

THE KING STAG (AND I): DANCING TRANS-CORPOREALITY  
AND QUEER ECOLOGY ON THE STAGE  
AND IN THE GARDEN

by

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## ABSTRACT

What does it mean to dance ecologically? *The Mists* and *The King Stag* were two works presented in vastly different settings, the first as part of an outdoor family event, the other at a modern dance thesis concert on the proscenium. Both of these works featured a herd of stag-human dancers led by the character of the King Stag. Though presented in vastly different venues, *The Mists* and *The King Stag* started from the same basic question; how do I intersect environmental justice with dance making? This question transformed through my process to become; what does it mean to dance ecologically? To answer these questions I weave between my histories, focus groups with performers, readings of *The Mists* and *The King Stag*, and the theories of queer ecology and trans-corporeality.

Ultimately, I propose that dancing ecologically is not a dance about an environmental idea of 'Nature', but rather a dance that dismantles Natural tropes, opening up an epistemological space for environmental justice concerns to emerge. Weaving my histories, theoretical perspectives, focus groups with performers, and readings of *The Mists* and *The King Stag*, this thesis conceives of and questions the possibilities of dancing ecologically. Ultimately, this thesis concludes that dancing ecologically means recognizing the ways in which nature is dancing all the time, in the performance and on the page.

For Avila Day, the strangest stranger of them all

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

*(May 2015) I'm standing in the middle of a grassy knoll at the highest point of Red Butte Garden, the Wasatch Range looming behind me. If I walk downhill to the parking lot, the Great Salt Lake shimmers in the sun, framed by cars proudly wearing Protect Wild Utah bumper stickers. With a stretch of my imagination, I can just glimpse the red rocks of Arches National Park and the deep rifts of Canyonlands to the distant south. The weight of the Utah sun is heavy on my back. Truly this is a protected and beautiful space.*

A deep inhale before the mammoth creative frenzy that drove *The Mists*, this moment is a memory from our first day of rehearsals. *The Mists* would eventually be a three-hour immersive dance theatre production that followed seven different main characters through the early days of King Arthur. These characters, Morgaine Le Fey, Guinevere, Viviane (the Lady of the Lake), Arthur, Lancelot, the King Stag, and the Queen of the Fey, danced alongside an ensemble of priestesses, fairies, stags, nuns, and courts people. All told, the cast of dancers, actors, and musicians numbered over 60 performers, professionals, and college and high school students. *The Mists* was collaboratively created by Alysia Ramos and I, integrated into Red Butte Garden's annual

Halloween event, *Garden After Dark*, for an audience of nearly 7000 people.

*(November 2015) A heavy green cloak flows behind the anthropomorphic creature sprinting clockwise around the stage. Adorned with antlers, the freckles painted on her face and arms read deer, even as her breasts say female-bodied human. Overhead, Terry Tempest Williams' monologue battles Lil' Wayne, her words rising above his driving beat; "Give us this bread, our daily bread, more, more, more... it is never enough."*

Following the large-scale production of *The Mists*, I adapted a section of the work into a six-minute solo for performer 'Anna.' This piece, *The King Stag*, premiered in November 2015 at the Hayes Christensen Theatre in the Marriott Center for Dance.

Though presented in vastly different venues, *The Mists* and *The King Stag* started from the same basic question; how do I intersect environmental justice with dance making? With an even finer point, how do I make this work from my positionality and histories? And, once made, how could this work be understood? To answer these questions, I weave between my histories, focus groups with performers, readings of *The Mists* and *The King Stag*, and the theories of queer ecology and trans-corporeality.

Queer ecology and trans-corporeality emphasize deconstruction, dissolving boundaries, and a willingness to be ideologically disoriented. These theories explore the many ways that nature is all around us, within us, composing us, acting on us. They do not neglect the action of the socially constructed facets of nature, effectively weaving material and discursive. Through these theories, the fundamental split between nature and culture is disrupted, disturbed, reconceived. Similarly, I attempted to disrupt, disturb, and reconceive this and other hierarchies in all three of my creative works: *the Mists*, *The*

*King Stag*, and this written thesis.

Ultimately, my work explores the possibilities of dancing ecologically in the contemporary moment. I propose that dancing ecologically is not a dance about an environmental idea of ‘Nature’, but rather a dance that dismantles Natural tropes, opening up an epistemological space for environmental justice concerns to emerge. I conclude that dance, whether in the garden, at the proscenium, or on the page, is uniquely able to create this epistemological space.

### Towards Environmental Justice

I’ve been thinking environmental thoughts – specifically environmental justice thoughts - since I arrived at the University of Utah three years ago. From the deepest place in my gut, I know that the unequal distribution of environmental ‘goods’ - such as water - and ‘bads’ - such as toxic waste, are the most pressing issues of our time.<sup>1</sup> My hope has been to create dance that helps me and those in my community build intention around our role in these unjust relationships. We are victims, perpetrators, and spectators, but maybe we could also be change makers.

The environmental justice movement is the space where these burning issues are explored, and I’ve been trying different approaches to integrating this space with dance. I’ve choreographed from environmental and social issues, personal experience, and

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<sup>1</sup> The environmental justice movement intersects environmentalism with social justice, redefining ‘environment’ to mean any place that people live, work, play, and learn in order to question the relationship between social locations such as race, class, gender, and environment.

community-based research data. I've taught Socially Engaged Dance & Performance from an environmental justice lens, and been the Teaching Assistant for an interdisciplinary Environmental Justice course. I've even undertaken an ethnographic research of Ananya Dance Theatre, a contemporary Indian company of women artists of color who do environmental justice work.

As part of this ethnographic study, director/choreographer Ananya Chatterjea told me, "I want you to think about the distinction between political work and social justice work."<sup>2</sup> For her, the distinction between political art making and social justice dance is the difference between dancing about an issue and doing something through the dance on that issue. This means that social justice dance involves extended relationships within communities, a consideration of justice in all aspects of the creative process, and coming into relationship with one's own positionality within the issue(s) addressed. Similarly, environmental justice activists consider parity in distribution, procedure, and representation, emphasizing that they tell their own stories. There is a level of integrity involved in justice work which one cannot fake. Social (or environmental) justice is not a label to be slapped upon a political piece.

Ananya's distinction placed my burning desire to see environmental justice explored through dance in a different light. I quickly realized that I couldn't cobble together an environmental justice piece about a random issue facing marginalized populations (of whom I'm not a part) in nine months, nor make a dance and then call it 'environmental justice.' The integrity of my thesis work would have to come from within my own stories, from how my own privileges and oppressions interconnect with societal

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<sup>2</sup> Chatterjea, Ananya. Phone call with author. Salt Lake City, September 20, 2013.

and environmental injustices. Starting from my own story necessitates a look at where I come from.

### I Come From

I come from the smell of pig shit and the cornfields of Southeast Michigan. I come from a small town farming community, on the side of a defunct railroad whose rotting ties my brother and I turn into props for our adventures. I come from no cable tv and home canned green beans. I come from good, kind, genuine people who cared about the world. I come from fundamental evangelicalism, “raise your hand and ask Jesus into your heart” Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, and Friday evening church services. That’s True Love Waits, abstinence-only sex education, and can’t wear short skirts so as not to cause a man to stumble into lustful looking. That’s my science textbook’s chapter on creationism, and another explaining how global warming was a hoax. That’s my government teacher telling us that the best form of government is a theocracy - with God at the head - but since that’s not possible until the Rapture, a republic like the US was an excellent substitute.

Disrupting this narrative, my dance training took me to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to dance in that department while still in middle school. This place was a 45-minute drive and a million worlds away. One memory is vivid in my mind; a graduate student - a black woman, stumbling across the stage, topless, carrying a cross on her back. This is an image of Christ that would not be placed on the flannelgraph in Mr. Smith’s Sunday School class.

