ENFLESHED

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This project is an exploration of humanity’s interbeing with the earth and all earthly bodies. Over the past five hundred years, with the rise of capitalism and its separation of humanity from nature, subjects of modern societies have drifted farther and farther from their awareness of this interbeing, landing us in the ecological polycrisis in which we are today enmeshed. Where are the pathways not back to an idealized past, but into our present relationality with the world that not only surrounds us, but moves constantly in and out of us as air, water, food, light, sound, bacteria, moods, and thoughts? For guidance, I turn to the practices and studies of Zen Buddhism, butoh, and ecological phenomenology. A few guiding voices in this work have been thirteenth-century Zen master Dōgen, twentieth-century butoh founder Hijikata Tatsumi, and contemporary eco-phenomenologist David Abram. These figures are joined by a host of other voices that each lend their unique perspectives, experiences, and insights, including indigenous voices, whose cultures have always been awake to our deep entwinement with the non-human world. The other aspect of this project has been my practice of butoh, which I have been fortunate to study with performers and teachers Vangeline, Ximena Garnica and Andrea Jones, the latter two of LEIMAY, an ensemble that practices the dance modality LUDUS, which has its roots in butoh although they do not identify it as such. Over the past semester I have been developing a butoh choreography that I will perform in the courtyard of Union Theological Seminary. It is site specific and seeks to explore relationship with the particular land and trees in which it is danced. I will not say more about it here, as it must speak for itself, other than that this paper is structured loosely according to the five sections of the

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1 Moore, “Capitalocene,” 600.
2 Butoh is an avant-garde Japanese dance form developed by Ohno Kazuo, Hijikata Tatsumi, and their students from the late 1950s into the 1970s, emerging in part from surrealism and Japanese body techniques. (Vangeline, Butoh, 8-9, 20, 199.)
3 Jamail and Rushworth, eds. Middle of Forever, x.
dance. It is my hope that this dance and this paper may inspire some to pause and investigate the nature of their own interbeing.

I. Yakshi (Being One With)

_The entire world of the ten directions is the true human body._ These words of Dōgen instruct that there is nothing that is not included in the true human body. So why call it “human” at all? For now, I’ll posit that we humans of dominant societies are the ones who need the teaching, and need it to apply directly to us, to our experience. Even eight-hundred years ago in Dōgen’s time people were mistaking their skin-delimited bodies for the true human body. How much more so today, when even more technology (air-conditioning in summer, heat in winter, electric light, the all-pervading smartphone) separates us from directly experiencing the world around us? John Daido Loori invites us into a thought experiment:

> Imagine, if you will, a universe in which all things have mutual identity. They all have an interdependent origination: when one thing arises, all things arise simultaneously. And everything has a mutual causality: what happens to one thing happens to the entire universe...a universe in which all the parts and the totality are a single entity; all of the pieces and the whole thing are, at once, one thing.

Daido reveals that this is indeed the state of things: “It is your life and my life, the life of the mountain and the life of the river, the life of a blade of grass, a spiderweb, the Brooklyn Bridge. These things are not related to each other. They’re not part of the same thing. They’re not similar. Rather, they are identical to each other in every aspect.” But I am not identical to a spiderweb, one might object. How can this be so?

Kath Weston writes about bio-intimacy, the perspective that bodies and ecologies are not

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4 In Vedic mythology, a yakshi is a female tree spirit. Part one of the dance engages with this imagery. “Yakshi (Tree Spirit)” _Indiana University Bloomington_. Accessed April 9, 2024. https://w2w.indiana.edu/explore-collections/yakshi-tree-spirit.html.
6 Loori, _Earth_, xi-xii.
merely related, do not merely influence each other, but rather constitute each other—are one another. For example, in post-Fukushima Japan, radioactive isotopes do not interact with or act upon a distinct, integral body (human or otherwise). Instead, irradiated bodies are comprised of radioactive isotopes.\(^7\) One might go so far as to say there is no distinct human body. As demonstrated by Hijikata Tatsumi in his genre-resisting written work *Ailing Terpsichore*, “The ‘body’ is always being encroached on by something else and losing its contours. It is pierced by and eaten by rays of light, steam, shadows, sugar, medicine, bugs, animals, smoke, ghosts, tatamis, sliding doors, sugar candy, dogs, and cats…The bodily sensation that the ‘body’ can be grasped as one’s own thing disperses into the universe.”\(^8\)

It is significant that Hijikata was primarily a dancer—a mover—someone concerned (in his case, obsessed) with the body, its sensorial experience of itself and of other bodies (whether animate or “inanimate”—more on this bifurcation to come). In *Ailing Terpsichore*, Hijikata relates this childhood memory:

> A feeble person who slept and woke over and over was always moaning in a dark corner of the house. You could say that I learned from the lessons of this feeble terpsichore my habit of turning loose my body on the tatami like a fish. It appeared that her body was made with the contours of doing something like desiring, but even so, it was captured by a darkness that was like something ruptured and ripened somewhere. She[\(^9\)] probably didn’t remember the darkness on the other side that no one knows, this dark resurrection which is like a beginning.

