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Standing Center: Autoethnographic Writing and Solo Dance Performance

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Abstract

In this article, I demonstrate an approach to fusing autoethnographic writing and solo dance performance, advocating for a place for the female performer to stand as creative practitioner and researcher. While contemporary ethnographers and autoethnographers have actively engaged with issues of methodology and representational forms, and have gained some recognition within qualitative research communities, artists engaged in contemporary performance research still struggle for acknowledgement of the methodological rigor and representational innovation in their work. As in other art forms, dance artists have distinct bodies of knowledge, unique methods specific to dance, and diverse embodied and representational options for sharing knowledge. Referring to creative processes utilized in developing a particular solo dance performance, I weave together descriptions of movement activities undertaken to enhance awareness, literature on human developmental movement and on performance ethnography and excerpts of creative writing. To represent my dancing in this article, I include images from the solo performance. In this weaving I offer a partial representation of embodied ways of knowing and make a call to qualitative researchers to reconnect with their own beginnings – to return home.

Keywords

Dance, solo, autoethnography, performance

In a recent performance *A place to stand* (Barbour, 2010b), I embodied a methodological fusion between my autoethnographic writing and solo contemporary dance practices. As a feminist researcher and creative practitioner, I have an agenda to explore, demonstrate, and articulate new methods of and representations of research that bring the female performer to the center of the research, whether that be on a literal stage or through autoethnography. In particular, I am motivated to spotlight embodied ways of knowing, validating epistemological alternatives to those traditionally accepted within Western academies. Acknowledging works by Soyini Madison (2007), Tami Spry (2001), Norman Denzin (2003), and others, I argue that autoethnographic dance performance becomes a method of inquiry into my life, allowing me to engage with issues of reflexivity, identity, embodiment, cultural commentary, transformation, and empowerment.

Significantly, these methods of inquiry are based on dance performance experience, encompassing improvisation, choreographic, theatrical knowledge, and movement training, as well as creative writing: “creative practice as research” (Barbour, 2006, 2007, 2010a, 2011). My aim in dancing is to embody through autoethnographic performance that which I am unable to write on the page. The aim in this article is to playfully represent my embodied methodologies and some of my “findings” through creative writing and images of performance.

Activity: Turning Inward (Navel Gazing)

Lie resting on the floor. Draw your knees in and rest them comfortably together, feet relaxed on the floor, arms to the sides easily.

As embryos, we reveal the ontogeny of ourselves. Our “growth functions precede all higher functions.

Activity: Turning Inward (Navel Gazing) (continued)

Nestle your body into the floor and allow the floor to support your weight. Pay attention to your breathing, noticing the movement of your chest, back, and abdomen as you inhale and exhale. Now bring your awareness to your belly button, to your center of gravity. Your belly button is what remains of your umbilical cord, your life-giving beginnings, your first connections to your social world. Allow your awareness to deepen. Let the smallest and simplest movements initiate from your navel. Try a tiny rocking motion. Move easily, gently from this earliest connection. Rest.

The achievements of the embryo are always the precursors of all subsequent accomplishments. As such, the former growth functions constitute the natural plan for all adult functions. There is no cell, no tissue, and no organ that does not already function during its very development. The fundamental functions are growth functions” (Bleichschmidt, 2004, p. 5) From our very fundamental beginnings, our development unfolds. In this development we are intimately connected to an other, mother, and to our genealogy. We are also connected in our development to our social world.

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I take flight, soaring on the call of the Ruru owl in the dark stillness of the night. My spirit returns to the sheltering caves of my childhood. Lying in the shadows, I run my hands through the dirt, remembering the caress of the earth, the warmth of its embrace. Playing the fingers of light on my skin, reaching into the recesses of the stone above. Stirring even earlier memories, safe in my mother's arms. Sudden joyous realization, connecting my memories to the play of my son in the night, seeking warmth in the crevices of my body, fingers learning the contours of my face, seeking the light from the safety of embrace.¹