Another smell of pig shit. This smell wafting from the Bagmati river in

Kathmandu, Nepal, where a monstrous pig roots at garbage littering the edges of the water. Waters in this place are so polluted that I spend months alternating between giardia and dysentery. From my small town bubble, I was evacuated here. Well, first into a progressive liberal arts college on Michigan's west side, where I accidentally learned critical thinking via a double major in International Studies and Sustainable Business. Then from that context, I spent a semester volunteering in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

My second day at Kalighat, Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying in Kolkata, I was washing my hands when the woman on the cot next to the sink died. She had a bed sore that covered most of her back – a concave opening through which bone, muscle, ligament had been eroded. I knew she was taking her last, shaky breaths but was too scared to go to her and hold her hand. Walking home that evening, I stepped around at least one hundred people sleeping on the sidewalk. I felt like God had been playing with his toys and forgot to clean them up when he went to bed. My fear and disgust were a shameful secret that I hoped the other volunteers could not see.

Two smells, rural Michigan farms struggling in an industrial food system, and polluted Nepalese rivers. These cloying smells are woven together in my mind by the place I come from - religion. My entire history is imbricated with religion, empowering me to act while oppressing me at the same time. This is the master narrative that drives us to far-off places of fertile soil and brown bodies to spread good deeds, and take what we want. At one time we took slaves, now we take stories that make us feel like heroic white people. Once we planted flags on hilltops, now we plant genetically modified seeds. Any dance drawn from my stories would have something to do with my complicities and resistances to my Christian histories.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORIZING ECOLOGICAL DANCE

#### Christianity and the Culture/Nature Binary

“Then, as now, sex and religion are really the two major ways that women had agency.” I’m speaking to a group of students at Brigham Young University about *The Mists*. Based on Miriam Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*, the show was a feminist retelling of Arthurian lore. When my co-director Alysia Ramos and I boiled down the 800+ page book to the pivotal plot points, our main characters were pretty much dancing from sex scene to sex scene. While discussing the show at BYU, one student questioned all the sex. I find myself explaining the way that these interpersonal love and power dynamics play out in the context of a world shifting from pagan animism to Christianity. In *The Mists*, these two worldviews represent opposing ideas about the human relationship to other-than-human nature. Zimmer Bradley’s novel recognizes that our religious beliefs deeply impact our ecologies.<sup>3</sup> And though her book is fictitious, the theme of women finding agency through sex and religion, in the context of a changing world, is reflective of a transformative moment in Western history.

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<sup>3</sup> Author Lynn White, Jr. marks this relationship in “The Historic Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*, ed. Ken Hiltner (New York: Routledge, 2015), 42.

The rise of Christianity in the 16th century and subsequent Scientific Revolution fractured the relationship between humans and nature, normalizing human exploitation of nature.<sup>4</sup> Where once humans had viewed themselves as part of the organism of nature,<sup>5</sup> nature became a resource for commodification,<sup>6</sup> a passive, empty space to serve as a backdrop for the human world. Part of this transformation was not just the exploitation of nature through the rise of industry but also the way that it was romanticized. Once nature became Nature; an idealized space wild, preserved, and unsoiled by human influence,<sup>7</sup> it could be used as a “material and spiritual food”<sup>8</sup> for human sustenance. The emerging Christian worldview thus placed culture and nature in opposition, considering the natural world separate from, and below, the human realm.<sup>9</sup> For ecocritical, poststructuralist, and feminist theorists, among others, this dualism between culture/nature and resulting hierarchy still undergirds the many other binaries that control the Western world;

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Merchant, “Nature as Female,” in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*, ed. Ken Hiltner (New York: Routledge, 2015), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>7</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*, ed. Ken Hiltner (New York: Routledge, 2015), 110.

<sup>8</sup> Merchant, “Nature as Female,” 14.

<sup>9</sup> Jodie Allinson, “Training Strategies for Performance and Landscape: Resisting the Late-Capitalist Metaphor of Environment as Consumable Resource,” *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 5, no. 1 (2014): 7 & 18, and Shane Phelan, “Intimate Distance: The Dislocation of Nature in Modernity,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 45, no 2 (1992): 385.

male/female, inside/outside, mind/body.<sup>10</sup> In these binaries, the latter is the denigrated aspect that defines the former. One term defines itself by driving out the other term; man becomes not woman, mind is not body, inside is not outside, and culture becomes whatever is not natural.<sup>11</sup>

Postmodern critical theorists including Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze attempt to deconstruct these binaries by exploring their foundation of language, discourse, and culture.<sup>12</sup> By emphasizing the linguistic aspect of these hierarchies, theorists demonstrate that the hierarchies are socially constructed, and thus - can be deconstructed. Feminist theories have followed this linguistic turn,<sup>13</sup> focusing on language, discourse, and culture rather than the material of the body itself. This focus is, in part, a retreat from problematic and essentialized associations of women with Nature (the idea).<sup>14</sup> For many feminist theorists, Nature was long used to enforce heterosexuality and subordinate women's bodies and the bodies of people of color, associating these bodies with ideas of 'women's place,' and 'natural sexuality.'

While this linguistic turn has been fruitful in deconstructing oppressive hierarchies, theorist Stacy Alaimo points out that there remains one major dualism that is

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<sup>10</sup> Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, "Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Alaimo & Hekman, Introduction, 2 – 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

generally not questioned in postmodern theorizing - that of language/reality.<sup>15</sup> The existing feminist theorizing, even that 'of the body' (such as Judith Butler's seminal works), does not adequately account for the way that the substance of the body acts. Alaimo explains; "Predominant [feminist] paradigms do not deny the material existence of the body... but they do tend to focus exclusively on how various bodies have been discursively produced, which casts the body as passive, plastic matter."<sup>16</sup> Afraid of the kind of essentializing that associates women with vaginas with motherhood with gendered normativity, feminist theory has shied away from theorizing the material biology of the body, focusing on the social aspects of the body - the way that power and culture create and reinforce race, class, gender, sexuality. This hesitance to deal with nature itself has unintentionally reinforced the Christian worldview of nature as a substance to be written upon or taken from, even in progressive feminist and environmental work.

In writing my choreography for this thesis, I slip between the ideological structures emphasizing social constructionism that feminist and postmodern theorizing have imprinted in my brain and the reality of working with the physical body in material nature. My existing models and conceptions of ecological dance from the work of artists such as Anna Halprin, Jennifer Monson, and Nigel Stewart (and those theorizing their artistic labor) seem to focus on the material body sensing itself in an idealized Nature, to the exclusion of questions of social locations like culture, race, class, gender, and

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<sup>15</sup> Alaimo & Hekman, Introduction, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 237.

sexuality. Juxtaposed with this, performance pushing the boundaries of discourses around social locations rarely seems to intersect with ‘the environment.’ It’s as if this culture/nature binary is played out in dance as well as in feminist theory. It wasn’t until grappling with my ethnographic study of Ananya Dance Theatre, a company working in both social and environmental spheres, that I discovered emerging models of ecological theorizing strong enough to traverse these spaces and hold my own work in the process.

There are two emerging models of ecological theory pushing at the boundaries of the relationship between the socially constructed and the material: the first - Stacy Alaimo’s *trans-corporealities*, the second - Timothy Morton’s *queer ecology* (which he also calls *the ecological thought*). Both of these theorists are ecocritics, applying ecological ideas to/from the literary field. Alaimo takes a specifically eco-feminist slant, and Morton a postmodern and critical theory perspective. The contours of their theories create a foundation to support my ecological writings of *The Mists* and *The King Stag*.

#### Trans-corporeality

Stacy Alaimo’s *trans-corporeality* is movement, traffic, and exchange between human and nonhuman actors. It is “the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment.’ Trans-corporeality as a theoretical site, is a place where corporeal theories and environmental theories meet and mingle in productive ways.”<sup>17</sup> With a foot in both material and discursive spaces, trans-corporeality maps complex connections between bodies, foregrounding the agency of the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 238.

nature that we often cast in the background role. In this theoretical site, ‘nature’ is a world of “fleshy beings, with their own needs, claims, and actions.”<sup>18</sup> These beings are not just acted upon by the human world (as in the case of anthropogenic climate change) but also act out and act back as in the hurricanes, floods, and other natural disasters that result from climate change.