Hijikata’s butoh is comprised of close observations of other bodies—so close that he brings their experience (or imagined experience) into his own body, beyond his body, into his own unconscious (or imagined unconscious). He was fascinated by small children in the countryside where he grew up who, tied to pillars while their families worked in the fields, “made strange

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\(^7\) Weston, *Animate*, 79.
\(^8\) Kuniichi, “Book of Butoh,” 172.
\(^9\) Ibid., 173.
movements; one fed food to his own hand…treating his hand as if it weren’t a part of himself.”

Hijikata reflects, “Taking into your own body the idea that your wrist is not your own—there’s an important secret hidden in this concept. The basis of dance is concealed there.” If your wrist is not your own, every piece of the world becomes your own. If one is limited to what is “their own”—hip, head, shoulder, foot—one’s experience of the world and of the self is limited by the conventionally understood human body. Relinquishing even one’s own wrist as “one’s own,” one’s experience-potential becomes unlimited. Wrist becomes “world.” “World” becomes “body.”

In class with LEIMAY this spring, I find myself instructed to dance in the third person. In the third person, I am not dancing; she is dancing, he is dancing, they are dancing, it is dancing. Especially, it is dancing! Taking into your own body the idea that your body is not your own.

“Think not-thinking,” Ximena tells us, referencing a teaching instruction of Dōgen. Move not-moving. “LEIMAY performers work towards conditioning a body that is simultaneously subject and object; a body that can be moved by the environment as opposed to a body that moves itself,” writes Ximena. “To carry the self forward and realize the ten thousand dharmas is delusion. That the ten thousand dharmas advance and realize the self is enlightenment,” Dōgen expounds. LUDUS practitioners train to realize the dispersal into the universe of the perception (and conception) of the body as one’s own thing. One class we might dance with the awareness of our body as the room—or as Williamsburg, or as all of Brooklyn or all of New York City—rather than in it, dispelling the notion of “human agent,” “I,” in a static, inanimate world. The

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10 Hoffman, Butoh, 125-6.
11 Routledge, 335.
entire city, the entire state, the entire world in the ten directions is the true human body.

From Abram’s perspective, “The human body is not a closed or static object, but an open, unfinished entity utterly entwined with the soils, waters, and winds that move through it.” Like Hijikata’s sugar, bugs, and medicine, or Weston’s irradiated bodies, there can be no separating out the stuff that moves in and out of the body from the body. But neither are we floating isolated consciousnesses in a body now as large as the world. Hiking through woods, Abram notices how a stretch of dense forest corresponds to complex, tight thought, while a patch of open meadow conjures expansive feelings and insights. He recognizes “mind as a broad landscape within which I was wandering, a deep field with its near aspects and its distances, its moods shifting like the weather.” Mind is not a human attribute, but an atmosphere in which we, together with all beings, are immersed and of which we partake according to the particulars of our sensing bodies. “Sunlight was a mood that colored all my thoughts.” Sunlight, then, cannot be said to be outside of myself, unless my thoughts, my mood, is also outside of myself. More simply, myself must include the entire space in which sunlight permeates, a mood to which all sentience is privy in its own way. “Mind as a medium, yes. As an invisible and ceaselessly transforming layer of this world, a fluid medium that permeates our bodies…this unseen medium charged with fire. This awakened atmosphere. This awareness in which we and the mountain trees are immersed. This mind.”

Dōgen teaches, “mountains, rivers, earth, the sun, the moon, and stars are mind.” If we apply Abram’s insight here, it is not that the aforementioned bodies are projections of the human

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13 Abram, Becoming, 110.
14 Ibid., 112, 122.
15 Ibid., 112.
16 Ibid., 124-5.
mind, but rather that mind is much larger than “human,” cosmically more expansive than the space between two ears. The distinct human mind, like the distinct human body, is a concept. We are completely in and of the earth (sun, moon, and stars). So what is the problem? In a certain sense, there is no problem. Processes are underway. Humans in dominant societies have forgotten their kinship with other beings (and with other humans) and are exploiting and trashing the miraculously complex system that holds and constitutes them. The whole system is thus undergoing collapse. This is not the first time our planet has experienced a global pollution crisis linked to a mass extinction event. Two billion years ago cyanobacteria spread across the earth’s surface, splitting water molecules and releasing oxygen into the ocean and atmosphere. Toxic to the mostly anaerobic biosphere, many lifeforms are thought to have been destroyed. Dramatic change of atmosphere accompanied by mass death has emerged from the symbiotic earth before, and, to borrow a line from Elizabeth Bishop, “it wasn’t a disaster” (what human mind was present to conceptualize it as such?), although many today refer to the event as the Great Oxygen Catastrophe. Yet, if we seek to preserve what is left of the incredible diversity of lifeforms that inter-are; to minimize the suffering of beings brought by drought, famine, heat, storms, fires, floods, and violence; to recover our awareness of our intimate connection to all earth bodies, rock and fern and moth and creek, as well as to our fellow human beings, then the problem is the belief held by many that we are individual, autonomous, exceptional creatures.

