

REIMAGINING THE WEST

by

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## ABSTRACT

Using sensory stimuli, creative movement practices, invented creatures, and immersive performance, this dance research presents a reimagined view of the desert landscapes that have come to be known within North American cultural discourse as “The West.” The research draws influence from both the author’s history as a Euro-American woman growing up in the Southwestern desert, and from her experiences with various North American Indigenous groups, analyzing the differing perspectives of landscape that exist in these two cultural demographics. It examines the influence of North American settler colonialism on contemporary Western views of desert landscapes as wastelands, and the ways in which Indigenous perspectives are counteracting this effect. This written work includes reflections on *Reimagining the West*, an evening-length dance performance choreographed by the author that presented audiences with a reimagined perspective of desert landscape, embedded with imagery, imagination, mythology, and symbolism. The creative physical and theoretical research of this thesis offers a new understanding of desert spaces and the role of the dancing body in preserving them, arguing for its effectiveness in inspiring individuals to coexist sustainably with natural landscapes.

For the late Berta Cáceres, and all others who  
gave their lives to defend the land

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

An expanse of blue, dusted with thin white clouds, arches over me. Canyon walls tower on both my left and right side, their smooth surface of beaten sandstone stretching farther and farther upwards until their craggy edges meet with the sky above. Down below I feel the dry earth giving way to the weight of my body as I take each consecutive footstep. I walk carefully, the pads of my feet tuned and responsive to the uneven canyon floor beneath me so that I might deftly move from one stone to another without slipping. I close my eyes for a moment to take a deep breath in, and the thick scent of the creosote and sage brush scattered around me settles on the back of my tongue. Somewhere in the distance before me the guttural *kraa kraa* of a raven's call echoes through the stone corridor. In this moment, I lift my westward facing arm to meet the rock formation next to me, letting the palm of my hand gently graze against the cold sandstone as my steps take me deeper and deeper into the skin of the Earth. Soon, in this physical, sensorial connection between skin and stone, I no longer can tell where the grit ends and my body begins. Seeped in the fullness of each of my senses—touch, sight, smell, taste, and hearing—I am enveloped into the narrative of this place.

Framed around the desert landscape of the American Southwest, the research I present in this thesis is largely influenced by my own lived experience as an individual

born and raised in Arizona. Growing up in this environment, the daughter of parents who made it a priority to take my sister and I far outside the boundaries of the city and into wild lands, I was afforded the chance to experience and learn about these landscapes of low deserts and high mountains in a tangible way. The more time I spent in these spaces, the more I began to appreciate both their subtleties and their drama, such as the softly shifting gradient of red in the sandstone, or the thundering magnitude of raging monsoon storms.

My personal history of time spent in these wild places has inspired in me a deep love of natural landscapes and a strong belief in the importance of preserving lands threatened by industries which seek to lay waste to them. The landscapes of my home state have not managed to avoid this threat, and it was in my reflections on the conditions of environmental and human rights abuses taking place there that the inspiration for my research arose. Arizona is a landscape that shares space with several Indigenous cultures, and I grew up parallel to the effects of environmental racism on both Indigenous peoples and the landscapes they lived in—as the child of white, middle-class parents the landscapes I lived in escaped this danger. As an adult, my friendships with Navajo tribal members allowed me the opportunity to hear the stories of poisoned drinking water and witness devastated landscapes firsthand. My most personal experiences took place in northern Arizona, on the reservation of the Navajo people. Vast expanses of desert grasslands on the reservation have been used as dumping grounds for toxic waste resulting from decades of uranium and coal mining, putting people, plants, and animals in the path of severe health risks. Scholar and author Traci Voyles coined the term “Wastelanding” to capture the nuances of this kind of polluting practice (Voyles 9). Wastelanding, she describes, is a practice rooted in a long history of Euro-American settler colonialist mentality, in which

certain types of landscapes and people are framed as being pollutable. She writes, “Wastelanding takes two primary forms: the assumption that nonwhite lands are valueless, or valuable only for what can be mined from beneath them, and the subsequent devastation of those very environs by polluting industries” (Voyles 10). The desert landscapes of the American Southwest and the lives of the many Indigenous people who live in them have been especially afflicted by this practice. The frameworks of wastelanding, and counter-perspectives to this practice, are discussed in *Chapter 2: Visions of the Landscape*.

Destabilizing the frameworks of the settler colonialist perspective is of paramount importance when fighting for the health and sustainability of both land and the people living on that land. It is my belief that the moving body, as a source of creative physical power, has a role to play within this discourse of perspective and sustainability. In my dance research, I aim to reorient and reimagine current Euro-American perspectives of landscape in a way that might destabilize dominant colonialist proclivities. To achieve this, I have worked to cultivate a cyclically sensing and imagining body, using these two mind/body actions as the driving forces behind the dance movements created in the studio between the dancers and myself (as choreographer). Crafting this method in a way that brings human and landscape together involves deeper ways of sensing and understanding the natural elements one engages with. It requires giving consideration to a place’s history, the greater context of its existence, and imagining how this place might experience the world. In this method of creative dance work, I see the opportunity for new relationships to form. I believe the knowledge, understanding, and empathy found in this type of engagement has the power to alter current Euro-American perspectives of the land, and establish an embodied perspective which acknowledges the vitality and significance of

landscapes and their inhabitants.

Throughout this thesis, I use a collection of terms to reference my concept of *landscape*, including *land*, and *earth*. To clarify the use of these terms throughout the text, I offer the following definitions:

When using the word landscape, I am speaking in reference to natural landscapes that have been largely unaltered by human culture and are generally not occupied by people. Landscapes are places miles away from city centers and the developed comforts they provide, such as easy access to water, food, and shelter. To me, the word landscape indicates a space that is untamed wilderness, one that a person may look at—on post cards or from scenic overlooks along the highway—but rarely enters. A landscape is also acknowledged as being a composite whole made of many parts. Although I often reference the landscape as a singular entity, my intention is for this word to be understood as representing not only the space itself, but all of the elements and entities existing therein—ecosystems of plants, animals, insects, and more, that make up the body of the landscape. The word land is used in this thesis as an abbreviated form of landscape.

There are two different ways in which I apply the word earth throughout this thesis. The first is using its common noun form—in reference to unpaved ground, where I can feel the dirt, soil, and clay beneath my feet. The second, instances where the word is capitalized as a proper noun, are in reference to the Earth as a planet, made up of a countless number of interconnected ecosystems which sustain life. This latter form is used symbolically at times, personifying the planet to illustrate it as a living entity.

In my research, I created two approaches to movement which I believed would allow a person to reimagine their perspective of and relationship with natural

landscapes. The first approach involved a sensory practice in which the body engaged directly with elements in a natural landscape, be they objects, plants, animals, weather, or places. This aspect of my research was focused on sensory engagement, but not necessarily creative movement. The intent lay more in a person's heightened awareness of the sensory information they were receiving, where the inherent task was to actively and consciously experience the world through one's senses. While this type of sensory awareness could be applied to a variety of spaces, both natural and constructed, for the purpose of this research I framed my discussion within the specific context of my experiences in the desert landscapes of the American Southwest. This approach is further discussed in *Chapter 3: Looking Deeper: Fostering a Multidimensional Sensory Experience*.

The second approach came afterwards, in which I cultivated a creative movement practice meant to meld sensorial information with visual information sourced from the sketchbooks that I maintained throughout my research process. This information was brought to the studio and reshaped into the improvisational scores and choreography that would become my thesis performance, *Reimagining the West*. It was in this practice that the core characters of my thesis work were developed: the Cow Skull creature and the Scarf Dance creature. This approach is further discussed in *Chapter 4: Personifying the Western Desert: An Analysis of the Creatures* and *Chapter 5: Becoming the Landscape*.

Throughout my life, I have maintained a strong belief that human beings are deeply connected to natural landscapes – for survival, physical and emotional health, spiritual fulfilment, and more. We are dependent upon landscapes to sustain us, and therefore inherit the responsibility of sustaining them for many future generations to come. Unfortunately, certain dominant viewpoints, such as the wastelanding perspective, do not

operate with this end in mind. The purpose of this research is to invite individuals to connect and empathize with landscapes, and alter any harmful perspectives of these spaces in a way that will contribute to the prevention of future environmental and social injustices. I apply the two approaches described above as methods for cultivating the physical and emotional space in which both dancers and audience members have the opportunity to imaginatively engage with landscapes, and reframe their relationships to them.

## CHAPTER 2

### VISIONS OF THE LANDSCAPE: A JUXTAPOSITION OF PERSPECTIVES

There are a multitude of ways in which one might perceive a natural landscape. Some might see a playground, made for exploring, hiking, skiing, and many other forms of recreation. Others see a wild wilderness, untamed and intimidating, too contrasting from the comforts of their developed lives to coax them. For some, a landscape is a spiritual home, a representation of something greater than us as a human race, and a place to be regarded with great reverence. For others, it is a land of many fruits to be reaped, space of possibility in which resources are meant to be found and taken at will. Like the metaphor of rose-colored glasses, I imagine the phrase “visions of the landscape” as describing a way of seeing, representative of the various perspectives that act as a filter placed over reality, that alter the way individuals may see the same space. Such variations in the way a natural landscape is seen inevitably affect the ways in which it is read, understood, appreciated, and treated. In this chapter, I will be discussing the varying perspectives of desert landscapes through the writings of scholars Traci Voyles, David Abrams, Jack Forbes, and others, whose words have provided the foundation upon which my research was built.

### Wastelanding

The deserts of the American Southwest are places of quietness and rage, mystery and frankness, extreme heat and bitter cold, and subtlety and grandeur. Enormous monoliths, such as the towering sandstone buttes in Monument Valley and silty hoodoo pillars of Goblin Valley, jut out of the earth to demand our attention with their surreal immensity. Meanwhile, far below, tiny cacti no bigger than one's palm nestle themselves in the crevices of rock. For months, the desert inhabitants survive on parched earth until torrents of rain flood the arroyos during the brief monsoon season. The Southwest desert is a landscape of paradox, always occupying the extremes on both ends of a spectrum. Scholar Traci Voyles adds another paradox to the mix: the desert, keeper of invaluable minerals, and the desert, worthless wasteland (Voyles 10).

In her book *Wastelanding*, Voyles investigates the history of environmental abuse and destruction on the Navajo Nation, the sacred lands of the Indigenous Navajo people, located in the deserts of northern Arizona and New Mexico. In the mid 20th century, hundreds of non-Indigenous owned industries saw the lands of the Navajo Nation as holding great potential for profit. The vast landscape was rich with resources such as coal and uranium, both heavily in demand at the time. In the eyes of investors, these places were highly valued exactly because of their potential to be stripped apart. What followed the introduction of these industries into the landscape was a decades-long legacy of devastating pollution and abandoned accountability that continues to affect the Navajo people to this day. Toxic effluence from the mines soaked deep into the ground, contaminating the precious water tables that support life in an arid desert. The companies that owned these mines have decades long since walked, hands wiped clean, leaving the

Navajo people in the wake of traumatic environmental destruction and severe intergenerational health concerns.

Voyles describes this Euro-American approach to looking at landscapes as the “wasteland” perspective (Voyles 10). Within this perspective, the word wasteland acts as a “... racial and spatial signifier that renders an environment and the bodies that inhabit it pollutable” (Voyles 9). The disturbing paradox of the wasteland perspective is that it orients a landscape as being both valuable and worthless in the same breath. It allows a landscape to be glorified as fruitful—providing the people an abundance of resources hidden just under the ground—while also suggesting that same landscape as being marginal enough to alleviate any accountability to its sustainment. Lands, such as those on the Navajo Nation, are framed in a way in which perpetrators can appease any potential guilt they might be left with after utterly destroying a landscape—if it was a waste to begin with, then polluting it further bears little to no moral repercussion. This practice is by no means limited to the confines of the Navajo Nation. Desert landscapes as a whole, Voyles argues, are especially susceptible to the practice of wastelanding, as they are often framed within American environmental perspectives as barren, marginal, and threatening (Voyles 8). In addition to this, there is evidence of a disturbing pattern in which lands occupied by Indigenous peoples are most targeted by these types of industries and their contaminants. Much like the landscape itself, the people too are seen as dispensable, sacrificial for the greater good of resource extraction.

