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ENVIRONMENTAL RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION:
ON DIVERSIFYING AESTHETICS IN AERIAL ARTS

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Sarah Lawrence College

ABSTRACT

Although aerial arts are typically relegated to performance, analysis, critique, and study within the niche of the Western circus sector, "Environmental Relations and Communication: On Diversifying Aesthetics in Aerial Arts" offers pathways for understanding aerial arts through a variety of practical, aesthetic, and non-circus lenses. Applying frameworks of transdisciplinarity, ecodramaturgy, and disability studies enables aerial arts to be practiced and artistically engaged by the many kinds of artists, bodies, and environments that do not adhere to or fit within the rigid formal structures of Western circus. This paper outlines the historical roots that have led to the conflation of aerial arts and circus and then shifts its focus to diverge from these roots and unpack methodologies and artist examples that expand the relational, physical, and artistic functions of aerial arts in practice and performance.

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INTRODUCTION

Before I saw *Pericles* at Shakespeare's Globe in autumn 2005, I thought aerial arts was something that only happened in Cirque du Soleil. I thought it was an exclusively acrobatic activity performed by elite athletes that showcased spectacular feats devoid of narrative. But in London's open air theatre that cool September evening, I watched aerialists/actors on ropes embody a violent shipwreck. They shouted to one another in Shakespearean verse as they flipped and dropped over our heads. In that moment, the narrative enabled me to see the aerialists' humanity over their virtuosity. The aerialists'/actors' stunts were not the object of the performance. Instead, the performers embodied the story: the bodies of the performers and the ropes held equal value in moving the story forward. It was a life-changing moment that ignited and maintained my curiosity: what could aerial teach me about embodying high stakes in performance while thinking and communicating clearly? In the years since, I have trained, performed, and taught professionally as an aerial artist while researching theatrical storytelling through aerial arts. With time and experience it has become clear to me that aerial arts is not something that is exclusively located in able-bodied acrobats. Rather, that understanding of the form is only an understanding of one specific aesthetic. What makes aerial artistic, and open to a variety of aesthetic expressions (including storytelling), is its capacity to imagine and illuminate the complex ways in which human bodies and environment relate and interact. Aerial arts can facilitate dynamic theatrical artistry full of embodied self-awareness, skills to wisely navigate physical risk, and confidence moving in non-pedestrian spatial environments. But the increasingly acrobatic norms of Western circus' approach to aerial technique also insidiously enforce limited perceptions of embodied relations. Aerial technique practiced through the frameworks of transdisciplinarity, ecodramaturgy, and disability studies disrupts the limited and harmful values perpetuated by Western circus traditions and reveals the diverse scope of embodied relational skills that can be cultivated through aerial technique while also deepening aerial's communicative potential in theatrical performance.

In Western circus, aerial arts has a long tradition of being used alongside acts of colonialism and imperialism to demonstrate “freedom” specifically as human dominion over the environment. The imperial origins of circus are also responsible for insidious sexist and racist labor roles that continue to be perpetuated within the aesthetics of circus’ disciplines. These conventions are rooted in circus traditions established in eighteenth century imperial England by cavalry sergeant major turned equestrian performer and entertainment producer Philip Astley. Astley is circus’ founding patriarch, and he and his contemporaries popularized a genre of public entertainment that featured stunt acts of acrobats, equestrians, jugglers, clowns, and tight-rope walkers (Jando). This genre of performance retains its shape today. Circus is still defined by its performance of any six distinct disciplinary categories: acrobatics/tumbling, aerial acrobatics, hand balancing, contortion, object manipulation, and animal acts (Dugan, 30). The twentieth century gave way to the growth and popularity of American circus companies like PT Barnum and Bailey and Ringling Brothers, who furthered Astely’s conventions in their touring shows. Featuring death-defying stunts, dazzling spectacles, and non-stop entertainment interludes, “traditional circus” emphasizes brute showmanship and is often performed in a tent, stadium, or arena venue. In *Thinking Through Circus*, editor, co-author, and circus dramaturg Bauke Lievens discusses how this aesthetic functions to assert relations of dominance and control, stating that “[i]n traditional virtuosity, the circus body is staged as physically (super) able: it is a body that masters the laws of nature, the animal kingdom and the trajectories of objects and other bodies. But this so-called freedom achieved through mastery also always means the capture and control of something else” (Lievens 21). Aerial artist and scholar Laura Murphy echoes how this influenced aerial techniques in her dissertation “Deconstructing the Spectacle: Aerial Arts as Critical Practice.” She explains, “[a]s aerial acrobatic technique evolved to become increasingly virtuosic and skillful, the performing aerialist implicitly became an embodiment of Western progress, and reinforced Darwinian ideals” (Murphy 25). These standards were maintained through the next significant aesthetic turn of “contemporary circus,” which began in the 1980s.

