teaching of dance-making over many years. I wrote the following poem during a 'Comparative Somatics Skinner Releasing' class for my students at the University of Otago.

Fish head skull  
 Sees inside and out  
 Sees into dark spaces.  
 Swirling seaweed is energy  
 Clear crystal pools become home

Slow river, my journey.

Artistic interactions with a number of important Pacific Northwest painters and poets moved me forward politically and artistically, so that when I returned to Aotearoa I was ‘ready’ (Goldman, 2010) to use dance as my means of protest. I had spent my final year in the USA in a cabin, off the grid, beside the huge tidal Skagit River two hours north of Seattle, and perhaps, more than anything else, this place filled me with the elemental imagery and eco-somatic metaphors for dance and life that remain with me today.

The river -ah the river  
Reminds me to stay in the flow  
No stale back eddies for me.

## Ecologies of Connection

Returning to Aotearoa in 1979, I became involved with a group of artists and activists in Auckland protesting a number of pressing political issues—The Takaparawha, Bastion point land grab, nuclear ships in our ports and the nuclear tests in Mururoa, the arrival of Chilean political refugees, the fight by Native Forest Action Council to save our remaining native west coast forests, and the anti-apartheid marches. In 1980, inspired by a poem for choreography, *Dance of the Origin*, by poet and ecologist friend Denys Trussell, I/we formed *Origins Dance Theatre* (a company of dancers, musicians, literary and visual artists) and presented our first full length work. Many years later, Denys commented on the work:

I now see the poem and the choreography of its performance as auto-poetic. Translated roughly, that is the making of the human house of nature anew in human awareness; the bringing to mind of the cyclical patterns by which we live and die. (Trussell, 2019, p. 544)

Over the following 15 years, I choreographed more than 25 eco-political works including *Dance of the Origin* (1980), *Waiting Trees* (1981), *Earth Rhythm* (1982), *Surface Tension* (1983), and *Masque for a Forest* (1987), *After Crazy Horse* (1990), *Islands 1,11,111* (1992), *How Being Still is Still Moving* (1996). *Origins Dance Theatre*, with musicians Bruce Robertson, Paul Hewitt or John Davies, travelled the country, teaching music and dance workshops to all ages in small halls, working with communities and engaging with the local landscape and with local environmental issues in each place. Though I didn’t know it at the time, I was laying the foundation

for more conscious eco-somatic sensory investigations of place. Meanwhile, in Auckland, I taught classes for all ages at the Limbs Dance studio and in urban schools and halls, including classes for the deaf and blind. The huge weekly African inspired community dance and music classes that I led confirmed my commitment to the benefits of dance as a social catalyst and, during the 1981 Springbok tour, they prepared us for the weekly ‘Artists against Apartheid’ marches.



**Figure 1:** The author in *Touch broken Antipodes*, Maidment Theatre, Auckland 1987.

In 1989, the opportunity arose to create the National Diploma of Contemporary Dance, now the Bachelor of Performing and Screen Arts in Contemporary Dance, Unitec, recently celebrating 30 years of existence. Here my committee and I, along with an eclectic variety of contemporary dance professionals, too many to name here, introduced subject matter that saw students learning a range of styles from local and international teachers plus Māori and Pasifika experts. They interacted

with artists from other artforms in collaborative interdisciplinary projects designed to cement their place within a broader world of artistic thought—locally and internationally. We introduced what is now known as Somatic practices, including yoga, releasing technique, contact improvisation and Movement Fundamentals including Alexander technique. The key focus, however, was in educating choreographers, whose work was artistically relevant nationally and internationally. The course brochure at the time made the school's mandate clear from its inception:

The Performing Arts School is committed to encouraging the development of personal creativity and artistic process through the theory and practice of the contemporary dance discipline and its related arts. There is a strong commitment to identifying a contemporary dance form that reflects the social, cultural and geographical environs of Aotearoa, New Zealand. The broad-based holistic programme is designed to develop a disciplined and sensitive human being and dance artist.