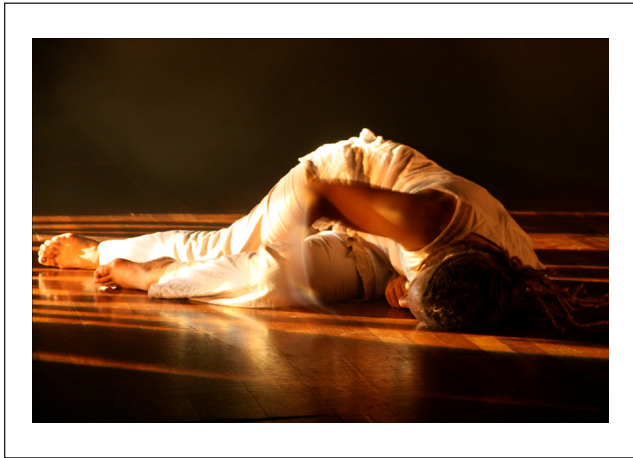


Image 1. Turning inward
Note: Photo by Marcia Mitchley (2010).

Activity: Moving Outward (Navel Radiation)

Rest easily on your back allowing your legs, arms, and neck to spread and lengthen along the floor. Gently release your limbs and head, allowing energy to surge from your navel. Extend and radiate energy from your center like a starfish. Send intention and tone into your muscles, expressing your desire to reach outwards. Then release your weight into the floor and rest. Breathe easily and soften your muscles to relax. Indulge the intention to curl and contract in toward your center. Visualize your navel and allow your limbs and head to curl inward toward safety and comfort.

Our first prevertebrate movement pattern is breathing—a gentle and simple, pulsing, cellular breathing. Our second developmental pattern is variously called *navel radiation*, and physiological flexion and extension (Cohen, 2008; Olsen, 2002). Through navel radiation, we establish “the navel as a center through which all the extremities relate individually and to each other. It is radially symmetrical. The extremities which do not relate to each other through the navel will not establish efficient relationships to each other in the future patterns; those extremities which establish a clarity to each other through the navel will continue to do so in

Activity: Moving Outward (Navel Radiation) (continued)

Curl as much as is comfortable and satisfying for you. Take this basic pattern of extending outwards—navel radiation, and curling inwards, into an improvisation. Allow your breath to guide the rhythm of your movement, engaging your abdominal muscles as you curl and radiating energy outwards as you extend.

the future patterns” (Cohen, 2008, p. 17). In navel radiation or physiological flexion and extension, we draw our limbs inward toward center as we do in the womb, and extend outward from center as we do from birth (Olsen, 2002). The return to center offers safety and comfort, and extension outward represents intention and desire to engage with the world.

Folding around center, my legs slide along the floor, gravity, and momentum draw my head and torso upward into space. Suspended for a moment, head floating, spine elongating. Light plays over my skin, enthusiasm flaming in my cells. My desire to move surges through, energizing, rolling, and twisting. Pelvis rising, I spiral onto hands and feet, an internal instinct to explore, palms and soles treading the earth, spine lengthening, head hanging. Wandering the earth.

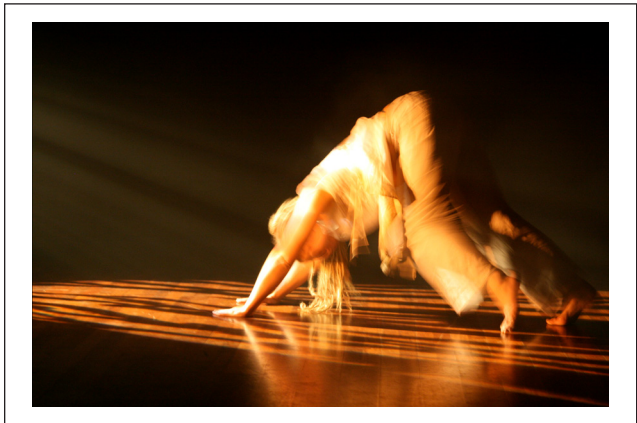


Image 2. Moving outward
Note: Photo by Marcia Mitchley (2010).

Activity: Remembering Home

Explore your personal archives, your photograph albums, creative writing, and your memories of home. Focus on a specific image of home, on a special place for you. Where is this place, the place you hold in your heart, even if you longer visit there now? What do you see? Consider the color, textures, and structures? How does the light linger in your recollection? What can you smell and taste

“By focusing on our human bodies as the vehicle through which we experience ourselves and the world around us, we learn to value the earth equally to the self. Thus, the perspective is both anthropocentric (human-centered) and ecocentric (earth-centered). The body and the earth are complex and profoundly interconnected entities developed through billions of years of evolutionary process.