Montréal-based Cirque du Soleil tidied up traditional circus' rough edges by layering loose narrative on the spectacle and performing in opera houses and theatres. Since then, contemporary circus has become such a successful global commodity from that region that it brings roughly one billion Canadian dollars to Montréal's economy annually (Chapman 445). While other genres and applications of circus and aerial arts exist in aerial dance, performance art, activism, and nightlife communities, the circus-specific representations of aerial arts in these commercial productions have functionally pigeon-holed the wide spectrum of artistic possibilities inherent to aerial arts to be dominantly known only through the narrow, imperialistic traditions of aerial acrobatics. Fortunately, there are many ways for artists to liberate themselves from these aesthetic confines and embody more inclusive relations in aerial practice and performance.

TRANSDISCIPLINARITY

A transdisciplinary approach to aerial practice interrupts and dispels harmful norms, codes, and processes perpetuated on the form by Western circus' disciplinary traditions. Evolved from its cousin, interdisciplinary performance practice, transdisciplinary practices do not just align different disciplines alongside one another, but allow disciplines to change one another by exploring the relations between, across, and beyond those disciplinary boundaries (Bryon 17). Transdisciplinarity is a broad methodological framework contextualized into performing arts practices by artist and scholar, Experience Bryon. In her thoroughly titled essay "Transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary exchanges between embodied cognition and performance practice: working across disciplines in a climate of divisive knowledge cultures," Bryon uplifts the importance of such practices as essential to the evolution of knowledge-making and relational awareness. She argues that "disciplines are not the custodians of knowledge, but ... knowledge is an active process often born of the crossing and colliding of disciplinary

concerns” (Bryon 13). Transdisciplinary practice, therefore, is inherently emergent and does not replicate itself in relation to existing modes of performance.

Transdisciplinary practice strengthens artistic integrity in performance-making. When theatrical and physical disciplines become siloed, they cut off relations from one another. A performer might be indoctrinated to believe they should compartmentalize their skills and interests: acting is different from singing is different from dancing. Repairing performers’ fractured sense of self core to Bryon’s work and 2014 book *Integrated Performance*. The first lines of her book expose the absurd impact that siloing disciplines has on human bodies:

If you ask very young children to sing, they invariably dance and act; if you ask them to dance, they sing and act; if you ask them to recite a poem or play a character, they sound a move with their entire breathing body and voice. It’s glorious. Why then, when we learn to become performers, do we disintegrate ourselves and suppress our intuitive impulses by separating aspects of expression into categories of singing, dancing, and acting?” (Bryon 1).

When disciplinary silos are dissolved, a performer is more able to experience the integrated phenomenon of the human bodymind. Space opens up for inquiry, play, and relations.

Disciplines and practices that are not typically considered “artistic” like the sciences, queer studies, land-caretaking, abolition, community organizing, etc can reshape artistic disciplines into hybrid, multipurpose forms. In the context of aerial arts, transdisciplinarity allows multiple disciplinary lineages beyond traditional performance practices to co-create realms in which to navigate the embodied and unfamiliar terrain of aerial practice outside of circus norms.

First, transdisciplinarity dissolves oppressive binary gender roles that have been codified into circus disciplines and training methodologies. In an interview in *Thinking Through Circus*, aerialist Camille Paycha describes how gender norms and training values conflicted with one another in her career: “I feel how the circus market asks me to perform a stereotype of female femininity. My strong arm muscles should somehow be combined with the set characteristics of

how a female body should look in aerial: tall with long legs, not unlike a classical ballerina” (18). In an effort to debunk and transcend these norms, artist and scholar Dana Dugan investigates how the circus body is a site of cultural disobedience. In her master’s thesis, Dugan describes several examples of such disobedience. From a “genderfuck” drag-baby clown named Q to a nude trapeze act that “embodied transgressive manifestations in an aging, abused, exaggerated, anthropomorphic, abject being “(73), the question of what lies *beyond* codified aerial disciplines creates room for more human(e) embodiments. By disobeying the disciplinary codes of circus performance, Dugan’s work reveals how violently stifling disciplinary circus norms can be for bodies, aesthetics, and performer/audience relations. As harmful approaches inherent to circus-specific aerial traditions dissolve, the relational possibilities between aerialist, apparatus, and audience evolve.