Students were encouraged to find an individual choreographic and movement language that would see them able to establish themselves as artists in their own right. They were introduced to approaches to art-making that were connected to the world beyond the studio and theatre. Students were also encouraged to look beyond a purely westernised dance forum to encompass other cultural perspectives. Students made works under bridges, in abandoned buildings, on islands, in their flats, and on the beach. They honed their spontaneity and somatic reflexivity. They learned to work collaboratively across disciplines and amongst each other. They visited the zoo and made self-revealing animal solos in response.

As a result of the training programme, a number of independent companies were spawned and some, such as Atamira and Black Grace, continue today. Other graduates have gained higher academic qualifications and are now teaching and researching, performing or directing. Those original values continue to underpin the curriculum, and today the school is in a very strong place under the new leadership of Charles Koroneho and other former graduates of the programme, which has evolved over the 30 years to keep up with new artistic trends. One of the original class of 1989, Josie Thompson, recalled,

In 1989 I was one of the first group of students to begin at the new Contemporary dance course developed by Ali East and my dream to study contemporary dance full time became a reality. I was a naïve 20-year-old with very little dance training, but Ali had seen something in me and she inspired

and believed in me as a dancer. We were an eclectic group of young people with some very strong personalities, who had to learn how to collaborate. Very quickly we built a deep trust as a group and in many ways this had the most impact on me... The old building was unheated and we would start class usually on the floor in our layers usually hats and thick socks, slowly peeling them off as we warmed up. Ali managed to bring in a wide range of tutors of all different techniques, she seemed to have connections both local and internationally and was always there encouraging and challenging us. I guess the most powerful memories really are about people and connections, the life-long friends we made. Ali's manaakitanga brought us together. A community was formed, dance is what brought us together and Ali's enthusiasm kept us going. We journeyed out to the West Coast and danced on the wild beaches, or explored the great gnarled trees of Albert Park. Ali brought in great musicians to accompany the classes and I recall the inspirational piano playing of John Gibson or Graham Humphries at daily class, or the drums of Paul Hewitt. Ali's Improvisation classes allowed me the freedom I needed to explore my own movement process and find the self-expression I had been looking for. Artists visited and spoke to us about their work.

Morag Brownlie, another multi-talented 1989 student, recalls the most significant aspects of those early years for her:

Meeting, cross-pollination of ideas, with inspirational guest artists and teachers from many disciplines, offering a deeper and richer world view.



**Figure 2:** Students of class of 1989 Tristan Glendinning, Morag Brownlie and Josie Thompson rehearse in the Upper Queen St studio.

Choreographer, cultural ambassador and Artistic Director of Atamira Dance Company, Jack Gray, was a student in 1996, my final year as artistic director. By then I was sharing the academic leadership with Raewyn Whyte. Jack reflected,

Mauriora, I was in the last intake of students at the Hargreaves Street studios, the first intake transitioning to Unitec School of Performing and Screen Arts and the shift from the leadership era of Ali East. Casting my mind back, the imprint of experiences on my (then) young, malleable, naïve and sheltered self still inform my (now) ever-evolving, global perspectives as a practitioner to this day. I remember all of the feelings and experiences of being at the Performing Arts School in the first decade or so of its existence as if it was yesterday. I distinctly remember the founding ethos and the words about being primed to become a contemporary dance artist rooted in the land and culture of Aotearoa, New Zealand. The primal sense of exploration, discovery and risk-taking were the ingredients that forged our spirits and souls into all types of imaginative being-ness. Community is and will always play a part in the fundamental role that the Performing Arts School gave to me and many of the alumni over the years. I have morphed and changed, in form and style and aesthetic, in politics and identity and location, and yet there are seeds of a genetic DNA that remain. A formation that identifies me as a product of my upbringing. The teachers who were part of my universe, the ethics and morals and values. I mihi to Ali, and these treasured and humbling experiences. In these memories I recognise my citizenship. My nature. My affirmation. I am a dance artist. Tihei Mauriora.