Wastelanding, as a perspective and practice, is rooted in Euro-American settler colonialism. Voyles describes settler colonialism as distinct from colonialism in that it not only involves the control of resources, but is unique in its “...form of colonial power that

involves the settler making a home in a land that is already home to indigenous peoples” (Voyles 7). This particular brand of colonialism forms a distinct type of relationship between people, land, and resources, and transforms any discussion of environmental justice into a discussion of social justice as well.

Since the first landing of European settlers in the 18th century, the history of the United States was built upon the subjugation of both Indigenous peoples and land. Voyles states, “Remaking Native land as settler home... involves a deeply complex construction of that land as either always already belonging to the settler—his manifest destiny—or as undesirable, unproductive, or unappealing: in short, a wasteland” (Voyles 7). The campaign of “Manifest Destiny,” introduced into the American vernacular in the 19th century, continued to perpetuate the structures of settler colonialism in its belief that Americans were destined for westward expansion into North American territories. Author Albert K. Weinberg, in his influential 1935 critique of nationalist expansionism, describes Manifest Destiny as “... a dogma of supreme self-assurance and ambition—that America’s incorporation of all adjacent lands was the virtually inevitable fulfilment [sic] of a moral mission delegated to the nation by Providence itself” (Weinberg 1-2). Indeed, as is illustrated in artist John Gast’s 1872 painting *American Progress*, many Americans believed it was their divine duty to drive out Indigenous populations and tame the wild lands with development and industry. Unfortunately, time passed has not altered the effects of settler colonialism and Manifest Destiny, but instead caused them to evolve into more contemporary versions of themselves. Neocolonialism, the practice of maintaining control over people and property using economic, cultural, and political pressures, continues the legacy of viewing communities and landscapes as dispensable in favor of capital gain.

America's history of settler colonialism and perpetuation of the manifest destiny myth have shaped a perspective of landscape deeply rooted in a sense of implied ownership and authority. In this perspective, land is a resource to be taken and used as is seen fit, regardless of the effect this act might have on others or the land itself. Polluted spaces and populations are understood to be an unfortunate necessity, sacrificial tokens by which the damaging practices of resource extraction "...allow industrial modernity to continue to grow and make profits" (Voyles 10). Essentialist views such as this do a great disservice to the potential for a society to imagine a different perspective of landscape. Even so, such types of exploitative practices have at times been argued as being a part of human nature. Philosopher and cultural ecologist David Abrams states that "There are those who suggest that a generally exploitative relation to the rest of nature is part and parcel of being human, and hence that the human species has from the start been at war with other organisms and the earth" (Abrams 93). This argument is of course made moot when observing the traditional dynamics of Indigenous societies, and the cultural perspectives regarding landscape that these societies maintained. Abrams goes on to say that the reality that Indigenous cultures have historically occupied North American landscapes "...without severely degrading the continent's wild integrity readily confounds the notion that humans are innately bound to ravage their earthly surroundings" (Abrams 94). It is within traditional Indigenous perspectives of landscape that I see the potential to redirect the defeatist essentialism of the Euro-American view.

I cannot place myself as a completely objective participant in these considerations of perspective. As much as I admire the Indigenous perspectives I have researched, throughout my history, the reality of the settler colonialist perspective—as a social

construct of my Euro-American cultural heritage and dominating perspective of the contemporary Western world I was raised in—is deeply engrained into my history. Like the first European settlers that came to the New World, I have a hunger for the unknown, a desire to go out into the wilderness and explore it, to see what is just around the bend of a trail. I want to discover new lands, and in these dreams it's convenient for me to forget that these lands are new to no one, that there are inhabitants (whether human or otherwise) who call such 'undiscovered' places home, and that my explorations could be intrusive. This mindset extends beyond just the exploration of physical space and into the epistemological space as well. Since a young age, my father would tell me that infinite knowledge was at my fingertips, and all I had to do was go out and find it, take it for myself. Settler colonialism was integrated into my understanding of how to exist in and interact with the world from my very beginnings. This perspective is inevitably a part of who I am, but over time I noticed fallibilities with it and its descendent, neocolonialism, when it came to environmental and social justice, and this led me to seek other epistemological views. In this search I came to deeply value the traditional perspectives of Indigenous tribes living in the surrounding areas of my home city of Phoenix, Arizona, such as the Navajo, Hopi, Apache, Tohono O'odham, and others.

Traditional Indigenous perspectives of landscape harbor a very different outlook from that of the contemporary American perspective. In the following excerpt, Indigenous writer and scholar Jack Forbes, of Powhatan-Renápe and Delaware-Renápe tribal descent, describes his understanding of the Indigenous perspective of one's relationship to the land:

But some things are clear. One of them is that there is a principle of unity of the life around us. Not only do we have a common origin, but we are a part of it. There is no separation. The air that I breathe is the air that the trees have breathed. And the trees and plants breathe the kind of air I exhale. We are in a symbiotic, mutually

embracing relationship.

People are starting to realize that we are ‘rooted’ just like the trees. Our breath is a form of root, in that without the air, we are dead. We have to have that continuous back and forth flow of oxygen and expulsion of carbon dioxide.

We are also rooted through our pores and other body cavities. We are utterly dependent, as the old Lakota said, like sucking babies. We suck our mother’s breasts all our lives. We are utterly dependent upon the earth and air, we are one with them. Our bodies are made up entirely of them, nothing else. Mostly salt water, but the rest is made up of the animals, the plants, the grass, the air. We have nothing apart from that except our spirit itself.

So we are one with the environment. There is no boundary. We can lose our hands and still go on living. We can lose our legs and go on living. We can lose our noses, our hair, our eyes, our ears, a lot of things, and we can go on living. But if we lose the air, we cannot live. If we lose the water, we cannot live. If we lose the plants and the animals, we cannot live. So they are more a part of us than that which we call our ‘body’. (Forbes 251-252)

Forbes’ words illustrate an integrated and dependent relationship between the body and the landscape that body occupies. This perspective recognizes that the health of the landscape is integrally connected to the health of the people, and as such these places need to be treated with reverence and care. In his words, I see an attentiveness to and empathy for one’s natural surroundings, personified as *mother*. I see a recognition of a landscape’s self-determining agency—the land is not seen as a passive entity, but an active one who meets us halfway in a mutual, consenting embrace. There is no sense of separation between body and landscape, and as such the land is not something one can walk away from. You walk with the land, always.

And while this is only one quote, it is a perspective I have seen and heard reflected in the written works and conversations I have had with Indigenous peoples from many tribes across the western United States. It is a perspective reflected in the actions of Indigenous led coalitions such as “Save the Confluence” in Arizona, “Bears Ears Inter-

Tribal Coalition” in Utah, and the “No Dakota Access Pipeline” (No DAPL) camps in North Dakota, who are fighting to protect lands from threats of overdevelopment, invasive mining practices, and leaking oil pipelines.

There are many different visions one can have of a landscape, but in order to work towards a more environmentally sustainable future, I believe that contemporary societies, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, need to address the multiplicity of perspectives at work in order to restructure those that are harmful to landscapes and nurture those that inspire more ethical considerations. The concepts of wastelanding and manifest destiny, rooted in settler colonialist mentality, illustrate a lost understanding of human being’s inherent, symbiotic connection to both landscapes and the other entities (people, plants, animals, and other) who inhabit these landscapes. It is unethical to consider landscapes and their occupants as disposable, and if we want to ensure the continuity of healthful existence on the planet we have to be considerate of our connection to the landscapes we occupy and the larger effects of our actions. In researching traditional Indigenous perspectives of landscape, I found what I believe to be a model for what Forbes described as a “symbiotic, mutually embracing relationship.” When I reflect upon the thoughts expressed by Indigenous communities about their relationships to the landscape, the connective thread that overwhelmingly resonates within me is the expression of an intrinsic sensorial relationship between the body and its natural surroundings. It is because of this sensory relationship that I began to envision a place for creative movement and the dancing body within environmental and social justice work.

## CHAPTER 3

### LOOKING DEEPER: FOSTERING A SENSORY EXPERIENCE

It may be that the new “environmental ethic” toward which so many environmental philosophers aspire - an ethic that would lead us to respect and heed not only the lives of our fellow humans but also the life and well-being of the rest of nature - will come into existence not primarily through the logical elucidation of new philosophical principles or legislative structures, but through a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us. (Abrams 69)

At the start of my research process, the meaningful experiences I had gathered from my desert homeland, and my growing knowledge of Indigenous perspectives of land and body, drew me in the direction of developing a sensory-driven creative movement practice. Like Abrams’ statement above, it was my hope that such a practice would encourage greater empathy towards landscapes and inspire individuals to more frequently consider their role in environmental sustainability.

At the center of this approach is the human body. The human body is a complex sensing mechanism, a web of interconnected systems that continuously deliver information about the unfolding world to the body, and allow the body to assess where it stands in relation to the world. In this cyclical process of gathering information the body becomes the tool through which one has the option to consciously connect with their surroundings. I say “option” because the perception of senses is not a given. Physically speaking, the body’s sensory nervous system is constantly receiving stimuli from its

surroundings, but whether or not a person pays attention to this information involves some degree of choice. To recognize the vibrancy of sensory information the body receives in any given place, one must make a decision to actively perceive their surroundings. A guided creative movement practice, calling participants to open their awareness to the ways in which their bodies sense the space around them, was the way I believed I could lead people to more fully engage with landscapes.

Initially I had hoped this practice might involve bringing participants out to the desert, thinking that the proximity to the land would more fully absorb them in a sensory experience. However, this was not a practical option at the time, and so I turned to other methods—to bring the desert to the dance studio. I looked to my identity as a hiker, my many memories accrued from times out in the desert backcountry, and began to analyze their significance to this research. In this history was a reference guide, from which I could form a context for the sensorially rich creative movement experience I hoped to provide for others.

### Sensing in the Wild

The moments of my life I spend in wild landscapes are the moments in which my consciousness is fully engaged in a deep dialogue with my senses. When I hike through these spaces, I find myself immersed in a transformative experience, where my sensations of the landscape begin to unravel the distinction I have between my selfhood and the other entities around me. In this perceptive sensing state, my body becomes symbolically permeable as my skin, ears, nose, eyes, tongue, and proprioceptors absorb incoming information from the world around me. I become less aware of the tangible physical

boundaries between my body and the landscape, and in losing this sense of “me” and “other” I feel as though I become a part of the whole. While this is certainly an abstract concept, rooted in my own subjective experience, in my studies I found a similar idea described in one account of Navajo cultural perspective.

Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, a cultural anthropologist who dedicated her research to Navajo culture and perspectives of the body, found that within this culture there was a belief “... that the boundaries of every individual extend around the full area in which parts of his or her body and thoughts exist,” (Schwarz 239). In this short sentence, I see a connection between my perspective of the undefined edges of the sensing body and the Navajo perspective of the boundaries of an individual extending around them. Each presents the argument that the human body is not limited or contained by the physical boundaries of skin, and this blurred outline between self and environment reveals a unique understanding of the connection that exists between these two entities. The perspective changes the nature of the body’s relationship to space from one in which a person’s actions and behaviors only affect themselves, to one in which those actions and behaviors have larger effects on the spaces around that person (and vice versa). The Navajo perspective of the body supports my proposition that selfhood and place are intrinsically entwined—that the body is a permeable form, and people are more a part of the landscape they occupy than they might initially perceive. However, rather than attempting the fool’s errand of recreating Navajo cultural context for the non-Navajo, I believed my sensory experiences of landscape, adapted into creative movement practice, could trigger a similar recognition of this connection.