Activity: Remembering Home (continued)

of this home? What sounds and sensations evoke this place? Where are you standing in this place called home?

Visualize your home, enriching your memory with sensory details. Immerse yourself in your image of home, bringing alive the memories so that you can return there again with ease.

Our task is to develop a dialogue with this inherent intelligence—to learn to attend. By enhancing active awareness of our bodies and the places we love, we deepen our engagement in the intricate and delightful universe we inhabit” (Olsen, 2002, p. xxii).

My body lies like the land, fluid within stone, welcoming the caress of rain, steaming with the touch of the sun, drying with the harsh pull of the southerly winds. Crevices and recesses, small miracles begun and secrets held close in the dark warmth. Shelter and comfort in the familiar terrain of my body, bones wrapped in flesh, stones wrapped in earth, landmarks, moments of rest, and safety. The stones of the land, observers of my moving, guardians, and reminders of striving. The bones of my body, integral in function, guardians of my organs, supporting life. Ever constant, the murmuring water, mumbling in the distance or chattering with me as I walk beside the river. Running like the blood through my veins, the rivers of my body. Spiraling and swirling, dissolving and surging, I am fluidity. I am home.

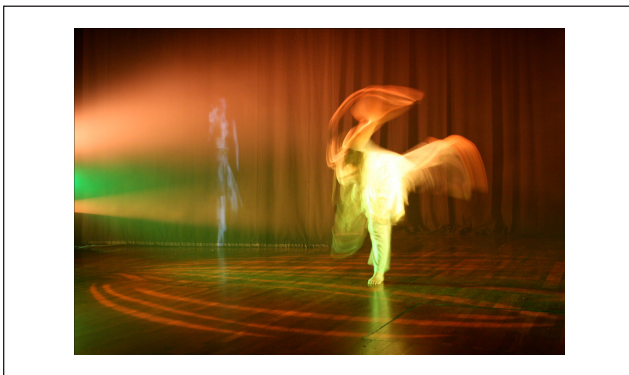


Image 3. Remembering home

Note: Photo by Marcia Mitchley (2010).

Activity: Belonging

Place your pen on paper, or fingers on keyboard and begin writing continuously for five minutes. Write as any ideas come, including any stumbles and self-doubts. Try to avoid censoring or judging and allow words to flow. What are your earliest memories?

In autoethnography, we write from self to others, from personal to political, from individual to cultural, and back again. In writing autoethnography, my “commitment involves a rejection of the historical and cultural logics and narratives that exclude

Activity: Belonging (continued)

Whom do you remember most clearly? Where and who do you come from? How do you name and describe yourself? How do others name and describe you? Where and with whom do you fit? Where is your place to stand? Who do you stand with and where? Where do you belong?

those who have previously been marginalized. This is a reflexive, performative ethnography. It privileges multiple subject positions, questions its own authority, and doubts those narratives that privilege one set of historical processes and sequences over another . . .” (Denzin, 2003, p. 234)

Belonging is an imagining, not uncontroversial, not straightforward. My parents are immigrants, and yet I was born here and all I know is here. My people are immigrants, struggling with being, not of there, but of here. We are who we are becoming. We are Pākehā but not colonists, people of this land but not indigenous Māori. However, we are not postcolonial here either. My politics strives for partnership. The work of de-colonization and conscientization continues, challenging the historical amnesia of White colonists. This is my striving for my people, for the peoples of Aotearoa. I belong with these people.

My home is a memory, a place I have neither ownership of, nor any claim to guardianship, nor any of my people still there keeping the home fires burning. My embodiment of home, my deeply felt sense of place, transforms into a call to action. I make a commitment to this land and to all the peoples of Aotearoa, imagining a partnership between peoples and with the land. I belong here.

