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ROCK, BREATH, SKIN – AN APPROACH TO TRAINING FOR PERFORMING LAND

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Rock, Breath, Skin – An Approach to Training for Performing Land

Abstract

In this time of human dislocation from land, many scholars and practitioners are exploring the role of performance in addressing this dislocation and its ecological ramifications. Performance offers a vehicle for generating new understanding and discourse by giving audiences experiences of immersion in land and natural environments. According to May, there is an urgent need for artists and performers to 'flesh out the way in which the human imagination participates in, and is integral to, our ecological situatedness' (May, 2007, p. 95). The analysis of human connection to land and place offers a timely contribution to understanding of human experience of the world. However, a definite list of principles that underpin the ways we connect to the environments we inhabit is elusive. Two key questions are considered. Firstly, how can we use theatre and performance to address the human disconnectedness to land? Secondly, and central to this project: how can performers train for work that addresses the current state of disconnectedness?

Within the fields of theatre and performance, there is not currently a comprehensive model available to answer these questions. This project aims to consider answers to the question of how performers might approach training for performance that, in various ways, addresses the current state of disconnectedness through performing land. What is required is, as architect and curator, Miwon Kwon suggests, 'radical restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience'. (Kwon, 1997, p. 12).

This research project: "*Rock, Breath, Skin – An Approach to Training for Performing Land*" investigates features and mechanisms of an eco-centric performer training for performing land and engages with three key bodies of discourse: philosophy of land and place; outdoor, immersive performance practice; and performer training. The research asks: How might performers develop approaches to training for performing land? By 'Performing Land' I suggest that the term encompasses performance in land, performance with land and performance of land.¹

The project explores the possibilities that developing awareness of our immersion in land is a means by which we can train for performing land.

¹ Performance in land can be seen to include performance that takes place in a natural environment and holds the land/landscape as important/relevant to the performance. Performance of land can be seen as performance that seeks to embody aspects of the land. Performance with land can be seen as performance in which land plays a role in the performance.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
Rationale	12
Research Project Aims	12
Methodology	13
The River Action.....	14
Thesis Outline	20
Chapter One.....	22
Theories of Land	22
Chapter Two	27
Performing Land	27
Introduction.....	27
Immersion.....	28
Archaeology.....	28
Site Specific.....	29
The Non-human	29
Transformation.....	31
Awareness and Modes of Perception.....	31
Elemental Nature of Body and Land (Blurred Boundaries and Permeability)	32
Body in Land	36
Walking.....	38
Duration.....	39
Conclusion	39
Chapter Three	40
Núñez	40
Chapter Four	48
The River Action – Rock, Breath, Skin.....	48
Introduction.....	48
Collecting the Perfume.....	49
Training Instructions	52

Awareness and Perception.....	54
Rock - Relating with the Materiality of Rock	56
Breath – A Tool for Engaging with the Land of the Rainforest	59
Skin - A Permeable and Porous Material	61
Chapter 5 - Conclusion	64
Bibliography.....	66

Introduction

The embodied nature of the theatrical experience offers performers and audiences a means to engage with land in ways that go beyond habitual or everyday experiencing to a deeper understanding of the interrelated nature of the human and natural worlds. This inquiry demonstrates that performers can experience and relate with land with more awareness than is common in our everyday experience of inhabiting land and place. This increased awareness can be brought about through performer training and it is through a training in immersion that performers can best develop the capacity to perform land.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold proposes that 'Land is a kind of lowest common denominator of the phenomenal world, inherent in every portion of the earth's surface' (Ingold, 1993, p. 153). However, the ways in which humans relate to and perceive their relationship with land is varied and complex. As psychologist and academic Will Adams explains, western society exists 'With the notion that humans are somehow separate from all the rest of nature' (Adams, 2010, p. 1). There is a stark contrast between indigenous philosophies of land and place and dualistic European/colonial belief. Adams statement about the way western society exists is, for me, a call (as a performer) to address this separation.

The investigation focuses on a specific contemplative and physical training process that performers could draw on to develop their own practice and their methods of training for performing land. To demonstrate this approach, I focus on my experience of working with rock, breath and skin during a performer training process: *The River Action*.

I have always been intrigued by the Geographer Tuan's idea that we need to exist in a stark place in order to be able to fully let go of habitual behaviours and tendencies. As a child, I spent many hours underground, exploring the derelict lead mines in my village. I always felt some affinity and sense of relatedness to the rock that I crawled through and touched underground. My sense perceptions were challenged and worked differently in the cold and the darkness. The absence of living matter appealed to me, I was forced to relocate myself in the geologic world and hours underground led me to a transformed perception of rock and my relationship with it.

Years later when I broke my femur on a mountain, I felt (as I lay in bed) a strong urge to be with rock in a stark environment with no plants, animals or humans. It was as if, while bone was healing, I might only feel comfortable in a rocky and desolate environment. I came to this investigation into rock in agreement with Henry Thoreau, who says of the organic nature of land and in particular, rock:

There is nothing inorganic . . . The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history . . . but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit – not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic. (Thoreau Henry, 2012)

Thoreau's words resonate with the notes I write after training one day:

In practising The River Action today, the materiality of rock comes to me again. I don't make a particular effort to focus on rock or consider my awareness of it. That I feel a strong sensory connection surprises me. Rock is simply the material that I am standing on: supposedly inanimate and lifeless. However, the physical sensation is that I am standing on vital organic matter. It is like the backbone of the river and supports the structure and shape of the entire rainforest. The transformation I feel through my embodied exploration of rock, and the feeling of interconnectedness I had with rock is a physical feeling. I can still feel the rock hours later, imprinted on the soles of my feet. ²

My experience was, as Thoreau says, that 'there is nothing inorganic'. By exploring means of experiencing rock as 'organic' elemental material, performers might open up approaches to training for performing land.

At the heart of this research this training process is *The River Action*,³ which was carried out over a three and a half week period under the direction of Nicolás Núñez and with a group of performers in the rainforest of Armila, Panama. Armila is a small village in the Guna Yala Province. This Province is an autonomous indigenous territory in Latin America. Following their revolution in 1925, the people of Guna Yala have protected their land and its resources and their culture from Panamanian and international interest which would be a threat to their way of life.

As a team, we worked as part of an artist's residency, led by La Wayaka Current which is the first such organisation to work with the people of Guna Yalas to build together a residency and exchange project. La Wayaka describe their project as important work that builds connections between indigenous communities and those from around the world, and as work that is important during the current environmental crisis. La Wayaka believe that it is:

Through listening and learning to (*sic*) those with strong ties to nature and community that we can regain consciousness that has been lost around the world and support those who are truly protecting our shared home and planet. (LaWayaka Current, 2017)

Thus, LaWayaka do not operate in what Macarena Gomez-Barris would describe as an extractive mode. The Guna Yala people are inextricably linked with the rainforest in everyday life and the

² Training notes: 21st June 2017

³ Created by theatre director Nicolás Núñez, 2017.

rainforest is profoundly connected with their culture and systems of belief as well being the source of food and medicine. As Paolo Fortis states:

Similar to other Amerindians, Kuna people contend that seeing what lies beyond the limits of normal visual experience is the field of what anthropologists call shamanism. (Fortis, 2013)

This training was preparation for performances of for *El Ensueño de los Árboles*, an immersive and ecological performance. It was created for forest locations and performed in Panama and Mexico in 2018. *The River Action* was a contemplative, psychophysical training action that aimed to expand the perceptions and awareness of performers' bodies and minds so that they might experience a deep sense of immersion in (or a deep awareness of their existing state of immersion) and embodied connection to the environment of the rainforest. Performer and writer Deborah Middleton describes the training process as involving 'cultivation of our own capacity for immersion, through the development of a mode of extended awareness.' (D. Middleton & Núñez, 2018, p. 217). The intention was that this psychophysical training might be a means of recreating an embodied experience in different forest environments; and thus providing audiences with a more engaging experience of the performances.

Over the past twenty-five years, I have worked with Núñez on numerous occasions. I have taken part in workshops in the UK where I have participated in many of his 'dynamics'; in 2016 I took part in Theatre as a Personal Rite (II) in Apan, Mexico; I have attended weekly workshops with The Taller de Investigación Teatral (Theatre Research Workshop) in Mexico City and taken part in the dance Citlalmina (a combination of Nahuatl and Tibetan dances). I have worked as a performer in his productions in Mexico, Panama and the UK. Notes from my training journal written during the rehearsal process for *Puentes Invisibles* (2017) are typical of my experiences of working outdoors with Núñez and evidences ways in which I perceive the value of his approaches to performer training in performing land.

As we are led into cool roots and canopies, I am jolted out of everyday sensations. I am forced to open all my senses. When I walk backwards, I stop relying on my sight and feel my way through the soles of my feet on the earth and the tips of my fingers in the air and I forget myself. Bridges appear and I can cross them to enter woodlands of my past and others' pasts.

My bare feet, in the cool forest dirt, begin to form a bridge. I cross it and journey into roots and rock of ancestors and beginnings. Looking up into early morning sunlight, another bridge appears and I am connected to the planetary world above. Staring into the eyes of my imagined lover, I cross imagined bridges for all the world's lovers.

Vibrations of voice, hompack and bone trumpet wake me up and my cells dance inside me and vibrate with the forest floor and the trunks of trees.

In moments of stillness, I feel the movement of the earth respond to me. In moments of movement, I feel the stillness of my core respond to the earth. Movement and stillness bridge the gap that has formed, over many years, between us.

Outdoor, immersive performance practices are well-established fields with numerous artists and performers engaging with land and geologic materials. The development of new approaches to this kind of work, and to training for such work, is a growing area of interest for performance practitioners and scholars.

The nature of human relationships with the materiality of land has been explored by scholars from many disciplines and many artists and performers have created work that engages with theories of land and place and that attempts to address our disconnectedness with land. However, as performance artist Jungmin Song points out, performance art audiences are accustomed to the artist's body as the central if not sole focus of attention (Song, 2015, p. 5). The emphasis on the human as central to performance and the traditional stage (within a theatre) or site (whether outdoors or indoors) as backdrop to the action reflects beliefs that the human body exists separately from the land. In some outdoor performance the natural environment or land is viewed as inert and inactive. During the training process of *The River Action*, it was Núñez's intention that we viewed the environment of the rainforest as active and integral to the training rather than being a site or backdrop.

Artists and performers such as Marina Abramović, Ana Mendieta, and Annette Arlander all work with processes where land is not inert or inactive. They each create work in which the materiality of land might be perceived as an equal agent and they seem to concur with dancer Anna Halprin's view that 'our bodies are composed of the same elements as the earth and our lives shaped by the same cyclic patterns' (Halprin & Kaplan, 1995, p. 216).

As practitioner Gretel Taylor says: 'similar views are evident in practices like Butoh and Bodyweather which both work with 'the fluid inter-relation between body and its surroundings' (Taylor, 2010, p. 85). Similarly, *The River Action* worked, for me, as an eco-centric practice where the materiality of land was an equal agent and there was a strong sense of 'inter-relation' between body and land.

Numerous practitioners who create outdoor performance allude to the importance of actions that require the performer to step outside habitual modes of perception in order to develop modes of

experiencing land or place. Practitioner and writer Sandra Reeve notes that Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski have all 'used physicality and movement to challenge the primacy of sight' (Reeve, 2011, pp. 9-10). As a physical practice, *The River Action* required performers to engage with the environment using all the senses.

There is a lot of existing practice and research within outdoor performance that aims to address human disconnectedness to land, and this research project was interested in how performers might train for such work and that is what this thesis aims to provide. Performance is a compelling mode to explore human relationships with land and the eco-centric approach to performer training we concern ourselves with here makes for a new and distinct approach to performing land through its focus on rock, breath, and skin as tools I used to develop my awareness of immersion in the natural environment.

While this research focused on the training, there is obviously an important relationship between the type of training and the kind of performance. Indeed, *The River Action* could be seen as a performance or practice in itself. Academic Jonathan Pitches considers this relationship between immersive performance and place:

With the crucial element of space/place and audience at its core, immersive practice often lends itself to an exploration of environmental concerns and ecological interests, as is exemplified in the work of Wilson and WildWorks. (Pitches & Popat, 2011, p. 55)

As Pitches says, an immersive approach lends itself to any performance that aims to address ecological understanding and awareness. Given the growing interest in ecological issues and the fact that performers are creating work to address these issues, we see how it might be worthwhile that performers working with land be trained in processes of immersive practices.

Throughout this thesis, I use the term immersion to discuss the performer's relationship to the natural environment. Within the general context of performance, there is much written about audience experience of immersion in a theatrical environment, but this notion of immersion is very different to the work of *The River Action*. Immersive performance is a broad field encompassing a variety of performance practices. The term immersion is used to describe a wide variety of theatrical, gaming, art, and literature experiences. Baz Kershaw describes the dynamics of immersive performance as that through which "spectators become wholly engaged in an event which they ... inherit as a complete environment" (Kershaw, 1999, p.194). Similarly, Machon writes:

It can be understood that this feeling of 'being there' is a fact; the audience-participant is actually there, physically inhabiting the fantasy world created. (2009, p.61)

Indeed, elements of *El Ensueño* could be considered an immersive experience for the audience/participants. Here, however, we are concerned with the immersive process of *The River Action* as a training for performers. Robert France considers the work of Roger Deakin:

An individual obsessed with swimming as few others have been, philosophizes that through immersion one crosses boundaries and achieves a kind of metamorphosis with survival displacing both ambition and desire as the dominant aim. Such an activity, he argues, is the most intense and complete way we can be truly in nature. (France, 2003, p.67)

In *The River Action*, my work with rock, breath, and skin concerned breaking down boundaries between body and environment as part of the process of immersion. Deakin's ideas raise a number of questions: what kind of boundaries was I crossing in the training process? What might crossing these boundaries achieve and would I achieve something akin to the metamorphosis suggested by Deakin? Performing *The River Action* wasn't about survival but certainly there was a sense of letting go of ambition to achieve anything and letting go of any desire to be something or to be in some way different. Deakin suggests that immersion is the most intense and complete way we can be in nature – and it was this profound 'being' in nature that I argue performers achieved through our training in the rainforest.