My interest in Indigenous perspectives during this research also prompted greater

reflection of my own cultural background as a Swiss-American woman. I felt it important to acknowledge how both these ways of looking were affecting my understanding of the sensing body's relationship to landscape. Growing up in my childhood home under the loving eye of my Swiss mother, all matters of life were handled with great observation and care. The Swiss people, she would tell me, are hardworking and careful—people of organization, order, and diligence. As such, the cleanliness of our home, the effort put into schoolwork, the feelings of others in the relationships we maintained, and even (much to my chagrin) the exact way a bed sheet must be folded, reflected the fastidious nature of our European heritage. My mother taught me the skill of noticing, to be perceptive of the world around me, and to weave the effects of this perceptiveness into my actions. She passed on to me an understanding of the significance of heightened awareness, and this is a way of living I have carried with me throughout my life.

This connection to my Swiss heritage, the carefulness and alertness that comes with it, has in many ways fostered the heightened awareness I feel when I am far from developed civilization, out in the untamed wilderness. One example of this is reflected in the seemingly simple act of walking along a trail. When I hike through a landscape, I recognize that each step I take matters—I must be careful to notice the subtle differences in each one, and I cannot take the earth beneath me for granted. Unlike paved, urban sidewalks, the earth's surface is varied and ever-shifting. With every placement of my foot, every subsequent step, the pads of my feet are alert. Even within the confines of my shoes they are attentive to the shape and size of the stones and sticks underfoot, to the amount of weight they can bear before becoming loosened, to the subtle adjustments necessary in the rest of my body in order to maintain balance on an uneven surface. In

the unpaved wilderness, every step becomes a brief conversation between me and the ground beneath me; in this split second, we are connected and must negotiate one another's presence to the advantage of both ourselves and the other.

This is a far cry from the sensory experience of my feet in the developed world. I've grown up in an urbanized world where level floors are assumed—from sidewalks, to indoor carpeting, to dance floors. The infinite flatness of the city allows me to never question what will lie under my feet. Indeed, oftentimes in most of my daily life my feet never even touch the earth at all. Every even surface I walk upon is a surface laid over the land: concrete poured to make sidewalks and streets that lead us from one indoor space to another. Unless I make the intentional choice to leave the boundaries of these socialized pathways, walking a shortcut through a neighbor's yard or detouring my walk home across the local park, my feet rarely touch the earth at all. I take these urbanized surfaces for granted, and after years in this process, my attentiveness decreases and footsteps become thoughtless, because I do not need to think about them.

Can every footstep be a thoughtful one? I mean this less in the way of consciously analyzing every step one takes, but rather that we find a way to reinvigorate the way we sense the world; the pads of our feet being just one example. Hiking through the backcountry is my method for returning to this reinvigorated state of sensing. No longer on a paved surface, I am reconnected to the earth beneath me, and my relationship to the world becomes clearer in the physical connection I feel between my feet and the ground.

In these moments, not only my feet, but my whole body begins to sense at a higher capacity. My fingers extend outward to graze the tops of the bushy sage which line the trail, like a gesture of greeting. Their foliage leaves my hands smelling richly warm and

tangy, and I breathe deep with palms cupped over my nose. My ears are tuned to every rustle in the grass that could be a deadly rattlesnake or a grazing deer, to catch a rare glimpse of the animals so foreign to us in urban environments. My eyes are drawn to the scope of the larger, scanning the stunning immensity of the landscape, miles and miles that reaches for the horizon beyond. At the same time, my eyes are drawn to the small—narrowing in to observe the details of tiny desert brush around my feet that may be deliciously edible or stick me in the toes with invisible spines. I am never stuck in one way of sensing for long, but perceive the world in many widening circles of space around me. The environment sets my senses ablaze as I navigate the space in a sumptuously infused experience of both sensory pleasure and instinctual survival. In this moment, I become connected to the elements around me through my body and its ability to sense, and the time spent here reaffirms my relationship to this landscape.

This was the type of sensory information I knew I had to bring to the studio, that I knew would carry weight and significance in my practice. These experiences were so sensorially full and diverse, I was curious of what their adaptation into movement would look like, and whether it would take dancers on a similar journey through a desert space, albeit an imagined one.

### Sensing in the Studio

The process by which I brought my plethora of sensory information from desert landscapes to the dance studio, to be crafted into *Reimagining the West*, involved a significant amount of independent improvisational movement practice. It was the method through which I distilled creative movement from sensory experiences, establishing

improvisational scores which I could later introduce to the dancers who would ultimately perform the work. One such score is outlined below, as an example:

*From the Perspective of Empathy*

Stand as if your body were a stalk of grass, tall, thin and fragile. You are one of an infinite number, growing in the vast desert grasslands. Your feet are your roots, reaching deep into the ground, while the rest of your body grows upwards, towards the sun. Imagine a gentle breeze begins to blow, weaving through the grass towards you. Hear the sound of the field beginning to shiver against the wind. How does your body shiver in the wind? How does it bend against it, while still keeping your feet planted deep? What does it feel like, to have the wind pressing up against your one side? What happens when the wind grows stronger; does it press you flat to the ground, does your stalk break?

*From the Perspective of Self*

Imagine now that you are not the piece of grass, but standing as yourself (human) amongst the grass. You are a lone figure in the bright landscape, and the wind continues to blow over the miles and miles of space around you. You see nothing but the never-ending horizon and acres of dry grass. You feel the grass brush against your legs and the warm wind against your skin. Your frame is sturdier than the grass, but still responds to the wind; how? You are not only one stalk, but have other appendages; how do they move with and around the wind? What does it feel like to be the tallest entity in this landscape, the only pillar breaking the flatness? There is no shelter or hiding place

here. In the seemingly infinite emptiness of this landscape, do you feel lonely or isolated, with no other person around you? Begin a dance of loneliness, feeling the grass beneath your feet and the wind in your hair.

\* \* \*

In this creative movement score, I harkened back to my own memories of hiking through a similar desert landscape. The score drew upon the things I sensed from the literal landscape, as well as the psychological effect this particular landscape had on myself—the stoic loneliness and isolation. In general, I aimed to craft improvisational scores, such as the one above, to reflect a multitude of perspectives, framing them not only from the perspective of a person reflecting on their own experience of the landscape (perspective of self), but also from the perspectives of others existing in that same landscape (perspective of empathy). The questions and directives within the scores drew the dancers' attention predominantly to their senses—of touch, sight, smell, hearing, and taste—and how their experience of these senses might be similar or different depending on the perspective they were engaging in. Through the juxtaposition of these sensory-based perspectives, dancers formed connections between their experiences and the experiences of others that allowed them to access empathy for landscapes and their inhabitants.

I believe this kind of physical empathizing has the power to produce a significant effect when looking at landscapes affected by destructive industries. Dance scholar Julia Handschuh, in an essay discussing the relationship between dance and ecology, asks “What are we sensing in our bodies as we witness shots in the chest, or scars on the land? How are these experiences being tracked, traced and archived by our bodies?”

(Handschuh 122). A key aspect in the framing of these questions is the way in which Handschuh has juxtaposed pain felt in the human body (shots in the chest) to pain felt by a landscape (scars on the land). Additionally, Handschuh's use of the word "scar" to describe the surface of a landscape contextualizes a relationship in which we begin to see the body of a landscape presented as a body like our own. Like skin that has healed from a wound, a landscape can also have scars—visual evidence of past traumas.

This concept of the landscape as a body is similarly illustrated in the words of Roberta Blackgoat, a respected Navajo elder and matriarch who fought federal relocation mandates when the Peabody Western Coal Company sought to mine coal near her and others' homes in a disputed area of the Navajo Nation known as Big Mountain. She states "The coal they strip-mine is the Earth's liver... The uranium they dug up for energy was her lungs. Her heart and her organs are dug up because of greed" (Benally and Denetdale 30). In her statement, she affirms that certain parts of the earth's body directly correlate to parts of the human body. By doing so, the kinesthetic empathy one might feel for a traumatized landscape is no longer a generalized notion of pain, but a mirrored affliction, taking place in a specific part of their own body. In directly correlating land to body, the outcome of the experience becomes personal, as any effect upon the landscape may be empathetically felt by a person as an effect upon a specific part of their own body. One can imagine what it would feel to take something sharp and dig under the skin to reach their liver, or remove pieces of their lungs. When considering landscapes affected by environmental abuse, this approach becomes an effective tool in reaffirming the notion that a landscape's health is integral to our own.

The sensory-driven scores described in this section, which framed various way of

looking at and experiencing landscape, were the seeds from which the Cow Skull and Scarf Dancer creatures would eventually grow. These two creatures are imagined characters, serving as personified embodiments of desert landscapes in a performative setting. The unique set of movements attributed to each of these creatures evolved directly from my practice of translating sensory information collected from the desert into creative movement scores. The aesthetics of their movements are traceable to their sensorial context. These creatures—their origin, character, movements, and symbolism—are discussed in depth in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### PERSONIFYING THE SOUTHWEST DESERT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CREATURES

Two distinct characters are performed in *Reimagining the West*. In the first section of the piece, *Bloom*, a figure methodically hops from out of the dark into pools of light, its precise footsteps landing gently on the ground as the surface of its faceless body shakes restlessly. Every inch is covered by colorful silk scarves that shift, shiver, and flourish with each jump. This character came to be known as the “Scarf Dance” creature (see Figures 1 and 2). The final section of the piece, *Hollow Bodies*, opens abruptly, lights flashing on to reveal two still figures, half standing, half hunching, in the corner of a wide, projected landscape. Bodies appear human, except for the stripped, white cow skull that has taken the place of the face. Their empty gaze motionlessly observes the space around them with a menacing quiet, and without warning they suddenly charge from their stillness, slicing the air around them. This character came to be known as the “Cow Skull” creature (see Figures 3 and 4).

These creatures entered into the creative process of *Reimagining the West* unexpectedly, revealing themselves in the pages of my sketchbook instead of the dance studio. They appeared in a very specific manner. As a visual artist, when I draw there are times when I carefully construct an image in my mind before I transcribe it to paper—I

know what each stroke of my pen is meant to produce, and every line is intentional. However, I have come to notice that the drawings which most resonate with me are often those that originate unexpectedly from a subconscious space. This approach is much less calculated, and I would even go as far as to say that it is completely out of my hands. The desire to draw in these moments comes as a sudden impulse, without warning, and although I do not have any particular subject in mind, the urge to draw SOMETHING is strong enough it cannot be quelled. I've come to understand these impulses as a sort of signal, indicating that whatever idea had found time and space to fortify in my subconscious is now ready to be born onto the page. In this way, my description of the Scarf Dance and Cow Skull creatures' conception as an appearance or a revelation, rather than a process I had any explicit control over, is intentional. I credit my imaginative, subconscious self as the creator of these creatures.

This process doesn't allow time to contemplate an image before it is drawn, and as a result of such an unpremeditated process, I find myself left at the end of a drawing session with an image whose meaning or purpose I do not yet fully understand. The core idea is not disclosed through the drawing process alone, but requires thoughtful post-analysis to unravel the meaning contained within the image. A multidimensional reading of symbolic attributes, and cultural, personal, and historical contexts helps me in beginning to understand why my subconscious mind makes certain choices regarding the content and aesthetic of the drawing. Knowing this, I examined the surreal Scarf Dance and Cow Skull creatures on my sketchbook pages, wondering to myself: Who are these figures, where do they come from, why do they appear as they do, and what relationship might they have to the research I've immersed myself in? What followed was an interwoven process of

layering visual, conceptual, contextual, and physical information to understand more about these creatures and their significance to *Reimagining the West*.