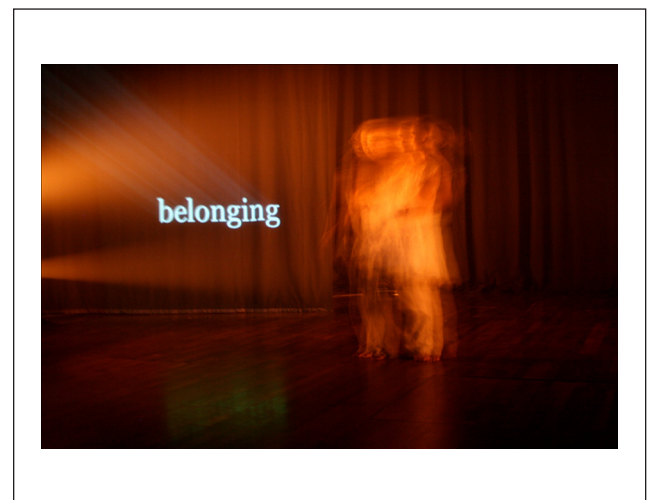


Image 4. Belonging

Note: Photo by Marcia Mitchley (2010).

Activity: Embracing “Other”

Write in the voice/language of your “other,” your lover or parent or child—the “other” who complements you. How would your “other” express home, belonging and identity? What words and concepts would your “other” use? What might their voice/language reveal and reflect back to you about yourself?

“... my deepest ethical dilemma in staging ethnographic data is not the absence of the Other ... but how and by what means I can make the audience who is there feel a *sense of being present* with the Other in the Other’s actual absence” (Madison, 2007, p. 22).

I tōku tamarikitanga kai ake ōku karu ki ngā pae maunga o Maungamangero ka tū tūtei ake mai e whakamakūkūtia ana e ngā awa kōpikopiko. Ka huri rā taku titiro ki ngā tomo i noho mai ai hei āhurutanga mōwai mōku. Rongo ai au i konei, taku piringa ki tōkukāinga.

Ina rongo ai au i te tangi mai a te ruru i te pō, ka hoki tika tonu atu au ā-wairua nei, ki te wāhi kei roto i tōku whatumanawa, ki te wāhi e kīia tonu nei e au, ko tōku kāinga.²

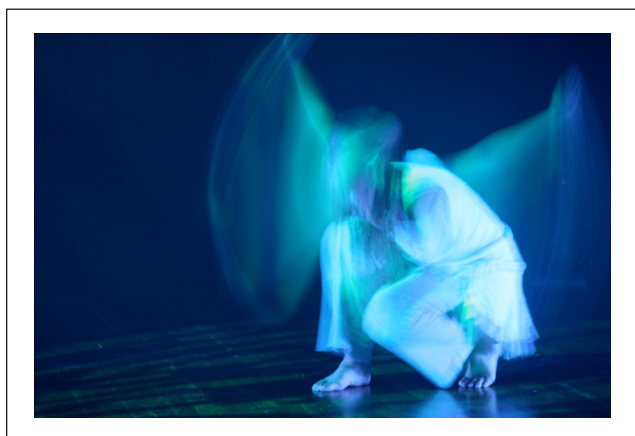


Image 5. Embracing other

Note: Photo by Marcia Mitchley (2010).

Embodied Ways of Knowing

Knowing arises through moving, not only through perception. We move to perceive and to understand. Movement itself is a way of knowing (Barbour, 2006, 2011; Cohen, 2008; Olsen, 2002; Sheets-Johnstone, 1999). We can enhance our awareness of our embodiment and make fuller use of our embodied ways of knowing. We can retrain ourselves to pay attention, to identify the connections between that which we know subjectively or intuitively, the knowledge we receive from others, and the knowledge we gain about how to do things, to construct new understandings. We can then live creatively with these new understandings.

And if new knowledge derived from our creative actions is to have any meaning at all, we have to be able to embody it, to live it, to discard knowledge if it is not livable. We need to realize embodied knowledge as useful in our living. To contribute to the development of new knowledge, to create artistically and to express our knowledge, we need to know ourselves. Moving reveals our worlds and ourselves.

For those of us inclined to express ourselves as artists through this kind of embodied performance,

Autoethnographic performance can provide a space for the emancipation of the voice and body from homogenizing knowledge production and academic discourse structures, thereby articulating the intersections of peoples and cultures through the inner sanctions of the always migratory identity. (Spry, 2001, p. 727)

To create such performances and share them with others necessitates drawing on a wide range of methods, as well as recognizing and validating epistemological alternatives beyond those traditionally accepted within Western academies. We must question what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts (Du Plessis & Alice, 1998). The opportunity exists to creatively embody issues of reflexivity, identity, cultural commentary, transformation, and empowerment as I have begun in *A place to stand* (Barbour, 2010b).