Transdisciplinarity also permits the blending of multiple physical training traditions and embodiment practices in the aerial space. As I will later demonstrate with artist examples, it is possible to distinguish what kinds of muscular control are necessary for safety in aerial arts from a dependence on hyper-muscularity to make and perform dynamic aerial art. While a coordinated, developed, muscular body is necessary for the safe execution of aerial acrobatics in circus, the role of muscularity in aerial arts changes with nuanced shifts in the artist’s embodied relationship to physics, gravity, and artistic intentions. These distinctions can be understood as similar to the differences between the embodiments cultivated by the ground-based disciplines of gymnastics requiring a different kind of reliance on muscular power than the vocabularies of contemporary dance. Aerial work exists along a similar continuum, meaning that physical/attentional practices from the dance world can be adapted to aerial work. Lievens and co-authors describe how embodied thinking occurs in circus practice in *Thinking Through*

Circus: “[i]ndeed, in circus we think *through* the body: through corporeality, we shape and perform relations, feelings, states, and ideas. The physical practice of circus is, in that sense, an embodied thinking practice” (Lievens et al 7). This understanding is foundational to bridging aerial’s circus roots with other artistic frameworks. One could embody strength as control-over, or one could embody strength as dynamic relations. Building on Lievens’ point, how one embodies relations with an aerial apparatus is a task of embodied attention. Tracking one’s relational embodied attention is a skill that can be learned, practiced, and refined.

Cultivating skills of embodied attention is as essential as an integrated aerial practice as cultivating muscular strength. Aerialists must train to simultaneously track both their own physical bodies and the environment around them while changing orientations and relations to gravity. The practice of tracking one’s embodied attention to dance partner(s) and/or an environment is central to the work of dance artist, activist and scholar Nita Little. Little’s insights derive from decades of developing and practicing Contact Improvisation (CI), a form of dance in which participants co-create dances through sharing and directing their shifting weight in alignment with the physical forces at play in and around their movement. Little has developed a field of practice out of her CI research called Relational Intelligence. Within that system, she adapts the term “perceptual positions” from Neuro-linguistic Programming to refer to the attentional points of view a dancer moves between when dancing (Little). Like in literature, different perceptual positions refer to first, second, and third person perspectives that one might experience when dancing. First position is from the perspective of the dancer’s own body, second position is from the perspective of the partner (person, environment, or apparatus), and third person position is from the perspective of a removed outside observer. To support the dancer in accessing these perceptual positions in their imagination, Little speaks to the importance of

specifying the use of prepositions when describing physical relations. In her 2014 dissertation, “Articulating Presence: Creative Actions of Embodied Attention in Contemporary Dance”, Little unpacks how prepositions inform relational embodiments:

Think of dancing with a partner, skin to skin: perhaps a close tango. Convention says “with” a partner. “With” originally had the meaning of “against” and has changed to mean in proximity to, toward, alongside, beside. If we dance *with* a partner, where might we learn to dance *as* our partner? At the moment *as* becomes a more appropriate description of the physicalmental relations and the enactive practices between dancers; the field of attention has shifted radically to accept new perceptual possibilities and along with them information that will help detail new relations (Little 88).

Like as for a tango dancer, performing “as” the physical environment rather than “with” dramatically changes an aerialist’s embodiment. At the same time, a first person perceptual position, one in which the aerialist is self-aware of their own physical form, is necessary for safety. The aerialist must know: *this is my knee, holding onto this rope, keeping me from falling to the floor*. The aerialist must also know the second position: *I am now part of a whole system; I am the rope, the hardware, the ceiling, the walls, the floor, and the audience*. Lastly, the aerialist can imagine third position, *this is what the audience is seeing right now as I move*. Moving one’s attention from self to apparatus to audience is necessary for effectively performing and communicating anything to the audience in aerial arts. Relational Intelligence offers both language and practices for describing and learning aerial techniques through physical relations that respect body, environment, and artistic intention equally. To further illuminate how such relations can be cultivated within an aerial practice, this paper will focus on two primary schools of thought — ecodramaturgy and disability studies — as specific applications of transdisciplinarity in practice.