### The Cow Skull Creature

#### *Initial Interpretations*

The Cow Skull Creature, as it appears in my drawing, is an emaciated figure, standing tall and thin. The creature is human in form except for its head, which has been replaced by the upper half of a cow's skull. Its posture in the drawing is significant. It stands with feet rooted to the ground, settled in a kind of passive, but determined manner. Its knees are locked and hips are thrust forward in this position, and the creature's shoulders hunch over to allow its arms to hang in a dead weight. The large, cavernous skull droops heavily to the front, jaw jutting forward.

Based solely on visual information regarding the creature's appearance and posturing, initial ideas about these creatures began to form in my mind. I understood the Cow Skull creature as a silent, looming figure. The absence of fleshy features to soften the gaze of the skull's deadpan stare formed a stoic, expressionless physiognomy. I mused on how humans tend to be drawn to the eyes of others, seeking a reciprocating gaze as a way to establish social and empathetic ties between one another. However, when met by the face of the Cow's skull, and the hollow cavities where eyes once were, this formed an experience that I found both threatening and mysterious. I thought to myself, this figure is not human, nor is it an animal, but some unknown combination of both that is paradoxically not living and not yet dead.

Death, in a Euro-American context, has historically been regarded as a concept that

inspires great fear. The Cow Skull creature, as a figure that juxtaposed characteristics of the living with the dead, formed an unsettling pairing rooted in this fear. Its gaping mouth and long row of exposed teeth reinforced the feeling of a threat, reminding me of carnivorous mammals who have the capacity to consume others, even despite knowing that bovine are herbivores by nature. The emaciated frame indicated a deep hunger—a need to fill its belly at any cost. The figure hung in stillness, rooted down by the way the joints of its legs were locked in hyperextension. This reminded me of the way hooved mammals would lock their joints when they sleep and because of this I assumed this posture is the creature’s resting position. There was no knowing if, how, or when it might break away from it. The unmoving, emotionlessly direct stare was a predatory gaze, fixed upon its prey, and I couldn’t help but wonder if this moment of stillness was one that prefaced a sudden attack.

I pondered on how the sense of time might also be experienced differently by these creatures. Bones are evidence of time passed—of flesh decayed away over years and the body stripped down to its most skeletally bare matter. While bones do eventually decay as well, in warm, dry climates such as the desert, they can last for thousands of years before finally becoming dust. How old might these Cow Skull creatures be? How might they experience time differently, with a lifespan potentially extending for thousands of years?

This drawing also left a number of contextual clues for me to piece together. My instinct to assume this creature was a desert dweller most likely originated from the contexts in which I had often seen the image of a cow’s skull used. Images of desert settings in the media, such as old Western films or even Saturday morning cartoons, often depict the lone cow skull sitting in the corner of the frame, while a quintessential

tumbleweed rolls by. Painter Georgia O'Keefe began incorporating cow skulls into her work after moving to the desert of New Mexico. Cattle ranching became an enormous industry in the Southwest in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with cowboys herding thousands of cattle across the vast landscape to slaughter. The image of a cow's skull, as seen from above, has long been used as a cultural symbol of the desert. It was in this gradual collection of information from the drawing that I began to understand this creature as a surreal, timeless resident of desert landscapes.

### *Interpretations After Physical Engagement*

The conclusions I reached from the visual, conceptual, and contextual information gleaned from the drawing formed the groundwork upon which the next step of research could root. After thinking about this creature strictly from a cerebral approach, the logical next step for me as a dancer was to physicalize it, and see what information I could discover kinesthetically. In rehearsals, my dancers and I established a structured improvisation in which we physically and imaginatively shaped ourselves into the bodies of the creature. By adopting the visual characteristics illustrated in the drawing, such as the posture and features, I hoped to learn more about this creature through the kinesthetic experiences of my dancers and myself.

We began with the most basic information we had about the Cow Skull creature: its pose. We embodied the way in which the creature stood in space, and imagined the vast desert landscape that would sprawl before it. We felt the weight of our heads as the heavy skull tipped forwards, and the brittleness of our stiff, skeletal limbs. Our feet were planted down into the ground, unable to move against the lock of our knees and the exaggerated

angle of our hips pressed forward. There were times we settled into the stillness of this pose for upwards of fifteen minutes, doing nothing more than investigating what it would be like to exist in this form and in this arid landscape. What would they see? We imagined staring out into distant horizons, a wide gaze and a sense of vastness observed through the sunken eye sockets of our faces. What would they feel? We imagined the environment around us, the grit of sand beneath our feet and the glaring sun bleaching our bodies to white. What would they hear? We heard the wind blowing, echoing inside the hollow cavities of our skulls. What would they smell? Our nostrils filled with the scent of dust. What was their state of mind? We imagined death as a state suspended in time, where we were left to infinitely search for something in the distance. In our stillness we felt like sentinels, posted to keep watch over the space around us.

During these initial embodiments of the creature the questions began to change from “Who are they?” and “Where did they come from?” to “What do they feel?” and “What drives them?” I wondered what their internal desires might be, and what might cause these creatures to move from their stationary positions. Yet, the possibilities for movement posed a challenge. Any initial movement from this creature would be significant in that it would be the first departure from the structure of the drawing, which had only given us information about the creature in its stillness. In expanding the pose into a dance, we would be moving into uncharted territory. It was of utmost importance to me that in this process a relationship to the original drawing was maintained—that the transition from stasis into movement was not arbitrary or unmotivated, but still reflected the nature and identity of the creature.

To achieve this, I set up a specific guideline to follow: that we would allow

ourselves to exist within the original pose, in stillness, with no expectation of what would happen next, and remain there until something happened. Similar to an improvisation exercise, the goal was to not plan any movement in advance, but instead allow the body to yield to whatever physical impulse the initial pose might trigger. Our only task was to settle into the quiet physical and mental space of this creature. In doing this, we had faith that eventually the body would react—and it did, the joints snapping out of stagnation with lightning strike precision.

We also spent a significant amount of time in discussion, offering one another personal insights of how we imagined the creature to move based on its physical components. For example, in knowing that this was a skeletal creature it became more logical for us to imagine it moving in an angular, jointed fashion, rather than a fluid one. Sensorial information of bones gave us textural qualities to apply to the movement—thinking of the forceful crack of a dry bone snapping created a movement quality that was sharp, fast, and loud. We mused over the creature’s connotation as a figure of death, and death itself as something that catches up with all of us. The concept of being stalked by death created a context in which this creature would move as a sly predator, simultaneously creeping low to the ground in an effort not to be seen and bursting forth aggressively in moments of opportunity.

As a result of these discussions, our movement began to adapt. We accentuated the sharp angularity in the joints of our legs and arms, experimenting with different ways to unexpectedly snap and strike at the space. We lunged even lower to the ground, in an attempt to hide from view, and predatory thoughts changed the nature of our gaze from wandering eyes to a sharp, direct focus—a fixation on the thing we were looking at. In this

way, the more we developed our understanding of the creature, its identity and motivations, the more we developed a way for this creature to move that felt true to its nature. We began to structure the nuance of these movements into a strict, but improvisational, creative movement practice. This physical practice became a meditation in imagining one's self in the body and mind of another—a meditation that required concerted effort and investment. In the early stages, moving as the Cow Skull creature over long periods of time was difficult to maintain, as we would have a tendency to dissolve back into premeditated or personal patterns of moving. It took consistent coaching to lead the dancers back to moving as the Cow Skull creature itself, and not as themselves playing the creature. Over time, we began to notice this shift taking place. With continued vocal guidance and consistent practice, what had first been an exercise of pretending to be the creature in order to move like it, now became a physical ritual in which the movements themselves acted as a catalyst for transformation. The very specific ways of moving were the key that opened the body and mind to become the Cow Skull creature.

Knowing that sensory experience was a significant part of my research, I sought out cow skulls to integrate into our practice. I believed interaction with a physical cow skull would provide us with distinct sensorial knowledge that would deepen our understanding of the creature. In what I can only call a stroke of luck, I was able to track down not only two cow skulls, but two cow skulls discovered in the desert. This detail of their origin was significant. The skulls were the remnants of animals who had lived and breathed in desert landscapes, and while holding them their lived history was in our hands. The native plants and bits of earth the cows ate and absorbed into the body while alive made the skulls a physical archive of the land, embedded in the bone.

By interacting and dancing with these skulls we were offered the unique opportunity to indulge in the experience of moving with actual desert dwellers while at the same time trying to embody an imaginary one, the Cow Skull creature. The sensorial information we collected from this experience was invaluable in our journey to a more informed and empathetic understanding of the creature. In smelling the skulls, we became aware of their age and origin, their odor being one of staleness and earth. Our ears picked up the sound of our fingers scraping across sandpaper surfaces, and our eyes saw the arcing planes and hollow cavities of a face with recognizable features. We put the cow skulls up to our own faces, in an attempt to adopt the visage of the Cow Skull creature, and unexpectedly tasted bone dust as we breathed in. In dancing with them we learned of their weight and their balance, the heaviness of attaching a skull of this size to the frame of the human body. All of this information, stemming from each of the five senses, combined to give us a deeper understanding of what it might be like to live life with a cow skull for a head.

### *Final Impressions*

My lasting impression of the Cow Skull creature is that it is the embodiment of something inherently negative. In addition to the creature's allusion to death, elements of its design are suggestive of two industries rooted in a settler colonialist perspective of landscape. The cow skull reflects the industry of cattle ranching, which decimates desert ecosystems through the invasive grazing patterns of the cows. The hollow belly of its emaciated frame indicates a deep hunger, revealing the motives of a creature who would dig at the earth to quell its endless hunger at any cost. What better parallel to this than the

Southwest's industry of extractive mining, which digs at the surface of the earth to attain the wealth of coal and oil that lie beneath, fulfilling Western society's hunger for nonrenewable energy? Such extractive industries, in turn, contribute to unnatural death for the inhabitants of the desert by poisoning streams and water tables with the toxic refuse left over from the mining process—more animal skulls left to decompose in the desert. Both cattle and extractive industry have proven themselves to be historically and currently destructive to desert landscapes and their inhabitants. I imagine the Cow Skull creatures as the only thing left remaining after hundreds of years of environmental destruction, their skeletal physicality a ghostly specter of the industries that laid the Southwest to waste.

### The Scarf Dance Creature

#### *Initial Interpretations*

From an inky black landscape, a figure emerges. Not quite human but humanoid in form, the image of the Scarf Dance creature hangs mid-jump, with arms outstretched in a distal reach and feet deftly positioned for a landing. It is a figure in motion, with a body formed of endless layers of bright fabric squares that ripple and billow in the air. Even the creature's face is shrouded by these scarves, a mysterious skin that never ceases to stir, a kaleidoscope of colorful petals skimming the surface, ever shifting, like delicate tectonic plates.

Unlike the Cow Skull creature, the image of the Scarf Dance creature manifested in my sketchbook mid-movement, and so it was its movement and not its symbolism that first captured my imagination. I couldn't help but imagine its state of motion being an

intrinsic and constant fact of its existence. This was not a creature that could be found in stillness. It appeared weightlessly suspended in the air, as if it wanted to infinitely exist in this moment. Even so, there was an inherent rootedness to this character. I considered the ways in which gravity played its part in drawing the creature back down to the ground, and the ground played an undeniable role in the creature's ability to reach the sky—upon landing the pads of its feet connecting deeply to the earth, pressing weight down to propel itself upwards once again.

