

Healing as Performative Practice: How Gesture Leads To Shared Sisterhood

or

Soil

There are many ways to break
to crumble.
eroding like damp sand
water pushing the grains further and further apart.
a gaping mouth opening to expose the muck beneath the beach,
wanting to be fed
to grow larger
to expand
gobbling up taking in
consuming the land
with a voracious
appetite.

there are many ways to fall to bits.

There is a creek running through the land where my partner grew up
splitting right down the middle of what would otherwise be a perfectly good field.
It acts as a division of ground between his dad's land and their neighbours.
I say his dad's land
(as though land can be owned as such)
because it is dad's land
not his mother's
after his dad passes on it will become his brother's responsibility
not his sister's.
my dad often farmed the land of a woman who lived in Germany
she was older
and owned lots of land.
I always imagined we would have gotten along
that older woman and I.

The earth where my partner grew up is finicky
it is light and gritty and requires frequent irrigation.
It's good for planting juniper bushes
and potatoes
and that's about it.
Roots have difficulty taking hold in this kind of earth
as they have to reach very far down
in order to sip the water.
The fields here have poor fertility as nutrients are easily washed away
slipping
through the particles of earth.

This is a far cry from the soil that I have gathered beneath my fingernails
where the mud is thick like clay and the land floods frequently.

Every spring

murky

frigid

water

washing away the tiny stick tombstones you made for dead kittens

and crushed butterflies,

rusting your swing set

scattering white plastic fertilizer pails across the prairies

like some absurd flower girl

begrudgingly walking down the aisle at her babysitter's wedding

plunking the remnants of

toxic

artificial growth

on the driveways of farmers

who just need their crops to grow.

When my partner was young, this creek was thin

a sliver

that he and his friends could hop across

in order to get to the beach by the reserve.

Every year

the creek grew from dainty scar

to wide gash

to engorged pit

swallowing the spindly sandy soil trees

and eating up land

the father's land

not the mother's.

Last summer

(or was it two summers ago)

my partner and I went camping on the land,

pitched a tent where he used to do his chores

mow the lawn

feed the chickens.

We brought along my sister and her partner

for more voices around the bonfire

and to keep away the eerie country silence

creeping down the road

hiding by the gate.

In the morning we went to go find the beach by the reserve.

we started walking

sweating

itching

wearing denim and rubber boots to avoid the ticks
waving on the tall blades of grass
waiting to hitch a ride.

We crawled
slipped
tumbled
into the crevasse
where the creek was
the cavity that used to be so small.

My sister and her partner started to bicker.
We were all victims of a gnawing hangover,
the one that starts right behind your eyes and sits at the very top of your belly
makes you want to vomit at the very thought of eating
or opening your eyelids
to the sun.

We trudged through the crater in the earth
grabbing onto the gnarled roots
of trees that had fallen sideways
the rug pulled out from under them.
With each step we took
dry earth fell deeper into the chasm
sprinkling down the sides
dusting our shoulders
and finding its way into our socks.

Our legs became heavy
after the water bottles were polished off
the bickering lulled
to the hum of cicadas
and pissed off silence.

My partner clambered through the wreckage
of turned over shrubs and beaver dams
hurrying
wide-eyed
disbelief
at how the earth was changing
how the erosion had eaten the land
had chewed at the memory of his childhood
was devouring us.

The following winter
(or was it last winter)
my sister and her partner broke up
the caustic

pissed off silence
had swelled
had disintegrated
had melted the desire
to help with dishes
to come home early from the bar
to forgive.

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I guess what I am trying to say is that we all break  
we fall to pieces  
like the grains pouring  
from what should have been a field  
basking in sun  
the sun that was too hot  
too dry  
instead  
keeling over into the ravine  
in search of water  
of cool  
of healing.

We break because of a weight  
a weight that we all carry.

It lives in how we sit on the bus  
how we walk down the street at night  
alone  
keys in our hand  
ready  
our muscles prepared to cross the street  
shift over  
run.

This weight casts purple shadows  
over the words leaving our mouths  
pinching the syllables between the bones of our teeth  
until we feel we have said our part  
done what we can do  
but it remains  
a dust cloud  
looming over our rickety house frame  
of exposed nerves and hair and guts.

It straddles our shoulders  
presses on our bra straps  
discomfort is a bitch.

