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EDITORIAL

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Performing ecologies in a world in crisis

The eco-somatic concept that body sensibility and conscious action can facilitate planetary awareness has provided the basis for this issue's investigations of ecology and performance. Authors represented here envision their relationships to performance and choreography through body and ecology, and in contexts of crisis. Editors Sondra Fraleigh and Robert Bingham, who have collaborated on several scholarly and creative projects related to ecological crisis, introduce themselves and the contributions of this issue in their dialogue below.

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Guest (guest)

Robert: In the summer of 2015, when I interviewed you for my dissertation 'Improvising meaning in the age of humans', we often spoke about connecting to place and earth through the body in dance. This exchange drew on your philosophical and historical writing in dance and on our collaborative improvisations in the desert near your home in St. George, Utah. Our dialogue continued long after that summer through e-mails and phone calls, eventually leading to this collaboration as editors for the current issue of *Choreographic Practices*. At what point did environmental crisis become a focal point of our inquiry?

Sondra: We were humming along in my car, returning home to St. George, having just improvised a barefoot dance in nearby Snow Canyon with the soft multi-coloured sandstone there. I was still holding the burnt rose and bright orange colours as an inner world-sight when I asked you what you saw as the emerging urgent research field in dance scholarship. Without hesitation, you said 'ecology and performance'. And I thought, 'Wow', how could I have missed that? What have I been dancing just this very morning?

Robert: I remember that day vividly, though I don't remember the exchange you describe. That must have been the moment of revealing the orientation of our highly improvisational interview. I wanted to delve into the relationship of body and earth through dance and to find meaning in today's context of crisis, even if the latter remained unacknowledged initially. I knew you would have much to contribute to this inquiry, as you have written often about dance and somatic processes as means of accessing ecological knowledge and remembering connection to earth. This appears repeatedly as a theme in your phenomenological writing, as well as your writing on butoh, though not necessarily as a central theme (1987, 2004, 2010). I was trying to foreground it, though I don't think the notion of crisis had yet entered into our dialog. I recall that it came later and that you were, initially, unconvinced. What led you to change your mind?

Sondra: Well […] No one really likes to think about crisis, and it is a thorny research topic, difficult to scrutinize systematically. I finally realized that the need to think about environmental crisis, to write about it and encourage others to become advocates for protecting our precious planet and assessing our collective fate. Yes, I use this word 'fate' decidedly. It is a bit old-fashioned and mythologically final, but indeed we humans have a collective project. We are all in this together; climate circles the globe and touches everyone and everything. Climate warming is the most pressing issue we face collectively, and we won't get a second chance to change our behaviour for the better.

It is easy enough to speak about planetary crisis in everyday conversation, to get angry at deniers and hope that will be enough, but to take a position and defend it in research requires much more specificity and commitment. While many turn to science, we turn to art, presenting a collection of articles that show how dance and performance can reflect crisis and take activist stances in the face of fascinating challenges. Admittedly, we might wonder whether dance performance, or any other

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kind, actually makes a difference? I will never be able to prove it, but I think it can and does. Individually and collectively, we need to pay attention in all the ways that we can. Our way here is through arts activism, making it more visible in performance, word and image. Every attempt to make a difference counts. As one of my friends tells me, 'the field grows green one blade at a time'.

Careful research often begins with a definition of terms, Robert. Do you think crisis needs to be defined? There are many kinds, and we are primarily concerned with environmental crises (in the plural).

Robert: Over the past couple of years of research, I have avoided defining environmental crisis in a limiting way. In my dissertation (2017) and other recent publications (2018a, 2018b) I reference climate change, pollution, and species extinction, and I invoke the Anthropocene, the geologic concept defining human activity as the dominant geophysical force influencing the movements of the Earth System, including hydrologic, carbon and nitrogen cycles. All of these have profound implications for human and non-human species and systems. I have chosen not to isolate out any single factor or phenomenon, both because of their interconnectedness and because my interest is in promoting an inclusive discourse that allows people to define crisis according to their knowledge and experience. We signalled this preference in our Call for Submissions for this issue, where we identified possible topics but left the door open to perspectives on crisis that we had not considered. Given the large number of respondents, it seems that a solidified definition was indeed unnecessary.