Looking toward how we might societally enter the process of restoration, Deborah Bird Rose suggests we attend to the ways in which humans have, in fact, been exceptional. “[B]y foregrounding the exceptional damage that humans are causing, the Anthropocene shows us the

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19 Bishop, “One Art.”
need for radically reworked forms of attention to what marks the human species as different…
Precisely because human cruelty tends to drop out of our conversations, I want to insist that we linger with it.”

The 2013 municipal attempt to eradicate flying foxes from a town in northern Australia is an example of such behavior that is particularly poignant for Rose, who was adopted into a group of flying fox people in Aboriginal Australia. Town residents, with government approval, assaulted the flying foxes with smoke, water cannons, firecrackers, and paintball guns and flew helicopters low over the bats’ maternity camp so that downdrafts broke their wingbones. This display of human cruelty not only terrorized a colony of flying foxes, but moreover demonstrates a pattern of “failing connectivities” that contribute to “extinction cascades.” As species “slip down that death road, other things start going too. Relationships unravel, mutualities falter, dependence becomes a peril rather than a blessing, and whole worlds of knowledge and practice diminish.”

We are in the midst of a mass extinction event. When we acknowledge these “worlds of loss,” when we resolve to “stay with the trouble” (to use Donna Haraway’s expression), we might begin to see the impacts of our connective failings and the world’s desperate need for us to restore them.

Fortunately, the pathways to remembering our connection begin with our two eyes, our two ears, our nose, our tongue, and our skin (or any combination or number of these more-or-less functioning sense organs with which we are imbued). As Abram suggests, “A genuinely ecological approach…strives to enter, ever more deeply, into the sensorial present.” Actions and protests have their place in the effort toward ecological justice, and, if we wish to truly

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22 Ibid., G52; Haraway, *Staying*.
decolonize our minds from the capitalist belief system that got us into this polycrisis, then we must stop in order to see, to hear, to feel. We must slow down. When I visit the trees in the parks where I live in New York City, I feel my nervous system wired to the speed of the New York subway system with its flashing advertisements, hurtling train cars, and swarming crowds. The speed around me is relentless, and I, porous being, swim in this water, in this mind. Willa Blythe Baker suggests that our sense of urgency around the climate crisis comes in part from the agitated state of mind—the mind that is distracted and stimulated into disharmony with the living land and its myriad forms of being—that has led to the current state of the world, to chaos ecological, political, and psychological (if I may draw such distinctions). The earth has teachings for us, and if we don’t listen, we won’t hear them. In a ninth-century encounter between Zen master Yunyan and his student Dongshan, Dongshan asks about hearing the teachings of the insentient. Geoffrey Shugen Arnold comments, “How do we hear the teachings of the insentient?…We could go into the woods, sit amidst the trees, we could go sit by the river, and sit, without a book, without music, without a phone, without conversation, because in that, we can’t communicate. The communication is happening, but we can’t hear it.” We must make ourselves available to the teachings, avail ourselves of them—open our senses to them. Mohawk leader Jake Swamp-Tekaronianeken urges all people to “find ‘the purest cloud to wipe away the tears,’ for vision to be restored… ‘the softest feather for opening the ears,’ so they could ‘hear the wind, the birds, and all the things that make sound in the world.’” Only in this way can we begin to hear the teachings of the insentient and come into right relationship with the earth.

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24 Baker, “Uncertainty.”
26 Jamail and Rushworth, eds. *Middle of Forever*, xxi.
When I go into the woods and sit, my nervous system calms and the pulse of my thought slows as I enter the mind of the forest. My attention becomes more available to receive the immediate sensorium and loosens its insistence upon its own self-identity. This simple, steady awareness of my surroundings brings me closer to experiencing myself as of the world as well as in it, closer to experiencing my non-self nature. Hijikata recounts watching rain fall into the cabbage patch from the veranda of his childhood home: “The rain seemed to be without beginning or end; as it fell, time and space became mixed and entwined, until no distinction remained between the two. And then, like rotting cabbage, I, too, seemed to deteriorate from the center.” By limiting his activity to watching, Hijikata found himself drawn irresistibly from his sense of an “I” to a sense of non-differentiation from his environment. It is with this awareness that Hijikata danced and trained his students, movement emerging from the body without conscious effort to express or represent. LEIMAY dancers strive to “access deep states of listening and to dissipate the urge to express.” By listening with the whole body, they invite the experience of existence beyond the social body, “unveiling moments of connection and transformation.” The dance emerges as the self yields to, is enfolded into, its environment. The dancer “deteriorate[s] from the center,” sinking into the rhythm of the swaying, turning, pouring world, and is moved by the ten thousand things.