This weight  
(this bitch of a weight)  
propels our hands  
to speak when sound can't  
won't  
escape out throats.  
It informs us how to purse our lips and shift our weight from foot to foot.  
Sometimes  
we hate these mannerisms  
we resent the fact that it reminds us of someone else  
someone we are not.

Sometimes  
we relish in the memory  
the fleeting glimpses of past selves  
past friends  
past loves  
ghosts that live on  
in subconscious movement  
we can wrap our arms around these memories  
that come out to say hello  
in the most mundane of moments.

Regardless  
these memories exist because we want them there.  
We have plucked them from our history  
and tended to them  
perhaps with care  
rolling the details around in our mouths  
like a jawbreaker  
trying to keep them alive.

Sometimes these memories bleed onto others  
melding into a crusty  
congealed  
mass.  
Things we'd rather forget  
throw laundry over

these wisps of recall live within us.  
We are the container.  
A vessel filled with our history  
the history of our mothers  
our grandmothers  
generations of bodies that have lived and breathed and now take up space  
in the soft skin behind our knees  
in the tension between jaw and earlobe.

The weight is memory  
and the memory helps us move  
it is the support  
or impetus  
that precedes movement.

We develop learned habits with this memory  
recollect steps  
actions  
from watching those before us.

In dance  
this muscle memory is used to remember choreography  
develop technique.  
Without allowing for time  
saturation  
movement can appear shallow  
superficial  
skimming across the surface of the stage with the blissed-out grace of ignorance.  
It is mid-translation  
stuck frozen in the air  
words you wish you could retract  
swallow back into your throat

Muscle memory allows you to become a character  
a different you  
past selves/present selves  
transform into another being  
time and distance  
allowing the lines between the authentic and the instructed to blur.

Muscle memory is something we grapple with  
we tuck our pelvis  
push out our sternum  
hyper extend our elbows  
yada yada yada

Memory  
Muscle  
Weight

The weight can become unbearable  
pushing down harder when we are asked to smile  
when our words are manipulated  
chewed up  
or completely disregarded  
when our experiences are discounted

shoved under the bed  
when we are silenced.

We are good at dealing with these setbacks  
we have done it before and we will do it again  
we will clear our throats  
and roll up our sleeves.

Sometimes  
the weight clogs our brain  
makes it difficult to fathom aspects of our own reality  
solutions  
we paddle through it's thickness  
attempt to navigate the reeds and the muck.

As much as we push against it  
swim against it's current  
the memory propels us forward  
upward  
outward  
wraps its fingers around our wrists and lifts.

The weight is accumulated history  
that we drag our bodies through  
but it also supports  
it's palms secured under our warm armpits.

Our flesh is a palimpsest  
layers of the past  
swimming liquid beneath our skin  
layers of soil  
roots reaching down  
grasping.

This history slips out of us sometimes  
like how a shell on your windowsill  
spills out grains of white sand  
years after it has left the water

the curtain lifts in a dark theatre and a beam of golden light breaks through  
we open our mouth  
press our palms  
and out it spills.

We hold it tightly  
and yet it leaves us.

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No matter what study you read
all researchers agree that physical cues make up the majority of communication
raising our eyebrows
flailing our arms
how we speak with others has more to do with our physical bodies than our words.

Brenda McLean
together with Ali Robson
has been working towards developing a system
with which to analyze
and teach gesture.

Gestures are something that we use every
damn day
yet
when asked to generate on the spot
or to abstract
or interpret
our impulses get marred
and we struggle to find clear pathways.

Their research has opened up a dialogue to discuss these everyday motions
to put into words that which we inherently do
and try not to overanalyze
lest we turn into numb
still
signalling
robots

similar to how Labanotation
took movement patterns
and expressed them through abstract forms
line drawings of figures in space
to articulate movement qualities
sustained
bound
direct
light
so as to teach his students
and archive his work

Brenda and Ali
break down what it means to express
using Michael Chekhov's list of archetypal gestures
gathering
pushing
throwing

and make it possible to discuss
to have shared language
to teach
they are drawing a roadmap
to assist others with the intention and interpretation of movement.

Watching Ali move from literal motion
to abstract
to interpretive
one could witness the drift
from external
to internal focus
the molten flow of communication
speckled
with moments of literal action
halting
highlighted
feeding the observer with just enough
information to understand and explore Ali's journey.