I draw also on Murray, who states that:

Immersion is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. (1997, p. 98).

Standing on a rock in a river and holding postures, the sense of immersion was both literal and metaphorical. We were, quite literally, immersed in an environment that was remote and dense and at the same time facilitating the metaphorical immersion through the training action. Murray's suggestion that our perceptual apparatus and our attention are taken over also ring true. Because the postures were physically challenging, our perceptual apparatus was forced to operate differently to our habitual ways of perceiving.

*It's as though I am simultaneously stripping away habitual thoughts and feelings and at the same time opening up to the rainforest physically and mentally. I'm simultaneously absorbed in the training action and immersed in the river and the forest.*⁴

As a performer in training, I viewed myself as 'already immersed' in the land and the rainforest. Through working with rock, breath, and skin as 'perceptual apparatus', I was uncovering awareness of my relationship with the natural environment as a kind of 'state of immersion'.

Immersion, then, concerns the individual or performer becoming increasingly aware of herself as part of a system that includes the environment in which she is immersed:

*Breath connects me with the forest. We inhale and exhale each other, occupying space together.*⁵

The idea of training 'for' performing land is a central pillar of this thesis. To define training, I draw on Wolford who states:

Training not only serves to strengthen the actor's physical and receptive capacities, but also has value as a discipline, an embodied commitment to constantly struggling to supersede the limits of one's abilities. (2000 p.198)

What was key to The River Action was that as a training in developing our capacity for immersion, it strengthened our receptive capacities. The training explored in this thesis is a training in developing this capacity for strengthened receptivity rather than a training to be stronger or better at something. In particular, I will consider skin and breath as key agents of perceiving.

Many of the practitioners discussed in this thesis deliberately blur the boundaries between training and performance. In *The River Action*, it was also challenging to define the training action in relation to performance. Yes we were training for a performance but the training action could also be seen as a performance in itself. As Richard Schechner says: "Performances are marked, framed, or heightened behavior separated out from just "living life" (2017, p. 35). While the intention behind our training was not to create a performance, it invariably incorporated elements of performance in the sense that the training was a deliberately framed, heightened behavior.

In this research project, immersion refers to being fully submerged in the rainforest and being surrounded/immersed in a reality that takes over all our attention and all our perceptual apparatus. Training here focuses on strengthening our receptive capacities, which will ultimately support us in our intention to take an audience through an immersive experience.

⁴ Training notes: 20th June 2017

⁵ Training notes: 20th June 2017

Rationale

The current state of ecological crisis is caused by human disconnectedness to land. Like May, I believe that our need to address human disconnectedness with land is urgent. Therefore, I argue that 'embodied experience' of land and 'immersion' in land can be seen as ways to counter the state of disconnect. With training, performers might develop their capacities of awareness and perception of immersion. Therefore, this research project engages in the discourse on training for performing land. As dancer Anna Halprin states, we are:

Insulated from nature by a special world of mechanical, technological construction. Western culture has deeply disrupted the delicate fabric of life to the extent that we now face a serious threat to our continued existence. Within the culture, we also confront a through-going dislocation growing from the same roots. (Halprin, 2005, p. 54)

By attempting to remove the layers of insulation from the performer (and, in performance, for the audience or participant), and by adopting an eco-centric approach to training for performing land, we can address this dislocation that Halprin describes.

Practitioners whose work is involved with performance of land (and particularly performers who aim, through embodied approaches, to in some way address human disconnectedness with land) generally involve encounters with the environment. Training in the 'capacity for immersion' (D. Middleton & Núñez, 2018) reference here, through developing awareness, provides practitioners with tools for deepening their own, and their audience's contact with the land. Aspects of *The River Action* offer a model for such training. The chapters that follow seek to:

- Explore approaches to training for performing land.
- Explore modes of embodied engagement with natural environments.
- Ask what *The River Action* offers to practitioners performing land.
- Offer methods of working with rock, skin and breath as tools for performer training. The project explores these as tools as each one offers the performer modes of engaging with land that reach beyond everyday modes of experiencing through visual, auditory, and cerebral perception. Rock, breath, and skin can be seen to be tools that might be utilised in performer training to support the process of immersion.

Research Project Aims

This project challenges notions that we exist separately from our geological habitat. Thus, it will illuminate possibilities for performer engagement with natural landscapes more broadly. The project builds upon and extends theories pertaining to immersive, outdoor, and land based performance, and proposes approaches to eco-centric practice and performer training.

The principal objective of this project is to investigate the processes of performer training for performing land, through practical investigation and exploration of the work of practitioners who perform in outdoor environments. This project asks how *The River Action* provides a possible model for training for such work. In the notes I make before we begin the training I ask:

How will the training we carry out in the rainforest be a training for a performance. I know that part of the writing will take place during the time in the rainforest as will the creation of the performance, but in what way will the performers be training? If the training is what Nicolàs calls “collecting the perfume” (which can perhaps be translated as immersing ourselves in the environment of the rainforest) then how will this impact on our performances back in Mexico? What are we training in? What are we training to be? What will we achieve? Are we expecting to improve some skills? I don’t think this is the kind of training we are doing...⁶

Methodology

In order to investigate experiential processes for the performer in training, practice-based research was central to the investigation. The process began with a broad theoretical survey of training for performing land. From this point I chose to focus on *The River Action* as a practice and a training for performing land. As part of my research design, I chose to include sections of my training journal which was written during the training process in Armila. Building on the processes and practice of *The River Action*, the project will investigate perspectives on human relationships and inter-connection with land. This written thesis will theoretically ground, contextualise, and critically examine practical approaches to training for performing with land. Documentation will include written and visual records.

I have chosen to adopt a phenomenological approach to researching *The River Action*. This will be done through paying particular attention to rock, breath and skin – within *The River Action* – and investigating these three materials as instruments performers can work with as part of a training for performing land.

In order to investigate experiential processes for performer and audience, practice-as-research will be incorporated. As Pears states: “*practice nearly always comes first and then it is only later that people theorize about practice*” (Pears, 1972, p. 29).

In this project, practice itself will create new knowledge and understanding, through developing ‘*know-how*’ (Nelson, 2006, p. 115) with regard to performance practice, and through reflecting on

⁶ Training notes: 9th June 2017

and examining "the relational and the experienced" (Nelson, 2006, p. 115) in the context of a rigorous theoretical grounding.

The River Action aims to expand the perceptions and awareness of performers' bodies and minds so that they fully experience their immersion in the environment of the rainforest. Through this experience, performers could possibly recreate this mode of engaging with natural environments in performance and share the immersive process with an audience.

At this point, I share with you my account of *The River Action* in order to provide an overview of the training process.

The River Action

The River Action is a contemplative training process that Núñez created, drawing on his work from the Theatre of Sources. The name "Action" follows Grotowski's use of the term which was developed at his Workcenter (founded in Italy in 1986). As Middleton explains, 'The central movement sequence in River Action was recalled from the Movements, an action developed in Theatre of Sources, some 40 years earlier' (D. Middleton & Núñez, 2018, p. 226). Middleton describes the practice as a 'meditational task' (D. Middleton & Núñez, 2018, p. 228) designed to 'let the mind rest in open awareness, receptive to the whole sensory field' (D. Middleton & Núñez, 2018, p. 228). The training was carried out in the rainforest of Armila, during June 2017.

The River Action was carried out over the period of three and a half weeks. For the first three days we carried out various sensitization exercises around the village of Armila, on the beach, and in the sea as well as exploring the rainforest itself. On the third day, we carried out *The River Action* for the first time. From this point on, *The River Action* was repeated every morning, beginning at approximately 9am and taking approximately two hours from beginning to end. The afternoons and evenings were taken up with creative processes related to the preparation for and creation of *El Ensueño* and with meetings and activities with members of the village community and other artists.

The aim of *The River Action*, as Núñez described it was to collect the perfume of the rainforest. Middleton explains:

Our work in the river was couched in terms of 'catching the perfume' of the jungle (we were also tasked, in other exercises, with catching the perfume of the sea, the village, and the people of the community as they gathered in the evening Congreso rituals). This meant entering so receptively into the experience that the sense memory of it would be deeply

imprinted in each of us. 'Perfume' did not, of course, mean only the scent of the place, but its multi-sensory essence. (D. Middleton & Núñez, 2018, p. 224)

The training was structured into three distinct stages to this psychophysical training:

- *A meditative walk into the rainforest from the village of Armila*
- *A contemplative, physical practice in a river in the rainforest*
- *A meditative walk that follows the same route back to Armila*

The River Action begins on the edge of the village of Armila. The four of us - director, writer and two performers - meet in a circle. We usually train in the morning. We connect physically, holding hands, and breathe together for a few minutes. At this point, we are "finishing to arrive" (as Núñez describes the process of leaving daily life behind and bringing ourselves to the present, working moment). We always work in silence, beginning when we connect in stillness and ending when we return to the village a few hours later.

We will go together to 'collect the perfume of the rainforest'. The task of collecting the perfume is, as I understand it, a process of immersing ourselves in the environment.

We let go of each other's hands, and the circle becomes a serpent with a leader. In the contemplative walking section of this particular training practice, I take the role of leader. Behind me, the group arranges itself with equal distance between each person. We begin a contemplative walk into the forest. We walk slowly. As we walk, we work with our sense perceptions and focus on the rainforest environment, how we relate with that environment, our individual movement, and the movement of the group within the environment.

The journey (which takes us about twenty minutes) takes us firstly through a fairly open expanse of rough farmland between the village and the rainforest proper. Here we pass through cultivated areas where mangoes, pineapples and coconuts are farmed, and the path is clear. Ahead is a clear view towards the mountains of the forest.



Figure 1: The contemplative walk into the rainforest. Photo:Sofie Iverson

After about five minutes, we cross a small river and from then on the path becomes narrower and the vegetation more dense and overgrown. The ground underfoot is often tricky to navigate, slippery clay, insects, rocks, and roots all demand our care and attention. We are careful not to disturb plants and animals as we make our contemplative journey, aiming to be present in the environment and always aware of the impact the environment and we have on each other. We are present in the sense that we open our physical and our mental intentions. I see our intention as to perceive the environment in a way that is more profound and expansive than our everyday perception.



Figure 2: Walking into the rainforest. Photo: Sofie Iverson.

An integral aspect of the walk is that we performers are working together. We walk in our serpent formation and, following the leader; we aim to be rhythmically and energetically connected. This means that while we focus on our awareness of the environment we do so with a shared energy rather than our intention being an individual endeavour. Our shared intention is to be aware of the interrelatedness of the group as much as we are aware of our interrelatedness with and our immersion in the forest environment.

As we walk we work with our breath as one might in sitting practice, but we also focus our attention on our senses as a means of engaging with the materials and atmospheres we relate with on our walk into the forest.

The final part of the journey finds us entering the river where the action will take place. The river is cold and fast moving, coming from the mountains of the rainforest. At the location where we always practice the action, the depth is between 30 and 50 centimetres, depending on the previous night's rainfall. There are rocks of various sizes protruding through the surface of the water.

We each choose to either stand on one of the rocks or the pebble riverbed with our feet immersed in the water. As a group, we stand in diamond formation, facing in the same direction, in our starting position.



Figure 3: Diamond formation. Photo: Sofie Iverson.

This position has us standing with feet shoulder-width apart and knees slightly bent and arms beside our bodies with our gaze ahead and open. From the starting or neutral position, we move, following the leader, into the second position where we raise our arms with our elbows bent at 90 degrees either side of our heads. This is held for some minutes, and then we return to a neutral position.



Figure 4: Position 1. Photo: Sofie Iverson.

In the second posture our backs are arched, heads back, and our arms raised.



Figure 5: Position 2. Photo: Sofie Iverson.

As you can see, in each of the postures we create what Núñez describes as a ‘doorway’ with our hands. As well as operating as a physical posture that might support a somatic experience of the environment, the doorway serves as an allegorical tool with which we work to immerse ourselves

imaginatively in the environment of the rainforest. After completing both actions and returning to a neutral stance, we turn 90 degrees and repeat until we have made a 360-degree turn. The process takes about an hour in all.

When we have completed The River Action, we make the journey back from the rainforest to the edge of the village. As with the journey into the forest, the walk is done contemplatively⁸ in the serpent configuration.

Through investigating some of the vital mechanisms of *The River Action*⁹, I will consider the possibilities for developing performer-training models for those practitioners who aim to create performance of land. Furthermore, I will show that training in developing awareness in immersion by working with the senses is one effective mode of training for such work.

To summarise: this thesis draws on existing practice and theory to highlight the key mechanisms of the training practice of *The River Action* and the findings are presented as an eco-centric training in immersion (and developing awareness of immersion) and as a possible model for anyone performing land.

Thesis Outline

The following three chapters review current practice and research on performing land. This will begin with a study, in Chapter One, of the relevant theories of human connection with land and consider the implications these theories might have for performers. Chapter Two reviews and explores the work of key performance practitioners who adopt varied approaches to engaging with land through psychophysical action. Chapter Three will investigate the approaches to performer training taken by Nicolas Núñez, focusing on his work in outdoor environments and the transformative nature of his work. His methods will be considered in terms of their potential value to performers working with land.

Following the reviews of current practice and theory, Chapter Four investigates *The River Action* and explores rock, breath, and skin as tools for performer training that can support embodied engagement with land and training for performing land. Through investigation of working with rock, breath, and skin as part of the training process for performing land, I offer a contribution to the discourse on performer training and to discussion about developing awareness of immersion and

⁸ Contemplative here means that the walk has a meditative quality and that the focus of the meditation is the environment in which we work.