After eight years of directing the Unitec programme, I was called back to Te Wai Ponamu in the South Island, 27 years after leaving to take up my original lectureship at the School of Physical Education, Otepoti Dunedin, albeit with a great deal more experience. I had honed my teaching and choreographing skills but had never had the opportunity to hone an academic identity. I began a search for words that would describe the feeling and motivation, the intention and intuition guiding my teaching and my dance. These eventually appeared in a master's thesis, *Teaching Dance as if the World Matters: Eco-choreography. A Design for teaching Dance - making in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2006), published as a book in 2011.

Grounding both my teaching and dance-making within a paradigm of ecological holism, I described the classroom as a functioning diverse and cooperative ecosystem where each class, rather than a 'lesson', was a practice in sharing, listening



and responding. Spontaneous reflective (often poetic) writing was interwoven with moving practice. One student, new to dance, reflected:

The effect of the class members around me enveloped me like a love cloud. I was soon enwrapped in their unconditional acceptance and thrown into a state of creativity ... Given the opportunity to do anything I liked, unjudged, I searched for my darkest moment. (Anonymous student voice, written in the Fundamentals of Dance class, University of Otago, 2004)

## Cultural connections

I became interested in translocated or ‘situated’ dance education (Brubaker, 2011), where students were taken out of the classroom to learn differently in different places—in different landscapes with different histories, and to experience the ways that our dance is shaped by the affordances of each place (Gibson, 1979).

I have led three student ethnographic reconnaissance (Wolcott, 2008) field trips abroad to study dance within the diverse cultural communities of India. They reported gaining a greater awareness of themselves and their own culture as they interacted with others through their dance. As their teacher, I observed the group translate and articulate the sensuous experience of dancing another’s cultural form, of creating “reflective communities of [shared] practice” (Burnard & Hennesey, 2006, p.8) and engaging in every aspect of life in India. As a result, I articulated four new learning outcomes, not at that time included as key objectives of the university. They included 1. Discovering empathy, understanding difference; 2. Learning cross-cultural communication by practising ‘being’ and ‘doing’ understanding; 3. Understanding group co-operation; 4. Understanding embodied knowledge of self/other/environment as ethnographic research (East & Rajendren, 2009, East 2013). As I review them here, they appear consistent with the original kaupapa of the National Diploma of Contemporary Dance course, and intrinsic to the research that I am now engaged in.

## Eco-somatic Connections

Intuition and somatic improvisation continue to fuel my artistic and research interests. The principles of ecosophy, or deep ecology, and the paradigm of ecological holism, whereby everything, body and idea, may be seen as inter-relational and inter-dependent, continues to provide the rationale for my art,

teaching and life. My writing and research practice has become a search for new metaphors, new communities of connection, for eco-somatic dance research—the field is innovative and interesting and largely participatory and performance-based. An interest in phenomenological action and core consciousness has drawn me towards readings in neuro-science (Damasio, 1999), the physics of organisms (Mae-wan Ho, 2003) and cognitive biology (Varela & Maturana, 1998).

From my early dances about deforestation with Origins Dance Theatre, my most recent fascinations are with vegetal intelligence (Marder, 2013) and the ways that metaphors of plant thinking, plant communication, gravitropism, multiple centres of activation and non-egotistical continuous endeavour might enrich, not only our dance, but also our relationship with other species on the planet. A workshop series titled Plantbodybeing was conducted in Czechia, Italy, Vienna, Austria and Bainbridge Island, Washington State, in 2019 (East, in press a). I continue to develop image-based prompts that may be inserted as stimulæ into the movement session without disturbing the dancer's own intuitive trajectory, such as the following example:

Practice merging with the environment around you while allowing a plant-like coming to appearance individually or with others as 'a co-appearing together'. (Irigary & Marder, 2016, p. 168).