This is not to say that conscious effort was and is not an essential part of butoh training. Ashikawa Yoko, Hijikata’s closest disciple, recounts how training in his studio “reached the last recesses of the flesh.” Hijikata’s matrix of mind training was equally rigorous. His

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28 Ibid.
29 Garnica, “LEIMAY,” 335.
30 Ibid., 328.
31 qtd. in SU-EN, “Light As Dust,” 204.
choreography consisted of *butoh-fu*, butoh image-memos, which dancers were required to learn and memorize. The imagery might reach the complexity of “Michaux—Person of Light”:

- the sensation of light extends—under the nose, elbows, joints of feet, knees
- manteau of light—transparent, infinitely transparent
- walk on a rope
- the sensation of light extends, crouch 4 meters in front—melt into the plane
- razor blades on the soles of feet—walk
- strong smell under nose—the nape of the neck extends
- be pulled from behind and to the right
- left leg raises
- fan in hand
- be observed from a bird’s-eye view
- softness from below
- directionality disperses

The dancer might be asked to perform “Michaux—Person of Light” with the awareness of being inside of a stone or under water.\(^{32}\) As in many crafts, no-effort emerges from strenuous effort.

Butoh is not not moving, not not thinking; it is moving not-moving, thinking not-thinking.

II. Wind (Life of the Insentient)

*The blue mountains are constantly walking.* Dōgen invokes this teaching of the Ancestor Ta-Yang, commenting: “We must devote ourselves to a detailed study of this virtue of walking.

The walking of the mountains is like that of humans: do not doubt that the mountains walk simply because they may not appear to walk like humans. These words…point out the fundamental meaning of walking, and we should thoroughly investigate his teaching on ‘constant walking.’”\(^{33}\) The mountains’ walking is like that of humans, though it may not appear to be so.

The teaching of the mountains walking holds the key to our understanding our own walking. Mountains exist in their own way, exactly as humans exist. Because mountains do not breathe, work, sleep, and eat in the same way that humans do, some may assume that a mountain does not

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33 Dōgen, “Mountains and Rivers,” 77.
have a life. Mountains do, however, have lives, and “life” is not a human attribute. Many of us simply associate “life” with “human life,” or “animal life,” or “plant life.” Yet, as Abram writes, “To step into [the mountain’s] shadow is to become a part, if only for this moment, of the mountain’s life…to abruptly find oneself exposed to the private life of the mountain.” I recently experienced an exposure to the life of the moon and the sun. For two and a half earthly minutes, the moon stood perfectly before the sun, concealing its light from the point on the earth where I sat staring up at the white ring now visible around a black circle in a darkened sky.

Sitting squarely in the moon’s shadow at three-thirty in the afternoon, for a moment (or two and a half) I was held in the private life of these cosmic bodies, my senses of sight and touch in particular awakening me to these aspects whose being is usually hidden in the ordinary, which less often or less dramatically captures my roving attention. There we all were—sun, moon, earth, earthling—together manifesting “total eclipse.” Dōgen exhorts us to devote ourselves to the study of the mountains walking (of the moon eclipsing the sun). He understands how our being is inextricably entwined with that of the mountains, rivers, earth, sun, moon and stars, how our life not only depends on them, but is one and the same. To understand our own walking, our own life, we must tune our ears to the teachings of the mountains, of the moon and the sun, of the earth on which we stand.

“The blue mountains are neither sentient nor insentient; the self is neither sentient nor insentient,” Dōgen continues. LEIMAY dancers strive to exist simultaneously as subject and object, to dance in the third person, to become the space, a candle, water. What is different about the nature of my existence and that of a newt, or a creek, or a running shoe? Abram insists,

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34 Abram, Becoming, 21-2.
35 Ibid., 78.
“everything is animate, everything moves…There are only these different speeds and styles of movement, these divergent rhythms and rates of pulsation, these many different ways of being alive.”

Not understanding my own nature, how could I claim to understand the nature of the blue mountains, of the moon as it arcs across the sun? Citing Dōgen’s “Mountains and Rivers Sutra,” Daido writes, “Water flows over the earth. It flows across the sky. It flows up, it flows down. It flows around bends, into deep abysses. It mounts up to form clouds, it descends to form pools. The teachings of the insentient deal with intimacy, not with words.”

We must listen to the teachings of the so-called insentient with our whole bodies, not only with our ears or our thinking brains. Daido tells us that intimacy is “seeing form with the whole body and mind, hearing sound with the whole body and mind.”