ECODRAMATURGY

Since aerial arts by definition involves both a physical performer and a rigged apparatus, narratives of body/environment relationships always exist in aerial, regardless of whether or not they are directly acknowledged by the artists. In the same way that transdisciplinarity broadens possibilities for physical training and artistic aesthetic in aerial arts, ecodramaturgy offers a lens through which to more deeply consider human/environment relations in both the physical practice and artistic intentions of aerial work. Ecodramaturgies refers to philosophies and practices of performance-making that engage an ecological consciousness into both the content and process of making and sharing performance. For example, shaping a sense of self in relation to one's environment is a phenomenon referred to as *autopoiesis* in collaborative dance-making lineages coined by Francisco Varela (Bishop and al-Rifaie 23). The word "autopoiesis" has its roots in biology as a description for the property of a living system (human body or ecosystem) to "maintain and renew itself by regulating its composition and conserving its boundaries" (autopoiesis). Autopoiesis, (and its plural expression of collective becoming, sympoiesis), weave through both transdisciplinarity and ecodramaturgy as the thread of interrupting convention towards deeper embodied relationality. When an aerialist co-creates their work with the apparatus, they each take on an expanded self. Such a shared embodied relationality with one's environment subverts traditions of human supremacy.

De-centering humans from ecological narratives is a pillar of many spiritual traditions as well as artistic ones. In *Earth Education, Interbeing, and Deep Ecology*, authors Tom Anderson and Annina Suominen Guyas explain how this value is understood in Buddhist traditions: "Implicit in the notion of interbeing is the understanding that self-actualization cannot be attained through heightened attention to the individual ego but must be achieved in relationship

with other people, species, living organisms, and even with water, rocks, wind, and earth.”

(Anderson and Guyas 238). Interbeing offers a way of understanding autopoiesis in aerial arts: aerialist and apparatus share one story. By bringing attention to this shared story — humans’ embeddedness in our uncontrollable and precarious world — aerial arts can offer both practitioners and audiences curated embodied experiences of interbeing with our environment.

An ecodramaturgical framework inherently rejects and composts paradigms of dominion embedded in circus traditions. In Paycha’s interview in *Thinking Through Circus*, she describes how removed her environment she was asked to become,

When I was studying, it was ‘normal’ to experience a high intensity of physical pain... Paradoxically, because I trained so much I didn’t feel pain. Looking back, I find this ‘painless pain’ to be a very interesting phenomenon... painless pain is not a conscious method of practice. Today it reveals itself as proof of my embeddedness in a (neoliberal) structure in which success is the goal and pain is the only way to reach it” (Paycha, 18).

By embedding oneself in an ecological framework rather than a political one, an aerialist’s possibilities for embodiment, aesthetic, and relations soften. Scholar Lisa Woynarski is an expert on ecodramaturgy. She speaks to ecodramaturgy’s power to expand our perception of what performance can do beyond the psychological and into the ecological,

...ecodramaturgies can subvert dominant forms of representation that often reduce and devalue the more-than-human world and ecological effects on people. This echoes Thomas Arden’s thinking, ‘by stirring the collective imagination towards a deeper sense of our material embeddedness in and accountability for the ecomaterial world, ecodramaturgical practices are poised to shift the paradigms of human-nature relations and to change audience perceptions of themselves. With its insistent emphasis on embodied connectivity, performance practices are crucial sites of investigation into the networks of exchange between culture, the environment and animals’ (Thomas qtd in Woynarski 23).

An “insistent emphasis on embodied connectivity” and appreciation of “material embeddedness” (or awareness of interbeing), are unifying core principles of both ecodramaturgical practice and transdisciplinary practice. Thus, engaging a transdisciplinary approach that investigates and

illuminates one's own embodied connectivity and material embeddedness extends this invitation to their audiences. In doing so, they also engage in ecodramaturgy. This is rich terrain for aerial artistry.

DISABILITY STUDIES

Discussions of how environments and bodies relate and adapt to one another invites further insight from those advocating on behalf of disabled and neurodivergent artists and audiences to include more possibilities of how these relations can exist. Definitions of disability and neurodivergence vary widely depending on the positionality of the person writing the definition. Sometimes these conditions are defined through overt or veiled pathology as some variation on "limited or challenged because of deviation from the norm." Disability Studies scholar Gretchen Henderson emphasizes this in her essay "Sharing and Shaping Space: Notes towards an aesthetic ecology":

Human bodies are dynamic, vulnerable, changing... The trend has been to pathologize disability, to turn a person into a medical category, rather than critiquing the cultural context. Far too often the disabled body is seen as a problem, without questioning the environment" (Henderson 63).