Striving to put sand in the pockets
of a fleeting movement
to weigh it down with meaning and intention
calibrating it on a shifting scale
Brenda and Ali boil down what it means to communicate physically

finding ways to capture the flutter of a finger
the jut of an elbow
to trace it and label it and pin it to the page

“like nailing jello to the wall”

the stuttering
familiar movements
the push of an open palm
the gathering of air
combing the manipulations
abstractions
interpretations
of these simple
pedestrian movements
allowed for
“a portal into the universe of the performer”
as mentor Grant Guy expressed.

The viewer is allowed in to this world by these familiar anchors
small weights dropped down into the bottom of the well
presenting an opportunity for the audience to grasp the rope

pull them up
reveal a sliver of light
lead them.

The study of gesture summoned learned behaviour patterns
analyzing what we are born knowing versus what has been taught
or passed down through observation

diaper-bottomed infants do not need to be told how to walk
or reach
or shrug
we take those precarious first steps knowing
despite the shakiness and the weakness
how to put one foot in front of the other.

This is different than the gesture
of bearing weight.
When asked to illustrate this action
Ali
who is pregnant
instinctively brought her hands to her hips
in a motion that implied
domestic exhaustion
women's work
the female experience

ask a man to interpret this same instruction
bearing weight
and he will most likely bring his hands to his head
expressing frustration
a hurting brain
over a hurting body.

Gesture also implies a sense of memory
each gesture is something we have seen before
taken in
worked through our body
added our own comforts or flairs
we inherit gestures from our parents
our friends
soaking in this bubbling
silent
conversation between bodies

before acting out a gesture we feel it
we internalize it
we allow our memory to support the movement
the memory is the impulse for the movement

we feel it
and our bones follow.

Gesture is an imprint of our memories
an expression of our memories
communication between our past and present selves.

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For Kristy Janvier  
gesture and intention  
run parallel to commonalities among individuals  
to connectedness  
and wholeness  
to the body holding memory  
and memory travelling down the bloodline.

Working with Emily Barker  
Lise McMillan  
and Rayanna Seymour  
Kristy seemed to find herself drawn to the fact that even though the group of artists came from  
various backgrounds  
they all had shared experiences

as Kristy puts it  
even though they all came from different side of the mountain  
they had arrived at the summit together.

Water is of interest to Kristy  
how we can exert energy onto water  
how water can conduct energy  
bodily fluids  
the water within our shell  
the water that is moved by our bones  
by our memory

water pathways  
rivers as roads  
leading people home  
guiding those who are lost  
the life force that enables communities to grow  
the blood veins beneath the earth's surface.

Harkening back to a certain Dr. Masaru Emoto  
the Japanese researcher  
who administered various energies  
happy  
sad

confident  
beautiful  
ugly  
onto collections of water.  
He would write these affirmations onto the jars of water  
and when frozen  
the water would form crystals.  
Dr. Emoto found the shape of these crystals  
to be a reflection of the affirmations written on the jars.

Water with positive affirmations froze into intricate  
stunning  
symmetrical shapes  
while the water burdened by negativity clustered  
into asymmetrical  
jagged  
tumour-like forms

with this study in mind  
Kristy collected water samples from the red river  
a river that at one time had been the highway  
for people in the community  
where families would swim and paddle their canoes  
build homes near  
had turned into the source of news tragedies  
bodies discovered on the muddy shores  
bodies of women  
bodies of indigenous women

wishing to heal this water  
heal the past  
heal communities  
and those in pain  
kristy  
emily  
lise  
and rayanna  
speak to the water.

During one of the first brutally cold days of winter  
the group of us  
kristy  
emily  
lise  
rayanna  
and i  
were tucked away in a studio in the exchange

the room was being warmed by heat fans  
scattered around the space.  
Every once in a while the power of the fans  
would cause the breaker to blow  
cloaking us in cold  
reminding us of the city we were in.

As the energy  
the light  
returned  
Rayanna came down the hallway in her traditional jingle dress.  
The jingles glowed rose gold  
in the warm light of the heater.

She began to dance.  
Her moccasin-clad feet  
hitting the hard wood floor  
with each down beat  
the jingles moved to their own rhythm  
a call and response  
they were the light  
dizzying  
rain  
in contrast to the steady rumbling of a thunderstorm.

