



# WALKING OUT OF OUR BODIES AND INTO THE MOUNTAINS

For over twenty years, **Simone Kenyon**, intra-disciplinary artist, dancer, and Feldenkrais practitioner has developed a practice of expanded choreographies encompassing movement, ecology, cultural geographies and walking arts to create participatory events exploring our relationships with place. Here, she discusses finding ecological and embodied connection through mountain-place-relational performance making exploring our relationships with place.

**T**his article is a short reflection on aspects of a performance project I developed in collaboration with many people, organisations, and mountainous places over several years.

Into The Mountain was an artistic project that explored embodied and ecological relationships to mountains. Central to the work was making women's (1) mountain experiences visible, in a culture where mountaineering narratives have historically prioritized hegemonic male narratives of conquest. Focusing on embodied awareness as >>

Performers; Jo Hellier, Nussatari, Caroline Reagh, Keren Smail and Petra Söör, Into The Mountain 2019. Photo: Felicity Crawshaw.







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a way into the mountains, was an approach with which to encourage ways of developing individual and collective kinship with mountain ecologies.

Through this project and the ongoing research around it, I am still asking how dance and performance practices can orientate an awareness with dialogues across eco-critical, geopolitical, cultural and outdoor perspectives.

At the heart of this project is the seminal poetic text of Nan Shepherd's, *The Living Mountain*.

(2) Her words are a recounting of her embodied experience of the Scottish Cairngorms Mountains in post WW2 Scotland. This book of short prose guided and interwove its way through my creative process over many years; from a dance maker's solo endeavors for a studio work within a dance festival context (3) to an expanded group of collaborators, participants, performers, and mountain encounters.

Shepherd's writing was a departure from the dominant mountaineering literature tropes of

conquest over nature often encountered within western mountaineering history. Instead, Shepherd makes 'pleasure visible' (4) when offering her sensory and embodied experiences as walker and mountaineer. She pertains to the idea that suggests the boundaries of body and mountain interconnections are permeable, when she writes, 'I have walked out of the body and into the mountain' (5).

Working specifically within the context and physical geography of the Cairngorms Mountains in Northeast Scotland, the project developed slowly over six years, resulting in a 12-month programme of events and culminating in a mountain-place-relational performance (6) within the Glen Feshie area of the Cairngorms National Park in May 2019.

This work considered the cultural, subjective and collective experience of mountain place and culture; through conversing with Nan Shepherd's accounts through a wide-ranging engagement in the very



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same sites over many years, as a deeper exploration into what Doreen Massey terms ‘place as process’. (7)

Into the Mountain was a project in which to further explores the complex and shifting boundaries between materiality and transcendence implied by Shepherd’s nature writing, through a ‘porous dramaturgy’ that invites, ‘an attention to the relationship between inside and outside’. (8)

The writer and academic, Sam Walton recently made the argument that Shepherd’s writing needs to be considered through a current eco-critical lens because her work, ‘explores ways of relating to others and to the complex, interconnected

ecology of nature’ (9) that is much revered through contemporary and ecologically conscious philosophies. I would add to this, that Shepherd’s embodied attention to place is the vital component to considering ecological perspectives and to understanding science, culture, nature, mountain relations. Her approach to writing through an embodied way foregrounds movement and somatic knowledge as valuable elements to engaging in eco-critical dialogues.

When considering Shepherd’s embodied understanding of mountains expressed in *The Living Mountain*, I continued asking: in what ways can contemporary artistic practice and dialogues >>

bring new insight to, not only the invisible experiences of women, but of the mountains themselves?

The project further explored these possibilities afforded by such a shifting of the perceptions of the embodied dancer and/or walker in the mountains for discourses around environment, bodily practices and place-relational performance making.

Approaches from Body Weather dance training and somatic movement work were central to the development of creating frameworks in which audience and performers came to know the mountain through embodied perspectives and experiences. The framing of attention often used through movement scores or explorations was developed through the elements of the performance work, which included facilitated walks, the creative development phase, to the choreographic scores for the live performance. Framing attention, finding curiosity, and foregrounding the pleasure and joy to be found with/in ecologies, I would argue is a direct way of developing sensitivities and empathy in relation to the unique ecologies we live and work in – in this instance a unique mountain ecology.

Contemporary ecocriticism holds a space for interdisciplinary approaches, where performance, dance and somatic inquiries can participate and contribute deeply to the conversation about direct ways in which to support a shifting of attitudes towards our earthly relationships more widely. Through this work, I continue to explore further how dance and movement methods can be integrated more deeply within approaches to outdoor learning and through facilitating mountain experiences. This

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ongoing research places embodied knowledge and sensory explorations at the forefront of participants experiences. Considering the historic frameworks of outdoor education practices and the colonial attitudes that framed it, more current developments in this area are reconsidering the facilitation of experience and engagement with nature in more nuanced and respectful ways.



#### References

1. The term 'women' in this context is used inclusively to encompass all individuals who identify as women, including transgender women and non-binary individuals who identify with womanhood
2. Shepherd, N., 2011. The living mountain: a celebration of the Cairngorms mountains of Scotland. Canongate Books.



3. Into the mountain (Solo) was performed as part of Dance International Glasgow (DIG) Festival in 2017. For a sense of the work see: Kenyon, S., 2019. Into the Mountain. *Performance Research*, 24 (2) pp.32-35

4. de Alegría Puig, I.R., 2022. Nan Shepherd's The Living Mountain: Making Female Pleasure Visible. *Atlantis* (0210-6124), 44(2). p.170.

5. Shepherd, N., 2011. The living mountain: a celebration of the Cairngorm mountains of Scotland. Canongate Books. p.106

6. I am coining this term of mountain-place-relational performance to offer detail about the environmental relationship this work seeks to engage with, as an ongoing, unfolding enquiry- as opposed to the more generic terms of site-specific or place-related dance/performance

7. Massey, Doreen (2005), *For Space*, London, Sage Publications Ltd.

8. Turner, C., 2014. Porous Dramaturgy and the Pedestrian. *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, pp.199-213. (p.199)

9. Walton, S., 2020. *The living world: Nan Shepherd and environmental thought*. Bloomsbury Publishing. p.2.

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#### **Info**

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