If matter acts, it has agency. Starting from the belief that matter is an activity, not a passive substance, we can expand ideas of agency to include the material world. Agency does not need to be a human attribute we apply to the material but rather agency could be re-understood as the transit between bodies.<sup>19</sup> Agency is an enactment - an action, or, as Alaimo calls it, a ‘material-discursive form of performativity.’<sup>20</sup>

The agency of the nonhuman world is outside the boundaries of the human body, and also within. Our bodies host aliens, amoeba and bacteria in an endosymbiotic relationship.<sup>21</sup> Mixed up in the transfer of nutrients from the mother’s placenta to the embryo are countless parasites.<sup>22</sup> Human bodies are “composed, recomposed and decomposed by other bodies,”<sup>23</sup> even our organs themselves are ever-transforming, creating their own existence through performance, actively responding to change and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 247 – 248.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2010), 34.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>23</sup> Alaimo quoting Gatens in Alaimo, *Trans-Corporealities*, 255.

contingency.<sup>24</sup> Nothing is static, all is movement. Trans-corporeality explores the choreography of these movements, making them visible.

Dancers intuitively understand trans-corporeality because we live in that epistemological space, whether we realize it or not. We are dancing with the agency of other-than-human fleshy bodies at all times. One day, the arabesque balance works at this spot on the barre and the next day, in another spot on the barre, it doesn't. It's all the things inside my tissue - how much sleep I got, the two glasses of wine I drank the night before, how tight my hamstrings happen to be today (and the interactions of the cells and organisms that compose bed, wine, hamstrings). But also, there is Salt Lake City's air quality. Dancers in this Department talk about how much worse our dancing is when the inversion is in town. Regardless of studies to the contrary telling us we're protected indoors, we know that the air outside is the air inside. And when an instructor offhandedly sorts us into two groups of 'men and women - men, you first' (which is basically organizing by dicks and vaginas, since many people in this class both dispute and disrupt these categories of 'men' and 'women'), my steps increasingly falter. There is less space to dance - six men to fourteen women - but also the social oppression implicit in this essentialized classification of myself and my peers, accompanied by the ever-present selection and promotion of men above women inscribes upon my arabesque, throwing my balance off. What physical, environmental, social, geographic factors were colluding together in each moment - inside and outside the body - of their own volition, outside of the control of my mind? I've mapped only a few.

Trans-corporeality doesn't just acknowledge the agency of these many factors,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 245.

but like my example, places the emphasis on the movements across and between these fleshy bodies, demonstrating the many intersections between the bodies in the environment, the bodies in the body, and their discursive inscriptions. This space acknowledges the “often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, non-human creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors.”<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, Alaimo and other feminists working in similar areas frequently call upon performance metaphors to explain the concepts with which they are working. Whether accidentally or intentionally, they’re acknowledging that performance is a site where these forces are already at play. Performance, including dance, negotiates between the material and the discursive, just as the epistemological space of trans-corporeality is attempting to do.

We are profoundly shaped by what we experience, see, and know - which is the point of social construction. Yet also, nonhuman nature and the human body talk back, challenge, and resist these cultural constructions.<sup>26</sup> Alaimo’s materialist turn isn’t describing a group of fleshy bodies that exist before culture - for culture to inscribe upon (that’s more essentialism), rather that materiality (the stuff of these fleshy bodies) is “co-constituted by various forms of power and knowledge, some of these being more or less ‘cultural,’ and some more or less ‘natural,’” though as she notes “such distinctions have become increasingly problematic.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 243.

It's not just that humans transform worlds through human actions - for better or worse, it's that nature transforms the human world through nature's actions. Nature is more than a resource for the construction of social identities, and deconstructions of these constructions. It's also more than just a resource for plucking and appropriating inspiration for dance. We are dancing with our material and social identities at all times, but not just ours – also those of the people dancing with us. And too, at all times, we dance with the things that are normally considered the 'background' – the environment. Considering the way trans-corporeality deconstructs the inside/outside binary, it becomes clear that we are dancing with nature, as nature all the time – inside the studio and proscenium as much as in the garden.

### Queer Ecology

I made two choreographic works - one outside and one inside. One rehearsed primarily at Red Butte Gardens, the other in Studio 220 at the Marriott Center for Dance. My first year of graduate school, I was bringing my toddler into Studio 220 on Tuesday mornings for my contact improvisation class. Unbeknownst to me, another student who frequently danced in this studio contracted a staph infection; her skin was reacting to a colony of staphylococcus bacteria; the kind of infection that is generally mild to adults but can become quite serious in children. Between the time this student thought she was having a bad break out on her face, to the day she realized it was staph, and then the several day lag of time before the studio was cleaned, I'd brought my daughter into the studio several times and let her roll around. It was only after the fact I found out that I'd been exposing her to staph -- because the students weren't notified about the infection

until the studios had been cleaned. All of a sudden, the benign space of Studio 220 took on a sinister alter ego, and I was furious to accidentally find my child in this toxic environment. Another semester, someone left the windows of this same Studio 220 open during the night. When the first students arrived in the morning, they found little white marks all over the blue gray marley. Birds had come in during the night and pooped on the floor. At this time I was pregnant for my second child, so again found myself negotiating a potentially hazardous eruption in an otherwise benign environment. During technique class, I tried to avoid rolling on the bird poop, which lingered for weeks on the floors.

There are literally billions of different organisms living in these studios - composing the marley, windows, floors, doors, air, each of these beings, organic and inorganic, driven by their own agency, acting and reacting in both benign (to me) and toxic (to me) ways. But who is 'me'? Is it my consciousness that is harmed? Or is it my liver? Or is it my baby - who is their own being but also still *in utero*, a pseudo-sentient, ever-evolving parasite taking up habitation in my abdomen. This dizzy spiral of possibilities and disintegration of the outside and the inside is an integral aspect of Timothy Morton's *ecological thought*. In the ecological thought, Nature is not ever really 'out there', and the idea of it as being something wild and untamed, separate from our daily lives, actually never really existed except as an idea.<sup>28</sup> The birds, the marley, the baby, me, we're all not Nature, but if not, -- what?

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According to Morton, we're *strange strangers in the mesh*. *The mesh* is his

<sup>28</sup> Wendy Arons quoting Timothy Morton in "Queer Ecology/Contemporary Plays," *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 4 (2012): 567.

metaphor for the interconnectedness of all things, a concept that displaces the person attempting to conceptualize it as an interconnected life form. He explains;

*“All life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings. We know even more about how life forms have shaped Earth (think of oil, of oxygen - the first climate change cataclysm.) We drive around using crushed dinosaur parts. Iron is mostly a byproduct of bacterial metabolism. So is oxygen. Mountains can be made of shells and fossilized bacteria. Death and the mesh go together in another sense, too, because natural selection implies extinction.”*<sup>29</sup>

*The mesh* makes the idea of Nature seem kind of trite. *The mesh* is different from the web of life; it’s not a fragile group of discrete beings hanging together by tendrils with humans sitting de facto at the center desperately trying to undo the Industrial Revolution. *The mesh* is tougher somehow, grosser. And it is intimate. *The mesh* isn’t out there, away from us; it is us, it is inside us, we are inside of it. Thinking *the mesh* means embracing difference and sameness, it means “[c]onfronting the fact that all beings are related to each other negatively and differentially, in an open system without a center or edge.”<sup>30</sup> These beings who are woven together in *the mesh*, especially those we historically called ‘animals,’ are *strange strangers*.