We do this constantly, though we are usually not conscious of the process. Crossing a busy street our body leaps back when a speeding car whips around the corner. Or hiking in the woods, tripping over a fallen tree branch, the body flailingly arranges itself mid-fall to recapture its balance and right itself. Abram writes that like other animals, “we humans also think with our muscled limbs…an ongoing and attentive response to the unpredictable nuance of the present moment, a corporeal decision-making that underlies all our abstract reflections.”

Even when our minds are elsewhere, our bodies are in intimate relationship with our surroundings. When we bring our awareness into our muscled limbs as they traverse the wilds of pavement or forest, leaving behind the world of words and discursive thought, of sentient and insentient, we approach the teachings of the insentient; we approach intimacy.

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36 Abram, Becoming, 269.
37 Loori, Earth, 78.
38 Ibid., 32.
39 Abram, Becoming, 191.
III. Seed (Becoming)

How close can we get? How intimately can we know our own experience? The experience of another? Baird writes, “One of the most repeated observations about butoh is that it requires the dancer to ‘become’ something, rather than act like or express something…As the goal of seeing from other perspectives came to prominence, only complete transformation was acceptable.” In order to become something else, to transform one’s being, Hijikata realized that one must first study the self. “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self,” Dōgen writes. It was evident to Hijikata that “one is inevitably raised in a body-clouding manner, and any attempt to interact with another body will entail the necessity of examining one’s own cloudedness.” Hijikata’s training served in part to help students learn their bodies and minds intimately, from the space under the nose to the joints of the feet, mental concentration and the slowness of movement inviting the mind to see itself. In writing his memoirs, Hijikata emphasized the indeterminacy of his own self-knowledge, playing with memories and aesthetics and never solidifying a sense of a preexisting self. Only in so studying the self and in recognizing the absence of any objective selfhood could one begin to see the world from other perspectives—a most necessary endeavor in the process of becoming. Butoh aesthetics and techniques served in part to help diminish the dancers’ individualities—white body paint, nakedness, strange and unfamiliar instructions for the body and mind, intense physical and mental training. This would all support dancers’ abilities to abandon their human existence and become something else, see the world from other viewpoints. “Now I am a frog, far away from the shadow of an idea,”

40 Baird, Hijikata, 159-60.
43 Ibid., 160-1, 202-3.
writes Hijikata.⁴⁴ “To study the self is to forget the self.”⁴⁵

Yet to what extent can one really become something else or see from another’s
perspective? Abram muses, “No human individual can fathom just how the encompassing
imagination is experienced by any other person—much less by a turtle, or a thundercloud, or by
a car door…And yet—and yet.” I cannot claim to feel your feelings, I cannot see through your
eyes which are colored by your particular lifetime(s) of conditioning, as mine are by mine. And
yet, Abram persists, “and yet: although there is no single way to tell it, it is the same Tale that is
unfurling itself through our gazillion and one gestures.”⁴⁶ Still, this does not grant me access to
your gaze, to your perspective (to a frog’s, to a toaster oven’s). What is happening when I
decloud my body and mind to see more clearly? Do I see things “as they are?” Do I see things as
a cloud sees them? As they see themselves? Dōgen writes, “the way of seeing mountains and
rivers differs according to the type of being [that sees them]. There are beings who see what we
call water as a jeweled necklace. This does not mean, however, that they see a jeweled necklace
as water. How, then do we see what they consider water?”⁴⁷ I cannot know how another being
sees what I see as water. Indeed, I cannot even attribute the qualities I know as belonging to
water to an autonomous concept of water that is separate from my perception. Merleau-Ponty
describes this phenomenon, in which “we could not dream of seeing [things] ‘all naked’ because
the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh.”⁴⁸ However, this enveloping, this
clothing is not a hindrance. Rather, it is each being’s access to every other being: “veiling them,

⁴⁷ Dōgen, “Mountains and Rivers,” 84.
it unveils them.”\textsuperscript{49} For Merleau-Ponty, the visibles of the world (the beings, the things) are not endowed with their own quale independent of their relationships to their perceivers. Instead, the visible exists in the qualia, “as flesh offered to flesh…whence vision is question and response.”\textsuperscript{50} Then my frog is different from your frog, though more similar than the frog’s mate’s frog, or the lilypad’s frog, or the fly’s. But what is a frog? Phenomenologically, things do not exist in isolation, but only in relation to everything else. Abram writes, “The sensing body is like an open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the surrounding earth.”\textsuperscript{51} The things, too, the surrounding earth, are completed (not once and for all but moment to moment, again and again) in the sensing body. And we too are not final, are not complete in ourselves, but are called into being again and again by the earth in which our existence emerges from second to second.