By honoring the spectrum of embodied sensory, cognitive, and physical differences between people, Henderson rightly illuminates the biases towards certain sensory, cognitive, and physical capacities often present in spatial organizations, as well as the artistic aesthetics prioritized within them. For performing artists navigating such biases and seeking a more harmonious body-environment relationship, transcending disciplinary boundaries offers paths forward. Taiwanese-American disabled interdisciplinary artist Yoyo Lin explains that disabled artists work with multiple disciplines as a necessary strategy for building deeper relations with one's own body and environment,

I didn't know how much I was making myself separate from my body until I started dancing... My work is interdisciplinary ... I learned from being in disability community

that most disabled artists are interdisciplinary because of the nature of our evolving bodies and the ways we move through the world. We're always adapting and figuring out ways to make things work. Interdisciplinary practice is a disabled practice (00:00:05).

The throughline of embodied connectivity and material embeddedness in work made by and for disabled people understands the multisensory facets of the human body. Not only do interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary practices avail access to multiple creative processes as Lin describes, they also enable the emergence of aesthetics that are inclusive of disabled realities.

Linguist and writer Robert Bringhurst offers an excellent paraphrase of a sentiment coined by Friedrich Nietzsche, describing aesthetics as “really nothing but an applied physiology” (Bringhurst 206). This definition of aesthetics brings form back to the body and its material embeddedness. Thinking about this in relation to disability, Henderson echoes this sentiment with a call for an *aesthetic ecology*, what she calls a system of aesthetic organizing elements that takes different ways of experiencing the world into account (67). An aesthetic ecology opens up for multiplicities of narratives, perspectives, and contradictions to coexist.

Aesthetic ecology in performance echoes sentiments of queer ecology in philosophy, a lens that embraces interconnectivity, cooperation, and diversity. Disabled aerial performer and choreographer Alice Sheppard, co-founding director of disabled aerial dance company Kinetic Light, centers the cultivation of such aesthetics in her work.

In all my work, disability is an aesthetic. It is not about deficit or diagnosis. It is not about the individual medical state of your body and mind. It is a source of artistry and technological innovation. Similarly for access, access is not something you do when disabled people show up to see a performance. It's not about buildings and services. It is a philosophy of community, a way of building relationship with your audience, and it is an aesthetic: a way of making the work in the first place (0:01:00).

As Kinetic Light's performers dance with their wheelchairs onstage and take to the air in them on bungees and fly systems, disabled performers create and offer forms of aerial that not only include their bodies and their artistry, but celebrate their unique point of view. By connecting

dots between access and aesthetic and between artistry and audience relations, Sheppard demonstrates the interconnectedness of disability studies with transdisciplinarity and ecodramaturgy. What connects all these dots is relationship: the relationship between, across, and beyond artistic mediums, body and space configurations, diversities of embodied perspectives, and performer and audience relations.

CASE STUDIES

In her solo performance *Nomada*, Mexican/Canadian artist Diana Lopez Soto weaves transdisciplinary performance with ritual to illuminate stories of ancestry, displacement, and land rights. Distinctly un-imperial in this sense, Soto spoke to how circus traditions have influenced her work in our interview together, “[b]eing a circus performer has informed everything I’ve learned. Circus practices have informed a lot of what I do and have strengthened me in different ways that have given me access to the curiosities I have” (Soto). At the same time, she describes the ways in which her spatial and relational understandings as a dancer framed her process of learning aerial technique,

[T]o be honest, I never learned any names [of the skills]. I learned maybe three names of what I was doing. And I never really fully went into that. Because, again, as we were saying, that was the least of my interests. I was way more interested in what this fabric is telling me? What is this texture telling me? What is this concept telling me? This space? How do I want to react and act together? What are we doing together? That was always the source of my interest (Soto).

This relational approach to aerial is foregrounded in *Nomada*. Aerial counterweight represents the balance and imbalance of relations: objects that carry personal and narrative significance to the piece function as aerial counterweight mechanisms. Soto describes the piece as a “physical and spiritual act of renewal, affirmation, and restoration” during which she animates these vessels through her aerial choreography before communing with their contents on the ground (Smith). Soto begins suspended in an aerial harness, directly influenced by the changing weight

of the vessels containing water, seeds, and beans. We begin to understand that these vessels contents' carry the support of her ancestors, and that as they change, so too does her relation to gravity. She dances between the vessels: greeting them, embracing them, offering them to the earth from the sky before landing on the earth to engage with them further. Blending contemporary indigenous practice with aerial and dance traditions, the show is distinctly transdisciplinary and ecodramaturgical in its use of material. Soto speaks often to the importance of "the source" of material when describing her relationship with those materials that co-compose her work. A continuum of remembering: planting, nurturing, and tending is core to her creative process. *Nomada* was gradually developed over the course of seven years, a patient attention to growth akin to Soto's experiences as a land-caretaker and mother. True to this spirit, the show is an offering, not a spectacle. It is a ritual performed by Soto to which an audience bears witness. Through changing relationships to material, space and audience, the ritual fulfills itself through the show's performance.