This issue is oriented towards meaning: what meanings can be drawn from crisis, subjectively defined, using the tools of dance practice and scholarship? The authors have taken diverse approaches to the question. Some address environmental crisis explicitly, while others allow it to live implicitly in the spaces of language and image: a shadow of crisis. In either case, all address dance as a vehicle for sensory connection among humans and between humans and environments, relating this connectivity to ethics, politics, activism, healing and more.

Sondra: Early on we spoke of a gap in ecological research in dance and performance. How do the articles we chose for this issue address this gap? Is there a connecting thread? Or maybe ecology has been addressed in various ways in previous dance and performance research, but not explicitly in the context of crisis? I think that is three questions.

Robert: I will respond to the third, as I am not certain that there is a gap in the literature regarding ecology and dance. With respect to the context of crisis, though, I believe the story is different. As far as I am aware, this issue of *Choreographic Practices* is the first multi-authored scholarly book or journal issue to engage environmental crisis as the primary context for exploring ideas about dance. Individual practitioner-scholars such as Olsen (2002) and LaMothe (2015) have foregrounded environmental crisis in their writing on dance. In this issue, we build on such work by bringing together

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a collective of artists and scholars. We are adding to what I hope becomes a substantial body of literature on why dance matters in the context of crisis.

I choose to name crisis explicitly because it is a call to action: a circumstance requiring response. Until recently, I bought into the illusion that climate change, pollution and other issues associated with 'environmentalism' were vast, somewhat speculative matters for science to resolve, seemingly unrelated to ongoing colonial histories and trenchant patterns of inequality. I had little understanding of anthropocentrism, speciesism and extractivism (Klein 2014), nor with how they were operative in the world of consumption in which I participated every day. Much of this changed as you and I worked together and as I encountered the work of scholars and activists such as Rob Nixon (2011), Naomi Klein (2014), Tom Goldtooth (2014), Robin Wall Kimmerer (2014), Zoe Todd (2015) and others who illuminate the colonialist and capitalist roots of environmental crisis and its disproportionate impact on Indigenous peoples and on the Global South. While attending rallies in Philadelphia protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016–17, I was also taking a hard look at my everyday consumption patterns in relation to food, energy and waste and trying to understand how they fit into larger contexts of unsustainable energy and agricultural practices. Framing these various strands of research in the context of crisis reinforced my resolve to wake up and remember my embodied connection to a world of shared resources that are rapidly dwindling. Dancing, particularly in the wooded Wissahickon Park near my home (Bingham 2018a, 2018b), was the most effective tool for waking up viscerally.

Sondra: You have sparked a new line of action for me, both personally and intellectually, and in reflection, I now see a strong pragmatic orientation that has been developing in my teaching through connections to ecology for quite some time.

Robert: When I was a doctoral student, I once received this comment on a paper I had written: 'There needs to be a problematic'. That comment, which I understood as encouragement to be more critical of other scholars, became one of the factors leading to my focus on environmental crisis in my dissertation. That was the problematic, and it motivated my research and activism. What does environmental crisis mean to you?

Sondra: I take environmental issues personally, and will say more about this. My pragmatic response to a rising tide of issues is first through experiential pedagogy, in teaching inclusively and non-judgmentally, not simply for virtuoso performers as I once did, but for anyone who wants to learn directly through movement experiences in varied environments. In my volunteer work with seniors, I teach a Land to Water Yoga class of about 80 students; I am the oldest one. I modelled this yoga developmentally as a somatic process that associates the human with life on land, and in water and air. I also respond through writing from experiential perspectives, facilitating performances in

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gratitude for the wild and cultivated beauty of nature. As a traveller, I continue to deepen my contact with the world through teaching somatic dance retreats and conferences.

On the shadow side, I pay attention to how things often fall apart and sometimes explore this in performance. Butoh gives me this opportunity. If nature has beauty, it has every other aspect as well, and I see myself as part of it all. Having grown up close to horses and harvesting potatoes in community, I am romantic about the physical, tangible world of nature, and I still love ploughing my hands into the earth. When I perform in nature, I feel invested in protecting it.