\textbf{IV. Offering}

It is through relationship that the world comes into being. Everything arises all at once, together. Buddhism calls this dependent co-arising. Thich Nhat Hanh calls it interbeing. Biology calls it symbiosis. In Aboriginal Australia there is the related concept of “shimmer,” \textit{bir’yun} in the Yolngu language. \textit{Bir’yun} is of the earth, which pulses from shimmer to dullness (a state of potential) and back to shimmer, arising in encounter with beings—human or angiosperm or flying fox. Rose writes, “Brilliance actually grabs you. Brilliance allows you, or brings you, into the experience of being part of a vibrant and vibrating world.”\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Bir’yun} lures and entices, offers and receives. Blooming trees beckon flying foxes with color and scent. The bats drink deeply of the nectar, nourishing their small bodies and capturing pollen which they will spread across the

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., fn. 1
\textsuperscript{51} Abram, \textit{Becoming}, 254.
\textsuperscript{52} Tsing et al, \textit{Arts of Living}, G53.
continent, playing their part in continuously calling the delicate ecosystem into being.

“Extinction cascades,” Rose grieves, “drag shimmer from the world.” Every creature, no matter how small or seemingly inert, adds to the web of pulsing brilliance.

In butoh, the investigation of the relational body is of supreme importance. The butoh body (*butoh-tai*), as a performative body, is always in relationship with an audience, whether physical or imagined. As a porous creative body, the butoh body constantly receives light, shadow, the movements and sounds of other bodies, the chill in the air, the smoke of the woodstove, and constantly responds with blinking eyes, twitching fingers, a turning head, stillness, sweat, a shout, a whisper, silence. The butoh company SU-EN writes, “The Butoh Body is an extended body. It is a living artistic organism, in intense interaction with the world around it. This body cannot be seen without the space around it, it cannot live without all the other living beings, it cannot move without the tension of different realities. The Butoh Body does not exist without other bodies.” Butoh dancer Kasai Akira teaches the community body—the idea that a butoh dancer’s body is one part or expression of a larger field which includes everything:

> The fingernail does not grow apart from the body, and the body of a human being does not grow apart from the community. It grows with the community, and that community includes all things in nature, not just the human community. No matter how hard dancers train—even if they are in superb condition—if they are not concerned for the larger body of nature, the dancer’s body they develop does not mean much.

Kasai insists his students understand that butoh is not about the training and cultivation of a single body and mind—such a thing does not even exist. Rather, butoh develops dancers’ awareness and experience of the intimate relationality on which the world turns. Kasai observes,

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53 Ibid., G51-55, G60.
55 Fraleigh, *Dancing*, 236.
“In dancing, we carry our body away from ourselves.” It is the effort of de-selfing the self—of dissolving one’s sense of oneself and at the same time expanding it to include the whole world. The butoh body is often conceived as a corpse—a thing, an it. In this way the preciousness of the idea of “my body” or “my life” is lost to the recognition of the body as yet another (miraculous) porous conglomeration of matter subject to decay and change. “There are many ways of living,” writes Kasai. “They are all our body. There is a deep connection with the outside and our physical selves as we develop the outside world. We develop the community body as we develop our physical body in dance. The sensations of your body must also reach out.” Butoh dancers must learn to extend their sense of a body far beyond the limits of their skin. Revisiting Hijikata’s “Michaux—Person of Light” we find the instructions “the sensation of light extends,” “be observed from a bird’s-eye view,” and “softness from below.” The dancer’s task is not only to translate these directions into externally visible movement, but moreover to feel them, to make sense of them: an extending sensation of light, relocation of their perspective to a point outside of their body, perception of a texture beyond the boundary of their flesh.

In recognition of the body’s inextricable interdependence with other bodies, Buddhism sets forth dana (giving) as the first of the six paramitas (perfections). The paramitas are a means of cultivating bodhicitta, the aspiration to realize enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. Through developing bodhicitta, practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism aspire to become bodhisattvas, enlightened beings who return to the world of suffering again and again to strive for the liberation of all. The Way of the Bodhisattva is a guide to this path written by eighth-century Indian monk Shantideva. In his teaching on dana paramita, he prays for the ability to

56 Ibid., 238.
57 Ibid., 247.
give his own body for the sake of others:

For all those ailing in the world,
Until their every sickness has been healed,
May I myself become for them
The doctor, nurse, the medicine itself.

Raining down a flood of food and drink,
May I dispel the ills of thirst and famine.
And in the aeons marked by scarcity and want,
May I myself appear as drink and sustenance.

For sentient beings, poor and destitute,
May I become a treasure ever-plentiful,
And lie before them closely in their reach,
A varied source of all that they might need.