⁹ 'Vital mechanisms' refers here to my focus on and work with rock, breath and skin as tools for training for performing land.

the immersive process. This chapter will include my reflections and notes written during the training process in the rainforest and seek to draw comparisons with the processes of practitioners who train for and create similar performances.

Chapter Five concludes by offering understandings of the practice of *The River Action* as a performer training and final considerations of rock, breath, and skin as tools the performer can engage with to deepen practice or training for performing land. The chapter considers what has been discovered about how to train for performing land and the implications of these research findings.

Chapter One

Theories of Land

In this chapter, I explore philosophical theories of land that are of relevance to the performer training at the heart of this research. Following an explanation of theories of land, and in order to contextualise the research, I question the importance of the role of performance in addressing our disconnection with land and ask why it is important that performers engage with this kind of work.

I begin here by returning to the rationale for this project, which is the need to address the current state of ecological crisis caused by human disconnectedness from land.

Psychologist Will Adams argues that this crisis has three distinct causes:

In my view, our crisis is driven by three phenomena interwoven in the dominant paradigm of modernity: (a) a supposedly separate, individualistic, ego-centred subjectivity and consciousness; (b) an illusory dissociation of humans and nature; and (c) exclusively human-centred cultures, values, and practices. As I hope to show, opening to nature's participatory psyche can dissolve our egoism, alienation, and anthropocentrism, and go on to foster well being for humankind and the rest of nature. (Adams, 2010, p. 33)

Considering disconnectedness in relation to or as a result of individualism, ego-centred subjectivity, human-centred values, and practices helps us understand what is at play in a process where we immerse ourselves in land. To perform land it may be useful to develop awareness of our existing state of immersion in land, and to go through a process of letting go of individualism, ego-centred subjectivity, human-centred values. I see *The River Action* as a training in opening up awareness to the possibility of the rainforest making itself available to us. In my training notes, I explore notions of awareness and immersion in the training action:

I am immersed **by** *The River Action* in the sense that I am fully engaged physical and mentally in the action but I am immersed **in** the rainforest. What the training action brings about seems to be a heightened awareness of environment and my body as part of that environment.¹⁰

From this position, we consider definitions of land from philosophers and academics who have theorised about human relationships with land. Invariably, discourse on land includes landscape and space, along with environment, nature and ecology. Indeed, it is not possible to research key theories of land without encountering a variety of other relevant terms. I draw firstly on the work of

¹⁰ Training notes: 20th June 2017

anthropologist Tim Ingold who proposes that 'land is a kind of lowest common denominator of the phenomenal world, inherent in every portion of the earth's surface' (Ingold, 1993, p. 153). This provides us with a simple working definition of land, and it is important, in terms of this research that the term 'land' is not used interchangeably with 'landscape'. I avoid the term 'landscape' because of connotations relating to human views of and interventions with land and the complex history of visual arts and landscape and agree with performance artist Annette Arlander who suggests that 'often landscape implies seeing from a distance' (Anette Arlander, 2011, p. 136). Since this project investigates a process of developing capacity for performer awareness of immersion in an outdoor environment, it is important that, as performers, we don't consider the land in which we are working to be something that is distant from us or as something that is merely viewed. I viewed *The River Action* as eco-centric¹¹ training and approached the training with this perspective. From this perspective, land is a far more useful term than landscape. As performers in training, we were not experiencing land from an objective stance as outsiders; we were adopting an embodied approach to working with land.

In *The River Action*, I was not interested in transforming the land into landscape. I was developing awareness of my immersion in the land. In working with my focus on rock, breath, and skin, I was exploring the nature of my embodied relationship with the land rather than seeking to create a landscape. My aim was not to develop my awareness of the landscape or even the land; rather I viewed the training practice as developing:

- Awareness of my immersion in the land
- Awareness of the interconnected relationship between myself and the land

Dean states that a 'more profound engagement must depend upon more than the visual, upon those things that remain invisible' (Dean & Millar, 2005, p. 25). It is this profound engagement or deep awareness that is, for me, what immersion meant during the training and that *The River Action* seeks to provide through an embodied approach that operates through all the senses and through deliberate action with the intention of perceiving land in ways that are different from our habitual ones.¹²

It is the focus of this chapter to investigate key thinking on the nature of land and, in particular, the concern that human relationships with land currently lean toward being anthropocentric and dualistic. This anthropocentric understanding of land contributes to the human disconnectedness

¹¹ By eco-centric, I mean having the view that the earth's eco-systems, atmosphere, water and land have intrinsic value regardless of their perceived usefulness to humans.

¹² In this project, I use the term 'habitual' in terms of using visual perception as our primary mode of experiencing the environments which we inhabit.

discussed earlier and it is necessary that I offer theories of land if we are to be clear about why performers would train for performing land.

The theories that I investigate in this chapter have commonalities in that they each call for a more eco-centric view of the world that we inhabit. The notion of eco-centricism provides a useful framework for this project. To add to the definition shared earlier, I draw on professor of philosophy and religion Daniel Capper who succinctly describes eco-centrism as 'an approach to nature that values all existent things in the natural world, including inanimate things like rocks and lakes, for themselves, without concern for human use' (Capper, 2015, p. 19). The position this project takes is that through performing land, theatre practitioners have the capacity to offer something unique to the process of addressing ecological crisis. The performer training central to this investigation adopts such an eco-centric approach in its practice and as a contemplative ecological performance; *El Ensueño* encourages the audiences to do the same.

Philosophers feature prominently in the exploration of human relationships with nature from the work of Plato to Martin Heidegger and Gilles Deleuze (Cull, 2012) and more recently, Alva Nöe and Timothy Morton.

Those who consider the degree to which humans and land are interrelated offer us some insight into the value of engaging performatively with land. In exploring human relationships with nature, psychologist and academic Will Adams, explains how western society exists 'with the notion that humans are somehow separate from all the rest of nature' (Adams, 2010, p. 1).

The River Action, as an eco-centric performer training in immersion, addresses notions of separateness and subsequent disconnection with land. While addressing the disconnection was not an explicit aim of the training, any practice that aims to develop awareness of immersion in an environment will, by its very nature, counteract disconnection and separateness from nature and land.

Abram analyses the legacy of 'the great chain of being' in Western thought, the hierarchy from spirit to matter, and argues that:

If we consider matter animate or self-organising rather than inert, the hierarchy collapses, and we have instead a differentiated field of animate beings. As humans, we find ourselves in the 'midst of this living field, our own sentience part and parcel of the sensuous landscape' (Abram, 2011, p. 47). That Abram suggests we might adopt more profound perceptions of matter is a valuable viewpoint. A training in immersion requires of the performer that she works with developing and deepening perception of the land in which she is training. In standing for repeatedly for long periods of time on one rock, my perception of it changed radically. To begin with it was a hard,

cold, wet lump of stone. By the end of the training process it was an integral part of the environment, supporting and interacting with other matter with changing textures and temperatures. As I show through my investigation into rock, breath, and skin as tools to support the process of immersion, considering matter, such as land or air as animate rather than inert, provides a basis for understanding the value of working with these materials.

This research project operates from the point of view that we inhabit the land or environment in which we train rather than observe it. The notion of separation, where land is viewed as other is also described by scholar Ben Spatz who states that 'psyche, consciousness, and mind are typically thought to exist exclusively in humans (or just our brains); nature is deemed merely an object, resource, or lower life form' (Spatz, 2016, p. 6). What Spatz provides here is a summary of traditional twentieth-century Western thinking on the nature of the human/nature divide. *The River Action* and working with rock, breath, and skin rely on an eco-centric approach and also induce a more eco-centric sense of belonging in the world as a result of the training. For example, perceiving the breath as a constant exchange between my body and the rainforest resulted in a more eco-centric perception than just focusing my awareness on my breath as a means of being present.

My thinking about land in relation to the psychophysical training of *The River Action* owes much to the work of philosopher and ecologist, David Abram who proposes that 'place itself is something more than an inanimate object and that a place has its own mind and psyche' (Abram, 1997). His view provides us with a framework with which we might begin to understand *The River Action* as a practice that involves developing a deep sense of connection and interrelatedness to the land. Viewing natural environments as having their own psyche might support an eco-centric approach to training in that the performer perceives land as a more equal agent within the relationship between herself and it.

In *The River Action* we experienced awareness of a state of immersion in land and we worked not only on and with our body-mind and ourselves as performers but we did so in relation to the place in which we trained.

Many humans living and working on this planet lack a close relationship to land and the natural world. However, others are, as Adams states:

Living in daily intimacy with the natural world, being attuned to nature's consciousness is integral to their sense of reality, their place in the community and cosmos, and their very health and well being. (Adams, 2010, p. 15)

Human's¹³ lack of daily intimacy with land (as well as being, in part, the cause of ecological crisis) demonstrates a need for performer training for any immersive outdoor performance.

Geographers like Yi-fu Tuan and Doreen Massey (as well as the philosophers who explore our relational inhabitation of earth) offer frameworks within which to understand training for performing land through training in immersion. Tuan's idea that 'only in the midst of mineral nature – desert or ice – can a human being feel entirely free from not only the actuality but even the awareness of social opprobrium' (Tuan, 2009, p. 52). Although Tuan speaks here of 'mineral nature', and we carried out the training in a rainforest, training in an environment away from 'social opprobrium' supports the performer in developing awareness beyond the everyday and thus offers the freedom to perceive land and environment in new ways. I suggest that this isolation, and subsequent freedom to perceive differently in the rainforest, can be seen as a catalyst in the process of experiencing immersion and a sense of interrelatedness with land:

We train together but I feel very much alone in my relating with the land of the rainforest. The others can see me and I can see them but we don't judge each other or adapt our behaviour to be acceptable. We just do the action and nothing else. This isolated focus on the action feels liberating.¹⁴

As I will discuss in later chapters, theories of the interrelated nature of humans and land are fundamental to understanding the processes of developing awareness of immersion in land. I draw again on the work of Adams who, in describing his own experience in a natural environment, states:

It became wonderfully clear that such intimate intercourse is happening everywhere and all the time, regardless of whether we are aware of it, but that being consciously attuned with nature's participatory mind can change how we live and interact. (Adams, 2010, p. 17)

The River Action supported our intimate discourse with nature through immersion which was facilitated through developing deeper awareness and new perception. Training that involves working with sensory perception of the material world is an integral part of this process and that this process is an active one. As Noë says:

Perception is not something that happens to us or in us. It's something that we do...the world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction. (Noë, 2004, p. 1)

¹³ Refereneses to 'human' and 'modernity' refer to European/colonial modernity.

¹⁴ Training notes: 18th June 2017

In this chapter, I have offered a brief introduction to some relevant theories of land and human relationships with land. These theories add to May's call for practitioners and academics to 'flesh out the way in which the human imagination participates in, and is integral to, our ecological 'situatedness'(Arons & May, 2012, p. 95). The theories are also offered as a context for the exploration of the performance work I explore in the next Chapter.

Chapter Two

Performing Land

Introduction

Having provided a rationale for the project and introduced some theories of land and human relationships with land, I look now to the work of theatre-makers and performers who 'perform land'.¹⁵

Here I take you on a path through the work of artists and performers working with land and particularly those who explore the nature of human relationships with land. The chapter considers the work of practitioners who offer something to the proposal that a contemplative, physical training process is an effective means of training for performing land. I weave together elements of different performance practices in order to understand common features of the work of practitioners who work with land, and draw comparisons with *The River Action*. *The River Action*

¹⁵ Performance in land: performance that takes place in a natural environment and holds the land/landscape as significant/relevant to the performance

Performance of land: performance that seeks to embody aspects of the land

Performance with land: performance in which land plays a role in the performance

was what Schechner describes as “marked, framed, or heightened behavior” (2017, p. 35), in contrast to the interactions the Guna Yala community have with the rainforest which could better be described as everyday behavior.

This chapter draws together and offers a critical review of different approaches to performance and performer training that have resonance with one or more of the key threads of this investigation. I consider the work of performers who work with land and whose work can be considered psychophysical or immersive. As we will see, there is some absence, within these fields, of any explicit comprehensive performer training for performing land.

Immersion

Archaeology

The theatre and dance work of Meredith Monk offers much to the discourse on performing land. Professor Nick Kaye describes her as ‘a pioneer in the making of site-specific work, often presenting her visionary music/movement/ theatre pieces in non-traditional locations’ (Kaye, 2013, p. 203).

It is her site-specific performance and outdoor work that is of interest here. Kaye describes the processes Monk goes through when developing an outdoor performance:

Monk chooses her sites carefully, often likening her role in the creation of her work to that of an archaeologist in order, as she has said “to excavate a place and let it speak” (Kaye, 2013, p. 203)

Monk alludes to an eco-centric understanding of the natural world and to an understanding of her relationship with land and site as one where co-creation is a possibility. Monk’s comparison of her approach to that of an archaeologist provides a useful metaphor for the training approach discussed in the following chapters. During *The River Action*, I often had a sense of digging beneath the surface of perception, of digging down to access parts of the environment that are usually just out of reach of my perceptual awareness. An archaeologist’s job, rather than to layer meaning upon what exists, is to engage in an uncovering of what is already there. Similarly, a training for performing land might depend upon performers uncovering awareness of the land and of uncovering awareness of immersion in the land or site in which they train.

Site Specific

While much of Mike Pearson's work comes under the 'site-specific' umbrella, he asks questions pertinent to this project, such as: 'How can performance inform, extend and enhance engagement with, and the interpretation and appreciation of, landscape and environment?' (Pearson, 2010, p. 188).