Intellectually, I think and write as a phenomenologist whose work descends from Edmund Husserl. Early in the twentieth century, he articulated concerns for 'the environing world' through various interrelated horizons or ways of knowing the world (Husserl [1932] 1995: 154–65), ones that we commonly call ecological, social and cultural. He called these horizons 'lifeworlds' and wrote of their relationship to the somatic life of the body. Most significantly for dance, his student Martin Heidegger identified what he called 'the lived body' as part of, and central to the environing world, and what he often called 'the worlding of the world', imbuing the word 'world' with life and movement.

Robert: Your work cross-pollinates phenomenology, somatics and ecology.

Sondra: Yes. Husserl is the progenitor of eco-somatics, a term several of our authors develop in this issue. His work infuses the ecological perspectives of Maurice Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1962, 1968). As we move our senses out towards the world, and a sense of the world returns to us, there is folding reciprocal play in consciousness. This is the same play that sustains creative consciousness. Merleau-Ponty described this play as a 'chiasm' or 'intertwining' of the visible and the invisible (1968, Chapter 4). His work informs modern phenomenologist and performance artist David Abrams' book, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (2010), a cultural ecology of our human entanglement with all of nature. In turn, Abram influences the 'ecopsychology of perception' by Laura Sewall (1999). These ecological perspectives suffuse my upcoming book with several collaborators, *Back to the Dance Itself: Phenomenologies of the Body in Performance*. A recent multi-author book, edited by Sarah Whatley and others, takes a comprehensive look at dance and ecology through the lens of somatics, *Attending to Movement: Somatic Perspectives on Living in the World* (2015).

Robert: Before we introduce the authors individually, I want to return to your comment about taking environmental crisis personally. Why is that?

Sondra: For now: several cases in point, most recently this fall (2017), calamitous hurricanes in the USA and the Caribbean – not to mention California burning and Las Vegas in mourning from gun violence. I live 45 minutes from Las Vegas and know people affected by these disasters. Regarding

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the senseless mass killing, the largest by a lone gunman in US history with 600 people shot, what has this to do with the environment? As yet, the public doesn't know much about this gunman's motives. He doesn't seem to have a history of mental illness. He pursued a lifestyle of gambling, was somewhat of a drifter and used two houses to stockpile weapons.

I see his violence in light of ecology. Individually, we suffer a loss of sensibility when we don't really work anywhere or belong anywhere; we cease to interact with earth and each other through labour and love, and in accumulation, our collective psyche suffers. This dullness is felt in our bodies and society, as people become inured to violence, seeking empowerment in abusive and selfish ways, perhaps with guns or through sexual aggression. My perspective would be difficult to verify, but as a careful observer and environmental activist, I wade in nevertheless. Violence has multifarious roots; one of these is loss of connection to the earth as home, and related to this is loss of empathy and connectivity in community.

Still, I have hope in the goodness of people. I am encouraged by the varied approaches to environmental crises that authors in this journal issue bring to the page. Human life is linked to the health and wellbeing of local and global environments, impacting our ability and willingness to take care of each other. All the contributors make these connections, each in unique ways, since originality is one of the marks of art. For example, Denise Kenney and Nancy Holmes position the sensory body specifically as the site of ecological practice and belonging. They strive to embody work that, in David Abram's words, will spark 'a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us' (1996: 69).

Performing the existential continuum

Robert: Many of the authors articulate a view of humans and environments as an existential continuum, in contrast to the enlightenment construct of a nature–culture split (Plumwood 1993). This view is perhaps most explicit in Chelsea Adewunmi and Jill Sigman's contribution, a 'performance album' that documents Sigman's 2016 performance and community engagement project entitled 'Weed Heart'. The album, and the work it documents, identifies a connection between ways that the construct 'weed' is used to signify 'invasive' and 'undesirable' and ways that human populations are similarly marked on the grounds of race and religion. 'Weed Heart' speaks out by centering the lives of weeds growing in New York City and insisting that environmental crisis and social injustice be recognized as interconnected. It does so with the help of weedy collaborators, whose histories in New York and elsewhere are deeply intertwined with the histories of their human cohabitants.