Rayanna had constructed the dress herself  
stitching on each jingle  
going back with a needle and thread to fix any mistakes  
she might make  
the dress  
the dance  
has become an emblem of dancing for those who cannot  
the response of the jingles a far away call  
an echoing catalyst.

Memory lives in each step  
each movement in the dance  
even how the dress is made is passed down  
through families  
through communities  
through generations

the dress dances for those who can't.

Focusing on the energy of the water  
the process became an act of women healing women  
the power of touch  
of breath

of connectedness

by healing the water through osmosis  
the women were doing the same with each other.

healing through dance  
healing memories through movement.  
by accessing the healing  
power of support  
and the hands of a strong community of women  
togetherness  
and peace  
were articulated  
found  
and fostered.

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Jaime Black
through work with natural props and improvisation
asked the question of
why we must heal
and how we could possibly
brave on
continue
succeed.

Working with Lise McMillan
using sculptural images
the two women
inquired about our connection to natural objects
the weight
and the energy that these items hold
sticks gathered in the woods
a scratchy wool
Bay blanket
stones from lake huron.

How can we alter the energy of an item?
How can we use it to heal ourselves?
Each other?

Images of the natural body
the female body
rose to the surface of the practice
a ball of red yarn
when pulled
bundled

and manipulated by the two sets of hands
evoked intestines
blood clots
veins
umbilical cord
a heart.

Similar to our own flesh
the items hold memory
carry the past.
It is our responsibility to release that
acknowledge the energy.

By using the props,
she is taking ownership of their use
taking ownership of the associations attached.

In one exercise
we took the broad
flat
stones
gathered from the large lake
that borders Ontario and Michigan
They had been sitting in Jaime's car overnight
and they were icy
we held them in our hands
rubbed them in between our palms
attempting to warm them
we pressed the cool stones
against our warm bodies
onto sternums
thighs and bellies
creating calm
meditation
healing

Similar to the stones taking in cold
or heat
our bodies absorb what is around us
releasing it through gesture
through movement
and dancing

Jaime and Lise would often return to images of women working
wringing the blue blanket
scrubbing the studio floor
gathering wood
task-oriented jobs that contained pedestrian

or functional
gestures

By bringing nature indoors
uniting elements of organic beginnings
with the artificial
The two women allude to a melding of two worlds
two cultures
two backgrounds
two histories.

Swaddled in the blanket
a place of security
or confinement
or carrying one another on their back
images arose of women helping women
women healing
from places of strength and togetherness
ceremony.

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The weight  
inherent in women's lives  
in all our lives  
the weight that can feel so crushing  
is supported by our sisterhood  
the works in discussion present a matriarchy  
a community evoking compiled memory  
physical wisdom  
women healing women  
and action  
action for change.

we wail  
we throw our bodies against the wall  
someone must be listening  
someone has to be listening  
who do we even want to hear us  
and if they do  
will they understand our language.

we break  
in search of healing  
crumble like sand towards the water  
cool rocks on warm bodies.

we heal each other



women healing women  
connected by blood and intention  
we rise, together

we huddle in ceremony  
create our own rituals  
turning fluorescent bulb to warm sun,  
sucking the energy from the windows,  
the dusty snow fall.  
oscillate to form new patterns,  
new ways of connecting  
of restoring.

And so we move  
boldly

hopping in home-made jingle dresses  
creaking on hardwood floors  
in front of the whirr of a heat lamp

we dance for those who cannot.

we do women's work  
women's gestures  
that is what we know.  
we know these learned behaviours from lines of mothers  
grandmothers  
wrinkled hands wringing cloth  
cleaning  
scrubbing wet wool  
sewing thread through leather  
bearing the weight of a pregnant belly

female bodies are a shelter  
bearing weight  
containing responsibility  
holding strength  
energy.

This healing as performative practice  
to be healed  
and to see other people being healed  
is vulnerable  
restorative.  
It suggests a tool to take into our everyday  
a safeguard  
a reminder  
of who has your back

a reminder to be present.

Not only does your sisterhood  
have their hands open  
palms exposed  
ready to catch you  
but your body  
holding history  
holding memory  
knows how to heal.  
how to repair.  
how to preserve.

We dance for those who cannot.