*Strange strangers* becomes a discourse that radically reconceives the startling interconnectedness, mutation, and disjointedness of human and other-than-human. Echoing Alaimo’s ideas about reconceiving agency, Morton proposes to reconceive subjectivity as a performance. Animals display imagination, use tools, demonstrate compassion, and improve skills and learning over time.<sup>31</sup> Are these *strange strangers*

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<sup>29</sup> Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

less sentient than humans? Morton points out that if both humans and animals took the Turing Test for artificial intelligence, we'd all come up 'not nonpersons.'<sup>32</sup> The ecological thought thinks us next to these other not nonpersons, "neither me nor not-me."<sup>33</sup> Thinking in this way is connecting with *the mesh*; "vast yet intimate: there is no here or there, so everything is brought within our awareness. The more we analyze, the more ambiguous things become..."<sup>34</sup>

Intimacy in many forms, including sexuality, becomes a crucial aspect of the ecological thought. Morton weaves a startling, spinning 'ecology without Nature'<sup>35</sup> by digging into the depths of Darwin's evolutionary theory. In the ecological thinking of Morton and other queer ecologists, queer desire is the 'quintessential life force,'<sup>36</sup> the engine driving the car of evolution. In Morton's hands, Darwin's evolutionary theory is revealed to be both nonteleological and arbitrary.<sup>37</sup> Living beings evolve according to their environments but are not naturally 'fitted' for a special purpose in their environments.<sup>38</sup> Giving example after example of redundant evolutionary features (like

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>36</sup> Arrons, *Queer Ecology*, 568.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 568.

<sup>38</sup> Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 29.

nipples on men), Morton emphasizes evolution is about mutation, not location. Though Darwin's famous 'survival of the fittest' is often deployed to explain natural selection as a linear pathway towards the right biological fit at the right geographic place at the right linear time, this is a misreading of Darwin's theory. For Morton, evolution is more about the pointless and gratuitous nature of change<sup>39</sup> and the randomness, and contingency that are driven by sexual display.<sup>40</sup> Evolution, in short, is queer, and so is the ecological thought.

### Dancing These Theories Into Written Words

When I read *The Mists* and *The King Stag*, I see a host of seemingly disparate elements - the 'background' to the dance. I see the space, the sociopolitical and sexual histories of the artists and myself, the political ideologies of Salt Lake City, the weight of the props in the performers' hands, where the props came from, and how these props ended up on the stage. All of these informed the choreographic choices but not necessarily in clear or linear ways. From a trans-corporeal and queer ecological perspective, I propose that these seemingly tangential concerns are not only important to the works but that mapping significant traffic between these unexpected agencies and how they work on each other through the creative process is the most crucial task for this thesis.

I attempt to dance these perspectives into writing by focusing on interconnections

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 37.

and passes, weaving between disjointed moments as a way to make sense of the patterns in the work. Each section in Chapter Four addresses one entry point into this intercrossing highway of activity between the fleshy bodies of the human, other-than-human, socially constructed, and material. The sections address People, Choreography, Space, Props, Stories, and Deer, in that order. I begin with people and end with deer, which are the two categories transgressed by one group of characters in *The Mists* - and thus, (in my opinion) the most fruitful site for theorizing these dancing works. So throughout this section, I look to the King Stag and her herd to teach us something about the movements between fleshy bodies and ways to transgress the culture/nature binaries that bind us.

## CHAPTER THREE

### WEAVING DANCING STORIES

#### How Anna Became the King Stag / On People

*(November 2015, Marriott Center for Dance) The stage lights slowly come up. Downstage right, the King Stag stands with her back to the audience. Her pinkish-tan shirt is speckled with small white dots, harem style pants close around bare ankles. A pair of antlers rest atop her short blonde hair, outlined by bright white cyc. These antlers at first glance appear like bone, several tiers high, secured with an elastic band under the King's chin. Directly in front of her, a green cape hangs on a hanger, apparently suspended in mid-air. Striking a note reminiscent of Lothlorien elves, the green wool cloak with its full girth and hood is calf height, fastened by a button at the throat.*

Anna's first role in *The Mists* was not the King Stag but rather a gender-bending Lancelot. Yet, early in the process, it became clear that something about her in the Lancelot role wasn't the right fit in the context of the event. What role worked for Anna? What would allow her strengths as a performer to emerge? While creating material for Lancelot, she had most come alive during the abstract improvisations, and she had lots of ideas about guiding the stag cast. She was also passionate about the queer aspects of

Lancelot (in our story his adoration for Guinevere masked his real love for Arthur), interested in performing across both straight/gay and male/female lines.

Together, Anna and I started to imagine that maybe the King Stag (a role yet to be cast) was another facet of Lancelot - Lancelot's animagus. If so, it seemed this King Stag was a perfect opportunity for Anna to work from her strengths, build on the material she'd already created, and guide a cast. Her breasts, face, and hips marking her as a woman in the performance, we still titled her "The King Stag," a character who slips between human animal and nonhuman animal, between man and woman.

The movement material for her character would be developed over the months of making *The Mists*. Excerpts of this movement material I adapted for the stage. In taking the King Stag from her roots in the Garden onto the proscenium, I grappled with presenting my inquiries while also leaving room for audience interpretation. At times I was too didactic, other times I was too vague. In order to bring the audience into my world, I would need to frame the dance with costuming, music, set, and props that could present my ideas without micromanaging the King Stag's story.

I started with a poem by Terry Tempest Williams, an ecological writer. Her words were abstract enough that they could have multiple meanings, yet she was directly addressing my themes of nature, religion, gender, and power. I placed her poem with a number of different pieces of music. Oddly, the music that worked the best was *A Milli* by Lil' Wayne, a song that I had on my iPhone, whose beat reminded me of my dance team days. To me, Wayne was a jarring disruption to Terry in terms of content, yet still supported her anxious syntax with his driving beat. This kind of juxtaposition and interruption overlaying an anxious, driving beat became the aesthetic markers of the *The*

*King Stag* that I used to adapt her movement material for the stage.

Creating Stag Bodies (Together) / On Choreography

*(May 2015) This morning, I woke up with a vision of Dance Team Stags. You know how a really good dance team moves in total unison, down to the placement of their hands? Well, I imagined our stags doing that up and down one of the long pathways of Red Butte Garden on their way to the battle between Arthur and the King Stag. I loved being on a dance team at my alma mater. After years of pre-professional ballet training, the brazen sexuality of our dances was totally liberating; I finally felt powerful and no longer a little girl waiting for a correction from her teacher. This was a Catholic college so we had to hide the sex a little bit. Actually, maybe the sex was in plain sight. During a game with a rival Baptist college, whose students signed a contract saying they wouldn't dance, we performed a hip swinging 80's heavy rock medley. In the middle of Jon Bon Jovi's crescendo, a student heckler actually shouted "Sluts!" at us. When I brought the idea of Dance Team Stags to rehearsal, it was sort of tongue-in-cheek and abashedly. Dance team is not high art, after all! That's just a four-year blank space on my dance CV filled with the male gaze! However, after years of abstract improvisations, the dancers were delighted by its vulgarity. We morphed Dance Team Stags into a traveling phrase, which became the beginnings of a character body for the group.*

The stags always rehearsed in their land; a grassy lawn across from the little lake at the base of Red Butte Gardens. We had a broad spectrum of source material: improvisation scores adapted from games like freeze tag that Alysia had created during our early rehearsals in May, my vision of "dance team stags" moving in unison, and the

collective pool of knowledge the dancers brought about their characters. One stag had just returned from a weekend residency in Montana when we began rehearsing. During her trip, she observed a herd of elk traveling together. Oddly echoing our casting, they had one (male) leader and five or so (female) followers in the herd. Their pattern of travel became an early improvisation score. Another stag had an idea of a score that involved vocalizations and singing. We began with that score and added rules that had them singing to each other, traveling near and far.

In addition to dance team stags, an underlying movement motif was “stag in drag.” This phrase emerged in our early rehearsals after one dancer started walking with a jutting hip and contorted torso during an improvisation score. Her slow rolling step gave off the feeling of a drag artist walking down the runway. The term “stag in drag” seemed to evoke movements that worked with the character, so we kept pushing the physicality further. The dancers made shapes inspired by the idea of “stag in drag,” running, walking, traveling as a herd and individually. We took drag into the hands, the head, and always - the hips.

Here was the raw movement material - what would we do with it? There was a space in the Garden that called for just this kind of material. This space, a long walkway next to a small cut-out balcony on stilts, overlooked a wooded area of the Garden. I hoped that putting dance in this part of the Garden could grab the audience’s attention as they walked through the event.