While Adewunmi and Sigman evoke weed history, other authors evoke land histories. Ali East draws upon ancestral and land histories in Aotearoa New Zealand in the context of Moa, Maori and

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European migration and settlement. Her account describes an eco-somatic improvisation project she directed in the historic ruins of a 150-year-old migrant dwelling, which inquired into the sensuous narratives of the site's past. It reflects on the layers of history vibrating in the broken stone and grass, which the dancers assimilate into their leaning and settling within the ruins. While a reflection on the past, East's account is also an abrupt reminder of the present. On several occasions, a second, unsettling narrative interrupts: images of the current crisis of displaced refugees, primarily from the Middle East, who have been driven from their homes by war and famine. As East weaves together these different strands of past, present, local and global movement, she invites the reader to reflect on the embodied meanings of migration and home.

Sondra: On the other side of the globe, Québécois author Christine Bellerose traces details of Montreal's history as she embodies the movements of land and elemental nature. Through text and image, she thematizes white settler responsibility as a concern informing her performance art research, which she refers to as 'dancing land'. Bellerose's lovingly rendered artist pages invite the reader into reflections on relationship and responsibility to land and one's place in its history. In her vivid photographs, land becomes depth, not simply a flat page backdrop for performance, and body is engaged interactively in and as nature.

Robert: While these authors reflect on land, they also present dance as a vehicle for such reflection. All seem to convey a reverence for land that emerges from their embodied practices of paying attention. Their accounts offer evidence that dance can be a powerful agent for change and a tool for building a more conscious and sustainable future. Merián Soto's *Into the Woods* does so as well. Presenting a series of short, outdoor improvisation scores, she urges readers to 'just go' outside and feel the heartbeat of nature through their moving, sensing bodies. This is, she writes, a practice of peace: a healing response to a world in crisis. Referencing the devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria in her homeland of Puerto Rico, she warns that there is not time to put off changing humanity's relationship with nature. 'We are nature', she writes, proposing that meaningful change begins here and now, with the movements and perceptions of this body in relation to the environing world.

Sondra: It strikes me as I read through the contributions that several are created with two or more authors, and that those written solo nevertheless contain collaborative associations. In decolonizing approaches to research, dialogue in community is important – the idea that one would speak, listen and learn from others and be inclusively responsive rather than reacting from a position of power and singular authority. How we come to know something somatically is a matter of participation and perception. This involves paying attention and attuning not only to what is present but also to how the past has contributed to present conditions. Bellerose in her article cites the work of Jo-Ann Archibald who teaches that circular learning and sharing are akin to non-extractive practice.

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The authors of this issue tap into ecological roots, looking beyond the immediate, as Nancy Holmes, Denise Kenney, Ali East and Christine Bellerose do, each through examining experiences of home and belonging. In their article, Holmes and Kenney study common depictions of home, what having a home means and where this might be located in perception and memory. They focus on environmentally responsive site-specific work that is generated with and for a site's ecological patterns as well as its historical and cultural systems. Their article builds meaning through connections of community, proposing a problem of 'endings' that are linked to place-attachment – noting that their own reflections on 'not leaving' were generated in a site far away from their own place.

Robert: Matthew Nelson also attends to ecological patterns as he articulates principles common to somatics and permaculture. Both are practical philosophies that engage systems – bodies and ecosystems, respectively – through holistic means, employing observation, trial and error to find ways of supporting a given system's capacity to sustain itself and to flourish. While permaculture is commonly associated with agricultural and architectural practices, and somatics with human health, wellness and artistic practices, Nelson's account presents these as interconnected eco-somatic concerns whose aim is mindful, collaborative participation in the relationships of human and non-human living beings. Permaculture choreographs the interactions of living systems, while somatics deepens the felt experience of participating in the web of life.

Like Nelson, Sandra Reeve applies the concept of choreography to the interactions of humans and their environments, both in site-specific performance work and in daily living. Her sensuous writing invites readers to dwell in both realms, from a luxuriant weekend morning at her home, with whistling tea kettle and 'ageing dog wagging his tail as I come into the kitchen', to the ruins of St. Gabriel's Chapel atop the cliffs of Dorset, England, where her work *Absence* was performed. Emphasizing a perspective grounded in somatic consciousness, she proposes that feeling how we compose the movements of daily living can carry us beyond 'sustainability' towards a realm of regenerative choreographies, where the things of the world can 'begin to revive, regenerate and thrive'.