Up and down this creature bounded in my mind, its time spent in a rhythmic dance of equal halves between the ground and the sky. The scarves caught the air, floating weightlessly for a brief moment before snapping quickly down upon the creature's landing. In the constant expansion and contraction, the creature's surface began to resemble a cycle of breathing—like a lung that swells and deflates with each breath. The absence of exposed skin and the kinetic nature of this shifting surface whose roots you could not see led me to wonder if there even was a physical body underneath it all. Perhaps the creature was nothing more than a mysteriously endless layering of scarves—a flock of fabric brought together by some unseeable force. Despite being unusual, the creature's surface was unthreatening—ethereally beautiful in its swath of vivid color, like the soft petals of a blooming flower. In the desert, finding this kind of color is a rarity—cacti may only sprout flowers once in a year, and wildflowers are often reserved to early spring. The climate is harsh, and flowers here bloom in the face of adversity.

Its bounding movement energetic, brimming with animated life, the Scarf Dance creature symbolizes the sustained harmony and beauty that can be found in a natural landscape. While the Cow Skull creature maintains a sickly transfixed character, the Scarf

Dance creature is nourished, powerful, and tireless. The absence of a discernible face inspires a sense of mystery, but there is no feeling of menace to its personality. It bounds calmly and stoically, its repeating movements a cyclical pattern that can be trusted. There is a comfort and a significance to its repeated shaking and breathing, a kind of dependable energy it creates that fills the space the creature occupies.

### *Connection to Indigenous Dances*

Throughout my research I was entrenched in philosophical comparisons between settler colonialist perspectives and Indigenous perspectives of landscape. This frame of mind influenced the way in which I was unraveling meaning from the drawing of the Scarf Dance creature. I saw this figure as the antithesis to the Cow Skull creature and its negative colonialist inferences. The Scarf Dance creature became representative of the ideals I saw in Indigenous considerations of the land, positive in nature and symbolic of a harmonic coexistence.

Reflecting on the pose of the Scarf Dance creature in this train of thought, I began to find similarities between it and Intertribal Indigenous dance culture. Arms fanned wide, with high knees, and a gaze that seemed to point to the ground reminded me of the postures found in certain styles of Intertribal powwow dance, such as the Women's Fancy Shawl Dance and Men's Fancy Dance. Even the aesthetic of traditional powwow dance regalia, cascades of colorful fringe and feathers that flutter as they catch the air, were reflected in the design of the Scarf Dance creature's layered scarf surface. In these dances, the movements radiate a powerful energy and endurance as the dancers perform their rhythmic and intricate footwork throughout the center of the arena. Such images of Indigenous

dancers that I had seen in photos, videos, and in person held meaning in the posture, design, and dance of this creature.

The similarities between the Scarf Dance creature and the movements and design that make up the Women's Fancy Shawl Dance and Men's Fancy Dance established a context for developing the creature into a dancing entity. They illustrated a way of moving beyond simply jumping up and down in one place, and provided a starting point for me to create movement patterns for the creature inspired by these dance forms. I say "inspired by" because I can in no way claim knowledge of powwow dance forms beyond what I have observed. I have not been trained in the techniques of these dances, nor do I claim Indigenous heritage, and therefore cannot understand the nuanced physical and cultural knowledge that comes with these things. It is important to mention that I in no way claim to represent the Scarf Dance creature as an Indigenous creature, nor its movement as Indigenous dance. To do so would be fallacious and ethically immoral, both misrepresenting Indigenous cultures and reflecting neocolonialist methods of cultural theft and appropriation. At the time, I was keenly aware of how my research could begin to fall into this territory, and consistently evaluated my choices and motivations throughout the process of developing the creature's movement so that I might avoid this pitfall. Rather than mimicking any exact detail of powwow dance forms and claiming them as my own, I distilled aesthetics I noticed in the performances that felt relevant to the developing nature of the Scarf Dance creature. My goal was to reshape, reimagine, and adapt these aesthetics of cultural information—to bring together these, and other, inspiring elements to the studio and see what new forms of moving might emerge from their combination.

The most significant of the powwow dance elements I chose to experiment with

was rhythmic consistency. While I had already deduced from the visual appearance of the creature that its nature was to jump up and down, the ongoing beat of the powwow drums and dancers' movements provided a rhythmic pattern and consistent meter for the bounding creature to follow. In powwow dances the beat of the drums are inextricable from the movement, and both dancer and drummer maintain the rhythm until the performance ends. The ongoing rhythmic characteristic of powwow dance and drum brings with it a number of symbolic considerations. Describing the effect of music in a powwow setting, Indigenous authors Robin Ridington, Dennis Hastings, and Tommy Attachie write, "The power of song and the drum's heartbeat connect people alive today to the heartbeat of the land" (Ridington et al. 126) In this setting it is the rhythm that forms the strong connection between the performers (both dancer and drummer), the larger community, and the land. Author Gloria Nahanee of the Squamish Nation, describing the footwork of the powwow Women's Traditional dance, claims that "Women must always have one foot on Mother Earth with every drumbeat" (Johnston et al. 42). Such a rule establishes a relationship between Earth and body, in which the two are constantly connected through the sense of touch.

The beat of the drum and the dancer's ability to match that beat with their footwork are rife with meaning, and illustrate a deeper sensorial connection to the land visually, sonically, and kinesthetically. Performers both hear the heartbeat of the Earth, as well as feel its presence beneath their feet. These connections harken back to the sensorial way of interacting with landscapes which I discussed in Chapter 3. As such, the rhythmic structure of the powwow dance felt extremely relevant to the role of the Scarf Dance creature as an antithesis to the Cow Skull creature. Where the Cow Skull creature represented a

destructive disconnect to landscape, the Scarf Dance creature now represented a receptive, connected relationship to the rhythm of that same landscape.

The more I considered this symbolism, the more I also imagined the unfaltering heartbeat of sound and movement as symbolic of Earth's other larger cyclical rhythms: day and night, rotating seasons, oceanic currents, and global wind patterns. Were these rhythms to end, so would the existence of life as we know it. It was this anecdote that made it necessary for me to not only have the Scarf Dance creature maintain a consistent rhythm in its movement, but for this rhythm to span the length of its performance. The creature entered from the darkness of the performative space already moving, and exited it still moving, framed in the mind of the audience as a figure that never diverts from its rhythm. In doing so, the creature became an emblem of a landscape in balance, sustaining its cycles, its heartbeat strong and eternal.

#### *Interpretations After Physical Engagement*

The discoveries made from countless hours of repetitive bouncing were numerous. What we encountered first, as our bodies struggled to meet the demands of this type of movement, is that it took a great amount of both effort and calmness to achieve it. When bounding from the floor, it became necessary to maintain strong alignment and muscular control to keep the limbs from flailing, torso vertically erect, and crown of the head lifted up to the sky to prevent bobbing. The amount of energy required to sustain the bounding movement in the lower half of the body was somewhat balanced out by the carriage of the upper body being kept relaxed, collected, and calm. Even so, the supposed simplicity of keeping relaxed and calm required a deceiving amount of attention.

Feet had to move with precision as they rolled through to the ground, landed through the heel, and relaxed into the floor for the briefest moment before engaging once more to jump up again. The grounding that had to be felt not only between the feet and the floor, but all the way up the body to the crown of the head, had no more than half a second at most to be found before the energy rebounded to explode upwards! This finely tuned movement offered the body very short, but consistent, opportunities of rest that allowed for the sustainment of this dance over longer periods of time. Although the physical demands were considerable, this movement inspired a more nuanced appreciation of the relationship between my body, the earth, and the sky—the constant arrival and departure from the ground and air reinvigorated my relationship to both these places, in a cyclical constant of meeting and saying goodbye. That being said, despite our best efforts of sustaining energy through technique, even the strongest of us were exhausted after only ten minutes.

I became curious of what might result from the physical experience of repeating this movement for longer and longer amounts of time. I was interested in the potential of repetition as a catalyst for a transformative experience—of not just dancing the image, but symbolically transforming into the Scarf Dancer creature. In her book *The Philosophy of Bodily Becoming*, dancer and philosopher Kimerer LaMothe states that the power of bodily becoming through ritual is not cognitive or emotional, but kinetic. She states, “Its power lies in the visceral transformation that occurs as a person experiences the power and effects of his own movement making” (LaMothe 163). In the rehearsals of the Scarf Dancer creature, the dancers would describe the powerful physicality they felt as they challenged the limits of their physical abilities. The kinetic experience of feeling their skin and

muscles shake on the bone, of the vibratory effects of their movement making, resonated through their bodies and the space around them. Not just exhaustion, but euphoria and joy would emanate from the dancers as they experienced cathartic releases of physical and emotional tensions stored deeply in their bodies. When describing Indigenous Tewa Pueblo dances traditions, author Jill Sweet attests to the psychological transformations performers may experience in certain dance forms, as a result of the repetitive and rhythmic quality of the movement found in these traditions. In them, the challenging of one's physical limits over long periods of time produces a transformational state in which performers become the animal or spirit they are meant to represent (Sweet 98).

In the Scarf Dance creature's dance, it was the kinetic energy and power of my dancers' full-bodied movement, as well as the ever-lengthening amount of time spent repeating this movement, that allowed for them to not simply imitate the creature, but psychologically transform into it. In my own experience rehearsing the Scarf Dance creature, I can attest that its rhythmic bounding brought me to a meditative state in which I felt completely at peace. Despite the burning of my calves, rapid pulsing of my heart, gasping lungs, and shaking of my body I felt myself transformed, as the exhaustion of my physical body forced me to retract from my own ego and drew me closer to what I imagined to be the state of the Scarf Dance creature.

This process of giving in to transformation required a level of trust, due to the limited understanding we first had of the creature itself. Prior to our kinesthetic embodiment we had no conception of the Scarf Dance creature's inner state—what this creature would be thinking or feeling. In pushing our bodies through the physical trials of repeatedly bouncing we engaged in a process of discovery, learning of the transition into a

meditative state and the involuntary euphoria that accompanied the shaking body. It was hard not to imagine the Scarf Dance creature as a positive entity when each session of bouncing ended with shared laughter and a sense of resonant awe. As a result of these discoveries, the Scarf Dance creature became imbued with the characteristics of positivity and healing, its nature meditative, calm, and beautiful in the face of physical adversity.