The stags and I went to the walkway to work. I asked each dancer to come up with a sequence of three poses based on Dance Team stags, stag in drag, and our other improvisation scores. When they showed their poses to the group, I was drawn to the

ones with dynamic distal edges: crazy hand shapes, sharp gaze, contorted hips. When one of the stags showed such a pose, I'd grab and keep it. Those poses that felt repetitive or generic, I cut. After culling the poses, we put them into a long series which all the stags learned.

This series would take the stags to their major scene - the battle between Arthur and the King Stag. Accordingly, the series needed to move, and have an energetic build that could explode into a battle. I had them adapt their poses to fit along edge of the cut-out, holding on to the edge as if it was a barre. I knew that dancing along the edge of the path would allow the audience to walk past, if desired, or give kids room to join in. The stags begin this series in a single line in perfect unison, yelping and howling to stay together and to grab people's attention. Then, when my attention began to slip as a viewer, I had them go from a single line into a double line, turning the poses into a slow, regal prance. My attention began to slip again, so we morphed their movement into a canon. By this time, I could sense that the audience would need a dramatic shift in quality to stay engaged. So the unison disintegrated into a running herd score, before collecting again at the battle scene.

These improvisation scores and set choreography contributed to the early development of the stags' character bodies. Building 'character bodies' happened as we realized early in the creative process that all the dancers, and in particular the stags, needed to develop a body for their characters that could carry them through a potentially tumultuous and unpredictable performance environment. It wouldn't be enough to choreograph steps or sequences; these stags needed a physicalized personality. "What is your stag body?" "How do you get into your stag body?" I would charge the performers

to explore during our early rehearsals. I quickly realized that many of the stags were already dancemakers and improvisers, and not only capable, they were also excited about coming up with answers for themselves. They used the set choreography as a basis and jumping off point for the improvised and acting sections of the evening. As the process continued, I would develop, guide, and shape the scenes. My focus was encouraging the artists to contribute ideas towards developing their character bodies. “What do you think about this?” I’d ask. Or, “Maybe it should be this? How does that feel as your character?” Or I’d say “Hm, I’m thinking you need to do this at that moment.” We would make a lot of jokes, debate, push and pull, and connect/collide. I loved how these moments of both laughter and conflict brought the focus back to the work and the integrity of the characters in relation to themselves and the environment in which they danced.

As the dancers took on the responsibility for the integrity of their characters, they also took on other jobs as well, such as making costumes, coordinating casts, and scheduling rehearsals. This caused a radical shift in roles. No longer central as choreographer with ‘my’ vision, or even ‘our’ (Alysia and my) vision, I was coach and companion for dancers. I felt at some point that I was facilitating the dancers in this experience but from outside of the role of ‘expert’, all of us were stumbling along together towards the final show. My focus on inquiry partnered with the unconventional setting, decentered me - the choreographer - in the space. Working in this collective way, decisions about the show were drastically dependent on who was there at each moment. The show was developed based off of the specific physical and emotional personality of the dancers, as well as their social identities and the places where these identities intersected with my own.

Dancing with Nature all the Time Because the Inside Is the Outside / On Space

(November 2015) As the lights rise on the King Stag, the audience barely takes in her figure before the cyc is filled in with a colorful wooded forest and trail. *Strike the match, protect the flame, ignite the hymns.* An unseen female narrator begins to talk, slowly at first, then picking up pace as she trots out her syntax. Anna falls into a strong stroll towards the forest-filled cyc, just passing the cloak, she turns smartly on her heel and returns downstage. Pausing at the front of the stage, she sharply bows at her waist. *The spirit of God like a fire is burning, start the city burning, feel the stomach turning, the ache that keeps returning, count your many blessings, name them one by one, it is never enough.* Turning again, she returns, carving a zig-zag pattern in the stage.

What is the difference between the stage, with its projection of a forest, and Red Butte Garden, with its actual trees and plants through the space? One is inside, one outside, yet both of these spaces have material realities and both also have powerful socially constructed narratives. Perhaps these narratives are not as far distinct as they might seem, or maybe there is more interchange between them than seems obvious.

At our first rehearsals for *The Mists*, we had to use a map to find our way around the Garden. It's easy to get lost in this sprawling arboretum, a beautiful 'living landscape.'<sup>41</sup> Conjuring images of rolling hills and oil paintings, the word 'landscape' evokes idyllic notions of the pastoral intended for enjoyment. The Garden, like other landscapes, is designed to exclude the human from the 'natural' space.<sup>42</sup> The natural

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<sup>41</sup> Red Butte Garden. "About Us." RedButteGarden.org <http://www.redbuttegarden.org/about-us> (Accessed April 2, 2016).

world is framed and presented for visual consumption from its paved paths and benches, fixing visitors firmly in the seat of spectator to nature's sensualities. The Garden seems to offer the natural world while actually fixing the viewer outside of it,<sup>43</sup> replicating the effect of a landscape painting, or fittingly, the proscenium.<sup>44</sup>

Like a landscape painting, Red Butte Garden intersects nature and society. The same space filled with natural elements has been constructed by humans, and filled with human built elements: paths, sculptures, benches. This space, a composite of categories of nature and culture, demonstrates that the subject of the landscape - the nature - is not free from cultural coding,<sup>45</sup> nor from careful human management.

Even as we were invited in - to make the show, we were cautioned to stay out - of the natural parts of the garden. In deference to the Garden staff's wishes, we choreographed the entire show on grassy lawns and built features of the garden: planters, paths, and benches. Still, in spite of my many admonitions to the performers to "Avoid the plants!" someone accidentally stepped on the edge of a flower bed during dress rehearsal. After that, several of the long-established volunteers became concerned about the dancers, notifying me each day with a list of any places where the dancers accidentally transgressed the path. The landscape became a specter hovering over our heads. One dancer commented; "It's odd. Though we are dancing 'in the garden,' we

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<sup>42</sup> Jeff Malpas, ed., "Place and the Problem of Landscape," in *The Place of Landscape: Concepts, Contexts, Studies* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>43</sup> Una Chaudhuri, "Land/scape/theory," in *Land/Scape/Theater*, ed. Una Chaudhuri and Elinor Fuchs (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002): 19.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

aren't allowed to touch the plants!"

After months of navigating the tensions between the performers' desire to get their hands dirty in the Garden, and the staffs' need for them to be away from the plants, I had imagined an awkward relationship between the performers and the space. I was a bit surprised by the focus groups, which revealed affinity and a hint of ownership. The performers affectionately described the Garden; "It's like we know the space more than anyone else," one stated. Another, describing a scene where he canoed through the small lake, spoke as if the lake had been designed just for his needs, stating "That little alcove in the reeds that I found - that was nice. And it was just enough space to turn a canoe around - that was convenient." A third performer spoke about how she was grateful to be able to work within the limitations and rules of the space presented by the Garden staff. For her, this helped her to exist in a land instead of having to create her own land the way that she does in a proscenium work.<sup>46</sup>

The dancers developed a dynamic relationship to the Garden despite inhibitions, in large part due to the way that they were immersed in the space, and given time. One character explains "...I didn't have much instruction on [the rafting scene], it was pretty much like 'go out on a canoe.' ... I started out by pushing my canoe to the very back of the lake and sitting there until it was my turn to act, then I figured 'why not have more fun with it?', so I ... [would] canoe around, just look up at the mountains and look at the water sort of things and that started even more things... singing to myself on the canoe because I felt like that was something [my character] would do...." This freedom to

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<sup>46</sup> Performer Focus Group with author. Salt Lake City: December 15, 2015.

explore in the space wasn't intentional, but a result of the vastness of the Garden, the scale of the project, and the challenges for me of getting all the way across the Garden during rehearsal quickly. Because I was working closely with certain casts in one area, I would set some of the other performers free to make material.