My duo project with Benjamin E. Oyzon, *Sticks & Stone*, approached relational interrogation through deconstructing a common relationship present in aerial work: that of the rigger and aerialist. Our work put aerial rigging operator Oyzon, onstage with me (the aerialist), as a scene partner. We began by dancing through 3:1 counterweight pulley system (which enables the rigging operator to manually support a third of the aerialist's body weight when changing that aerialist's height in space). This rigging system became a landscape for an imbalanced and gendered relationship between my and Oyzon's characters. Our duet confronted how the parallels between heteronormative power dynamics in the broader culture mirrored the production roles into which our circus careers had pigeon-holed us: rigging operator whose function is to animate the "pretty dangling girl", and "the pretty dangling girl" whose function is

to be an unattainable object for the male gaze. As the show evolved, the dramaturgy of the aerial rigging paralleled the changing relations between our characters. Initially at the mercy of Oyzon's manipulation in the 3:1 system, the duet ends with me taking hold of the rigging rope while still suspended in the air, manipulating my own changes of height to bring myself back to the floor. Later, still on the 3:1 system, we tie the counterbalance ropes in knots, holding us in a purgatory of suspension as we navigate sharing the aerial space together. At the end of the show, the 3:1 system is replaced with a 1:1 system, where we are both suspended from opposite sides of the same rope directly counterbalancing one another. In the 1:1 dance, our body weight directly impacts the movement of the other. By heightening our sensitivity to one another's weight shifts through our own physical connection to the rigging, we become more attuned to one another *through* our embeddedness *as* that environment. The rigging system enabled us to move more directly "as" one another. What began as a query into aerial counterweight as metaphor became a necessary context in which we unpacked how the gendered roles allocated to us by the commercial aerial/circus world were impacting our bodies, psyches, relationships, and sense of agency in those environments. Throughout the show, other uses of image, puppetry, dance, and text call the two characters into deeper connection with embodied experience, leading them into a more balanced relationship with one another and their environs.

Kinetic Light's show *Wired* offers a final example of how disability can be centered in the dramaturgy of theatrical aerial work. Described on their website as, "a passionate and potent aerial and contemporary dance experience that tells race, gender, and disability stories of barbed wire in the United States," the onstage content of *Wired* blends aerial bungee with flying systems that enable dancers and their wheelchairs to fly, build environments, and embody the stakes of the stories they tell (*Wired*). The company prioritizes the embodied experience of the audience as

well by translating the sensory experience of the aerial choreography through a wide range of accessibility options. The company takes an expansive scope of access needs into account that support disabled audience members feeling safe in these performance environments. Blending disability with ecodramaturgy in this way enables aerial work to transcend beyond the visual and into the sonic and tactile. For each presentation of *Wired*, the website outlines the following access accommodations,

ASL is present for all live performances. A limited number of seats may feature a *haptic experience* of the soundtrack. There is no spoken text in *Wired*. These performances feature expanded accessible seating. *Audio Description* will be available for all performances. Live performances will feature audio description through *Audimance*, with multiple content and experience options. Orientation and assistance with the app will be available pre-show at the venue, along with a *tactile experience* of *Wired*'s set, props, and costumes.

There are no strobe lighting effects in *Wired*. There are moving lights and animated projections. Light haze is present in some sections. *Wired* content and artistry will remain the same for all performances. Audience members are welcome to exit and reenter the theater. *Quiet space and sensory kits* are available before, during, and after all performances (*Wired*).

The care that is put into the audience experience is as much part of the art as the development of the onstage content. Sheppard and her collaborators make sure that bodily autonomy is within the agency of each audience member, and all bodies are included, welcome, and part of the artistic experience they are creating.