Spontaneous, often poetic, writing has become a part of this work. During a recent Bainbridge workshop exploring our evolutionary relationship with the vegetal world, I wrote as the participants danced:

Silence and the sound  
Of drums, of fingers  
Striking metal, of bodies  
Leaning, surfacing - like plants  
They sense heat and light.  
Breath - everywhere-  
Vibrant, alive rhythmic  
Breath. This is the dance.

Since ending my tenure at Otago, I have been invited to work as an adjunct lecturer in Cultural Studies at Tezpur University in Assam where I have had the opportunity to name and clearly articulate an ethnographic methodology that

encompasses the kinds of intuitive and sensory movement research that I and others have been exploring for a number of years.

An Intuitive Ethnography (East, in press b) validates intuition, experiential body-centred knowing, creative performance, multiple interpretation and intangible evidence or outcomes. The methodology has arisen out of a number of projects that have involved a spontaneous engagement with place by a number of groups in different locations. I generally refer to the mode of practice employed as eco-somatic improvisation, intuitive movement or ecography (my term). As with all of my teaching and performance work there are strong ecosophical principles (Naess, 1989) guiding the work, key to which are collaboration, co-operation, self-determination, spontaneous adaptation, deep seeing and listening, and evolution or transformation. Researchers adopt a participatory consciousness (Hesushius, 1995) that sees them dwelling in (Adams, 2013) and merging with land and place rather than as objectified outside observers (East, 2018). Key features of intuitive ethnography include a set of performance prompts derived from the theme or project's aim and from relevant literature; an open-ended exploration of sensing, searching and surfacing that, once it begins, is free to progress in any way and for any duration. Any outcomes of the researchers' intuitive eco-somatic sensing are articulated through spontaneous (often poetic) reflective writing and video recall analysis, validated as bodily or 'creaturely' knowing (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009; East, 2019) and presented as a psycho-geographic (Debord, 1955) eco-somatic study of Place.

During one section of a recent intuitive movement workshop with dancers and improvising musicians in Auckland, I offered the participants a series of prompts that merged the disciplines of dance, music, somatics, perception psychology and botany:

Listen with every cell (I call this Plant- listening) and allow a physical response to arise. Respond to a number of sounds simultaneously from different places in the body. Let the sounds move you through the space—adopt an “ambulatory perceiving” (Gibson, 1979)—‘grazing’ through the space—a primordial absorption of nourishing action/ideas.

## Conclusion

As I have attempted to peel back some of the layers of past experience that have brought me to this point in my life, I realise that, in many ways, my beginning childhood curiosities and movement interests haven't changed and have continued

to inform my work. My interest in creatively connecting movement with the energies of the natural world during my formative years led to a focus on eco-somatic dance that has remained my passion to this day.

Improvisation with musicians and other artists from different disciplines has been a major passion and continuing research interest into the intersection of diverse languages of expression. This interest has extended into the classroom where I undertook an auto-ethnography, investigating my own Intuitive teaching method, Intuitive Movement Practice IMP (East, 2011), practising, as I have described, ways of being with others intuitively and co-operatively through improvisational teaching and learning (East, 2015). The focus of my teaching has always been the fostering of diverse voices within a co-operative community.

Dance, for me, has never been just about steps and clever moves (East, 2011; Shapiro, 2008; Fraleigh, 2004; Schiller & Meiners, 2003). It is about taking risks, revealing one's vulnerability and being true to each moving moment as it reveals itself. It is about practising being community and playing a role in helping people to remember their integral relationship with the planet. It is also about recognising that difference and diversity are crucial characteristics of a healthy eco-system. Dance is about playfulness and co-operation with others within an atmosphere of reflexivity and eco-somatic awareness, where we may continue to practice a healthy co-existence within diversity as human beings and dancers, inter-relational with the rest of the planet. A small dance and movement prompt to end:

Breath—then

Breath again—yes that's right—in and out, become a 'conduit for air' (Irigaray & Marder, 2016), Channelling it through your body and into the environment.

Let your breath move you as you move the air around you.

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