This freedom was an invitation to the dancers to build their own adventure, and I hoped to offer a similar invitation for the audience. I knew that my context of inquiries and the audience reception of the work would be at radically different points. Most of what I was thinking about would be subsumed in the context of the *Garden After Dark* event, with its focus on a fun family Halloween. Early on, I decided to embrace this, let my theoretical concerns fall into the background, and enjoy building a show that fit with the specifics of the event. I didn't know how the audience would respond, so I tried to incorporate a little something for every kind of audience member in the choreography. Some of the dancing was done on a mini-stage, which would allow the audience to stop and watch or move on. In other spaces, we had the performers disrupt the paths, hopefully encouraging more interaction. The people who seemed to enjoy the show the most were the kids. Seeing kids get into the performance brought tears of joy to my eyes during the event.

I was equally surprised by how much some of the performers invested in the show. Their sense of the space lingered in their bodies after the show was over. They equated being in the garden with being their characters, describing how much they missed their characters and the space interchangeably. One character, who played a stag, stated "If I go [to Red Butte Garden] again, I'll probably want to be in character and be a stag again... I'll probably start to imagine the scenes that I was in..." Later, this same

artist stated; "... I was so invested [in *The Mists*], I would get lost and forget I was in character... I would make stag noises after we were done when I was just hanging out with my friends."<sup>47</sup> The character and the garden melded together in their memory of the event. The culture/nature binary was broken apart in their experiences of the space, in more ways than one.

Like the Garden, the proscenium, though inside, intersects nature with culture and meaning. I return again to my memories of dancing in Studio 220 throughout my MFA. This same studio where Anna and I rehearsed her solo was a place where nature (in the form of bird shit) acted out and acted back. A tangible reminder that the inside is the outside, the shit on the floor impacted the development of Anna's solo, if only by reminding me that environment is not out there, rather it is here, we are it, it is us. Whether it is in an obvious way – as in the rain that hindered our performance one night in the Garden, or a more subtle way – in the remnants of the shit on the floor of Studio 220 - trans-corporeality tells us not that there is no difference between stage and garden, but that both are filled with agency. This agency acts, interacts, and changes those who act within it.

As I write about the agency of spaces generally, I am asking myself how the agency of the Marriott Center for Dance acted on my choreographic choice making in *The King Stag*. Going into this building, the location of Studio 220 and the Hayes Christensen Theatre, makes me anxious. I am often on edge, never really able to find my stride. In trying to decipher my choreographic decision-making for *The King Stag*, now,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

in retrospect, through my memory of the process, I can see my anxiety reflected in the arc of the work. Anna's dance builds, interrupts, builds, interrupts, five times over, before it abruptly ends. She also never seems to quite find her stride.

In part, my anxiety was because the Hayes Christensen Theatre is not just a proscenium, but a theatre that mostly presents dance, for a dance audience. When choreographing *The Mists*, I was faced with the challenge of a non-dance audience in a non-dance event. I knew many people may not 'get it.' But I also knew the joy of the kids who did get it, and even enjoyed the raw honesty of those who hated the show. When choreographing *The King Stag*, I thought that maybe a more experienced dance audience could come with me into the ideas behind the *The King Stag*, which would be nice. At the same time, I imagined that they would be more critical of the choreographic construction of the work, especially since it was a graduate thesis work.

In early iterations of *The King Stag*, I grappled with a way to demonstrate that I was thinking about nature and commenting on the ways in which Nature is culturally constructed. I had been playing with the idea of using an overhead projector so that Anna could come on stage and literally draw her environment. After several viewings of this version, my committee explained that to them, the symbolism of the projector read more 'middle school' than 'culturally constructed.' It became clear that this prop was distracting rather than supporting my inquiries. I took it out and replaced it with a short animated film of a forest filling in the cyc behind her, an alternate proposed by my committee. This image was still constructing Nature but more effectively framing the entire piece and hopefully transporting the audience.

This incident underscored that though the stage and audience were more known to

me, my context of inquiries could still be radically different from those who intercepted the work. After the opening night, a friend from the Environmental Humanities graduate program asked me “Is this piece intended to juxtapose an anthropocentric with an ecocentric worldview?” A fellow student who is a Mormon recognized the hymns that Terry Tempest Williams uses in her poem, asking “Is this about religion?” Of course, we each come into the space with our stories. I hoped to make my context of inquiries clear. But how these would look to the audience or be received, I could not control. After *The Mists*, a work that was so far from my context of inquiries that they were probably indecipherable, I didn’t even want to control the audience. *The Mists* was an experiment in being surprised each night by the performers, audience, and space. As an art-maker, I loved those visceral surprises. So, with *The King Stag*, I decided to put our stories on the stage and invite the audience to complete the dance with their own experiences.

#### Moving Materials / On Props

*Give us our bread, our daily bread, more, more, slice the bread, slice the wrist that’s threatening to raise.* A spasm interrupts the King Stag’s walk, jerking her body out of its pathway. *See the servant Adam slumped in his Eden, dead from words, dead from Eve.* She gathers herself, returning again to a regal walk and bow. She kneels at the front of the stage, waiting for a magical sword to knight her a member of the round table. *Up, down... one ladder at a time, how high do we dare to go? How low do we dare to go?* A deep bass *thum* overpowers the words of the speaker. Anna whips her head sharply to the left, looking for the sound. Her antlers wiggle in response, revealing their true nature, not bone but something more flexible. She waits for them to fall silent, then turns her head

again, sharply seeking this noise. Faster and faster she twists her head, frantically trying to locate the source, falling head over heels, flinging her body, clawing her way back to the forest.

The bass resolves into *A milli, a milli, a milli, a milli*, Lil' Wayne's classic anthem. Wayne competes with the poem, vying for dominance. Again Anna stands, one last attempt at her walk, jerking and flying out of place, snapping back in line, repeat. The stag fully possesses her body, a fierce dragging step on forced arch. Drawn inexorably towards the cape, she stalks, hips disjointed, feet stumbling over each other and head resting at an awkward angle on her neck. *To anything but here we go to work and work and work, eat work, sleep, work, work and work*. When she reaches the cape, she whirls it over her shoulder, grappling with the complicated clasp and button. The cape is alive, choking her neck, she struggles to get it attached and then sprints, circling the stage.

These props dance. The antlers are white, triangular make up sponges skewered together with wire, carved, and painted. Bouncing in time with Anna's movements, they are a bit of silly puncturing her elegant dance. The cape is a dead weight, green and very heavy, pulling at her shoulders when she runs, dragging the air behind her. These props tell stories of the way that material objects dance, act, form, and create oppressions.

I began wearing pantyhose to church one winter when I was still in the single digits. I hated them - itchy, uncomfortable, ugly, and despite my best efforts, they would always run. But all the little girls at church wore them, so I did too. I was aware of my leg hair that stuck out through my nylons and ashamed of my black unibrow. I wasn't like my best friend with her soft blonde fuzz or even my siblings who had brown hair. These nylons dance in my history like the weight of Anna's cape - a symbol and material object,

scratchy on my skin and pulling me into a way of being that is punctured by my unruly body's actions.

I grappled with the props for the solo quite a bit, trying all different kinds of combinations: a projector, a drawing, a light, no cape, no costume, shoes, make-up, etc. I knew I wanted props, they felt essential to frame my ideas, but I didn't know what exactly would work best. After stripping down all the possibilities, the antlers and the cape remained. I couldn't ever cut them because these two props were inextricable from the King Stag's story and Anna's physicality - she needed them to complete her transformation on the stage.

The props influenced my choreographic choices. The pause in Anna's movements is a choreographed result of allowing the antlers to finish their wave. Her struggle to put on the cape is not aesthetic but real – it was hard for her to get the button done gracefully while running. We choreographed it into the work. The weight of the cape was something she battled against to run around the stage, and that also provided a necessary grounding for the final moments of the dance. These objects literally propped up her dancing, bringing an emotional weight on to the stage with her in this solo.

To me, the props also connected the King Stag and I. They symbolize women's stories of intersecting privileges and oppressions, negotiations of female bodied-ness in Christian families, each of us with our unique histories. In fact, it was these unique histories shared with me by Anna and other performers during the creative process that drove me to grapple with my own positionality – in my gender, my sexuality, my race, my religion. Who am I, a straight woman, in the context of queer performance? Who am I in a Mormon city? Who am I as a white woman in the Environmental Justice

movement, historically driven by persons of color?