This research is also concerned with performer engagement with environment in terms of training and asks whether a training that develops awareness of interrelationship with land might be a successful means to enhance engagement with land. This project offers some answers to Pearson's questions through its approach to performer training. *The River Action* certainly extended and enhanced my engagement with land beyond my everyday, habitual modes of engaging with land. He also asks 'What strategies and forms of performance-exposition do working with landscape as medium and scene of expression inspire and necessitate?' (Pearson, 2010, p. 188). Working with land necessitates a specific kind of performer training and *The River Action* is just one type of strategy a performer might use as a training. That *The River Action* is contemplative, embodied, and functions as a means to develop awareness of immersion are three specific features of the training practice explored here.

The Non-human

A number of works created by Marina Abramović deliver perspectives on the discussion on performing land and training for such work. While Abramović's art and performance doesn't focus on land, much of her work is site-specific, and her work with place and space are of relevance. Mary Richards, in her book on the artist, describes the way Abramović works with space and states:

The phenomenological approach attempts to demonstrate the inter-subjectivity of place and perception. It stresses embodied experience and the way in which both the place and the participant are mutually involved in what is felt; the place feeling the person and the person feeling the place, as it were. (Richards, 2009, p. 67)

During the training process reflections, I asked similar questions about how much the rock was feeling my feet and the air feeling my breath and questions about how mutually involved the rainforest and I became during the training process of *The River Action*.

*...as if the rock has begun to feel my skin, my weight and as though the rainforest is breathing itself into me.*¹⁸

¹⁸ Training notes: 20th June 2017

Abramović concerns herself with the mutual involvement of place and body in her work. Jungmin Song, in an article about the anthropomorphic life of objects in performance, considers some of the work of Abramović. He makes this observation:

Performance art audiences are accustomed to the artist's body as the central if not sole focus of attention. This emphasis has the consequence that non-human actants (Latour 2007) have often been neglected and pushed to the periphery. (Song, 2015, p. 5)

By drawing attention to this 'pushing to the periphery' (Song, 2015, p. 5) of the non-human we are reminded of the anthropocentric and dualistic views discussed earlier. Pushing the non-human and the natural environment to the periphery, whether in life or in performance and art, is a process that contributes to the dislocation May urged us to address.

Through psychophysical training actions such as *The River Action*, we can, through working with the senses, develop awareness and begin to perceive the reality of the non-human as active agent in the relationship between human and non-human.

In an interview with Abramović, Adrian Heathfield also recognises the way the objects she works with are active agents:

Even in her returns to sculpture and the object, she has been concerned with the energies that objects convey, their role within interaction, and in her later performance-installation works, with the trace and stain of bodies residing in a place. (Heathfield & Glendinning, 2004, p. 145)

What Heathfield says about traces and stains of 'bodies residing in a place' is reminiscent of Casey's definition of place as inhabited space. The idea that this work, particularly the *Transitory Objects* project is concerned with energies of objects and places and with the impact humans make on the non-human (and vice-versa) has something to offer to those who perform land. To train within a framework of working with mutual involvement and impact with land forms a solid basis for such practice. Her approach to working with non-human elements could be argued to be interactive and immersive. This is in part because she approaches the non-human elements of her performances as though they have equal agency in the processes and outcomes. Even in works such as *Rhythm 0*, objects are equally as important as audience and performer. In *Transitory Objects*, Abramović works with the energies and attributes of the non-human to trigger transformational experiences in her audiences.

Transformation

Much of Abramović's work can also be described as transformational for audience as well as for performer. Abramović's spiritual influences and practices influence the transformational nature of her work. Frieze highlights the fact that the spiritual aspect of immersive and interactive practice is one that causes debate and scepticism:

Combatting the disconnectedness of the digital age, refreshing the senses, restoring communal and individual agency, saving the theatre from stultifying traditions by bringing it to new audiences and new spaces: these are just some of the things that have been heralded as spiritual effects of immersive and interactive theatre. It is little wonder that the spiritual is the dimension around which there is most controversy. (Frieze, 2017, p. 11)

Again we see a reference to the disconnectedness, and Frieze rightly highlights the spiritual effects of immersive theatre that claim to address the disconnectedness, as controversial. Like much of Abramović's work, *The River Action* and *El Ensueño* feature transformational aspects. What Frieze does is highlight the need to be robust in the ways in which we approach any research into the spiritual and transformational nature of art and performance. Abramović, in her interview with Heathfield, says that *Charged Spaces* was 'about mental transformation, and the elevation of the spirit, more than the physical body. The physical body is taken as an instrument' (Heathfield & Glendinning, 2004, p. 147). *The River Action* operated through the physical body and (like rock, breath, and skin) I viewed the body as an instrument, which supported transformation – transformation (mental and physical) into a state where my awareness of immersion in the land and embodied engagement with land became profound.

If we are to move beyond an approach to performance of land that is essentially Cartesian we have to see land and human relationships with land differently, as Miwon Kwon suggests, we need a 'radical restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience' (Kwon, 1997, p. 12).

It would be difficult to address human disconnectedness with land through any form of training or performance that is based on a Cartesian model. Kwon's idea that we should explore our relationships with land through lived bodily experience provides a theoretical grounding that supports the psychophysical approach adopted in training like *The River Action*.

Awareness and Modes of Perception

In her article on interperformance, Jennifer Fisher considers the mechanisms at play in Abramović's *Transitory Objects* and notes that:

On the haptic level, the realms of awareness accessed are intriguing because they involve the simultaneous sensing of interior and exterior energies, which, in effect, render the body's boundaries porous. (A. Fisher & Abram, 2012, p. 32)

This simultaneous sensing is evident in a process of immersion. A performer needs to develop awareness using all of her senses. Abramović understands and works with senses other than the primary sense of sight. In describing *The Dragon Series*, Fisher quotes Abramović as saying:

I think that we rely too much on our sense of vision and not enough on other sensations. So I think that artists have to be trained to 'see' with the entire body. (J. Fisher, 1997, p. 31)

Abramović is often noted for her work inside and for her focus on human relationships rather than the non-human and human relationships. What I have attempted to indicate here is that her work, whether indoors or outdoors, also demonstrates an understanding of the interrelated nature of the human and the non-human and the importance of developing awareness and using all the senses in order to interrelate with land or immerse oneself in a natural environment.

Elemental Nature of Body and Land (Blurred Boundaries and Permeability)

Dancer Anna Halprin offers insight into the processes and experiences of performing land, stating:

Since we are part of nature, our bodies composed of the same elements as the earth and our lives shaped by the same cyclic patterns, it is possible to understand the natural world as a reflection of human experience (Halprin & Kaplan, 1995, p. 216)

In pointing out that humans and land share common elements and experience the same cyclic patterns of nature, Halprin could be seen here to have an understanding of one of the factors at play in developing awareness of immersion in land. As part of a training process for performing land, a performer can begin to sense that she is not a separate entity existing outside land but that she is material that shares common elements with the land in which she works. Approaching training in this way, through developing a strong sense of the interrelated nature of the body and land, offers the performer one means of deepening the awareness of immersion.

Halprin's work is characterised by the integration of physical, emotional and mental awareness but what is of relevance about her work is the way she relates to the natural environments and land in which she works. Of his work with Halprin, photographer Stubblefield writes:

Halprin's performances in nature are not about an external display of motion and kinaesthetic ability; instead, her gestures are intimate, revelling in the mutual impressions that the nature of the human body and nature in the environment make on each other. (Arons & May, 2012, p. 117)

The Still Dance Project concerned itself with land as active rather than passive which could be beneficial to any performer attempting to train for performing land since such a view transcends imagined barriers. Stubblefield goes on to describe human and land as co-performers:

Halprin's still, slow body in nature is living, sensing, perceiving: her body exceeds the limits imposed upon it by dualistic mind/body thinking and thwarts the closure that the human/nature divide insists upon. (Arons & May, 2012, p. 123)

Seeing a performer's body as sensing and perceiving the land, and thus moving away from dualistic thinking offers possibilities for the importance of training. If, through repeated and focused contact (using all the senses) we can perceive differently, we open up new possibilities for creating connections with land.

The work of artist and performer Ana Mendieta can be seen as an ecological practice, and she described her *Siluetas* pieces as earth-body works. She is cited by Susan Best as describing them as 'visualising the body as an extension of nature and nature as an extension of the body' (Best, 2007, p. 73). Many of her pieces explore her relationship with land. In an article on her work, academic Becca Voelcker states:

Mendieta becomes part of the landscape. In *Grass Breathing* (1974), the camera observes a patch of grass that rises and falls as Mendieta lies underneath it, her breathing increasingly heavy. *Genesis (buried in Mud)* (1975) sees Mendieta similarly submerged, its title marking the earth as a place of both formation and internment. (Voelcker, 2017, p. 16)

In works like these, it is interesting that Mendieta literally immerses herself in the environments she practices in. These actions are then photographed and filmed. Some critics of Mendieta's work focus on the feminist perspective and suggest that land or earth artworks are created predominantly by female artists and performers:

Mendieta's practice brings out what could be called an eco - feminist orientation. In this ecological orientation, Mendieta's work is distinct from most earthwork practices. While Robert Smithson also referred to the world as mother earth, Suzaan Boettger has very convincingly argued that he, and the other key figures in the land art movement (Heizer, Oppenheim, Morris, De Maria, Kaltenbach) were not motivated by an ecological ideal. She argues that their practices embodied a deep ambivalence about nature, which she acerbically characterises as 'going to nature, but relating to it as dirt'. (Best, 2007, p. 67)

While this aspect of Mendieta's work and feminism and performing land more broadly are beyond the scope of this research, it is interesting to note that much of the work explored here is created by women. What is key about Mendieta's work is the mutuality of body and land and that her images of the work challenge our tendency to focus on the human figure and instead invite us to view the body and the land as co-existing and co-creating one another.

The performative practice *Body Weather* is interesting in that it can be seen as a training practice in itself. As well as being a training practice, Tanaka and his students also worked closely with the land. Tanaka's workshops were held at Body Weather Farm which was a self-sustaining organic vegetable farm in Hakushu, Japan. Tanaka founded the Body Weather Farm in 1985 and developed farming methods from the local inhabitants. As Body Weather performer Tess de Quincey states, it is:

A broad-based training that proposes a practical strategy to the mind and to the body. It is not just for 'professional dancers' or 'performance practitioners' alone but is an open investigation that can be relevant for anyone interested in exploring the body. (deQuincey, 2018)

Although de Quincey describes it as a practice that explores the body, *Body Weather*, in fact, works very much with the body in relation to the natural world. Founder of Body Weather Min Tanaka speaks of 'dancing the place, not dancing in the place' (Taylor, 2010, p. 72). This intention to dance place rather than in it resembles much of the work discussed in this chapter in that it aims to practice place from a starting point that doesn't assume the body and the environment or land to be entirely separate entities, one active and one passive. Anderson describes the work of *Body Weather* practitioner and dancer Tess de Quincey as 'articulating that her creative practice seeks to train artists to empathise on a cellular level' with aspects of the physical geography' (Anderson, 2011, p. 41).

As with Halprin's view of the importance of the shared elements of bodies and land, de Quincey's work with *Body Weather* seeks to explore the shared nature of the materiality of body and land and asks whether we can access a permeability of skin and exchange of elements and minerals with the land we train and perform in.

This echoes the work of artists and academics Schiller and Rubridge in their explanation of transformation in performers of Parkour:

Micromapping occurs at the subjective and, dare we say, inner 'cellular level' or place cell level. It is here at the micro-mapping level that the transformational experience of the traceur takes place, as transitional spaces become permeated with the traceur's physical concentration and effort. (Schiller & Rubidge, 2014, p. 15)

Similarly, *Body Weather* practitioner Gretchen Taylor, suggests an alternative:

The notion of permeable borders of the body does not demand that I am in any way erased, emptied or indeed, that the place is in any way erased by my presence. (Taylor, 2010, p. 85)

Body Weather's predecessor Butoh also holds notions of attuning and melding as fundamental to its processes. Sondra Fraleigh, whose dance practice and teachings are loosely based on Butoh, describes 'attuning to nature in dance holds potentials for experiences of belonging – inviting transformational morphologies through letting go of self' (Fraleigh, 2016, p. 80). The idea of attuning, developing awareness within a natural environment suggests a process – something that a performer can be trained to do. In noting that the 'letting go of self' is an important part of the process, Fraleigh describes a process that is similar to that which takes place in *The River Action*. She talks of her outdoor dance and performance and describes the process of interrelating with the natural world:

When I dance on the seashore in Greece or in the Tuscan landscape, I meld with it, and vivid colours of the poppies, as boundaries, disappear. (Fraleigh, 2016, p. 65)

Again we encounter notions of melding and disappearing boundaries between the human and the non-human. For me this was also evident during *The River Action*:

*Over time the boundaries that I perceived between my skin and the rock have disappeared. Today I cannot feel where my skin ends and the rock begins.*¹⁹

Annette Arlander is a performer and academic who performs landscape and explores her relationship with land and the natural world. Of her project *Becoming Juniper*, Arlander asks how we might 'show the interdependence between human beings and the environment, performer and landscape, me and a juniper?' (Annette Arlander, 2015).

Becoming Juniper and other performances take place over significant periods of time and are often filmed. Arlander doesn't describe training for any of the work she produces, but where a performance might take place each day over the space of a full year, the performance itself could be seen to have similarities to a training in immersion. Immersion is not just about deepening awareness, it is about time, and repetition, and duration. Awareness of immersion does not happen instantly but is an incremental process. For example, immersion in the rainforest didn't reveal itself the first time I performed *The River Action*. It happened because I repeated it daily over a period of a month. My mind and body gradually learned new ways of perceiving reality through focusing my awareness on rock, breath, and skin.