Sondra: These accounts of human–environmental interaction remind me of Bakhtin's translinguistic phenomenology (1986), which explains that every genre of speech is a living dialogue vested with the individual imprint of the speaker and oriented towards a responsive other. So I ask how I might become a responsive listener for the world I inhabit? Everywhere I see the colour of a mountain, hear the crunch of dry leaves in the woods or pick up a soft handful of sand and seaweed can be a site for listening as bodily sensing. We pay a price for denial of sensuality in coldly objectifying the body of the earth, diminishing all of our relationships.

Authors of this issue model performance in the discovery of sensuous understanding, where attentive sight becomes knowing as touching, hearing and tasting. When we acknowledge the world through the senses, it can return in unspoken interchange. We see in this issue how Andrea Olsen relates to

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ocean health through her danced performances with seaweed. Her poetry rings with sensuous understanding and immediate contact with this concrete aspect of nature. She says of her work in Iceland:

> My best exploration was dancing (and photographing) along the Wild Atlantic Coastal trail. It was the one calm and sunny day after weeks of wind, and ended with a stunning/terrifying display of the northern lights, requiring me to lie flat on the Earth in awe and howl with delight – hearing other voices in the distance.

Olsen reminds me that nature does exist, and not only in tropes or definitions, but in our direct participation with tangible elements. In our continuities with the physical world, someone or something hears our spoken and danced encounters. When we dance directly with the land, the woods or ocean, it can dance back and change us in the experience.

Robert: Dancing can be employed as a language promoting change in the Anthropocene.

Sondra: Yes, Bakhtin says: 'we speak in diverse genres without suspecting they exist' (1986: 78, 98). The movements of nature, including our human movements, speak. Is it just possible that the more-than-human environmental world has something important to say to us? I think so, as we see through Rosemary Candelario's article in this issue. I see her contribution as part of a long trajectory in developments and departures from butoh. Candelario's work draws upon Min Tanaka's Body Weather practice, once grounded in butoh through Hijikata, but now independent.

If the environing world could speak its pain, might we listen and open our eyes to the suffering? At its best, Japanese butoh and its offshoots do this. In his initiation of butoh, Hijikata Tatsumi ached as he listened closely to the world he inherited after World War II. We gather his pain in *Leprosy* and other sections of *Summer Storm* (1973) that speak of World War II. His surrealist writings show a love for raw nature in both its cruel and tender aspects, while his dance demonstrates global empathy cast in worldwide eclectic imagery, or *butoh-fu* (Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006: 52–57). More recently, contemporary butohist Takenouchi Atsushi dances to heal the earth in places that have known great suffering, including Cambodia and southwest Utah: His award-winning film with Kathi von Koerber, *Ridden by Nature*, is a performance record of environmental alarm (Takenouchi and von Koerber 2015).

I first wrote about ecological devastation through my exposure to nuclear testing at Frenchman's Flat in Nevada, not far from Snow Canyon and my ancestral home in southwest Utah. *Dancing Identity: Metaphysics in Motion* (2004) records how years of nuclear fallout affected my health and the future history of my home and family of origin. Since then, I have noticed that an ecological ethos, as a characteristic spirit of culture, community and family, can be discerned in performance. Initially, I encountered great resistance in publishing on dance and ecology; expert reviewers and publishers thought that ecological issues and personal life stories didn't belong in a book on dance.

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I wondered how this issue might address contemporary developments relative to butoh, since it originated in an atmosphere of crisis in Japan after America's dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and concurrently our massive fire bombing of Tokyo along with several Japanese countrysides. This wartime crisis is documented in ecological detail through the Hiroshima Peace Park and Memorial Museum, dedicated to ending nuclear testing around the world. I was very pleased when Candelario submitted her fascinating article exploring Body Weather practices through the work of philosopher Timothy Morton. He argues that hyperobjects, as things massively distributed in time and space such as global warming or all nuclear materials on earth, are requiring us to respond to the environment in radically new ways. Candelario further observes how hyperobjects are addressed in Body Weather and her own site-specific performance with others. Her experiences with former Tanaka dancer, Oguri, form the basis of her evocative article in this issue, and her dance with others into the quarry near her home in North Texas.

