

BODY AS PLACE:
A SOMATIC GUIDE TO RE-INDIGENIZATION
by Nala Walla, 2009
[For Gaia Education's
Ecovillage Design Curriculum]

Today, many millions of people are part of a growing worldwide diaspora which may never know precisely where its ancestors lived, or what practices they used to maintain respectful connections to the land. This same concept of diaspora—a dispersion from place—applies to those of us who do not feel at home even in our own skin, who feel somehow estranged from our own bodies. Countless modern people are currently wondering: how do we create a true sense of home, an ecologically relevant sense of *place* instead of a mere *space* where we extract what we need, and dump toxic waste when we're done?

Since our bodies are indeed our primary home, any endeavors to create a sense of place must include strategies for getting to know our bodies more deeply. Here, developing awareness of our own felt-experience can be a beneficial practice which connects us inevitably back to Earth via our own flesh. Thus a reinhabiting of our own bodies is an essential step towards *re-indigenization*—behaving in an ecologically respectful and culturally sustainable manner which truly honors “home”. The embodied arts are designed to help us to do exactly this.

ZONE ZERO: LOCALISM BEGINS WITH THE BODY

For those of us in green movements seeking a deeper sense of home and respectful relationship to place, it can be very helpful to recognize that as infants, our sensation of gravity provides our very first experience of a sense of “place.” Our relationship with Earth is primary, forming the basis for development of every other movement we make.

When we add permaculture terminology to our discussion of “home” and “place”, we notice that the body likewise forms the basis of the concept of *zone zero*—the natural center from which all activity radiates. Accordingly, any sound ecological habitat design will plan to optimize bodily health and strive to take basic bodily patterns into careful consideration. Our bodies are the first units of *localism* from which homes, villages and communities are built. By serving the health of body

and community, the embodied arts are very useful tools to placemakers, to cultural regenerators, and to village designers.

ECOSOMATICS : A WORKING (and playing!) DEFINITION

Ecosomatics is an emerging interdisciplinary field which connects movement education, improvisation, healing arts, psychology, ritual, performing arts, and good old-fashioned play with ecological consciousness. The practice of ecosomatics heals the separation between mind, body and Earth by encouraging direct sensory perception of one's body both *in* the natural environment, and *as* the natural environment¹.

In order to understand ecosomatics, we must first grasp the distinction between *soma* and *body*:

When you look at me, you can see that I have a body. What you cannot see is my proprioceptive, or felt-sense, of my own body—my *soma*. In 1976, Thomas Hanna coined the term *somatics* to distinguish this subtle “inner body” from the outer, gross body. This term is based on the wholistic Greek concept of *soma*, which refers to the entire mind-body-spirit system.

Thus, *somatics* refers to the art and practice of sensing the *soma*, or “the body as experienced from within.” The somatic sense is a veritable sixth sense, as it cannot be adequately explained by any of the other five categories: taste, touch, hearing, sight, or smell. In an age where experts and professionals in the human health field often dole out conflicting diagnoses and ineffective treatments, *somatics* is an empowering concept that affirms our innate knowledge of our own body, and encourages us to participate deeply in our own healing.

By tuning in to our direct sensory experience, we can learn to release habitual tension and pain, instead optimizing for ease, efficiency and enjoyment. Any movement—sacred or mundane—can be re-patterned in this way, from dancing and singing, to simply getting in and out of a chair.

We can also apply these sensing and repatterning skills to activities which restore a sustainable relationship to Earth, such as planting trees, harvesting food, or creating a community ritual. Noticing the analogies between patterns in Nature and those we sense in our bodies helps us

¹ see Susan Bauer's article “Body and Earth as One” in *Conscious Dancer Magazine*, Spring 2008.

create effective ecological design. When we do this, we venture into the realm of *ecosomatics*.

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1- The art of sensing the 'inner body' as a way to connect to the greater social and planetary(Gaiac) bodies. 2- The view of somatics as inseparable from ecological health and sustainability. 3- The practice of using somatic principles to facilitate and enhance sustainable work in the landscape--i.e. gardens, farms, village building.

RE-INDIGENIZATION: CREATING A SENSE OF PLACE

“Okanagans teach that the body is Earth itself. Our flesh, blood and bones are Earth-body; in all cycles in which Earth moves, so does our body. As Okanagans we say the body is sacred. It is the core of our being, which permits the rest of the self to be. Our word for body literally means “the land-dreaming capacity.”

--Jeanette Armstrong, Okanagan Teacher, Activist, Traditional Council

The word *ecosomatics* has recently evolved to describe a gateway to the greater “Earth-body” via our individual bodies. It expresses the fluid nature of the Self, and a world of boundaries which are at once distinct, and permeable. And though the term comes from a scientific language that the modern human—steeped for generations in a rational worldview—can comprehend, the concept is as old as humanity itself, and well understood by indigenous cultures.

Because we are microcosms of Earthly patterns, practicing respect for our bodies demonstrates respect for the Earth, both of which are characteristic of sustainable, indigenous cultures. Members of the diaspora may never be indigenous in the same way native peoples who have resided in a particular place or region for thousands of years; however, we can (indeed, we must) learn to behave with the same respect of place which is exemplified by indigenous culture.

A key step towards *re-indigenization* is a “coming home” to our own bodies, a deep “rooting” into Earth through our own flesh, a return to the sense of connectedness which is ever-present in sensation. There are many simple somatic practices that can help us access sensation any time we are feeling “out of body.”