CONCLUSION

The bodies that practice diverse relations through aerial arts become vessels of knowledge that understand the interrelation of human and environment. As demonstrated by Soto, the aerial landscape can be one of sensitivity, attention to relations, and ritual of connecting earth with sky, past with present, and human with non-human. In my work with Oyzon, interpersonal power dynamics were shaped through aerial rigging designs that supported the broader storytelling of our performance work. In Kinetic Light's work, the aerial offers disabled performers and audiences ways to experience the sensory aspects of dynamic movement through space via a multitude of experiential access points. These examples point to aerial's power to not only be a site of embodied relations, but a site of cultivating more specific physical-spatial relations for practitioners, artists, and audiences. This experience of shaping interpersonal spatial relations is unique to live performance, and one that aerial practice enhances, expands, and heightens. Through such an understanding, the early question I asked so many years ago at that production of *Pericles*, "what could aerial teach me about embodying high stakes in performance while thinking and communicating clearly?" is revealed as the tip of a proverbial iceberg. With the wide spectrum of possibilities for embodied inquiry availed by frameworks of transdisciplinarity, ecodramaturgy, and disability studies, aerial has so much more to offer when considered within the larger ecology of embodiment practices and the performing arts.

INTERVIEW WITH DIANA LOPEZ SOTO

Diana Lopez Soto is a Mexican-Canadian artist who works at the intersection of indigenous studies, ecology, ritual, and the performing arts. We met in 2020 during a zoom meeting for aerial dance artists navigating the conditions of the COVID-19 lockdown, and more recently we connected at the Montréal Complètement Cirque festival in 2023. When I began the process of writing this paper, Diana (said Dee-ana), came to mind as an ideal artist with whom to speak due to the transdisciplinary and ecodramaturgical nature of her work. Our conversation involved discussion of artistic process, practices for sustainable living, and the role of aerial arts within her broader ecological practices.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

NICKI: In other interviews you've talked about the importance of cultivating durational and reciprocal relationships with space, resources, and people in your life and artistic process. Can you talk a little bit about how that informs your performance work? And how performance impacts those relationships?

DIANA: What I see as performance is really about presence, being a medium, letting the message come through you and [being interested in] what comes through. There might be things that I don't know, but in a moment [when] the message is coming through me, I either visualize it [or] understand it physically.

When I started to do performance, it always initiated from the performance art practice: the conceptualization of ideas and memories. Material was [and] still is very important. Perhaps [that] is the basis of it: understanding our relationship to material and where the material comes from. Elementally, it's always from one of the mother's sources: metal, textile, plant, ground, and earth. It's always an elemental material that really is a source. And in my perception, an element is not dead just because it does not move at the same speed that humans do. There is vocabulary, conversation, tactility, and vibration. And in that way, we're always working with another being: another living, ancestral recollection of body, blood, and flesh. We are always collaborating with ancestral beings and/or elemental beings.

When I came into aerial dance, for example, I already was translating my work on the ground and with material into the air and seeing it as a partner, a duet, a collaboration. What is being asked of me? It's always been my initial question. Sometimes it comes from the curiosity of that material. Sometimes the message has already infiltrated my body, my mind, and an image directs

me to where I need to go. In allowing myself to fully be present in those moments of awareness of the material, the space, the image, I go deeper and deeper. The more I go with it and flow through it, I understand what was asked of me. I think that it really allows you to go through all of the layers of that perception that has been provided to you or offered to you as a potential.

That's so exciting to hear you describe that, I resonate with a lot of what you're speaking to. I'm wondering if we can kind of use this as a bridge into talking more about interdisciplinarity. What are the different ways that you've engaged artistic and ecological practices thus far? How do they relate to each other, and how does aerial fit in?

DIANA: The true nature of my spirit is not acquiring one discipline and focusing on one, [but rather] about my body and my mind, as well as spirit, allowing [multiple disciplines] to come to me. [I] allow practices that perhaps are not perceived as artistic disciplines to become part of my practice, such as pollinating. Creating pollinating gardens, learning more about agriculture, sustainable practices, sustainable buildings. My curiosity actually evolved in all of that, and that's how I came to understand interdisciplinarity. What I understood is that it's integrating and merging disciplines that perhaps are not always perceived as artistic. Integrating artistic practices, adaptability, and that willingness to be curious and to learn constantly with practices that fit into our spirit and living values has been very important to me. To understand how to [sustainably] feed myself and my family, and how that is our medicine. Our ways of life are the way of our medicine. In growing the food that also heals our community and heals the land we are creating reciprocity for us, for our families, our communities and the land. That's where I understood that learning more about ourselves and what the land is asking of us is interdisciplinarity as well.