¹⁹ Training notes: 21st June 2017

Arlander asks a number of questions pertaining to this project and seeks to answer them through her performances, films and images:

How to perform landscape, not only represent it? Can you have a meaningful relationship with a singular element in the landscape? How can you relate to a living being that you do not easily recognise as your kind? (Annette Arlander, 2015)

She half answers some of these questions in asking:

Could a practice of focusing attention on a specific organism in the landscape, help us develop an interest in the environment and an understanding of our mutual dependency with other forms of life? (Annette Arlander, 2015)

However, it is unclear what Arlander means by 'focusing attention' and how this might be done. While her work poses interesting questions about human relationships with land, and she often appears to immerse herself in the landscapes she works, there is little analysis of training processes taking place in her writing about her work, perhaps because doing her work is the training in itself.

Body in Land

Performer, dancer and academic, Sandra Reeve works in ways that could be considered immersive and eco-centric. There are some interesting parallels to be drawn between her work and the training process being investigated here. Reeve argues the case for her practice of *Ecological Movement*, which she says has its emphasis:

On being 'among' and being 'part of', on being constantly in flux in a world that envelops us (rather than being scenery or a backdrop) it encourages a sense of belonging rather than longing and a sense of the world as a shared habitat rather than owned territory. This sense of belonging and sharing is profoundly ecological. (Reeve, 2011, p. 201)

The work of Sandra Reeve, and in particular her practice called Ecological Movement (which is a movement practice that focuses on the movement of the human body as interrelated to the place in which that body moves), is of interest. Reeve proposes that:

It is possible to foster new understandings of the interrelationship between body and place. It is a matter of somehow adjusting accustomed responses, fracturing routine reflexes and radically readjusting environmental references so that the familiar becomes once again unfamiliar. In this way, the interface of body and place is sensitised, and the relationship between them brought to the fore. (Reeve, 2013, p. 71)

The River Action allowed me to foster new understandings and my notes describe something similar to Reeve's suggestions, particularly in terms of sensitisation of the interface of body and rock:

...and I have developed a hypersensitive awareness of air, water and rock touching my skin. Staying with these sensations and feeling them without adding a layer of thought process means that I understand such feelings in an entirely different way to what is usual for me.²⁰

Performer, Paula Kramer, who has worked with Reeves, adds to the discussion and gives consideration to the idea that movement has the capacity to activate systems of perception:

The topography of the land, uneven features, thorns, animals, infrastructure, vegetation, refuse, darkness, buildings, weather, other humans – all place an immediate demand of attentiveness on the mover, thus activating the perceptual system. The more difficult the site or terrain, the more explicit this becomes. (Kramer, 2012, p. 85)

This idea of attentiveness bears resemblance to the work of performers like Kate Lawrence (Lawrence, 2010) and Dan Shippides (Sweeney, 2013) and Steve Batts (Sweeney, 2013) in that working in challenging terrain (vertical or horizontal) the performer has no option to be attentive and aware of the immediacy of their experience.

In *The River Action*, my attentiveness and focus was at the forefront of my work with rock, breath, and skin:

Because of the huge effort it takes to carry out the physical action, it's not difficult to focus my awareness on my body rather than get carried away with thinking.²¹

Kramer describes the work of fellow performer Simon Whitehead's approaches to capacities of perception:

Some of Simon Whitehead's strategies for heightening the capacities of the perceptual system include, for instance, working in the dark of night, fasting, listening exercises or walking in the transitioning phase of dawn (Kramer, 2012, p. 86)

Kramer alludes here to the importance of actions that require the performer to step outside her habitual modes of perception. Kramer also talks of cultivation, stating that 'perceptivity and attentiveness are cultivated when simultaneously practising receptivity' (Kramer, 2012, p. 86). Practising receptivity is key in any approach to training for performing land. In order to become immersed in land or place, it is imperative that the performer develops the capacity to become

²⁰ Training notes: 18th June 2017

²¹ Training notes: 21st June 2017

receptive and to receive the reality of the environment through using all the senses. It is Kramer's acknowledgement of the need to repeat an action, and that awareness or perception can be cultivated that demonstrates again the need for training in order to perform land.

Walking

Performers and artists such as Deidre Heddon (Heddon, Lavery, Smith, & Mock, 2009) and Richard Long (Long, 2002) place the act of walking at the centre of their creative practice. Walking was an integral part of *The River Action* and as performer Cecilia Lagerström states:

The act of walking becomes a link between body and environment. This means that there is no absolute boundary between body and environment, between the mind and the physical. (Lagerström et al., 2015, p. 65)

Again, we see reference to the act or process of breaking down boundaries between body and land, achieved by repetitive physical action.

Performers Jess Allen and Sara Penrhyn Jones agree that walking practices develop our capacity to feel a sense of embodiment and interrelatedness with land and environment. Allen focuses on the capacity of walking to address the disconnectedness from land:

Tilting threw up many dichotomies that parallel these socio-political polarities, and reveal how dualistic thinking remains deeply embedded in our cultural perceptions: body as separate from mind, art from science, community from individual, political from personal, scenery from landscape, humans from planet. (Allen, 2012, p. 15)

Her understanding that the move from dualistic thinking toward thinking that perceives land and body as entities that are not entirely separate are of relevance here, and she is also one of the few artists or performers who discusses the concept of training:

A training in performance informed by somatics encourages presence and intention to be inscribed in the body; the intention of the walk and my cultural 'belonging' in and ownership of these landscapes underscored by my deep-rooted connection to the underlying political themes, may all have been more patent than I was aware. (Allen, 2012, p. 10)

Allen focuses on the political, but her suggestion that a training in this type of performance is informed by somatics demonstrates an understanding of the processes taking place when a human develops an awareness of their relationship with land.

Duration

Like Allen and Penrhyn Jones, Louise Ann Wilson's performances explore historical and cultural relationships with land, but, in an interview with Scott Palmer, she says that her work 'is still concerned with making performances through an extended period of immersion in, and investigation of, a chosen place' (Pitches & Popat, 2011, p. 73). Wilson's recognition that the process of immersion over a period of time is integral to the performance making process itself is crucial. Wilson understands that to perform land or a place, the performer must train for such work. She explains that what she aims to do is:

Create relationships between space, performer and audiences and to find new ways of revealing, re-showing and re-enchanting a place by saying: 'Look anew at what is here; witness the surface of things, and then look again and you will see something more profound about this place and perhaps about the world, and how we experience it, and our place within it. (Wilson, 2011: 65) (Pitches & Popat, 2011, pp. 63-64)

Wilson understands the need to look differently at land in order to perceive it more profoundly. As with *The River Action*, she is concerned with how land and place might reveal itself over time and through training.

Conclusion

The key finding I wish to draw attention to is that patterns emerge from this exploration of practices and performance. These include:

- Comparisons of the performance making process with excavation and archaeology
- Interest in interrelationships between humans and land that take place on a cellular level
- Focus on blurring boundaries between the body and land

That these elements appear in the work of a number of artists and performers is significant and as ideas, concepts and tools they may well be of significant value to the process of training for performing land.

Chapter Three

Núñez

In this chapter, I explore the approaches Núñez takes to performer training, giving particular focus to his work in outdoor environments. To support the investigation central to this thesis²², I will also investigate the transformative nature of his work and build, where appropriate, on important concepts and practices of other artists. His methods will be considered in terms of their potential value to performers working with land and this short chapter will offer the relevant insight into Núñez's work to provide the necessary context for best understanding *The River Action*.

Núñez, along with the *Taller de Investigación Teatral* (Theatre Research Workshop or TRW) has developed, over the past 40 years, a form of participatory theatre which he calls *Anthropocosmic Theatre*, describing it as a 'research process which recognises that there are as many systems as there are performers in the world' (Núñez, 1996, p. xiv).

Núñez spent time at 'The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts in Dharamsala, in the north of India. This Institute was founded by the Dalai Lama in 1960 to promote and preserve Tibetan culture'(Núñez, 1996, p. 1). Thus, Tibetan Buddhism, the Bön tradition and sacred Tibetan dance have all influenced his working processes. Núñez talks of receiving 'guidance about meditation in motion, through the observation and practice of the dances of the "Black Hat"'(Núñez, 1996, p. 11). Middleton states that:

With his collaborators in the TRW, Núñez has carried out a phenomenological research across cultures in order to establish the parameters and principles of an anthropocosmic theatre. The result is a paradigm forged upon psycho-physical practices, which are supported not by religious ideas or doctrines, nor by conceptual ideologies, but rather by technologies of attention and intention, modes of relation to self and other. (D. K. Middleton, 2001, p. 53)

It is these 'technologies of attention and intention' that are of particular interest to this research project.

²² The central investigation into training for performing land and exploring how *The River Action* provides a possible model for this kind of work.

The key elements of Núñez's work to be considered in this chapter are:

- Psychophysical approaches to actor training (in order to contextualise *The River Action* as a psychophysical training action that supports an immersive process)
- The possibilities for transformation²³ experienced by participants in his training and performances (so that we can see the links between the transformative and the immersive processes in the training)
- His theories of 'human interplay with the cosmos' (Núñez, 1996, p. 76) and the ways these theories are relevant to the practice of performing land and the argument that we can train for performing land

After investigating the three elements of Núñez's work that are relevant to this investigation - psychophysicality, transformation, and 'cosmic interplay' - I will draw together the threads we have explored thus far to demonstrate how his approach to performer training adds to existing theory and practice relating to training for performing land and training in immersion.

Núñez has developed a set of actions or 'structures' (D. K. Middleton, 2001, p. 46) that are seen to be psychophysical performer training exercises. Many elements of the work Núñez has developed derive from the work he carried out with Grotowski and *The River Action* is no exception. Of particular note is the way in which Grotowski describes Theatre of Sources. He describes the approach to the research as:

rather solitary. Often working outdoors, we were looking mainly for what the human being can do with his own solitude, how it can be transformed into force and a deep relationship with what is called the natural environment. "The senses and their objects," "the circulation of attention," "the Current 'glimpsed' by one while he is in movement," "the living body in the living world"—all this in some way became the countersign of this work. (Richards, Grotowski 1995, p. 120 - 121)

Similarly, *The River Action* involved performers working individually (although we carried out the action as a group, the experience was a very individual one) and through the experience, we deepened our relationship with the environment of the rainforest.

As Middleton explains:

He calls these structures "dynamics" because their primary effect is upon the energies within an individual, a group, and the spatial surroundings. (D. K. Middleton, 2001, p. 46)

²³ In this context, 'transformation' means to transform from everyday awareness of self in environment to heightened awareness. Perceiving both directly through senses (Machon 2009)

The River Action contained many elements that are common to his dynamics. Through my analysis of the training process, I have distilled the process down to the following list of elements as those that are integral to the process:

- Movement
- Stillness
- Effort and intention
- Focus and awareness
- Sensory perception
- Repetition

It is interesting to compare this to what Middleton reports - that for Núñez there are four key elements to the dynamics:

Through practical research, the members of the *Taller de Investigación* have discovered what Núñez considers to be the key features of the dynamic: Continuous movement, continuous mental focus on one's experience, changing rhythms, and alternation between tension and relaxation. (D. K. Middleton, 2001, p. 46)

The River Action was rhythmic in the sense that the structure is cyclical and repetitive and there was alternation of tension and relaxation within the structure. *The River Action* also required a continual mental focus in order to hold the postures and carry out the contemplative walk. There was movement between each posture and moments of relaxation between the tensions of holding the posture. The main variation of rhythm came from the different rhythms of the walking and the postures.

Middleton explains that aims of the dynamics are to enable participants, to experience a 'sense of connectedness to an underlying reality' (D. K. Middleton, 2008, p. 45). It is through this focus of connecting to an 'underlying reality' that Núñez's design of *The River Action* addressed the call to artists to address the disconnectedness discussed earlier. For me the notion of an underlying reality describes the way in which we relate and engage with and experience the environment (and land). We experience it somatically, with all our senses, as it is, breaking away from our habitual modes of perception. If this is the case, we can see that Núñez's approach to performer training offers something to critical discourse concerning how connecting to underlying reality might be trained for by performers.

One of the mechanisms of *The River Action* was its effectiveness in encouraging the performer to perceive in ways that are beyond the habitual ways of perceiving. Middleton describes the dynamics as 'experiences through which one might strip away, or learn to refrain from, habitual modes' (D. K. Middleton, 2001, p. 46).

As we have seen in the previous chapter, this process of experiencing and perceiving the environment differently is evident in the work of a number of practitioners. This is a key factor in developing awareness, as a performer, of our immersion in the environment in which we worked. In *The River Action* I refrained from experiencing primarily through using my sense of sight and by focusing my awareness on rock, breath, and skin, I developed less habitual, and more profound ways of experiencing and engaging with land.

Middleton mentions the notion of deprogramming, which comprises modes of working that support the development of perception and awareness:

In Núñez's dynamics we also find a complementary deprogramming on the physical plane. Many of the dynamics involve physically counter-intuitive actions, such as running backwards with eyes closed (D. K. Middleton, 2001, p. 48)

While the physical actions of *The River Action* were not specifically counter-intuitive, I experienced them as deprogramming us from experiencing in habitual ways:

I am not seeing and experiencing the rainforest in the way I habitually experience places. I am breathing it in and feeling it through my skin. Without thinking.²⁴

We experienced and engaged with the natural environment. The physical actions we carried out supported us in perceiving and experiencing in ways that possibly deprogrammed (over time) our usual modes of perception.

As we know, The River Action training took place daily over a period of three weeks. The process of repeating the action over time was important. In describing Núñez's processes of performer training, Middleton explains that 'full embodiment and, particularly, full mental presence are cultivated only through repetition over time' (D. K. Middleton, 2001, p. 50). The nature of the repetition we are considering here has qualities in some ways similar to the repetitive nature of the training an athlete might undergo. An athlete would repeat a training action expecting incremental results and transformation. Although *The River Action* and other dynamics require us to 'expect nothing' - which is a phrase Núñez uses during the training process. As Middleton goes on to say, for Núñez 'actor training requires an incremental process akin to that of the spiritual path' (D. K. Middleton, 2008, p. 52).

