All images right: ©Gottlob/Hulme

DANCING THE BIOMES: AN ECOLOGICAL DANCE PEDAGOGY

Improvisational movement artist, **Stephanie Gottlob** has followed a path begun in North America, exploring movement improvisations with nature, leading to England, where she designed her ecological dance pedagogy. The source of this journey is the co-creative relationship she experiences with landscape, which continues to inspire her current creative pedagogic activism and mission for embodying environmental ethics.

Journey into landscape

I am an improvisational movement artist. In 2019 I bought a truck camper and set off on a journey to embody the ten biomes of North America: deciduous forest, lake, tundra, swamp, grasslands, river, desert, temperate rain forest, boreal forest, and marine/reef. I wanted to feel all the ways nature expresses herself. For over three years I traveled to these biomes, spending a month in each, living and dancing as remotely as possible, exploring with landscape:

- *movement improvisation*
- *somatic experiences*
- *creative process*

I challenged myself by traveling through the tundra biome to the Arctic Ocean, by learning to SCUBA dive with the reef biome, by venturing through the lake biome on a fifteen-day solo canoe excursion. During most of this journey, I drove my camper as deeply as possible into the biomes, away from the main roads and crowds. I engaged in movement improvisations, mindfulness, somatic awareness, photography/videography, adventures, stewardship, and readings on the ecology of each biome.

After immersing myself in a variety of landscapes, it became clear to me that each biome is completely different. Scientifically, a biome is defined as a very large ecosystem with a unique climate based by two main factors: the amount of rainfall and the degree of temperature. Aesthetically and somatically, though, biomes are much, much more than that. They are expressive. Each manifests a different sense of time, space, motion, interaction, and aesthetics. As I explored various landscapes, a co-creative process began to emerge in my improvisations. It wasn't that I was connecting with nature while dancing. It was more that we were creating or emerging into something together. Each biome offered a unique co-creative, co-arising experience.

These insights came slowly, biome by biome. Here are some excerpts from my field notes about these initial experiences:

Lake Biome:
The lake biome is about reflection, moods, qualities.
The lake animates.
When I enter the water to dance with her,
she responds. Pushing, pulling, initiating.
She's not a backdrop for art.
She's an active partner in the creation process.

Deciduous Forest Biome:
The forest is alive and penetrating.
The first thing I notice while dancing
outside the studio
and in nature…is…wildness.
A wildness deeply rooted to self.
It is becoming obvious when dancing in the woods,
also, that I am never alone.
Every movement, every gesture, every choice
is in relation.

Tundra Biome:
The tundra biome is about extreme distance,
silence, and total exposure.
Spatial distance has a feeling.
There is a whole range of sensations
between near and far.
Silence has qualities: spacious silence,
historic silence, internal silence.
In the tundra, there is a landscape of silence.

While in the biomes, my partner filmed my improvisations with landscape. After each biome, I attended artist residencies where I took this raw footage and created video-dances and expressive >>