I begin to position myself through storytelling. Telling stories in the rehearsal space was a huge aspect of how we worked. We talked about our histories and the micro-aggressions we were facing; we danced with these stories, were pissed about them, danced about them, danced them off. The micro-aggressions, the oppressions big and small, and the privileges, are props that we carry, props that inform and inscribe on our dancing.

We dance our own stories and we dance each others' stories too. The connections between our stories, for me, these were the most vivid and dynamic points for creativity.

#### Seeing Each Other / On Stories

*(November 2015) Rehearsing the King Stag walk in Studio 220. And walk. And walk. There is something mesmerizing about her pathway cutting through the space in sharp lines from upstage to down, stopping to bow at the front of the space. She and I talk about awkward high school dances. She walks. We remember not being invited by anyone or paying for our date to come with us, and she walks. She bows, we tell stories of forced baptisms and cold water baptisms. Again she walks. I can't stop watching her walk.*

This first rehearsal of *The King Stag* solo, I could not stop watching Anna walk up and down through the space, entranced by what she was doing. In stark juxtaposition, I remember her at the beginning of the rehearsal process. In May, Alysia and I had been facilitating a number of improvisations to develop material for *The Mists*. A week of working from abstract scores sent us back to basics. We brought in clips from movies that we thought resembled each character, analyzing walks, bows, and introductions in

character. These early attempts made the whole cast laugh – Anna’s awkward bows were especially memorable. Yet somehow, between May and October, her walk and bows metamorphosed into a spellbinding movement score.

What could have happened to transform her performance quality so dramatically? Or, what could transform my way of seeing her so dramatically? I think we were both transformed. Anna’s performance had to grow with the sudden onslaught of strollers exploding through Red Butte Gardens: lines of people loaded down by bags, coats, and glow sticks. Anna explained; “... when we were rehearsing [in Red Butte Garden], it was like ‘How can I use the space?’ and highlight things: my body in the space, the space in my body. But then, when there were lots of audience members, [the space] kind of became a secondary concern for me. It became ‘who’s here? and how can I weave through them?’ Like, [awareness of the space] was still a part of the performance, but then the audience was ... a huge factor... I would use the plants to hide behind and peer at audience members, but it wasn’t like ‘look at the leaves.’”<sup>48</sup> She went from a focus on an abstract sense of her own body in space, to performing with not just the plants but also the audience. This meant that Anna and the stags invented different ways of interacting with people, learning to approach kids who were scared, make people laugh, and keep the audience’s energy involved the whole night. With the practice of capturing the attention of this distracted audience, she was able to more easily capture me in our mundane rehearsal setting.

However, it wasn’t just her performance quality that evolved in the time that we

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

worked together, it was also my ability to truly see her. By the time we got around to making *The King Stag*, I felt as if I was completely attuned to what Anna was experiencing during her simple zig-zag walks, an intimacy beyond words. This intimacy grew through working closely together during the months of *The Mists* in multiple capacities. Anna was core cast performer, rehearsal director, scheduler, and friend. Her presence during this intense time of my life while I enacted the artistic labor of my thesis and first major concert, simultaneously having my second child, meant that she saw many (usually hidden) sides of me and perhaps, vice versa.

The moments in the choreographic process for *The King Stag* that I loved the most were when Anna and I discovered odd and surprising intersections between our biographies. Many of the choices that I made for the solo not only spoke to me aesthetically and conceptually – with these themes of nature, religion, gender – but also were reflective of Anna’s stories she had entrusted to me. For example, Terry Tempest Williams’s words, *Here we go, to work and work and work*, rang true to me, recasting the hundreds of hymns that I grew up singing and the Bible verses that I still know by heart. To Anna, Terry’s poem meant something else - in relationship to her own narratives, but still deeply meaningful. When considering the sound score for the piece I sent her some of what I was thinking, and she loved the Terry Tempest Williams poem as much as I did, approving that as a final choice for this solo. To the Lil’ Wayne, I proposed, she commented “It’s perfect, I used to be a shy bitch!”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Though the trace forms of Wayne’s lyrics were in her dancing, we opted to use his edited version of *A Milli* in which he just sings “A Milli” over and over to the driving

Anna had four distinct sections of movement material: the walks I described above, a stag in drag improvisation, a slow melodic circling with the upper body in deep lunges, and a tripping, flinging herself backwards. During the choreographic process, we tried lots of ways to string these sections together. I wanted her to jump from idea to idea, shy bitch in one moment, King Stag the next, Lancelot the third. But I realized that she needed time to transform, the audience needed time to see what I could see in her, and the symbolism of the props didn't read separately. Strung together like beads on a necklace, these sections were a run-on sentence, but when they were woven together, interrupting each other, they made more sense.

The walks provide a great example. We started with this movement score of walking up and down through the space, which was compelling for me to watch and I loved the zig-zag inscription on the studio floor. However, in relationship to the arc of the piece, there was something that was missing in the walking. My committee's feedback demonstrated to me that though I was entranced by the score, it was going on too long for other viewers. Anna needed to disrupt herself, to begin her transformation so that we were ready to see her as the stag in drag in the following section. So I began to collapse the sections together. Her walk started to have a jerky interruption of the stag in drag, as if the stag was exploding out from her stomach Alien-style. The solo was cut down from fifteen minutes of material into about six minutes, driven by the anxious beat and choreographic structure. This abbreviated length, suggested by my committee, felt fitting to me because my attention span is usually just about good for five minutes of a dance. I

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beat. In the original version, which we used in rehearsal, Wayne sings "She ain't shy no more, she change her name to 'my bitch.'"

hoped that by making it short, anxious, and interrupted, when Anna finally collapsed at the end, the audience would be left wanting more.

To me, that is the odd paradox of intimacy – with dance and with people. As I knew Anna more deeply through the choreographic process, I became more aware of what I didn't know, which made me more curious about watching her dance in rehearsal. She became even more of a strange stranger to me as we grew closer.

### Strange Strangers / On Deer

*Driving 80 on back roads rushing to make it home for curfew. I've been at my best friend's house - again - and I'll be in trouble if I'm late, since I've basically been gone all week at dance. I straddle the centerline with my white Buick LeSabre to be able to see those red shining eyes that indicate a deer about to cross. I usually see at least eight deer in this five-mile drive; car wrecks are common. I'm good at sensing when they will run or freeze and avoiding them. In my hometown, the sound of gun shots is just a friendly reminder that hunting season had begun again, and to wear bright clothes when walking outside in our woods.*

It's easy to drive in the city, well-lit streets at night and no animals to avoid. However, I still see deer occasionally. On my drive to campus, I often spy a few grazing in the cemetery just off of the main road. This thoroughfare is a busy one, traveled by the thousands of faculty and staff headed to the U, patients at the hospital, and folks driving up the canyons to ski. Yet, these deer - they insert themselves into the space. What are they thinking or feeling? Are they happy, sad, frustrated, hungry, lonely?

My questions, an application of human feelings to other-than-human creatures,

could fall under the category of ‘anthropomorphism.’ Generally a derogatory term that implies assigning human qualities to animals, anthropomorphism is often critiqued as another way to center human ego in the frame of an ecology that doesn’t actually center around humans. Think of *Bambi* or *My Little Pony* for example, a kind of animal minstrelsy. As I was reading ecological theories after the show premiered, I began to grapple with the stags - perhaps it was actually really problematic that I had these characters in the show, a kind of appropriation of a being who I can’t ever fully understand?

Yet, it’s just my inability to fully understand deer - such a standard character in my own history - that actually provides a slippage in anthropomorphism. Perhaps ‘dragging’ as a deer is one way to hold our differences from other-than-human and our sameness in view? To me, dragging is a chance to both try on another identity and explore the way that identity already lives within your own tissue. Dragging animal could afford one the chance to see both strangeness and intimacy of the *strange strangers* in the fields around us. In fact, dragging stag might be one of the closest to these *strange strangers* we’ll get. This kind of performance could be imagined as a queering and horizontalizing of the hierarchy of human/animal, actually raising the visibility of our own foreignness to each other.<sup>50</sup> Returning to Morton’s idea that what we perceive as human is an effect of performance, then theatre theorist Wendy Arrons posits that we treat beings as people, not in order to apply ‘human traits’ to nonhumans but because it’s our ethical responsibility to us and them.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Arons, *Queer Ecology*, 570.