The process of training in *The River Action* was incremental and during the weeks spent training in the rainforest there was a slow process of transformation:

²⁴ Training Notes: 20th June 2017

*When I look back at the notes I made on the first day we trained in the forest, I can see that my relationship with the rock and the forest air has changed – at least my perception of it has changed. We are no longer so different and other, we share a lot.*²⁵

Another of the key elements of Núñez's work is that participants are willing and able to work with a goalless approach and without expectations. [LINK BACK TO IMMERSION TRAINING IN INTRO](#)

Some of the dynamics work with participants' sense of boundaries and separateness:

In dynamics such as *Tlaloque Nahuaque*, participants move in repeating rhythmic patterns of coming together and moving apart, in such a way as ultimately to blur one's sense of boundaries and separateness from the other. (D. K. Middleton, 2008, p. 53)

In *The River Action*, through rock, breath, and skin I explored blurred boundaries: the boundaries between the human and the non-human and the boundaries between the performer and the land.

Núñez constantly reiterates the importance of attention, intention and effort in his work, stating that 'the most important factor for the performer is concentration. One way of helping to develop it is to establish the discipline of self-observation' (Núñez, 1996, p. 107). In my experience, this was key to the work and the process of training that will be explored in the following chapter. *The River Action* was a mentally and physically challenging training and, through this discipline of self-observation, we were encouraged to take on both the physical and mental pain as part of the process. Núñez says that the actor must 'take on the "good pain"' (Nicolas & Middleton, 1997, p. 10).

I see the 'good pain' as that which comes from physical and mental effort and that feels somehow instrumental in connecting to land and environment. The physically challenging nature of *The River Action* required concentration and focus in order to carry it out:

*The ice-cold pain of the water numbs my feet and my shoulders muscles burn pain too. Over time the two different pains feel the same and stop being pain. They are just a feeling.*²⁶

Many actions and approaches, which could be described as transformative, are found in Núñez's training and dynamics as well as his performance work. The transformative aspects of the training were key to developing our awareness of a state of immersion. In *The River Action*, the transformation involved moving from everyday perception to more profound awareness and perception. Sandström researches the transformative qualities of Núñez's work and acknowledges that:

²⁵ Training notes: 20th June 2017

²⁶ Training notes: 15th June 2017

In the work of the TRW, as in the work of Grotowski, the performer is seen to have the potential to transform the everyday state of being into an altered state. (Sandström, 2013, pp. 44-45)

As we will see, some of my training notes suggest that I experienced the training as one that can alter my state of awareness and the ways I perceived the land of the rainforest.

The River Action focused specifically on awakening our awareness of the environment and land in which we practice. As Middleton explains, paratheatrical elements are at play in the work of Núñez generally:

The journey to self-knowledge is a theme inherent in many kinds of theatrical activity, and, in a heightened form, in paratheatrical activity in particular. 'Paratheatre' involves the use of dramatic structures and psychophysical exercises to reawaken the participant's sensitivity to the self, to others, and to nature. (Núñez & Middleton, 1997, p. xi)

While developing sensitivity to self and others occurs, it is the sensitivity to environment that is of most relevance to this project. *The River Action* was a psychophysical structure that awakened sensitivity to the environment of the rainforest.

A process of transformation is inextricably woven into the process of immersion according to Machon who says that immersion can be:

Transformative, like a rite of passage, where one can be personally and positively changed through the thematic concerns of the event, communicated via its experiential form. (Machon, 2009, p. 28)

The potential for transformation in Núñez's work is a component in the process of training for performing land and for a process that is essentially a training in immersion. Machon describes different types (or levels) of transformation; the one of interest here is that of total immersion, of which she states:

Certain events may enable emotional or existential transformation to occur due to the ideas and practice shared. (Machon, 2009, p. 63)

Machon describes the immersion that might take place within a performance, and *The River Action* was a training process that facilitated that kind of immersion. In looking at the work of Núñez and the practice of *The River Action*, we see another aspect that is required of a performer in order to be able to create the kind of event Machon describes.

We have explored theories of land in relationship to performance and the premise that interdependence exists between human and the natural environment is important to the way we consider training for performing land. According to systems theorist Gregory Bateson 'the basis of ecology is centred on the interdependence between an organism and its environment' (Bateson, 2000, p. 492). So, in talking about Núñez's work in relation to land, the notion of interdependence is central. The possibility of 'contact with the self and the cosmos' (D. K. Middleton, 2001, p. 46) is central to the way in which I approached *The River Action*. Núñez alludes to the concept of interdependence:

When we study our body, we are also studying part of the cosmos. Not all behaviour systems understand this truth. Our research stems from this thought to draw us closer to theatre in an anthropocosmic way. (Núñez & Middleton, 1997, p. xii)

Having taken part in many of Núñez's dynamics and other psychophysical or sensitization exercises - in particular work outdoors in Mexico²⁷ - I have experienced the impact on body-mind energy in relation to the land or spatial surroundings. Núñez himself explains how his processes of training work 'at sensitizing our visual, olfactory, auditory, tactile, taste and intuitive areas, along with a few essences of Nahuatl thought' (Núñez, 1996, p. 73). And he states that 'through performing the psychophysical exercises/dynamics, every single part of our body and our emotions is connected to, or rather interplaying with, the cosmos' (Núñez, 1996, p. 73). This interplay of body, mind and cosmos is another mechanism at play in *The River Action* as we immerse ourselves in land and train for performance of land.

Many of the dynamics created by the *Taller de Investigacion Teatral* draw on imagery and archetypes of the natural world. In his book 'Anthropocosmic Theatre' Núñez describes in detail 'Aztlán (the Lost Paradise, Tonatiuh (Sun) and Huracán (Hurricane – the heart of the sky)' (Núñez, 1996, pp. 84-85). In these dynamics and in the training of *The River Action*, natural imagery is integral to the processes. Many of Núñez's participatory performances take place outside in natural environments and aim, amongst other things, to connect participants with elements of nature and land. *Puentes Invisibles* (2016), written by Deborah Templeton and directed by Núñez, is a participatory performance that was first performed in Chapultepec Forest, Mexico City in November 2016.

In the dynamic *Tonatihuh*, one perceives the states of mineral, vegetable, animal, human and spirit. Núñez describes Tonatiuh as 'an allegorical offering of our hearts to the sun' (Núñez, 1996, p. 87). Many of the dynamics of the *Taller de Investigacion* involve allegorical actions and

²⁷ Theatre as a Personal Rite, Apan, Hidalgo, Mexico 2016

visualisations, and an element of allegory was also evident within *The River Action* in the way in which our hands/arms created 'doorways' into the rainforest. While we focused more closely on the psychophysical nature of the training, it is possible that the allegorical impacted the process of training and supported the development of training in immersion.

The following list provides key features of his approach to practice and training for performance (and is supported by the theories and philosophies of land and the work of numerous performance practitioners discussed in previous chapters) and it is these elements that we will investigate in *The River Action*:

- Training that takes place over time
- Deprogramming and moving away from habitual behaviours and perceptions
- Meditative quality of the work
- Connecting to an underlying reality
- Working without goals or expectations
- Blurring boundaries
- Transformative capacity of the work
- Interplay with the cosmos
- Natural imagery and allegory
- Concentration

Chapter Four

The River Action – Rock, Breath, Skin

Introduction

We have seen that there are artists and performers who adopt an eco-centric approach to performing land and investigated the different ways in which they approach this process. This chapter investigates the mechanisms of *The River Action* and how it develops performer capacity for developing awareness of immersion in preparation for an outdoor participatory performance with ecological themes.

By exploring various modes of embodied engagement with the rainforest, this chapter addresses the question of what Núñez's *River Action* offers to anyone performing land.

The primary objective of this chapter is to share my reflections, as a performer, on the inner and outer workings of the training process with particular focus on:

- How I related, during *The River Action*, with the materiality of rock.
- Breath as a tool for engaging with the environment
- Skin as a porous, permeable material that supports my capacity to be sensorily aware of the interrelated nature of the environment and myself.

Throughout the chapter, I draw on the work of other practitioners and academics to investigate and identify the processes and mechanisms that seem to have taken place in my experience of the training process. It is these mechanisms that support the argument of the thesis, many of which we have touched on already in looking at the work of Núñez and other practitioners.

I identify the key features or mechanisms of the training, focusing on rock, breath, and skin in order to highlight what the training practice and perspective offers to other performers and practitioners whose work can be broadly seen as 'performing land'. My interest in focusing on rock in *The River Action* stems from the idea that through working/training with the non-human we can deepen our connection to land. I chose to focus on how I used skin and breath as tools for training in immersion because they provided physical, literal, and metaphorical links between the performer body and the land that was being trained in. The focus on rock and skin was my own

invention, rather than part of the training directions from Núñez. Likewise, my own particular use of breath was a process I developed independently.

Collecting the Perfume

Our training processes incorporated contemplative practices and a psychophysical structure, motivated by the provocation to immerse ourselves or 'collect the perfume'. At all stages of the training we were engaged in action that involved body-mind and environment. I propose that in addition to the materiality of earth, the plants, and water that we worked with, we must also consider the notion of perfume. Here we are dealing with something more ephemeral than the land or environment that is at the foreground of this project. I took the instruction to collect the perfume of the rainforest as an instruction to immerse myself:

So this is how I see my task, my job...go into the rainforest, stand on a rock in the river, carry out the action, breathe in the rainforest, feel the rainforest through your skin. Focus every muscle in your body and every inhalation and exhalation on being here and now. Immerse yourself in the action and discover your immersion in the rainforest. Keep doing this until you stink of rainforest and rock and river. If you keep repeating the action, your cells will carry the perfume of the rainforest – a bit like when you swim every day in a chlorinated pool or work in a fried food bar or sit by a wood fire outside.

This process of immersion required development of awareness. In order to collect the perfume of the rainforest, Núñez's training action incorporated many of the features seen in his dynamics and those identified in the previous chapter.

In Theatre of Sources projects, Ronald Grimes, describes his experience as not being 'a sentiment of group kinship or nostalgia for unity with the forest' he instead suggests means 'a letting go of both feelings and thoughts as the centre of awareness' (Wolford & Schechner, 2013, p. 273).

This 'letting go' is perhaps the way into experiencing immersion. I experienced the effect of *The River Action* as:

A process of letting go of holding thoughts and feelings as my centre of awareness and perception during the training. Somatic awareness became more central to my perception. I developed my capacity to experience and perceive differently through focusing on rock, breath, and skin.²⁹

In *The River Action*, the process of immersing myself in the environment was incremental and happened through the daily repetition of the training. Working with land or the natural environment over time was a key factor in changing my awareness and quality of experience and this theory is

²⁹ Training Notes: 21st June 2017

supported, as we have seen, by artists like Abramović and Arlander who both work with repetition and duration in order to develop their capacity to perform land, objects or place.

My focus on rock, breath, and skin was very much about developing my capacity to comprehend the rainforest in a way that was more immersed and profound than the ways in which I normally comprehend the environments I inhabit. Through focusing my awareness on rock, breath, and skin, my whole body was comprehending (and relating with) the environment.

The River Action involved an expedition or a journey with a purpose – the purpose being to ‘collect the perfume’. As practitioner Włodzimierz Staniewski says of the work of Gardzienice:

From each expedition we bring observations, pictures, smells, images of living. This is the pre-performance work. (Staniewski & Hodge, 2003, p. 108)

Like Staniewski, Núñez was asking us to collect something, and like Staniewski he defines it as training or pre-performance work.

While, in geographic terms, the village of Armila was isolated and difficult to reach, it was our daily journey into the rainforest to practise *The River Action* that provided me with a sense of journeying into the unknown.

The River Action involved a daily walk into the forest. I began to work with focusing my attention on sensing the ground under my feet, often working barefoot. The contemplative walking involved all my senses though, and this included emotions and feelings. As artist and performer Bruce Gilchrist suggests:

Entering dense forests feels like stepping into the unknown, there can be a sense of foreboding due to unrecognisable sounds and trepidation at what or who may be behind the trees. (Gilchrist, Joelson, & Warr, 2015, p. 66)

The River Action walk felt to me like a journey into the unknown. I experienced some sense of trepidation and I began to be more conscious of using all of my senses simultaneously and of developing a heightened awareness of the environment (in order to protect myself from imagined threats). In this way, the alien environment contributed to *The River Action* functioning as a transformative process – it transformed my everyday perception into a heightened or more alert awareness and perception. This transformation, for me, contributed to a sense of interrelatedness with the rainforest environment.

I experienced a notable lack of predictability during the walk into the rainforest (which varied widely each day, depending particularly on weather and wildlife we encountered) and this unpredictability impacted on my feelings and emotions as well as physical experiences. I was not

in control of the environment, and worked on letting go and accepting it just as it was at any given moment.

In 'A Philosophy of Walking', Frédéric Gros considers the contribution that an element of risk contributes to journeys taken on foot:

The elemental is that to which we entrust ourselves, and which is given to us in its entirety. But to experience its texture we have to take a risk, the risk of going beyond the necessary (Gros, 2015, p. 192)

Certainly, in the early days of the training practice, I felt a tangible sense of risk, which was part of the sensory experience. An element of risk wakes up the body-mind, because by placing ourselves in a position of perceiving danger or uncertainty, we induce certain biological reactive processes. In *The River Action*, I utilised the fact that this heightens awareness of the senses in order to perceive the environment through all my senses.

Like the 'deprogramming' in Núñez's dynamics, a sense of risk offered me an opportunity to move away from the habitual modes of experiencing and develop awareness by paying attention to my contact with the ground, my inhalations and exhalations of rainforest air, and the sensations of air, water, plants and insects on my skin.