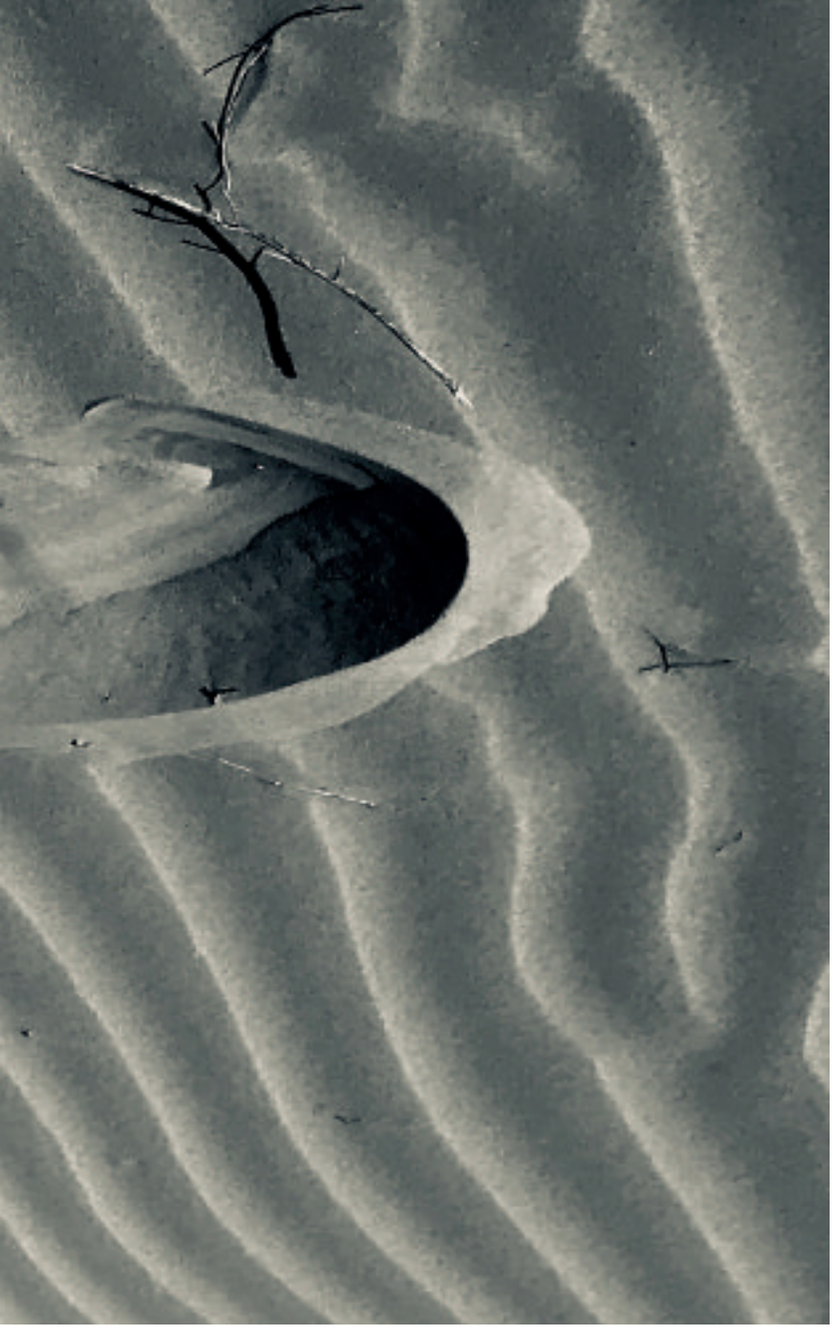








All images: ©Gottlob/Hulme





‘This ethical aspect of my biome journey has now become as important as my co-creative experiences with nature.”

black/white photos. Scattered throughout this essay are artistic photos my partner and I created of my improvisations with landscape.

Ethical considerations

There was a time in the biomes where I questioned this artistic path. I was dancing in the temperate rainforest biome while loggers were scheduled to cut down the very large ancient trees I was improvising with. Blockades were set up by activists to stop the logging trucks from entering. I joined the protesters and wondered, maybe I should stop dancing and devote myself to this type of activism. Ultimately, I decided this was not my path, but ecojustice and environmental ethics were now beginning to enter my awareness.

Instead of focusing my energies on protesting, I decided to follow my journey, to seek out other artists and researchers to see if they were having similar experiences with nature. Serendipitously, my partner found a new master’s program called Movement, Mind, Ecology at Schumacher College in Devon, England, a progressive college for ecological studies. This program seemed like a perfect fit.