Robert: While Morton (2013) eschews the term 'climate change' (favouring 'global warming'), climate change is named as such in the collaborative contribution of Pamela Burnard, Peter J. Cook, Susanne Jasilek and Birgitte Bauer-Nilsen. This article highlights global, local, ecological and cultural impacts of rapidly disappearing ice in Greenland. It does so through its narrative account of *Siku Aappoq* (*Melting Ice*), a collaborative choreographic project inspired by climatic changes occurring in Greenlandic coastal communities. Most of the participants in the project – including choreographer, performers, musicians, set and lighting designers – come from either Greenland or Scandinavia, where some of the planet's most dramatic changes are taking place. *Melting Ice* draws on their lived experiences of these changes and capacity to translate them into art and activism. It argues for the need to engage art, particularly dance, as a political response to climate change and as a vehicle for personal and cultural transformation.

Sondra: Climate doubters would say that the world has always experienced extreme weather, and will do so in the future, but Burnard and her collaborators warn of our collective peril, particularly how politics influence the health of the environment. There are many current examples in our country. It is now near the end of October, and President Trump, while providing modest governmental assistance continues to bully and patronize Puerto Rico after the devastating hurricane that destroyed this beautiful island earlier this month. Is this weak response for much needed aid racially motivated, political, or both? Recently, the American government also eliminated the Clean Power Plan, repealed the Clean Water Rule, backed out of the Paris Climate Accord, and approved toxic pesticides that marginalized EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) scientists say can cause significant neurological damage to children and the environment ('War on the Environmental Protection Agency', PBS Frontline Special, 11 October 2017).

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As a witness to current environmental disasters, I take them personally, because our lives are entwined with the health of all life for the foreseeable future. As America pulled out of the Paris Climate Accord under the direction of Trump, many officials made sure their individual states participated. This included California – a nation unto itself. But a closer look at California in mid-October 2017 shows it experiencing an environmental crisis of its own. Because of warming air and drying winds, California has been burning for four days with fires completely destroying the city of Santa Rosa in California's historic and beautiful northern wine country. The vines are cinder, and it is not over yet. There are yearly fires in California, but never before one such as this, destroying thousands of structures, homes, business, schools and hospitals.

As of my writing today, 5 November, the *New York Times* front page story by Lisa Friedman and Glenn Thrush reports that thirteen US federal agencies just unveiled an exhaustive scientific report that says humans are the dominant cause of global temperature rise, creating 'the warmest period in the history of civilization'.

Closing thoughts

Recent environmental changes, including many cited here and in the pages that follow, warn of unprecedented planetary suffering. Now that we can see our blue planet in photographs from space, we can look upon the whole, observing its floating beauty at a distance. Up close, we are entwined with its future, its life forms and ecological events. Ignoring the suffering of the planet and its vulnerable inhabitants imperils all life on earth, including future generations. This journal issue focuses on performative responses to crisis with articles about care for earth as our common home. Underlying this is an ethic of care for each other, as humans and as ecological kin.

The authors and performative collaborations gathered here present an enlightening view of the natural environment and our evolving place within it. Significantly, their articles and photographs point towards current ecological crises and issues of somatic displacement of the human. They ask several basic questions in their dances and performance projects. What is our responsibility to the land and to each other? What is the meaning of home? Of the earth, our common home? How do these meanings come alive when we dance?

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Robert Bingham, MFA, Ph.D., lives in Philadelphia, where he teaches dance at Temple University and elsewhere. For over twenty years, he has been a professional dance artist, scholar and educator whose choreography has been presented throughout North America. He is a Fulbright Scholar Award recipient (Berlin, 2013) and was a visiting artist in dance at Alfred University (2005–12). Robert has extensive training in somatic modalities, which inform his dancing, teaching and writing. He is a certified yoga instructor (Integral Yoga Institute, 1996) and registered somatic movement therapist/educator (Eastwest Somatics Institute, 2003). He studied with butoh artist Diego Piñon in the United States and in Mexico. His chapters on dance, somatics and ecology appear in *Back to the Dance Itself:*

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Phenomenologies of the Body in Performance (University of Illinois Press, in press), *Moving Consciously* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), *Dance and the Quality of Life* (Springer, 2018) and *Oxford Handbook of Improvisation* (2018). Robert has been a presenter at arts conferences in the United States, United Kingdom, Mexico and Germany.

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