We all begin with creativity, with the potential to develop as we grow and move.

“An ovum has an extremely high capacity (potential) for original, creative development and this capacity decreases continuously with its ontogeny and therefore with growth and aging. The mature organism, although developed, is not a “higher” entity than the egg from which it grew” (Blechsmidt, 2004, p. 11).

We reduce our potential as we age, becoming subsumed by colonialism, capitalism, neo-liberalism, postmodernism, and the rest of the “isms.”

We have to find a way home, to reconnect with our beginnings and with the simplest movements that provide embodied knowledge. This is a call to return home.

A place to stand
A lonesome call through the dark stillness
Heart beats in the sheltering womb of the land
Paths worn by murmuring water and bare soles
Wandering
Below the watching faces of stone
Visceral longing.

Acknowledgments

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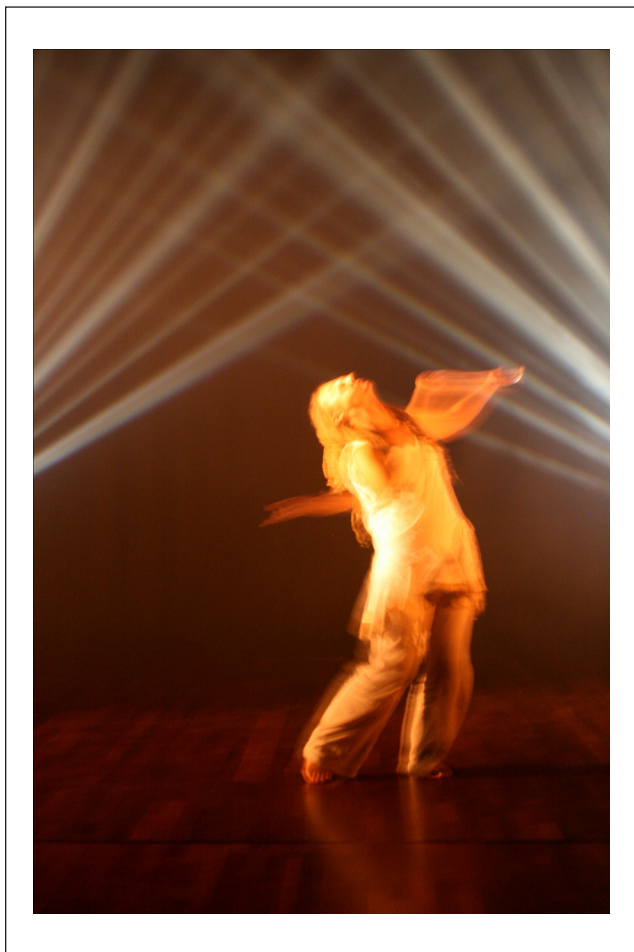


Image 6. Embodied ways of knowing
Note: Photo by Marcia Mitchley (2010).

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Notes

1. In my writing, I have been exploring ways to represent embodied movement experiences by deliberately using moving words, such as lying, remembering, playing, reaching, and stirring. My intention in using these types of verbs is to highlight action in the present tense.
2. I do not offer a translation of my writing in te reo Māori, but instead draw attention to the way in which understanding other languages provides opportunities to know and communicate

embodied experiences in different ways. My intention is also to highlight that te reo Māori, the language of the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa, is a living treasure and that there is a community of speakers which include some Pākehā learners like myself. However, my poem concluding the article encapsulates some of my sentiments in the English language.

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Bio

Karen Nicole Barbour is a senior lecturer in dance and choreography at the University of Waikato. She is committed to fostering qualitative dance research, specifically in choreographic practice, contemporary dance, improvisation, site-specific dance, and digital dance. She has recently published *Dancing across the page: Narrative and embodied ways of knowing* (2011). Her current research interests lie in collaborative artistic research, feminist choreographic practices, and narrative writing practices to express lived experiences.