I joined this programme in 2023. I was introduced to environmental philosophy & ethics, embodied ecology, and eco-artistic practices with place. This program ignited my passion for the ethical side of my biome experiences. Initially, I went into the biomes to explore dance, but there was a whole other side to the biome experience that I was just starting to realize. In every biome I went to, there were signs, museums, and writings raising awareness of the horrible treatment of indigenous people by settlers. Also, besides the obvious activist blockades in the rain forest, there were also industrial remnants left behind on the landscape in every biome, such as oil pump-jacks, roads, fences, ‘do not enter’ signs, old mine shafts, clear cut tree-stumps, and machinery that attest to the over-use and mis-use of the landscape by oil and gas companies, logging industry, agricultural development, mining, and ecotourism. This ethical aspect of my biome journey has now become as important as my co-creative experiences with nature.

In addition to this ethical learning, the master’s programme at Schumacher College also offered the philosophical lens of feminist new materialism >>

Right: ©Gottlob/Hulme

"Overall and foundational to this ecocurriculum is the premise that knowing, learning, and thinking are embodied acts. Through moving, with others, with landscape... knowing comes into being."

(Coole & Frost, 2010) (1). This theoretical field of inquiry was very important to me and highlights the co-constitutive nature of reality. According to these feminist scholars, things (objects, people) do not arise individually in this world; they co-arise through intra-actions (Barad, 2007) (2). This perspective eerily concurs and reflects my co-creative biome experiences. I realized that on my journey into landscape I was finding aesthetic moments, not creating them. Improvisations felt more like revealings and less like makings. This philosophical realization inspired me to combine all my experiences and share them in a way that gives back to nature with gratitude.

Creating an Ecological Dance Pedagogy

Originally, I imagined this offering to be an outdoor performance, a video showing, or a lecture. But those approaches didn't seem quite right to me. I thought the best way would be to design something artistic and pedagogic that honors those co-creations with nature while also offering people a chance to immerse themselves for an extended period of time. Over the last year, pedagogy had become increasingly more important to me. I see pedagogy as a method of merging art with activism, of merging embodiment with research. Therefore, for my dissertation, I designed Dancing the Biomes, an ecological dance pedagogy.

Dancing the Biomes (DTB) is a trans-disciplinary ecocentric 12-week, 2-day-a-week, indoor/outdoor ecopedagogy designed for dancers as well as environmental humanities students. This embodied ecocurriculum combines the somatic and aesthetic experiences I had in the ten biomes with the environmental ethical concepts I learned in my master's programme: nature's rights, eco-feminism, queer ecologies, deep mapping, and embodied cartography. DTB sessions are trans-disciplinary and combine learning from many different perspectives. In a typical session there will be:

- slides
- discussions
- somatic experiences
- movement improvisations
- mindful awareness activities
- videography/photography
- drawing & diagramming
- movement explorations
- academic readings
- collaboration
- creativity.

DTB sits somewhere between the realms of dance and environmental humanities. It can be seen as bringing ecojustice into body-based dance practices. Or, on the flip side, it can be seen as bringing embodiment practices into environmental sciences. Overall and foundational to this ecocurriculum is the premise that knowing, learning, and thinking are embodied acts. Through moving, with others, with landscape... knowing comes into being.

Collaboratively Moving Forwards

Although the experiences in DTB originated in North America, with its trees, waters, mountains, and trails, DTB, can be explored in any landscape. In the English countryside, where I am now, I find the magic in the mixture of culture & nature, in the merging of myth & ecology. The co-created moments in this landscape, for me, arise with the rough-cut coasts, the surrounding vast ocean, the wildness hidden in the hedges, the rocks placed in ancient patterns on the landscape, and the sounds of old stories seeping through the rivers.

I will continue to develop DTB within this unique Devon landscape, through an action-research based PhD, starting in Autumn, 2024. I welcome participants – dancers, non-dancers, artists, researchers, environmental humanities students, curious folk – who are interested in helping build DTB from the inside out. If there is anyone who would like to collectively explore or participate in DTB within the local moors, woods, and rivers, please reach out.

References

1. Coole, D. and Frost, S. (eds.) (2010) New materialisms: Ontology, agency, and politics. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

2. Barad, K. (2007) Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning. Durham: Duke University Press.

Info

stephanie.r.gottlob@gmail.com