Developing awareness of perception beyond every day, forward facing perception is another way that we can engage in the work to open perception. Practitioner I Wayan Lendra describes his experience of *The Movements* (which later became *The Motions*), saying:

Seven directions: east, west, north, south, up, down, and centre. The up and down are performed in connection with body movements, and the imaginary center is associated with the heart and with what Grotowski calls the "primary position" (Lendra, 1991, p. 12)

The idea of working with the seven directions is helpful in understanding ways in which I may have developed my sense of interrelatedness with the rainforest – in all directions. My experience agrees with what Lendra says in the sense that I developed an awareness of what was happening all around me rather than just ahead of me. What appears to happen here is that the durational and repetitive nature of the action provided me an opportunity to focus my attention on the way I interacted with the environment through connecting with rock, breathing, and sensations on my skin. I would describe it as an incremental expansion of awareness, in all directions, over time. This expansion of awareness came from focus and concentration on rock, breath, and skin rather than mind wandering. This 'awareness in all directions' contributed to the sense of interrelatedness, which as a training tool could be valuable to those training to perform land by training in immersion.

While we worked with all our senses to collect the perfume of the rainforest, what and how we saw and heard was important. As Lendra states:

Another essential requirement of the Motions is that the eyes should see in a wide angle, a panoramic view, and the ears should hear all sounds at once. Grotowski usually said: "See that you are seeing and hear that you are hearing." (Lendra, 1991, p. 126)

This approach challenges habitual, and limiting modes of experiencing our environment and, through cultivating an ability to hear and see all that is there simultaneously, we were supporting the process of developing our awareness of our immersion in the rainforest. What I came to work with during the training practice was cultivating my awareness of how I perceived the environment through rock, breath, and skin but I began with a focus on panoramic vision. Once this focus of awareness was established, I was able to extend focus, incrementally, to include other senses.

Training Instructions

Núñez's instruction for *The River Action* was simple and did not include unnecessary detail. It was typical of my experience over the years of the approach Núñez takes to indoor and outdoor performer training. The lack of specific instruction added to the sense of entering the unknown and to the sense of taking a risk and having no expectations.

The technique of withholding all but the most basic information can be traced to Grotowski. I Wayan Lendra, talking about the Motions (a practice that Núñez based *The River Action* on), tells us that 'another important element of the training process in the project was that Grotowski never described the meaning of or the idea behind any exercise' (Lendra, 1991, p. 123). This absence of detail and explanation (while it could be challenging to work with such an approach) was instrumental in enabling me to relinquish habitual processes of perceiving and exist in awareness and the 'here and now' of the practice.

Middleton also talks about the way Nunez typically gives only loose instructions:

In the dynamics, there is typically a certain "looseness" of form; participants are not given detailed formal instructions but instead find their own way to perform the actions. That is, they seek out their own means of utilising both personal imagery and the imagery inherent in the specific dynamic in order to make sense of the experience in their own terms. (D. K. Middleton, 2001, p. 49)

It was this looseness or openness of instruction, which contributed to enabling me to become aware of my immersion in the rainforest. My means of 'utilising personal imagery' in this training

was to focus on the way my breath and skin interacted with and perceived the land and environment.

By moving away from my habitual modes of perception I allowed myself to perceive my immersion in environment and land. This is one of the elements required in a training for performing land – the development of a new awareness that enables the performer to experience the land/environment in a way that was removed from the habitual.

Working in silence is another element that supports immersion. In silence, we are able to become more profoundly aware of sounds and sights of the rainforest and are not distracted from experiencing it through all our senses. It is no coincidence that Grotowski and Nunez both chose to work in silence. To chat or discuss the working process would distract the performer from developing a deep awareness of their relationship with the environment. So, the approach Nunez took in leading us throughout the practice was that we 'did' rather than discussed or analysed the work. Again, Lendra sums up a similar approach in describing working with Grotowski:

Verbal communication, describing what is being learned, is not a part of this training process. This is an ancient way in which a novice learns through the body directly rather than through a preliminary mental process. Grotowski says, "the body itself functions like a brain"; it can record and later recall movement patterns and emotion in a seemingly instinctive way, when stimuli are given. (Lendra, 1991, p. 124)

What emerges from Lendra's words, those of other performers and from my experience during *The River Action* is that somatic experience and the notion that we can learn through the body are fundamental to training for performing land which is why I chose to focus on rock, breath, and skin in this research. The notion of the body functioning like a brain is one that came into play as we practised *The River Action*: I comprehended the environment somatically rather than more the more habitual way of perceiving through seeing and thinking.

The practice of *The River Action* appears – in description, images and film – to be quite simple and easy to carry out. However, the physical action was challenging and intense mental effort was required. Lendra says similar of *The Motions*:

The rules of this exercise seem to be simple, but to perform the Motions precisely-physically and mentally-is extremely difficult. The brain is occupied with monitoring the minute details of the physical action, thus freeing the inner mind, the subtler consciousness, to "come out" and merge with the environment. (Lendra, 1991, p. 126)

As suggested earlier, the 'freeing' that occurs requires huge physical and mental commitment. What I found was that only through putting in substantial effort did any change in awareness and

perception occur. My physical and mental precision came from working specifically with rock, breath, and skin.

Awareness and Perception

It was crucial to the practice of *The River Action* that we worked with a willingness to change and develop our awareness and perception. We could experience our immersion in the rainforest if we were willing to perceive the environment in a way that was different to our habitual way of experiencing and engage with the rainforest just as it was. Chogyam Trungpa says something similar of the way we should approach art and experience generally:

As far as dharma art or absolute experience is concerned, along with our experience, we begin to see things as they are, touch on things as they are. Then we begin to just be with object perceptions, without accepting or rejecting' (Chogyam Trungpa, 1996, p. 77)

In this sense, my practice involved perceiving the land and the environment of the rainforest through the materiality and physicality of rock, breath, and skin – without accepting or rejecting any experiences and without processing experiences through thought and by trying to give meaning to my experiences.

The idea of perceiving things as they are was, for me, at the core of the training and the daily repetition of the practice (and focusing my attention on rock, breath, and skin) supported my capacity to incrementally drop my habitual modes of perceiving my environment. As Huntington (author of numerous texts on Buddhist Practice) states:

To see things as they are is to unearth our hidden assumptions about ourselves and our world, to bring them into the light of full consciousness, and to notice how, on close inspection; these assumptions often contradict our actual experience.(Huntington, 2016)

My experience of the training over time was that I was able to move away from making assumptions or judgements about the environment.

In addition to the silence in which the group worked, it was important for me to develop my own silence and practice without an internal dialogue or labelling of experiences. Focusing on rock, breath, and skin (through my body) supported the quietening of the chatter I might normally experience in my mind. As Zen Master *Thích Thông Triết* explains:

Wordless awareness is knowledge of what is happening in the environment and inside the body without any silent verbal commentary arising. When we move through life, it

constantly processes what is happening, understanding everything while keeping the mind unaffected.(Triệt)

Not accepting or rejecting experience during the process training was another way in which I engaged with the natural environment as it was. In summary, the key elements in the way the team approached the training were:

- Being given only loose instruction
- Working in silence
- Working with alertness and effort
- Developing a sense of goallessness

To collect the perfume, we worked with all our sense perceptions. My particular focus was on rock, breath, and skin but I was, of course, using senses of sight, sound and smell as well. In itself, developing awareness of experiencing sensorily is part of the movement away from the habitual.

Paying attention to the interrelatedness of myself and the rainforest through rock, breath, and skin was a factor in the process of shifting from habitual modes of perception and developing a more profound sense of connectedness. The physical sensations of the rock beneath my feet, water and air on my skin and the constant action of inhaling and exhaling the rainforest's atmosphere led to this profound sense of feeling connected to the environment. Lendra suggests that 'the requirement of the Motions is that you must not react to any one thing but must fully perceive all that there is to see and hear' (Lendra, 1991, p. 127). The notion of not reacting is similar to Trungpa's suggestion that to perceive things as they are we need to 'be with object perceptions without accepting or rejecting' (Chogyam Trungpa, 1996). What I found during *The River Action* was that it became easier to experience directly without accepting, rejecting, or reacting when I focused on perceiving through rock, breath, and skin.

Practitioner and academic Phillip Zarrilli also emphasises the importance of awareness and perception:

Open your auditory awareness not just to yourself and your own breath, but also to each other. Using both your peripheral and back awareness, as well as opening your ears, 'take in' everyone else in the space so that you are moving as one. (Zarrilli, 2012, p. 97)

What he says about auditory awareness echoes Lendra's comments on the seven directions. Within a training for immersive performance, it is useful to work with all the senses and develop non-habitual modes of perception. With sight as the most habitually used means of experiencing the environment – even with the engagement of peripheral vision, there is a danger that we only

see and absorb that which is in front of us. If we work with all our senses, there is an enhanced opportunity to 'take in' the space and environment. Numerous practitioners have established this fact; Staniewski is another who emphasised the importance of perception:

In emphasizing the interaction with the natural environment, Staniewski stresses the importance for the students to deepen their perceptual awareness (Staniewski & Hodge, 2003, p. 15)

Through practicing *The River Action* (and through focusing awareness specifically on rock, breath, and skin) I worked on the process of deepening of perceptual awareness that Staniewski saw the importance of.

Rock - Relating with the Materiality of Rock

Each day I stood barefoot on a rock for about an hour while holding the postures of *The River Action*. Before the action, I had carried out the contemplative walk into the forest which seemed to sensitise my feet. During the walk, my feet/skin played an important role in perceiving the environment. In bringing the body-mind and the geologic materiality of rock simultaneously into the foreground, I developed considerations of human relationship to land and rock. A project that explored this subject was *Rock/Body: Performative Interfaces between the Geologic and the Body*, which was an AHRC-funded research network. The exhibition flyer stated:

Rocks appear hard, static, inactive, obdurate, while bodies look to be lively, mobile, perishable, capable of affective relations and political acts. However, as this exhibition highlights, geologic and human bodies are porous to each other and mutually implicated in many ways. (Unkown, 2016)

The notions of permeability and mutual implication are familiar to the sensations I felt in focusing my awareness on rock during *The River Action*:

It is difficult to access adequate vocabulary to capture my experience of the interplay between my feet and the rock I am standing on. I feel my weight and the weight of the rock bedded in the river. I am aware of sensations of hardness and cold – these sensations are at times amplified and at times dissolve. As time passes, I feel the boundaries between my skin and the rock blurring. We are mutually permeable and don't exist without one another. Standing on the rock and focusing my awareness to the sensation of it beneath my feet is an embodied exploration of an elemental substance and my relationship to it. I am perceiving land through my feet. Sometimes thoughts and ideas about the rock appear but I let them go, imagine them floating down the river and return to feeling. Afterwards I feel I share as many commonalities with rock as I do with animals or plants.³⁰

³⁰ Training notes: 21st June 2017

Contemporary performers and artists work with land to explore what Thoreau described as a 'living earth'. Of Anna Halprin's *Still Dance*, May says:

The body exceeds the limits imposed upon it by our long-held notions of a human/nature divide. Instead, the body acts and is acted upon, an unguarded conversation between the body and the landscape it inhabits.(Arons & May, 2012, p. 119)

The suggestion of a conversation between body and landscape is similar to the approach I took during the practice of *The River Action* where: *I sensed a dialogue taking place between my skin and the rock*³² and the idea that this conversation be unguarded is reminiscent of Trungpa's call that we 'just be with object perceptions, without accepting or rejecting'(Chögyam Trungpa & Gimian, 2004, p. 87). It is possible then that if a performer was to work with the possibilities offered by somatic dialogue and 'be' with object perception, the boundaries between performer and land might become less discernible.

As well as the conversation between body and rock, it seemed important that I didn't view rock any differently from the way I viewed the trees, plants, and animals of the rainforest. Parkes explains a model of understanding rock, which is not commonly held in Western philosophy:

By contrast with the western tendency to make a sharp distinction between the animate and inanimate, with rocks falling on the lifeless side of the divide, the ancient Chinese understand all natural phenomena, including humans, as configurations of an energy they call qi. (Parkes, 2005, p. 78)

For those training for outdoor immersive performance, letting go of the distinction between the animate and inanimate could be an important part of the process of perceiving differently. For me, this came easily and naturally and I felt my longstanding affinity with rock rise to the foreground of my perceptions. In repeating *The River Action* and engaging with rock through my body, the perceived boundaries between the rock and myself blurred:

*I had a real sense that there were no borders or boundaries between me and the rock I stand on. Physically we seem the same. We share something more than a common elemental structure and make up though; we share a sense of being in a place and in a space.*³³

³² Training notes: 20th June 2017

³³ Training notes: 21st June 2017

For the immersive, outdoor performer or the performer seeking to engage with land, the realisation that the dichotomy between animate and inanimate is imposed by thinking is helpful in developing awareness of immersion in land and place. As Skrbina states:

Because of our usual preconceptions concerning rocks, we not only regard them but also experience them as being more distantly related to us (if related at all) than plants or animals. (Parkes, 2005, p. 348)

By perceiving rocks somatically through a training such as *The River Action*, a performer of land is offered an approach that could support a process of dropping the preconceptions Skrbina talks of. My own notes say:

*In directing my awareness towards the rock I stand on, my perception of its materiality and of its being begin to shift. As with my underground wanderings as a child, I feel and sense rock differently and I feel it and sense it in relationship to my own existence. As well as feeling the rock beneath my feet, I feel it within the flow of the river and I see the scattering of rocks up and down the river. I hear the noises the rocks create and they force the flow of the river to navigate round them.*³⁴

Rocks have of course inspired visual artists forever. Artist Richard Long talks about the impermanence of nature and its constant state of flux and change: In discussing *Walking The Line*, Long describes mud as 'a natural bridge between water and stone, like fluid earth' (Long, 2002, p. 39). My own experience of rock in *The River Action* was of a:

*Material that is simultaneously solid and bound but at the same time part of the unending processes of change and movement happening in the rainforest.*³⁵

For a performer, recognising the flux and impermanence of inanimate material like rock provides an opportunity to relate with it and recognise the commonalities we share with land.