Something about the anthropomorphism of these stags was disruptive for audience members. Their wild howls delighted most children and disturbed some parents. A Red Butte Garden staff member explained; “A lot of people, especially I heard a family - a mom had two girls with her, they loved interacting with the deer. One of the deer made a sound at her and she made it back and they kind of had this back and forth thing going on. But then I also heard, and this was mostly from adults, “they wouldn’t leave me alone” or “I didn’t want to interact...”<sup>52</sup> The uncanny presence of these performers incited some audience members to threats of violence, albeit jokingly. Anna estimated that about a third of the adult audience members made a hunting joke or reference in response to their appearance on the garden paths.<sup>53</sup> These raw reactions created an intimacy between the performers and audience members. Anna explains; “There’s a whole spectrum of .... the hunting families and the liberal, vegetarian families.... [and] the ones who were totally encouraging of their kids pretending to shoot us. That’s a huge part of [audience] identity that you don’t normally find out, especially if it’s a proscenium work.”<sup>54</sup> Not only were the performers in physical proximity to the viewers, they were dancing with the cultural identities of the audience. The stags blurred the lines between human and animal, male and female, as well as the relationship between performer and audience.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 568 – 569.

<sup>52</sup> Red Butte Garden staff focus group with author. Salt Lake City, December 4, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Performer focus group with author. Salt Lake City, December 15, 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

### Black Out

A third voice enters the huddle, a deep *The moment when* which is quickly overtaken by other sounds. Margaret Atwood's throaty voice is a baseline that rarely rises above Terry and Wayne. Three circles of the stage, Anna begins anew, slowly unfolding her right hand. She looks at it intently, dropping water off her fingers, before collecting it and reaching to circle around, her torso pulled behind like an anchor. She abruptly interrupts herself to begin again. Slowly unfolding her right hand, she looks at it intently. Dropping it down, she reaches to circle, interrupts herself and begins again. *Sit at the table they say, come to consensus they say, with the power vested in them they say.* A slow unfolding of her right hand, but now - not so slow. Faster and faster, she interrupts herself, starts again. *It is never enough.* Her interruptions accelerate until they overtake her, knocking her standing leg out from under her with her back foot she flips, *amillia milliamilliamilliamilli*, a loud bass *thummmmm* - her torso releases standing legs, arms spread wide and chest open, eyes closed and cloak hanging heavily to either side. The forest turns white, bright fluorescent lights come on overhead. Then - black out.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

As I write this conclusion, I'm looking through a glass-bounded conference room in the family reading area of the Marriott Library. In the distance, I see the sloping hills behind the Avenues neighborhood underneath a perfect blue Utah sky with no trace of haze. Coming closer, I see a cement wall holding up a series of short trees, whose red flowers are just beginning to bud. Closer still, I see a balcony that I don't understand on this building as it seems to always be locked to keep the students off. And then I see the conference room, two glass walls and then my computer's iconic background image of Arches National Park. On one of these walls, I spy ten flower decals in impossible shades of red and pink with a bit of bright green stem.

I retell this memory to demonstrate that nature is all around us. And so is "Nature" – the idea of Nature and her representations. So nature is a slippery fish in my hands that frequently swims away from me right as I seem to have caught it. I look down to find that I'm holding Nature - the idea, not the thing. And it's the idea of Nature that makes it difficult for us to talk about what nature really is, and thus, how we can coexist with it. This tension between language and reality is what makes dance such an effective vehicle for my research questions. An abstract form that uses material bodies for

representation, dance can drag ideas of Nature, transforming them into something that invites us see the thing-ness of nature. In ways that are not completely describable, dance teaches us something about what it means to be part of nature. We – audience members, viewers, dance theorists - just have to practice learning how to read that message. I believe that the *King Stag* was able to drag Nature, inviting audience members to new ideas about nature. I hope that this thesis can invite readers to think about ways of reading the natural messages encoded in dance.

But were *The Mists* and *The King Stag* environmental justice dances? I return to my original intent to make an environmental justice dance. I remember my early realization that my own story of relative privilege doesn't easily fit into the topics generally covered under the environmental justice flag, a realization that opened up new kinds of possibilities for what it means to do environmental justice dance. I begin to question my sense of urgency to do something about environmental justice, which though well-intentioned, could be another iteration of my training in evangelicalism or perhaps related to the idea that Nature is a spiritual and aesthetic food which is quickly disappearing. This conception of an idealized Nature often appears in environmental discourse, for example, the common environmental image of the 'web of life.' There's something about this image that supposes a rush against time to save these fragile connections, while in Morton's understanding, the eco-apocalypse has already happened and continues to happen.<sup>55</sup> We're not trying to preserve some imagined Nature, rather we're waking up in the day after tomorrow. Climate change isn't going to happen - it's already happened. Entire species are extinct. Kids can't learn to read because of lead

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<sup>55</sup> Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 15.

poisoning. Farmers are killing themselves in India because their GMO seeds won't grow.

This realization of the end of times is oddly liberating for me. It liberates me from evangelizing, from trying to save the environment through dance. In a way, it even liberates me from the question "Were these environmental justice dances?" Through this process, I struggled with feeling that my work isn't what I imagine an environmental justice work 'should' be. It was too abstract, too many kids, not enough artists of color, etc. But maybe that's ok. Maybe *The Mists* and *The King Stag* are enough. Maybe rather than a perfect environmental justice dance, these works are an embodied trans-corporeal epistemology, a route from human corporeality to the flesh of nature and back again. These works explore *the mesh*, immersing the audience and imagining *strange strangers* dancing together. They are disorienting, decentering, disrupting. These are not environmental justice dances; rather, they are dances done ecologically.

Even as I write that this is enough, it's still not enough to dance ecologically. In working through these ideas, I feel I need to write ecologically, mining the text that lives in the remembered material body and allowing it to dance upon the page. In many parts of the academy, the mind is valued over the body, and language is valued over reality. It seems to me that the promise of dance in the academy is that of exploring a different way of knowing, of valuing the knowledges that originate in the body, which could and do disturb this hierarchy. The possibility of dance in the academy is that perhaps in dance, multiple kinds of knowledges will be valued, could live alongside one another and inform each other. Yet, the danger in dance is that this hierarchy of mind/body, language/reality isn't decomposed, but just reversed. Now the 'reality' – the body - rises to the top and choreography becomes the best or 'most real' mode of research. Theoretical and written

labor is less real and thus, less valued.

Choreography is the craft of placing bodies in space and time, shaping transition, energy, and flow, with attention to image and communication of ideas. Timothy Morton points out that like a body, the page is also composed of cells, of entities with agency, and placing text on these cells is an embodied activity – employing a muscle memory, an attention to structure, poetry, syntax – similar skills as those required for the craft of choreography. Further, the acts of reading dance and reading the written word both bring attention to the content, the structure and shape of the words on the page and formation of the bodies on the stage.

Writing is a crucial aspect of my creative process, not ancillary to or derived from, but an actual dance in itself. Accordingly, the structure of this written thesis was intended to offer the reader an outstretched hand, inviting them to join me in this dance. Just as choreographic motifs seem to simultaneously appear around the world, theoretical ideas also seep through a generation of dancers, reinvented by each artist for their own needs. I know that there are many artists grappling with what it means to make art in the eco-apocalypse. I hope that they, and others who read this thesis, will be able to develop and challenge my ideas, taking what is useful, transforming it to dance and write ecologically.

Through the knowledge gained from my three acts of choreography; in the garden, on the proscenium and through the written page, I've realized that dancing ecologically is not dancing about the environment. It's not even dancing in the environment, if by saying 'environment' we begin to imagine an idealized nature. Rather,

dancing ecologically means recognizing the ways in which nature is dancing all the time, in the performance and on the page.

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