The other place that I went into, because I am very interested, was ceremony and ritual. The places where I feel the most belonging, and the strongest, when I feel that my practice shows, is when it's a ritual; when I can take an engaged audience through an offering that we all experience together, that we all move through. And in that way, also, I feel that that's when I'm able to do this work.

That blends a little bit with the other question: how do I integrate my interests outside of an artistic practice [in my work]? It is that they communicate constantly. They communicate all the

time, my way of living really supports my practice. The way I eat, the way I practice energy work. Since my work is about being present and taking people on this journey with me, I am no longer just me, I'm spirit in space. I need to understand where that is coming from [within me] and strengthen those organs [in my body]. It's very visceral and engaged deep, deep in the core of my being. That is a kind of training that is not part of a specific practice that I have had.

What is your relationship to “circus,” and how do those circus traditions, assumptions and norms impact your experience of making and sharing work? What has your experience been locating your own work in relation to other people who have expectations about what aerial means and does artistically?

DIANA: When I entered into multidisciplinary and accepted, “this is me,” my curiosity brought me to an aerial dance audition. I didn't have any technique and was chosen to participate in this show with a beautiful company and director. They were very much rooted in “just go and do what you need to do, but I'll guide you.” [The director] was gorgeous about not pushing me into “this is called this this is called that.” So from the source of my beginnings, I was taken by a company and a director that was willing to let me fly with my perception of what circus could be.

I never really fell into the “dominating something.” I have to say it was a bit of subconscious insecurity, that when people talk to you trick names, I had no idea what they were talking about. All I knew is that *I weave through this, I fly with this I, I know this is where I need to go, my body will follow or like my lungs want to go this way.* I was dancing in the air. That's all I was doing. I was excited about elevating my floor and having a spherical environment that I could access. I'm grateful that I was given that opportunity.

I never learned any names. I learned maybe three names of what I was doing. And I never really fully went into that. Because, again, as we were saying, that was the least of my interests. I was way more interested in *what this fabric is telling me? What is this texture telling me? What is this concept telling me? This space? How do I want to react and act together? What are we doing together?* That was always the source of my interest.

Being a circus performer has informed everything I've learned. Circus practices have informed a lot of what I do and have strengthened me in different ways. It has given me access to the

curiosities I have technically. [For example,] the biggest love I have is not so much in apparatus, but in rigging: creating spherical moments and accessibility to spaces. I am way more interested in accessing the whole space and what that means, and connecting sky and earth and in the air, and elevating my floor, then I am about perfecting a technique on one apparatus. Which has its own value, but that's not me. I need to remember that. And now I feel more confident about knowing that that's not really my practice.

Amazing, thank you for that. Another question I have is about storytelling. It feels like there are so many stories embedded in what you're doing. How do you relate to the practice of storytelling?

DIANA: Sometimes I find that my storytelling is more present in some of the offerings [rather] than others. I don't often use verbal communication in my offerings, but I have at other times invited other people who have communicated some verbal or spoken word because I am very attracted to that as well. And it's a source that I'm still very curious about and that I want to keep building on. As I grow into myself and motherhood and grandmotherhood, eventually, I want to be better at storytelling. I want to understand and gather more stories to be able to tell them.

I really want to attend more indigenous knowledge ecology summits and conservations. I really love *Braiding Sweetgrass* [by Robin Wall Kimmerer]. That book is like a bible to me, and I love the way that she weaved her biology understanding with storytelling. I am remembering and honoring more of my understanding of myself and my spirit, and really inhabiting myself and my surroundings. The traditional indigenous knowledge in ecology and biology is the conversation I'm the most excited about. For a while, I've been looking for a masters program. Now that a lot of institutions and indigenous colleges have masters in Indigenous Studies, I am feeling so drawn to really diving into that. What I want to do the most is learn the stories and take the stories with me. To be the voice if I can, and continue to share them so that my kids can then continue to share them. That's what storytelling is for me. So important.

I go back to *Nomada*. Everything [in that show] started from a memory in a story that I tell my kids all the time. When I cook beans I cook in my terracotta vessels for people, I always share with them that my grandmother always cooked in terracotta vessels. She didn't like us cooking

and pressure cookers. She said “beans were not beans, if there were not cooked in terra cotta vessels.” It all started there, in my sharing of my own story with terra cotta.

This 70 minute offering that happens on stage or in performance space has so many stories weaved in it. I know where that story is from and how it communicates to elements and organs inside of my body. It goes to my gut, my throat, my lungs. And that's the importance of the stories I believe: remembering the embodiment of the stories as well.

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