### *Connection to Hiking*

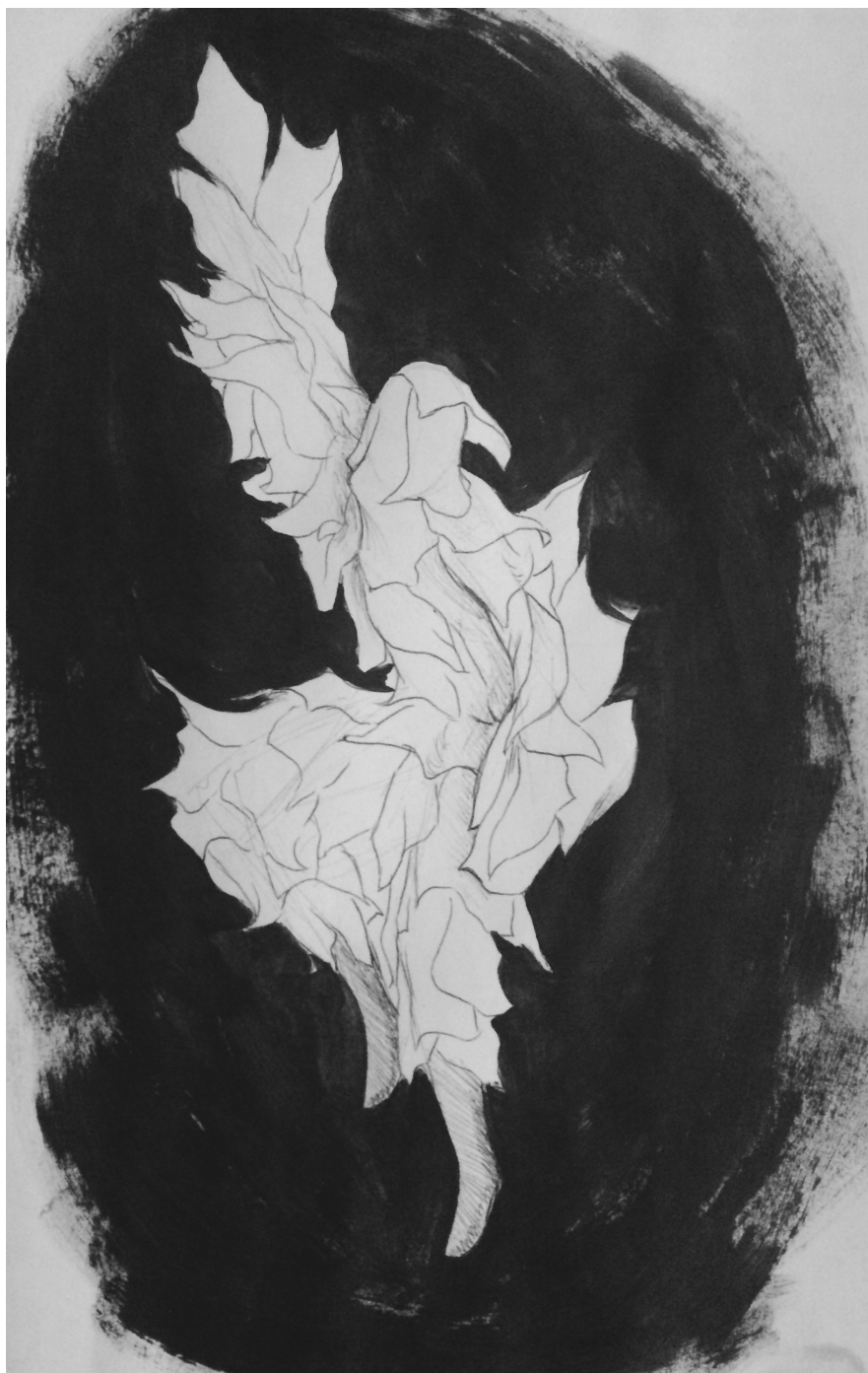
At the time that my dancers and I were rehearsing the bounding movements of the Scarf Dance creature there was no question in my mind of where this creature would travel: forwards, always and only ever forwards, tracing snaking pathways through the studio space no more than one small hop at a time. It was a decision I had largely taken for granted, and it was only after the performance was over and done that I began to contemplate the reasons why this directional impulse felt so natural.

The answer struck me during a conversation with a friend, in which I was discussing the significant role that hiking plays in my life. As described earlier in Chapter 3, hiking has greatly informed and shaped my relationship with the natural world. When I hike through a landscape, walking for hours at a time, the step after step I take are a meditative practice—a repetitive act that carries me away to a different state of mind. The seemingly infinite steps form an ongoing rhythm I begin to trust, and the buzz of superficial thoughts subside to the sensory experience of my physical self and the land I occupy. I feel an ebbing away of the past and future, as my awareness becomes fully present in the unfolding landscape. As Abrams puts it, in this type of moment my “present” “...expands to become an enveloping field of presence. And this presence, vibrant and alive, spontaneously

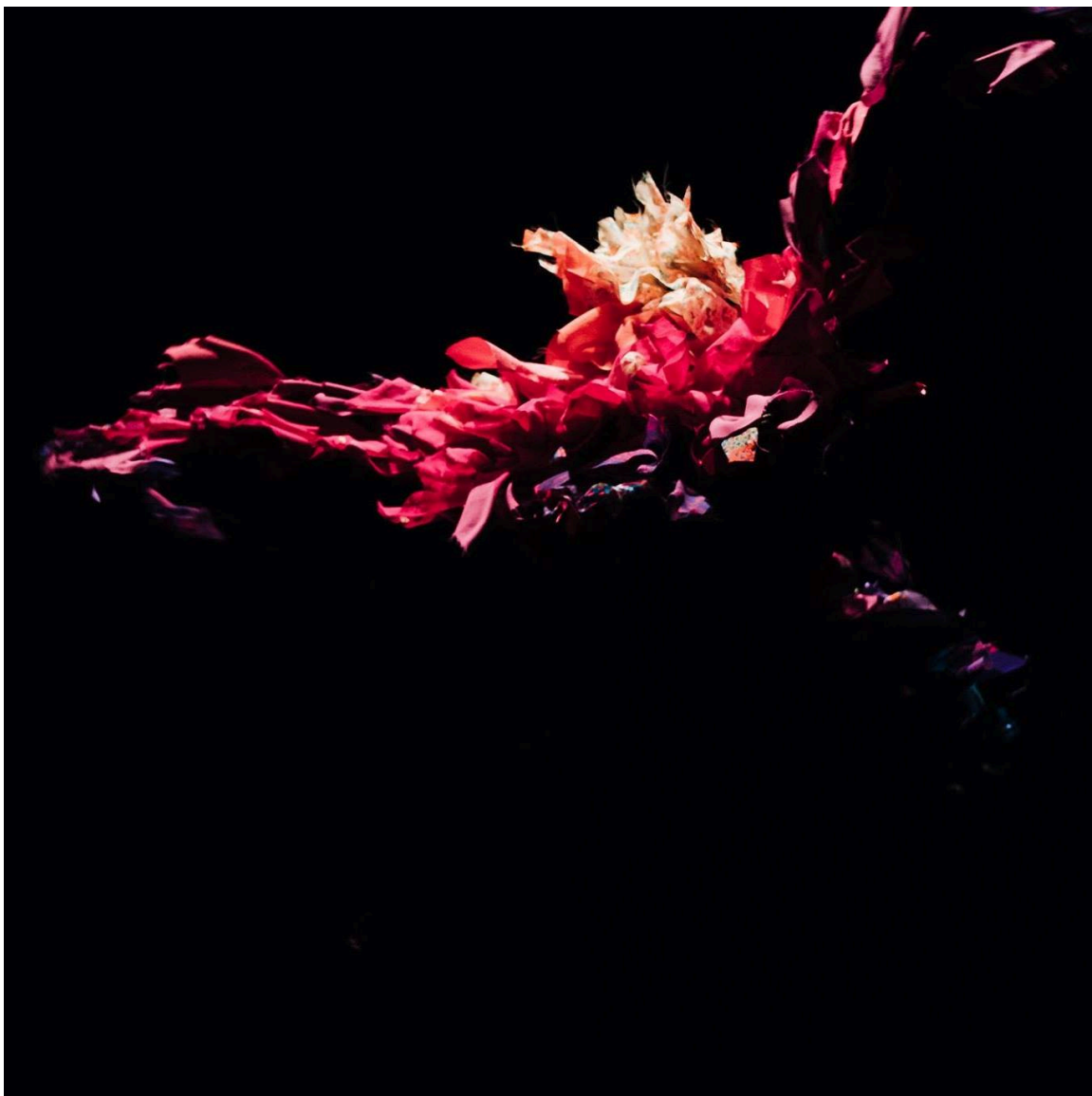
assumes the precise shape and contour of the enveloping sensory landscape” (Abram 203-204). The functional movement of my body walking forward fully integrates me into the fabric of the landscape—moving in, around, and through it, sensing it in multifaceted ways. With this in mind, it made sense that my kinesthetic memory of walking trails would reintroduce itself when I was choreographing a creature meant to embody harmonic coexistence with land.

Trails, whether human or animal made, thread through terrains in a way that reflect both the act of asking and listening on part of the trailblazer. Trails are not formed at random, but in response to the things one seeks—the hiker metaphorically asks the landscape where they might find water, food, shelter, or simply an advantageous view. These needs make trails strategic, but this strategy does not work in a way that subverts the land itself. A trail must also follow the rules of the landscape, and the others that occupy it. For example, if one encounters a grove of thick cholla cacti, these spiny figures are respectfully acknowledged and walked around. In this way, a trail listens, in a responsive snaking that coexists with the rhythm of the landscape.

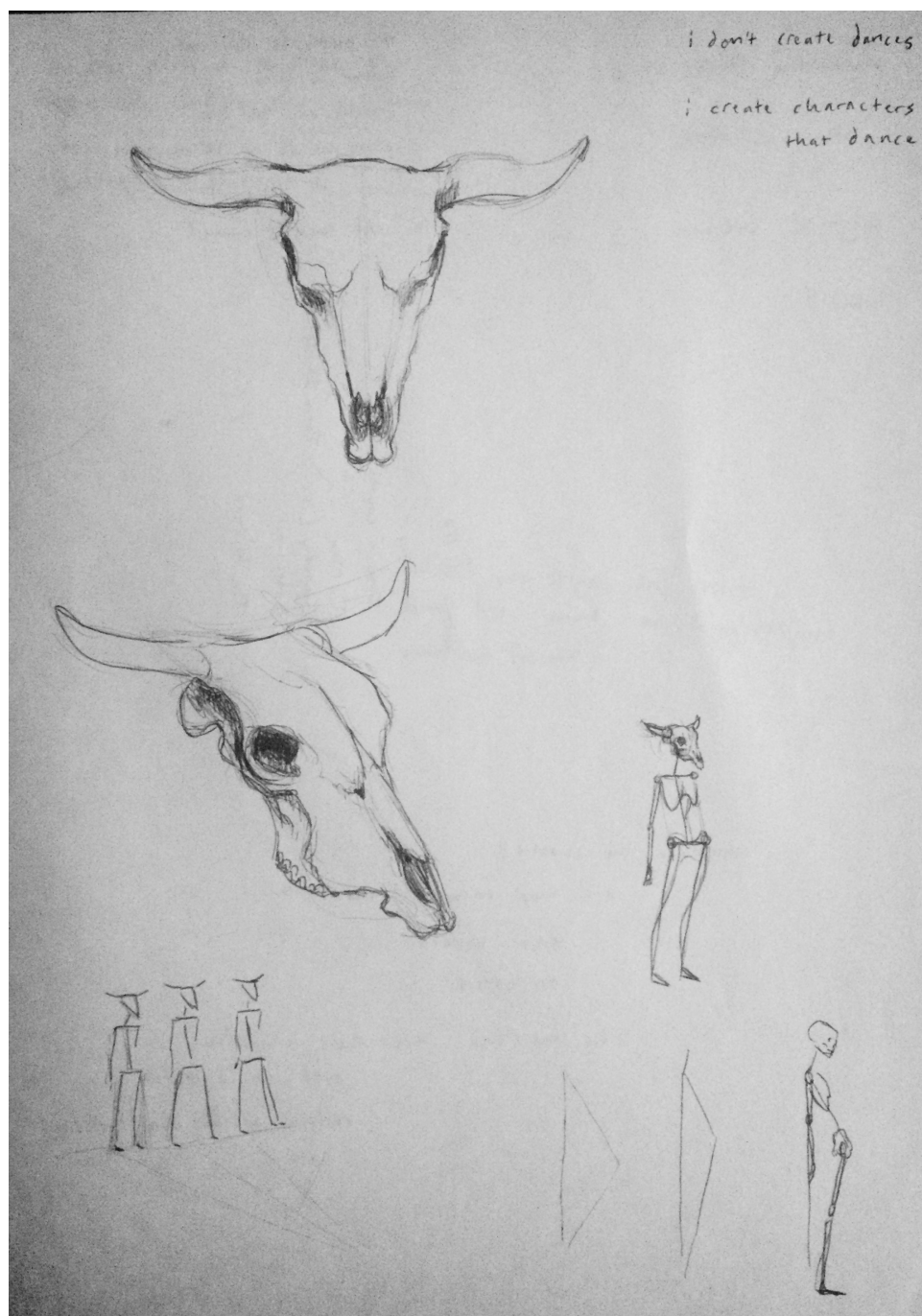
This kind of sensitivity, this ability to listen to the land and move through it with mutual benefit, are inherent to the nature of the Scarf Dance creature. I imagine this creature moving in and around the physical world, traversing desert paths through the sagebrush in bounding steps, filling these spaces with energy. It does not haunt a landscape, but unendingly moves forward through it, its rhythmic nature infinitely sustained as it hops on its way to somewhere unknown.