My body, thus, and all my goods besides,
And all my merits gained and to be gained,
I give them all and do not count the cost,
To bring about the benefit of beings. 58

In his depth of compassion, Shantideva identifies more strongly with the suffering and need of “others” than with his own physical being. His sense of himself transcends his human form as he expresses his desire to become medicine, drink, sustenance, “a varied source” of whatever is required. He offers his body and all of his possessions without a sense of sacrifice, for he is more troubled by the suffering of other bodies than by his own. This is not to advocate self-abnegation or mortification. Rather, as Shantideva later expounds (in a Merleau-Pontyesque formulation), self and others are the same, as one’s own body consists of multiple limbs that all comprise one body. 59 Shantideva understands others’ pain to be the same as his and thus is compelled to extinguish the pain of everyone—the suffering of multitudes as opposed to his own individual suffering alone. Of course, he is a part of “everyone,” and when their sorrows and misfortunes are dispelled, he too will be at peace. Shantideva suggests developing “the habit of adopting

58 Shantideva, Bodhisattva, 48.
59 Following a discussion of how separate body parts, each with their own tactiles, comprise a single Sentient, Merleau-Ponty asks, “Now why would this generality, which constitutes the unity of my body, not open it to other bodies? The handshake too is reversible.” Visible, 142.
other beings” as one’s self, for the conventionally viewed “self” was formed through the “drop of sperm and blood” of other bodies. Why not identify other bodies as one’s “I” and one’s “own” body as another’s?60

Likewise, the first of Dōgen’s “Four Methods of Guidance” for the bodhisattva is giving. Describing the myriad forms of giving available to aspiring bodhisattvas, Dōgen writes: “to accept a body and to give up the body are both giving.”61 One might accept the body of a doctor or nurse to heal the sick, or the body of Michaux—Person of Light, or the body of a frog, far away from the shadow of an idea. All are forms of giving. One might allow the body to dissolve into medicine, into rain and rotting cabbage, or simply give up the idea of the personal bounded self. One might accept another body as one’s “I” and give up one’s own body to another’s “I,” then viewing oneself in the third person. Each of these is a form of giving. “To leave flowers to the wind, to leave birds to the seasons, are also acts of giving.”62 To allow things to be as they are without interfering is an act of giving. Human beings in our deluded states are constantly taking. We pick flowers for our own purposes, we pollute the air, waters, and soils that nourish them. Our modern ways of life have caused the decline of half of the world’s bird species.63 What freedom would we give if we left them to the seasons? To leave them to the seasons today might require beneficial action on their behalf. This is a form of giving. There is the giving of non-conceptualizing. When I see a flower and think “flower,” or see a bird and think “bird,” I reduce it to my idea of a generic flower, a generic bird, of which there is no such thing. Leaving a flower to the wind, I inter-am with it as it is; leaving a bird to the seasons, I pulse in and out of its

60 Ibid., 122-5.
61 Dōgen, “Bodhisattva’s,” 474.
62 Ibid.
dynamic existence, as it does with mine.

When we practice giving, we cultivate reverence for other kinds of beings, an acknowledgement of and deference to their ways of life, rarely found in modern culture. Flowers, birds, mountains, and waters all have their own ways of being. “The water watches you and has a definite attitude, favorable or otherwise, toward you,” explains a member of the Mattole Indians, a hunting and fishing tribe that traditionally dwelled by the Mattole and Bear rivers of northern California.

Do not speak just before a wave breaks. Do not speak to passing rough water in a stream. Do not look at water very long for any one time, unless you have been to this spot ten times or more. Then the water there is used to you and does not mind if you’re looking at it. Older men can talk in the presence of water because they have been around so long that the water knows them. Until the water at any spot does know you, however, it becomes very rough if you talk in its presence or look at it too long.64

This tradition of demurring before water is infused with humility. The cultures who practice it do not see humans as exceptional—neither exceptionally sentient, nor exceptionally intelligent, nor exceptionally dominant. There is respect for water in its wateriness, a process of coming to know water and to be known by water, of paying attention. Simone Weil views attention as a way of cultivating humility.65 When we pay attention to other kinds of beings—attend and attune to them with our whole bodies and minds—their being-ness comes into view. Recognizing another being, I must bow down. Human and humility share the root *humus*—earth, soil, ground. On the evening of the Buddha’s enlightenment, as he sat at the foot of a tree, the Buddha was visited by Mara, the personification of discouragement and doubt. “Who are you to achieve enlightenment?” asked Mara. In response, the Buddha reached down and touched the earth, testifying that it was not he who attained enlightenment, but the whole earth and all beings

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64 qtd. in Abram, *Becoming*, 173-4.
65 Fraleigh, “Presence,” 476.
V. Gravity/Eros