ART AS TECHNOLOGY, NOT LUXURY

At this crucial time in human evolution, we are wise to uproot the foolish notion that The Arts are only for the “talented,” for “professionals,” or that they are a luxury that the average person cannot afford. The

embodied arts are far more than frivolities for the privileged few. These systems were evolved over eons by the grassroots, and are better regarded as potent and sustainable “soft” technologies in the truest sense of the word. (*Technology* comes from the Greek word *tekhne*, meaning *skill or art*.)

In direct contrast with “hard” technologies (automobiles, computers, etc.) which commonly pollute and consume vast resource supplies, the body-based arts depend only on resources within ourselves. Considering the dangerous imbalance and over-reliance upon hard-tech in industrialized societies, a refocusing upon the soft technologies is actually an intelligent survival strategy.

Technologies of the social realm like dance, ritual, storytelling, and song (the original software!) have always served as communication methods, social exchange and conflict resolution strategies, information transmission schema, knowledge banks, and efficient energy utilization patterns. And, as anyone involved in ecological and activist groups can attest, it is primarily social conflict that impedes our progress and creates burnout, not lack of hard-tech. The Arts have always served as grease for the social wheels. Thus, if social dysfunction is the great limiting factor in implementing truly ecological habitats, it is greatly helpful to view them as tools for re-indigenization.

EMBODIED ACTIVISM—COUNTERING DISSOCIATION

As techno-industrial society races along ever more digital and virtual pathways, humans witness the disturbing side-effect of losing touch with our embodied experience. Our modern habit of fouling of our own nest is evidence of a people suffering acutely from disconnection and dissociation from *the body* at every level—the personal body (*Soma*), the social body (*Community*), and the greater Earthly body (*Gaia*). Dissociation is a serious psychological pathology, yet is so widespread among modern people that it is unfortunately considered normal and even encouraged by technologies in which we “inhabit” virtual and cyber “worlds.”

Since our bodies are quite literally composed *of* and *from* Earth (carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, oxygen...) a reinhabiting of our bodies amounts to a profound activist strategy for re-association with Earth, and re-indigenization to Place. Aligning with our bodies may seem to be but a small contribution, but since our habitual denial of the body lies at the root of our mistreatment of Earth, these small ripples eventually become a sea change that affects the entire world. Simply by becoming

advocates for our own flesh and blood, we initiate an *embodiment of activism*, practicing behaviors which come closer to those of true indigeneity.

By utilizing The Arts, we can facilitate a shift away from slavery paradigms where we push our bodies beyond their capacity, and learn to honor our needs for proper alignment, rest, and play as essential to community function. Such a body-based philosophy encourages us to dissolve outdated views of manual labor as a chore that is somehow “beneath” us. Instead, we learn to value earthwork as a privilege: an enjoyable and healing endeavor where we can express our creativity, breathe fresh air, and exercise our bodies—all the while helping the shift towards sustainability.

BEYOND THE MAT: THE YOGA OF EARTHWORK

All of the arts originally evolved within the context of Place and Community. Long before they arrived in the halls of Academia or Broadway, the arts belonged to the Folk, who wisely cast them in valuable healing, therapeutic, and integrative roles. For example, somatic practices such as yoga have developed to tune our body-mind systems to the daily tasks of building and sustaining a village—squatting and reaching to harvest food, flexing arms and legs to carry water or dig a foundation. To learn how best to push a heavy wheelbarrow and build an earthen house without throwing out our backs, becoming bored, or sunburned is indeed a yogic practice.

When we recognize the somatic opportunity in earthwork, we move more slowly and deliberately, checking for proper alignment and breath patterns, and we heed our bodies’ requests for a break. By treating our bodies kindly and humanely, by dancing and telling stories in the garden much like our ancestors have always done, the line is blurred between work and play, between action and activism, between life and art. Over the last few years, I have facilitated many earthwork and building projects which integrate dance, song, bodywork, rest and play into the worksite, with results that are both empowering and fun.

Here, I am suggesting that we view embodied arts through a wholistic lens. Ours is no armchair movement. We cannot simply sit back while someone else does the “dirty work” for us. To create ecological habitats, we will need to rid ourselves of the outdated stigmas attached to manual labor, and welcome the sweat on our brow. Thriving, sustainable villages and gardens will not build themselves. Only healthy, vital bodies and communities working cooperatively can achieve the vitality we seek.

The arts are designed and destined to move beyond the bamboo-floored yoga studio or velvet-cushioned theater, where they can be put to practical use—out of doors—in our everyday lives. In true egalitarian fashion, the arts have always offered *anyone* (not just professionals) who practices them deep understanding of Earth's grand cycles and strength of community. The good news is that these tools are still there. All we need do is use them.

THE ECOLOGY OF THE BODY

Every time we take a breath, a billion electrochemical reactions occur within our bodies, a billion cells are born, and a billion die. Billions of organisms are right now living synergistically in our guts. Our modern sciences have now provided evidence confirming what indigenous cultures have always known: that universal and ecological patterns are right here, beneath our skin, and beneath the soil-skin of the Earth. These ecosomatic patterns can be experienced and perceived directly within our bodies through embodied arts practices.

It is imperative at this time to invest in the soft technologies—the skills, stories, and arts which connect Earth, Body, and Community. As they have always done, the Arts are helping us to create the respectful, cooperative, sustainable cultures of the future, and thus ought to be widely adopted as best-practices, especially among activists. And as a pleasant side effect, our lives will include more play, and more celebration as we become, once again, indigenous to the places we live.

*“Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces,
I would still plant my apple tree.”*

—Dr. Martin Luther King

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