*Figure 1. Scarf Dance creature, original drawing*



*Figure 2. Scarf Dance creature in flight during the performance*



*Figure 3. Cow Skull creature, original drawing*



*Figure 4. Cow Skull creatures in rehearsal*

## CHAPTER 5

### BECOMING THE LANDSCAPE

#### Coalescence

In metalworking, there is a moment in which two pieces of metal, placed together, gently touching, slowly heated at the same rate, reach a temperature at which they suddenly liquefy and meld with one another. It is over in less than a second, if you blink you would miss it, and suddenly two become one at a molecular level. This moment is termed a process of coalescence.

It was during the time spent cultivating the creative practice of *Reimagining the West* that I became intrigued with this concept of coalescence—of two things, a human body and a landscape (or, elements of a landscape), blending to become one. Within this concept I saw a connection to my focus on Indigenous perspectives of the body and its relationship to natural surroundings. I saw it as the next step in my practice of sensorially connecting with a landscape—that a person not only engages with a landscape more deeply, but to the point that the edges of each entity’s boundaries melt into one another and they become aware of how integral a part of that landscape they are. As Forbes says, “... if we lose the air, we cannot live. If we lose the water, we cannot live. If we lose the plants and the animals, we cannot live. So they are more a part of us than that which we call our ‘body’” (Forbes 252). This view argues that human beings are intrinsically dependent on

and connected to their surroundings, and I extend my interpretation of the quote to support the notion that a state of coalescence is not necessarily an event that occurs and ends, but a continuous fact of life. To reveal this state, I wanted to create a practice that would invite people to recognize the ongoing coalescence they have always had with their natural surroundings, but may have become disconnected from. I believed a coalescent experience would create a scenario in which the person would begin to notice the connective threads that exist between human beings and the landscapes they inhabit—that they would reimagine their relationship to the landscape. I hoped that such an experience would inspire a realization that body and landscape are connected in effect, and that in order to maintain the health and continuity of the human race the health and continuity of an environment must be considered as well.

In my initial stages, I imagined this process to manifest by juxtaposing the body with natural objects and landscapes. I had hoped to take my dancers to the desert, to have them experience the landscape for themselves. However, logistical problems of time and travel prevented this, and I had to find another way. Instead of a pilgrimage, I brought my lived history of the desert to the studio, and in this creative problem solving lied the seeds from which the landscape of *Reimagining the West* grew. Verbal directives from myself worked to shape an imaginative desert space in the studio and guided the tasks and quality of the movement practice. Movement explorations drew parallels between concepts of the human body and these arid landscapes—the skin as a topographic surface, the internal organs as oil and coal, each other's bodies as the curving, arching walls of canyons to be explored. At times, I would bring in small tokens from past trips to the desert, stems of sagebrush to smell or chips of sandstone to feel, that would continue to inform their sensory

experience of this desert space. Dancers were asked to stay in an active state of imagining, a suspension of disbelief as they began to create, inhabit, and move through this conjured landscape. Using this method, we cultivated a way to sense a landscape using our imaginations, where the coalescent experience originated from an inner state, rather than physical contact with a landscape.

The shift from literal sensory input to remembered and imagined sensory input is interesting to me. When engaging in the process of imagining, the mind calls upon memories, various elements from lived experiences, to shape what is being imagined. Memories are fluid, evolving and shifting with the passage of time, and the likelihood of remembering each tiny detail of a memory is rare. Certain parts of a memory might fade and must be reshaped and emended to feel whole again. During the creative research for *Reimagining the West*, this process presented an unexpected secondary layer in the aim to “reimagine” a landscape. The memories I had of my time spent out in the desert were resurrected and reimagined throughout the creative process of this piece, and blended with the memories my dancers kept of their own experiences in natural landscapes. Through verbal sharing and personal reflection between the dancers and I during the rehearsals these memories were combined to form inner projections of a desert landscape.

The Cow Skull and Scarf Dance creature were unexpected additions into this practice of coalescence, introducing themselves partway through the creative process. However, in time I became more aware of the inherent connections between asking my dancers to embody imagined landscapes, and asking my dancers to embody reimagined anthropomorphized landscapes. The creatures were, themselves, the products

of a process of reimagining a landscape—my own. They were a coming together of the many parts of my experience with desert landscapes—my lived history and cultural background, the perspectives I’ve witnessed and absorbed from others, and the sensory stimuli collected from years of backcountry hiking. All of these ideas amalgamated into the surrealist bodies of the creatures. They operated as both symbolic representations of a desert landscape, as well as two contrasting perspectives of that same desert landscape. The Cow Skull creature reflected a settler colonialist perspective, always hungry, always seeking, seeing the land as something to be consumed. The Scarf Dance creature was rooted in an Indigenous perspective, harmoniously coexisting with the land in a reciprocal pattern of giving and taking energy, seeing the land as a home. In this way, the creatures were also reflective of my biases towards the ethical dynamics between settler colonialist systems and Indigenous agency and knowledge.

In bringing these creatures to the studio, I was asking my dancers to add another layer of complexity to the movement practice we had already established. Now, they were not only exploring their relationship to desert landscapes and elements of those landscapes, but also exploring their relationship to these creatures, and the creature’s relationship to these landscapes. This multifaceted process shaped an intensely investigative movement practice. It required the dancers to cultivate a greater understanding of what it meant for them to engage with a landscape they were asked to create for themselves, as well as negotiate how their own identities would meet with the identities of the creatures. In the months spent in this physical and mental practice the dancers became cyclically sensing, imagining, transforming, embodying, and performing bodies.

During the performance of *Reimagining the West*, the dancers received exclusive

agency and responsibility over this process, as I could no longer vocally guide them through the creature's movements and descriptions of the landscape. Instead, they had to independently delve into their own memories and imaginations, the deep spaces of their inner selves, to transform into the creatures and perform them in an imagined landscape. Although they performed for an audience, the dancers were not there, so to speak. In that time and place they were in deep communion with themselves as the creatures—asking themselves what the ground would feel like if they were dancing outside, what they would see on the distant desert horizon, seeped in the experience of imagining and inhabiting their own inner landscape. This was the process that fused the allegorical metal of their selfhood to that of the land. The creatures themselves were the bridging of body and land into one anthropomorphized being, and the performing of these creatures became the heated process which ultimately created a coalescent experience between dancer and reimagined, inner landscape.

This coalescent experience was not without effect or consequence. By embodying the creatures, and the perspectives the creatures held of the desert landscape, over time the dancers began to report feeling personally affected by them. Even after they had ended a sequence of the movement practice, and returned from their transformation into the creature, the emotional impact was resonant. Performance of the Cow Skull creature, especially, had to be approached carefully. Left too long in the embodiment of these creatures and dancers would describe feelings of anxiety and despondency. Their bodies would begin to feel heavy and stalled, as if they could not muster the energy to continue dancing. The Scarf Dance creature, in contrast, had dancers mentally and physically buzzing with excited energy, laughter, and ease. In becoming the creatures, the dancers

were doing more than performing a perspective, they were emotionally engaging with the landscapes they projected inside of themselves. It was their emotional experience, initiated by their physical engagement, that created a change in themselves.

The contrasting effects the creatures had on the dancers' physical and mental states began to answer the initial questions I had when entering into this research—about the greater implications of how we as human beings look at and treat landscapes, and how the recognition of these implications could inspire individuals to work towards a sustainable future. What I discovered throughout this research process was that the perspectives of the creatures, illustrated through their movement, had the power to inflict a positive or negative impact not only on the condition of a landscape, but on the condition of the performer as well. In this state of transformation and performance, this coalescent moment of landscape and self, the two were inherently tied together in effect.

The words of Indigenous activists Klee and Princess Benally, protesting the use of reclaimed waste water on the ecological island and sacred site of the San Francisco Peaks in Northern Arizona, poetically reify this concept. Their quote, memorialized in the visual work of artist Chip Thomas, states, “What we do to the mountains, we do to ourselves” (Rojo and Harrington). I found that by transforming into the creatures, and experiencing a coalescent moment with an inner landscape during the performance of these creatures, the dancers moved from theoretically understanding this concept of mutual impact to kinesthetically experiencing it. The creative movement practice made the effect direct and personal, and in doing so had the power to demand change in the most immediate sense. In such a scenario, I hypothesized that instincts rooted in self-preservation would discourage a person to live within a perspective of negativity towards landscapes, because of the

realization of the impact of those behaviors on oneself. I hoped the creative movement practice I developed in this research would motivate those who engaged in it to reimagine their relationships with natural landscapes—that it would guide people to regard these landscapes with greater empathy and inspire efforts towards sustainable coexistence—if not for the landscape’s sake, then for their own.

### The Performance

Although the Cow Skull and Scarf Dance creatures were born in my drawings and fleshed out during the rehearsal period of my creative research, it wasn’t until the performance of *Reimagining the West* that they truly came to life. Placed into the landscape of the performance space, the creatures were reintroduced into their desert habitat and now had space to roam. And roam they did, taking the audience along with them into the depths of the landscapes that unfolded throughout each section of the piece, acting as both a spectacle and a guide.

*Reimagining the West*, from start to finish, was crafted to immerse the audience in an emotional and sensory experience of a desert landscape. Rather than a proscenium setting, audience members sat in the midst of the performance space, with seating arranged in uneven clusters around the periphery of the black box theater. Like rocky outcroppings, the audience themselves became a part of the landscape of the space, and their positioning put them at a vantage point from which they were both watching the performance take place and coexisting in that same landscape with the creatures. With speakers hidden all throughout the space, sound came from no one fixed point, but instead swathed each person in a multidimensional soundscape. Floor to ceiling projections of desert landscapes seemed

to eliminate the enclosing walls of the theatre, appearing like surreal portals into distant horizons.

The highly orchestrated landscapes of the performance space were an invaluable part of the piece. However, it was the creatures and their movements that played the most crucial role of making these landscapes come alive. More than interesting props, these creatures lived and breathed in these spaces the audience had found themselves in. They stirred the space through their dances, creating an energetic friction that transported us to a desert expanse and made this new landscape believable. Their surreal visage and unearthly behaviors permeated the boundaries of reality, creating what I believed was a turning point in the way the audience was looking at the performance. Such creatures do not exist in the natural world, but here they were, in front of the audience, alive and moving. I hoped this suspension of disbelief, for what could and could not be real, opened up the mind to imagine the space in a different way, to believe in the realness of it in the same way in which we could believe in the 'real' creatures we saw moving in front of us. My designing of the black box theatre presented the audience with the image of a landscape, but it was the creatures that took us into it. In so, the creatures were the heartstring of the performance, the only constant, threading the landscapes together as they danced the audience on a journey through them.

Together the sounds and sights of the space, and the movement of the creatures, were meant to guide the audience through the transformation of this black box theatre into a new landscape. Like a surreal dream, the piece began as we entered into the dark of an inky black space, slowly making shape of the lone figure of the Scarf Dance creature who emerged ethereally from the shadows. The creature moved steadily in its meditative

rhythmic patterns through the space, guiding us into and around this dark landscape. Small pools of golden light periodically lit the creature from above, illuminating a path, a flutter of color, mysteriously appearing for a brief moment before fading away. Both the figure and the landscape felt unearthly, far less literal than psychological imaginings, but the uncertainty of these elements was intentional, meant to inspire intrigue on part of the viewer and draw them in. What was this strange creature, this unfamiliar place? The sensuous spell of the Scarf Dance creature's movement invited the audience to believe in the unfolding landscape, to follow the creature down into the allegorical rabbit hole.