All earthly bodies exchange a gravitational pull. The earth itself—the largest body—exerts the greatest gravitational force, and so our bodies are irresistibly drawn to it. Abram writes of what he calls the erotic nature of gravity: “Like the felt magnetism between two lovers, or between a mother and her child, the powerful attraction between the body and the earth offers sustenance and physical replenishment when it is consummated in contact.” There is a reciprocal relationship between the body and the earth, which, perhaps more like that between a mother and child than between two lovers, is not equal. The earth, like a good enough caregiver of any gender, is our holding environment—the physical and emotional ground that holds us. Following Winnicott’s statement, “There is no such thing as an infant,” no such thing considered separately from its mother, there is no such thing as a person autonomous from the earth. Hijikata often proclaimed, “I would never jump or leave the ground; it is on the ground that I dance.” Vangeline describes butoh as the relationship between the body and gravity. Between the body and the earth. It is a dance that sinks into the eros of the human body as a body on the earth and of the earth. This erotic relationship is not limited to the earth, but extends to every body—bodies of stone, bodies of water, bodies of wood, bodies of metal, bodies of plastic. All bodies are in gravitational relationship with every other body, to greater or lesser degree. Abram encourages readers to “[spark] up an erotic relation between oneself and every aspect of one’s surroundings.” Or perhaps the relation is always already there and one’s task is to become

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66 Abram, Becoming, 27.
67 qtd in “Winnicott.”
68 qtd in Hoffman et al, Butoh, 8.
69 Vangeline, Butoh, 190.
70 Abram, Spell, 276.
aware of it, to pay attention. When we pay attention, we may notice not only this erotic relationship with other things, but further still, a double-belonging, a reciprocity of this body and that one, both inhabiting simultaneously the roles of subject and object, perceiver and perceived.

Merleau-Ponty describes this unbounded fluidity in which the seer, a presumed self, is also thing seen and thing seen, a presumed other, is also seer in a sort of möbius strip of perception. “[O]ur body is…from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them…If [the body] touches [things] and sees them, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs… because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh.”  

When I place my hand on the bark of a tree, I feel its roughness and solidity against my skin. At the same time, the tree perceives my hand in its own way. Our reciprocal sensing of each other and our shared ability to be sensed is our means of mutual participation—I in the tree’s life and it in mine. As Abram writes, “The whole terrain is talking to our animal body; our actions are the steady reply.” It is this element of sensible sentience, sentient sensibility, which weaves through all of sensible world, that Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh. Vision and visibility do not belong to me or to objects, but “to the flesh, being here and now.” Merleau-Ponty presents the idea of intercorporeal being: “Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? Where in the body are we to put the seer, since evidently there is in the body only ‘shadows stuffed with organs,’ that is, more of the visible?…There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other.” Merleau-Ponty locates “the seer”—consciousness, or at least

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71 Merleau-Ponty, Visible, 137.
72 Abram, Becoming, 276.
73 Merleau-Ponty, Visible, 142.
74 Ibid., 138.
sight consciousness—not in the individual person or deer or fish, but in the flesh, the enfolding and entirely interdependent existence of the entire world. Or, in Abram’s formulation, mind is a property of the earth’s in which we and all other earth beings are immersed.75 I take up butoh in the spirit of waking up to my enfleshment with the world, loosening my hold on taking myself for the seer and inviting seeing to envelop me, functioning around me and in me; allowing tactility to animate the ground and the wall as well as my skin.

This opening of the senses yields intimacy, seeing form with the whole body and mind, hearing sound with the whole body and mind. The whole body and mind is as expansive as the earth. I become intimate with the tree when seeing sees it, when hearing hears it, beyond my attachment to my identity as an individual with its own intelligence. The intelligence belongs to the earth in which I am enfleshed. I partake of it according to my particular manifestation in the present, as does everything else. Abram reflects,

[A]n affinity between my body and the sensible presences that surround me…unfolds in an utterly silent dimension, in that mute layer of bare existence that this material body shares with the hunkered mountains and the forests and the severed stump of an old pine, with gushing streams and dry riverbeds and even the small stone…[that induces] me to clasp it between my fingers. The friendship between my hand and this stone enacts an ancient and irrefutable eros, the kindredness of matter with itself.76

Prior to all thought, I am of the nature of bare existence, the same nature as every other being or thing on earth. All pieces of earth’s body are earthlings, kin, in and of the earth, enveloped and entwined with each other in the sensing and sensible flesh of the world. For many humans alive today, this awareness has been obscured by our many mediations between ourselves and the things of the earth, by our distractedness and the speed at which our minds have been conditioned to move through all of our waking hours. And yet, as Abram maintains, “there’s a

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75 Abram, Spell, 262.
76 Abram, Becoming, 29.
wildness that still reigns underneath all these mediations…[O]ur animal senses, coevolved with the animate landscape, are still tuned to the many-voiced earth. Our creaturely body…remains poised and thirsting for contact with otherness.”77 The entire world of the ten directions is the true human body. The blue mountains are constantly walking. We should study this, as Dōgen exhorts us, and study it still more. The continuation and quality of all life on earth depends upon it.

77 Ibid., 264.
Bibliography