Like Annette Arlander in her work *Becoming Juniper*, I chose to focus my awareness and interact with a specific element of the natural environment. Arlander says:

It seems to me that in order to avoid seeing landscape as surroundings, material setting, systemic resource or thematic source only, one option is to choose an element in the landscape and to interact with it over time. (Annette Arlander, 2015)

After my first journey into the rainforest I described surroundings:

*I find myself trying to absorb all the elements of the rainforest simultaneously – trying to take in everything that surrounds me and touches me.*³⁶

³⁴ Training notes: 20th June 2017

³⁵ Training Notes: 20th June 2017

Later in the training process, I talked of interaction;

For days now, I have just related with the rock. The other components of the rainforest are present in my awareness but it is the rock that I interact with.³⁷

During the training process I lost the sense of barrier between the rock and myself. My skin felt to become permeable to the rock and both surfaces became porous. Performer Bram Thomas Arnold, in his *Notes After a Week of Wandering* says that 'the atoms on your fingertips mingle with the feather you're holding, you are entwined and deeply involved, you are together, one, there is no barrier, no bridge' (Gilchrist et al., 2015, p. 106). In a process that appears similar to the one he describes, losing my sense of boundaries and barriers (my skin and the rock surface) enabled me to become 'deeply involved' and more fully aware of how involved with or immersed in the land I have become.

Breath – A Tool for Engaging with the Land of the Rainforest

As well as working with focus and awareness of rock, working with breath was central to the approach I took to immersing myself. My focus on breath was present throughout the river action but at times I would vary its degree. If I felt my mind drifting, for example, I would return to the breath and put 100% of my attention on the inhalations and exhalations. At other times, my focus might be weighted more on rock and/or skin, with perhaps just 25% of my attention on the breath. I chose to focus work with breath because prior meditation practice had shown me that focusing on breath provided me with an accessible way to be present in the 'here and now'. I felt that I could access my awareness of land and environment through focusing on my breath. Zarrilli proposes that breath 'is the most accessible of our visceral processes to intentional control...breathing is based in existence more than any other physiological function' (Zarrilli, 2004, p. 662). It was this intentional control that I worked with to connect with visceral feeling.

There is nothing new about performers working with breath as a means of improving their performance but I focused on how breath could be used as one of the tools for training in immersion and training for performing land. I make two key suggestions based on the research process of *The River Action*:

- Awareness of breath and working with breath can support the performer in being present in the 'here and now' and this is necessary in order to experience a state of immersion.
- The process of breathing is an exchange with the environment and awareness of this exchange supports the process of immersion.

³⁶ Training Notes: 15th June 2017

³⁷ Training notes: 15th June 2017

During *The River Action*, breath was my tool or gateway into an embodied engagement with the land. Dancer Daria Halprin states that:

When we are connected to the actual sensory experience of our breath, we become more aware of all our bodily sensations, the qualities and possibilities inherent in each movement. (Williamson, Batson, Whatley, & Weber, 2014, p. 95)

In my own notes, I also talk of my work with breath as a precursor to bodily awareness more generally:

It seems – as with sitting practice – that it starts with the breath. Without connecting first with my breath, I cannot connect with myself or the rock/land.³⁸

As well as awareness, breath focus brought me to a position where I could place attention on skin and rock. As Halprin suggests that ‘connecting with our breathing brings more awareness, more presence, more attention and more expression in the body’ (Williamson et al., 2014). Again my own notes support the idea that focusing on the breath is a foundational tool for being present and for engaging with land.

Beyond being here, present in the rainforest, every breath is an exchange with this place. I cannot engage with the rock until I am fully here – in my body and in the land. I need to focus on my breath for that to happen.³⁹

For me, breath was a key tool in my transforming from a state of being separate or other to land. As Halprin says, it is only with ‘awareness in this here-and-now state that anything can be transformed’ (Williamson et al., 2014, p. 95). My notes map this process of transformation, which could support a performer training process for performing land.

³⁸ Training notes: 17th June 2017

³⁹ Training notes: 20th June 2017

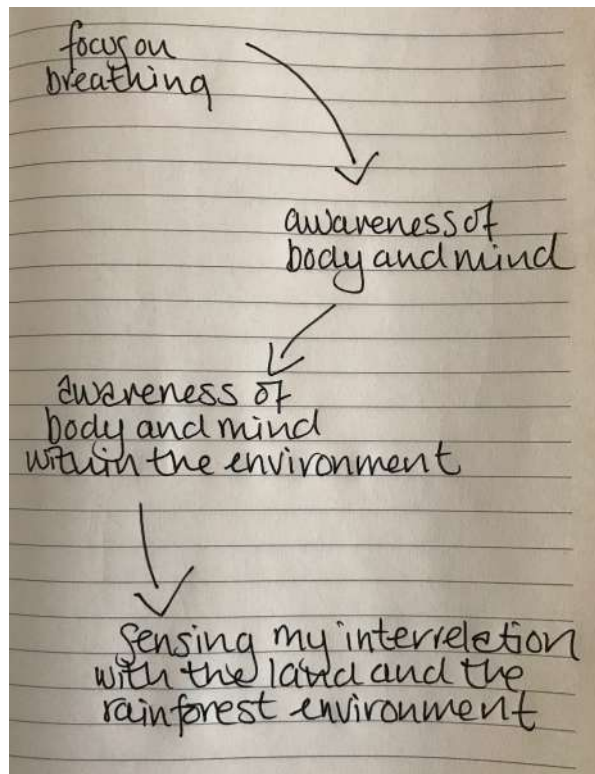


Figure 6: Diagram from Training Notes 21st June 2017

Reeve also suggests that the breath might be the key tool to an embodied engagement with land:

One route into the immediacy of the experiential is to attend to the dwelling body, the situated body, through the breath...a bodily intelligence can be developed and, over time, a heightened awareness of the interrelationship between body and place fostered.(Reeve, 2013, p. 71)

According to Nair, for Núñez too, breathing is viewed as one of the key tools of his work as 'the tools of breathing, movement, participation and vibration are the firm basis of Anthropocosmic theatre' (Nair, 2007, p. 146). In focusing deliberately on breath as a tool for engaging with land and the natural environment, I found that I was able to relate more profoundly with the rainforest in which we trained.

Skin - A Permeable and Porous Material

In the early days of the training, my focus was more on breath and the rock beneath my feet. After a few days I expanded my attention to include awareness of skin and its interactions with the rainforest. Reeve also notes that regarding her practice of *Ecological Movement*, moving away from the automatic sight-centric mode of experiencing is of value to a performer's working process:

Barba, Brook and Grotowski all 'have used physicality and movement to challenge the primacy of sight' (Reeve, 2011, pp. 9-10)

Challenging the primacy of sight, and focusing my awareness on rock, breath, and skin was another way of breaking my habitual way of perceiving. On day five of the training I noted:

In working with skin, I focus my attention of the physical sensations of rock, water and air as they touch my skin. I simply focus on each sensation as it arises on or in my skin. I am feeling it without labelling it in the moment. The sensations of breeze, humidity, sweat running down my back, insects landing on my face, dead leaves brushing against my feet in the flow of the river and the ever present rock on the soles of my feet. Sometimes I go further and visualize the boundary of skin as very permeable so that I can develop my sense of immersion. Sometimes I focus on my feet touching rock and feel them dissolve into it.⁴⁰

This concept of dissolution of body with environments is not a new concept in performance of outdoor environments. In discussing approaches to the relationship between performer and environment, Arlander talks of a 'confluence or sharing, where the human figure seems to dissolve into the environment to some extent'(Annette Arlander, 2014, p. 166). Sensing a blurring of boundaries between body and environment could contribute to training for performing land. Such an approach might enable the performer to then experience somatically or viscerally the land that they train in.

We are constantly engaging with objects and our environment through our skin. Zarrilli proposes that we 'intersubjectively engage the world around us through our sensorimotor surface body, such as when we use a hand to explore, touch, or relate to the world' (Zarrilli, 2004, p. 656). What may be different about my focus on skin in *The River Action* training is that I deliberately focused my attention here, repeatedly and for extended periods of time:

For over an hour I drop my focus from my other senses as far as is possible and engage with the rock and the forest purely through my skin. I feel the land. I understand or perceive it without thinking, seeing or hearing it.⁴¹

As performance maker, Adrian Howell says about his work *The Garden of Adrian* (2009):

I identify what I refer to as 'entangled listening' practice. I propose entangled listening as resonant listening – a listening which depends on touching.(Howell, 2009)

My resonant listening to the land was a key way I engaged and a means or tool that other performers could use in their approaches to training for performing land.

⁴⁰ Training notes: 18th June 2017

⁴¹ Training notes: 18th June 2017

My experience of *The River Action* was of an immersive practice, in the sense that I was not merely an observer of the land but a part of it. As Machon states, immersive practice ‘which demands bodily engagement, sensually stimulates the imagination, requires tactility’ (Machon, 2009, p. 26). It is the bodily engagement that seems key to the process of training for performing land and for immersing myself in the land.

Sensing of the environment through the skin was, for me, one of the most valuable modes of perceiving and engaging with the land in a way that supported a somatic understanding of the ways in which I related with land. Describing her Ecological Movement work, Reeve explains that ‘the skin is no longer the boundary between the world and myself, but rather the sensing organ that brings the world into my awareness’ (Reeve, 2013, p. 28). It is this notion of world or environment being brought into awareness through skin that resonates with my experience of *The River Action*:

*If I focus on engaging with the rainforest via my skin, my awareness of the land and environment is very different to my everyday awareness. I feel it more fully – inside as well as on the skin’s surface.*⁴²

Reeve goes on to say that she is exploring ‘the possibility of reconceptualising the physical borders of bodies through attention to sensation’ (Reeve, 2013, p. 28). What I also found in *The River Action* was that skin was not, on its own, enough for me to engage with land fully. What seemed important was to attend to the physical sensations without labelling them or thinking about them:

*If I can let go of my imaginings and refrain from using words to describe my skin’s sensations, something shifts and the boundary between the land and myself dissolves.*⁴³

Stewart suggests that environmental dance breaches ‘the boundary between environment and skin. One does not begin where the other apparently ends’ (Stewart, 2010, p. 35). It is in training for performing land, through carrying out *The River Action*, that I experienced this breach between the body and my skin.

I viewed rock, breath and skin as tools that I used to help me develop my capacity for immersion. I would use rope, chalk, and climbing shoes as tools for rock climbing. Rope, chalk, and shoes are tools that give me access to otherwise unreachable environments. In the same way, rock, breath and skin are tools that able me to access natural environments in a way that is deeper and more

⁴² Training notes: 18th June 2017

⁴³ Training notes: 18th June 2017

connected than in my every day encounters with the natural world. Performers and those working to develop their capacity for immersion in natural environments could use and develop these tools as part of a training in immersion.

In terms of further developing the tools and techniques discussed in this chapter, I consider the following to areas I would work with:

- Exploration of the ways in which the tools might be used in different environments, including practical exploration of working with rock, breath and skin in outdoor environments other a rainforest
- Exploration of working with rock, breath and skin without the frame of *The River Action* and perhaps exploring working with different durations and repetitions, different times of day, and in different seasons
- Further consideration of how these tools might be utilised by other performers in practical terms

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

This research project has explored the question of how artists and practitioners can use theatre and performance to address human disconnectedness to land. I have attempted to address the question of how performers can train for work that addresses the current state of disconnectedness. My research has focused specifically on performing land and how we might, as performers, train for that kind of performance.

I have given consideration to what is meant by land (particularly in relation to the term 'landscape') and have drawn on a number of relevant disciplines in attempting to define land and to explore the ways in which humans relate with land. Following this, I have investigated the work of artists and performers who work with or in land, asking how they address human dislocation to land; what types of performance they create; and what modes of training they utilise to prepare for performance.

Throughout the project, I have explored the concept and practice of immersion and considered the development of perceptual awareness as integral to training for the performance of land. I

explored different performance practices, including the work of Núñez and drew out elements that I feel support the process of training for performing land. These included archaeology and excavation, relating to non-human objects, the possibilities of blurring boundaries between body and land, and working with duration and repetition.

A description of The River Action, alongside my training journal notes have provided insights into immersion and awareness and offered some answers to questions about training for performing land. My work with rock, breath, and skin provided the opportunity to adopt a detailed and focused approach to looking at the ways in which performers might train.

It is clear, from the journey this research project has taken, that there are many different approaches to training for performing land that could be taken and that different types of performance will require different modes of training. What does seem apparent is that it is hugely valuable for performers to spend significant amounts of time in/with land as part of their training. It is also clear that in order for performance to address human disconnection to land, training approaches need to focus on utilising modes and mechanisms that support and develop connection to land.

Further research, including other areas of focus, would be of benefit to this area of research. It would, for example, be interesting to consider expanding the training approach to include working with the elements of water, fire, earth and, air or to consider the roles of movement and stillness or working in daylight and darkness. An area of this project that would benefit from extensive research and development would be to explore this kind of work as an 'emergent alternative' from the 'extractive zone' that Gomez-Barris writes about:

The emergent and heterogeneous forms of living that are not about destruction or mere survival within the extractive zone, but about the creation of emergent alternatives" (Gomez-Barris, 2017, p. 4)

While the practice of this research project took place in a rainforest, it would be interesting to explore training for performance in different types of land and to investigate the opportunities different land would offer for addressing disconnection. Núñez states that 'there are as many systems as there are performers in the world' (Núñez, 1996, p. xiv). Likewise, there are as many ways of performing land or training for performing land as there are performers.

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