*Reimagining the West* would not have been the same piece if it had been performed in an actual desert landscape. Unlike taking the audience into a literal landscape, the performance in the black box theatre allowed me to craft the way in which I presented the desert to them. It allowed me to show them various landscapes in less than an hour, and in one case present a perspective normally impossible to reach: a landscape sensed from underneath the earth. During this section, the theatre was cast in complete blackness, only a soundscape offered any clues about the place we inhabited. It was through the clattering sound of small stones and dirt falling, echoing in a cavernous space, that I aimed to transport the audience deep underground, to the subterranean space underneath a coal mine. Sounds of deep rumbling and the groaning of heavy machinery permeated the air as more and more dirt began to fall, placing the audience in an imagined situation of what they might hear in such a place. The volume rose and rose, reaching a deafening roar that encapsulated the body in the violence of what was happening—of the earth being torn into. Thundering vibrations from the speaker's base reverberated through one's ribcage, ensnaring the audience into a sensory understanding of the act taking place. The darkness

and sound created an atmosphere that was disorienting and threatening, and in myself I felt a fear of being buried or pierced into. It was my intention that this embodiment would take each person through what I imagined was the personified experience of a mined landscape, and for them to emerge on the other side of it impacted by what took place. Now, instead of knowing only how a mine appears from above, the audience was given an interpretation of what it would feel like from underneath. This was my aim throughout the piece, in the setting, sound, the design and movement of the creatures, and all else: to look at these desert landscapes from a different angle, a reimagined perspective.

The complete transformation of the black box theatre's topography, and integration of both performers and audience members into this landscape, was significant to the intentions of this piece. I wanted them to feel as if they had been transported into a new place, as if we had left the building and found ourselves in unexplored spaces, in landscapes which they could sense for themselves. I wanted them to feel as if they were a part of these landscapes, infused and integral to the setting, to the point that the events occurring there were not something to be viewed from a comfortable distance, but a scenario each viewer was directly involved in. Ultimately, I hoped the space would give the audience the feeling of having travelled to the desert and back again, and in the journey of having gone to these landscapes found a changed understanding of them.

At the same time, I acknowledge that much of what I presented in the piece framed a landscape in distress—from the references to invasive industries, or the predatory nature of the Cow Skull creatures. That the Cow Skull creature was able to point its fixed gaze directly at audience members, no more than a foot away at times, was meant to make them feel at risk—the same risk of being “devoured” that landscapes are subject to. It was no

accident that the projected landscapes featured small nods to the impact of industry on the desert—barbed wire fences and power lines off in the distance, snaking through the land. There were times in the piece where it was my aim to stir the audience, through sharp changes in sound or setting. All this, because I did not want the audience to leave the performance complacent. I hoped that by my framing these landscapes in a specific way, audience members might leave the performance in a state of reflection. I hoped they would empathize with both the stark beauty of the featured desert spaces and the painful legacy of abuse that exists in them, and feel inspired to enact change in some way. It was important to me that the piece would rouse discussion about these landscapes, and a reimagining of what they mean to each person who attended the performance.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

I know now that I have built a mythology of the desert in my mind. It is a combination of the stories I have heard throughout my life, tales of creatures from my Swiss and Irish heritage, stories of speaking animals and spirits in Indigenous folklore, and legends of cowboys and the ghosts of gold miners from Southwest oral traditions. It is peppered by my long stretches of time spent in the backcountry, winding along creosote embalmed trails and curling my body into canyon nooks to sleep, face up to the stars. I no longer live in the Southwest desert landscape I grew up in, and this too influences the way I see it in my mind—as a distant home, to be missed. Creating *Reimagining the West* was my way to figuratively return home for a moment and contribute my own story to the anthology of this place. The creative process reacquainted me with the landscape I yearned for, and through thoughtful analysis I, too, gained a better understanding of the narrative my imagination had created of the Southwest desert.

*Reimagining the West* gave me the means to cultivate the kind of emotional and visceral resonance that I am left with after having been in the desert—and invite each person who was a part of the creative process, or attended the performance, into my inner landscape, this secret desert, an allegory for a space I hold dear. I wanted the audience to inhabit and experience the reimagined spaces for a period time, to sense them visually,

sonically, physically, and deeply, and in doing so perhaps find ways to empathize with the landscapes and creatures. For the dancers, I hoped that the creative process of transforming into and performing the mythical Cow Skull and Scarf Dance creature would lead them to an embodied and kinesthetically empathetic understanding of landscapes functioning in disruption or harmony—as well as a different understanding of themselves and the inner landscapes they shaped. The two creatures, though originating from my imagination, also ended up becoming independent figures I felt accountable to. I felt a responsibility to them, to honor their inherent qualities and innermost motivations, and perform them with respect and integrity.

Quantitatively speaking, I cannot conclusively know if the performance of these creatures and the construction of the performative space changed the perspectives the dancers or audience members. What I do know is that I successfully presented them with an alternate view of a desert landscape. The crafting of the theatre into an amalgam of rich sensory stimuli absorbed the audience and the performers into a new landscape, putting them directly in the midst of the infinite horizons and underground cavities of the earth. The creatures were examples of how a perspective of landscape can be anthropomorphized, adopted onto the human body, and performed. While the audience did not participate in the movement, even the act of watching the creatures in movement gave them an experience of landscape they could take with them. According to scholar Kent De Spain, “Movement... is the medium through which the improvisation is experienced by both the improviser and the audience. It is also the lens through which that audience can view the inner world of the mover” (De Spain 97). In this way *Reimagining the West* gave the audience the opportunity to witness a reimagined landscape through the

bodies of the performers, who they themselves were physically experiencing that reimagining through the performance of the creatures.

### The Role of the Moving Body

In the act of moving my body, I am reabsorbed into place. I feel it in the endless hours spent walking along narrow footpaths in the desert backcountry. The meditative practice of each sequential step, and heightened awareness of my lush and unpredictable surroundings, leads me deeper into this state where my ego dispels. I no longer kinesthetically recognize where I end and the world around me begins—I become no different than the space I occupy. In movement, I coalesce with the landscape.

Taken to the studio, and formed into the creative movement of *Reimagining the West*, the effect of my hiking practice remained. Throughout the creative and performative process, it was always the movement of the dancers' sensing bodies that acted as the catalyst for a coalescent embodiment of landscape and creature to take place. Without the moving, sensing body, the creatures would have been nothing more than images on a page, static and unfeeling, unrelated to landscape. Adopting them onto the dancing body allowed for them to come alive and flourish in their respective ways. It gave an evocative physical power to the shape of the creatures, and an ability for them to enact a tangible effect on their surroundings. It also allowed for the dancers to better understand the creatures and their perspectives of land, whether harmful or healing. Their embodiment formed a relationship that humanized the multiplicity of ways in which landscapes are seen and treated, recognizing the potential for nuance in the perspectives of environmentally destructive industries and those seeking to protect landscapes from them.

### Contributions to the Field

This research, first and foremost, was conducted in an effort to contribute to a shift in the American environmental perspective of desert landscapes as wastelands. The need to reimagine deserts as being more than just wastelands is immediate and imperative, for the sustainable continuity of both the lands and lives of these places. I hope that my work will effect real change in this task, while also continuing to reinforce the understanding that dance has a role to play within discourses of environmental justice.

There are a multitude of researchers publishing studies of the effects of environmental destruction, but efforts specifically rooted in the arts offer a distinct approach. While quantitative facts are essential, at times I find them to feel too distant or too abstract to nourish motivations to enact change. Alternatively, works of art hold the power to speak to an individual's emotional perspective, taking facts and artfully illustrating their significance to the public. Dance, as a performative art form, is particularly powerful in this regard because of the inherent involvement of the human body, and the viewing of this "other" body in the state of performance by an audience. Abrams writes, in reference to the research of German philosopher Edmund Husserl:

Husserl discerned that there was an inescapable affinity, or affiliation, between these other bodies and one's own. The gestures and expressions of these other bodies, viewed from without, echo and resonate one's own bodily movements and gestures, experienced from within. By an associative "empathy," the embodied subject comes to recognize these other bodies as other centers of experience, other subjects. (Abram 37)

Dance is unique in its capacity to appeal to a viewer's selfhood. To watch a dancer in the act of creative movement opens up a pathway between viewer and performer, where the former may empathize with the physical and emotional experience of the latter, and by default, empathize with the intention of the artwork the dancer is a vehicle for

representing. Watching dance has the potential to initiate a process in which the performed movement intertwines with the viewer's identity and lived history, creating a bridge between the two. In doing so, the issues presented become personally relevant to the viewer. This impact is why I believe dance holds a significant role in environmental justice work, and why I chose it as the medium to create *Reimagining the West*.

I am not the first to use dance as a medium for making a statement on environmental issues. Performance and dance artists Ana Mendieta, Anna Halprin, and Jennifer Monson have created a legacy of work revolving around concepts of the environment and the human body's relationship to it. My creative research, and the performance of *Reimagining the West* that followed, are my contributions to this canon. However, while the works of Mendieta, Halprin, and Monson lead audiences to a closer relationship with environments via outdoor performances, the research I present is new in the way it takes the reverse approach. In my work, I choose to subvert constructed spaces and reconnect audiences to land by symbolically bringing natural landscapes indoors. Using one's imagination and the technological majesty of the theatre, I create sensorially immersive, psychological representations of landscape that transport the audience and the performers to a new space without ever having to leave the room. In addition to this, my research offers a contemporary, secular context for ritual transformation in the series of investigative creative movement practices the dancers engaged in to become the creatures—a transformation that alters one's interaction with a landscape, both imagined and real. Both of these legs of my research provide a way for dance to guide people to sense the landscapes around them in new and different ways—to leave the familiarity of a space or an identity behind, and engage in the unknown. My research prompts individuals to not only hear the

numbers and logic of quantitative studies on the environment, but feel the impact of these things, their immediate relevance, within their bodies. Perhaps such a phenomenon only lasts for the duration of the rehearsal or the performance, but it is my hope that the vignettes I presented in *Reimagining the West* had an effect powerful enough that it remained with the dancers and audience long after that.

### Closing Thoughts

The other day I took a walk on an easy trail that breaches the city limits of Salt Lake City and enters into the undeveloped wildness of Utah public lands. Although unlike the landscape of my low-lying Southwest desert home, this high desert terrain cradles small moments of familiarity—a cactus hidden in the tall grass, a rattlesnake coiled on a warm stone. I take a moment to become conscious of my senses, and notice the information I'm receiving from my surroundings. The scope of my eyes widens to see the bending horizon of a mountain range, and it reminds me of a curvaceous body, resting on its side. I feel the weight of my body pressing down into the pads of my feet and think of a pulse in the ground beneath the soles of my hiking shoes. I imagine the intricate mapping of various plants' roots reaching long and deep through the sandy dirt, veins seeking scarce water and intertwining to form a communicative web. Parallels begin to form between my body and the body/bodies of this place, and I see the land as a living organism made of many parts, myself being one of them. This process is a weaving together of what I sense and what I imagine, to form a new idea of the landscape around me—one that has ties both to the literal space and to my own creative identity. This is the effect which *Reimagining the West* has left on me. I recognize the interplay between the outer landscape and my inner

world, understanding the fundamental role my body plays during this phenomenon as the link between the two, and in so I am lead to a reimagined understanding of this landscape.

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